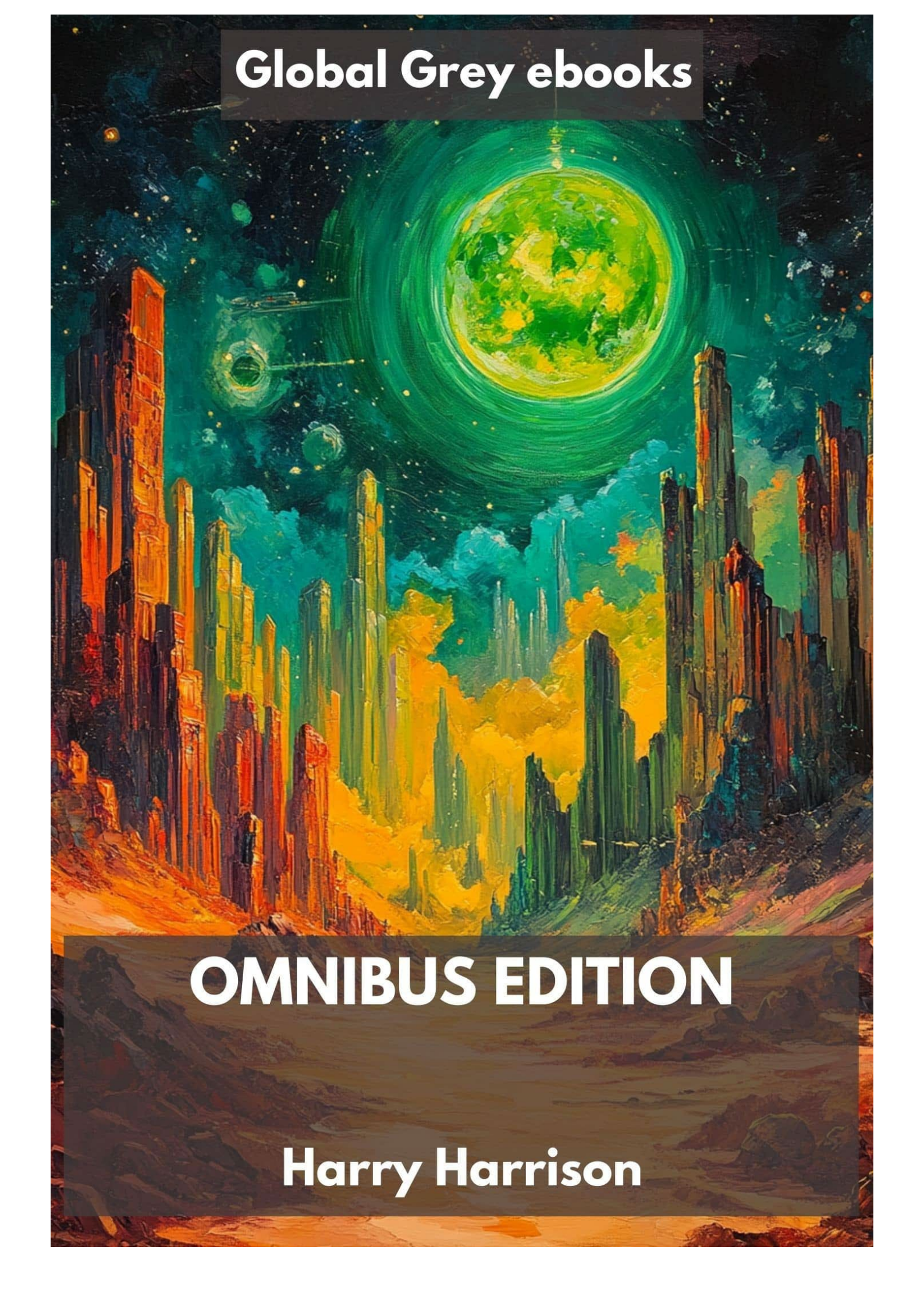




Global Grey ebooks

OMNIBUS EDITION

Harry Harrison

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HARRY HARRISON

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Deathworld

Chapter 1

Jason dinAlt sprawled in soft luxury on the couch, a large frosty stein held limply in one hand. His other hand rested casually on a pillow. The gun behind the pillow was within easy reach of his fingers. In his line of work he never took chances.

It was all highly suspicious. Jason didn't know a soul on this planet. Yet the card sent by service tube from the hotel desk had read: *Kerk Pyrrus would like to see Jason dinAlt*. Blunt and to the point. He signaled the desk to send the man up, then lowered his fingers a bit until they brushed the gun butt. The door slid open and his visitor stepped through.

A retired wrestler. That was Jason's first thought. Kerk Pyrrus was a gray-haired rock of a man. His body seemingly chiseled out of flat slabs of muscle. Then Jason saw the gun strapped to the inside of the other man's forearm, and he let his fingers drop casually behind the pillow.

"I'd appreciate it," Jason said, "if you'd take off your gun while you're in here." The other man stopped and scowled down at the gun as if he was seeing it for the first time.

"No, I never take it off." He seemed mildly annoyed by the suggestion.

Jason had his fingers on his own gun when he said, "I'm afraid I'll have to insist. I always feel a little uncomfortable around people who wear guns." He kept talking to distract attention while he pulled out his gun. Fast and smooth.

He could have been moving in slow motion for all the difference it made. Kerk Pyrrus stood rock still while the gun came out, while it swung in his direction. Not until the very last instant did he act. When he did, the motion wasn't visible. First his gun was in the arm holster—then it was aimed between Jason's eyes. It was an ugly, heavy weapon with a pitted front orifice that showed plenty of use.

And Jason knew if he swung his own weapon up a fraction of an inch more he would be dead. He dropped his arm carefully and Kerk flipped his own gun back in the holster with the same ease he had drawn it.

"Now," the stranger said, "if we're through playing, let's get down to business. I have a proposition for you."

Jason downed a large mouthful from the mug and bridled his temper. He was fast with a gun—his life had depended on it more than once—and this was the first time he had been outdrawn. It was the offhand, unimportant manner it had been done that irritated him.

"I'm not prepared to do business," he said acidly. "I've come to Cassylia for a vacation, get away from work."

"Let's not fool each other, dinAlt," Kerk said impatiently. "You've never worked at an honest job in your entire life. You're a professional gambler and that's why I'm here to see you."

Jason forced down his anger and threw the gun to the other end of the couch so he wouldn't be tempted to commit suicide. He *had* hoped no one knew him on Cassylia and was looking forward to a big kill at the Casino. He would worry about that later.

This weight-lifter type seemed to know all the answers. Let him plot the course for a while and see where it led.

“All right, what do you want?”

Kerk dropped into a chair that creaked ominously under his weight, and dug an envelope out of one pocket. He flipped through it quickly and dropped a handful of gleaming Galactic Exchange notes onto the table. Jason glanced at them—then sat up suddenly.

“What are they—forgeries?” he asked, holding one up to the light.

“They’re real enough,” Kerk told him, “I picked them up at the bank. Exactly twenty-seven bills—or twenty-seven million credits. I want you to use them as a bankroll when you go to the Casino tonight. Gamble with them and win.”

They looked real enough—and they could be checked. Jason fingered them thoughtfully while he examined the other man.

“I don’t know what you have in mind,” he said. “But you realize I can’t make any guarantees. I gamble—but I don’t always win ...”

“You gamble—and you win when you want to,” Kerk said grimly. “We looked into that quite carefully before I came to you.”

“If you mean to say that I cheat—” Carefully, Jason grabbed his temper again and held it down. There was no future in getting annoyed.

Kerk continued in the same level voice, ignoring Jason’s growing anger. “Maybe you don’t call it cheating, frankly I don’t care. As far as I’m concerned you could have your suit lined with aces and electromagnets in your boots. As long as you *won*. I’m not here to discuss moral points with you. I said I had a proposition.

“We have worked hard for that money—but it still isn’t enough. To be precise, we need three billion credits. The only way to get that sum is by gambling—with these twenty-seven million as bankroll.”

“And what do I get out of it?” Jason asked the question coolly, as if any bit of the fantastic proposition made sense.

“Everything above the three billion you can keep, that should be fair enough. You’re not risking your own money, but you stand to make enough to keep you for life if you win.”

“And if I lose—?”

Kerk thought for a moment, not liking the taste of the idea. “Yes—there is the chance you might lose, I hadn’t thought about that.”

He reached a decision. “If you lose—well I suppose that is just a risk we will have to take. Though I think I would kill you then. The ones who died to get the twenty-seven million deserve at least that.” He said it quietly, without malice, and it was more of a promise than a threat.

Stamping to his feet Jason refilled his stein and offered one to Kerk who took it with a nod of thanks. He paced back and forth, unable to sit. The whole proposition made him angry—yet at the same time had a fatal fascination. He was a gambler and this talk was like the taste of drugs to an addict.

Stopping suddenly, he realized that his mind had been made up for some time. Win or lose—live or die—how could he say no to the chance to gamble with money like that! He turned suddenly and jabbed his finger at the big man in the chair.

“I’ll do it—you probably knew I would from the time you came in here. There are some terms of my own, though. I want to know who you are, and who *they* are you keep talking about. And where did the money come from. Is it stolen?”

Kerk drained his own stein and pushed it away from him.

“Stolen money? No, quite the opposite. Two years’ work mining and refining ore to get it. It was mined on Pyrrus and sold here on Cassylia. You can check on that very easily. I sold it. I’m the Pyrric ambassador to this planet.” He smiled at the thought. “Not that that means much, I’m ambassador to at least six other planets as well. Comes in handy when you want to do business.”

Jason looked at the muscular man with his gray hair and worn, military-cut clothes, and decided not to laugh. You heard of strange things out in the frontier planets and every word could be true. He had never heard of Pyrrus either, though that didn’t mean anything. There were over thirty-thousand known planets in the inhabited universe.

“I’ll check on what you have told me,” Jason said. “If it’s true, we can do business. Call me tomorrow—”

“No,” Kerk said. “The money has to be won tonight. I’ve already issued a check for this twenty-seven million, it will bounce as high as the Pleiades unless we deposit the money in the morning, so that’s our time limit.”

With each moment the whole affair became more fantastic—and more intriguing for Jason. He looked at his watch. There was still enough time to find out if Kerk was lying or not.

“All right, we’ll do it tonight,” he said. “Only I’ll have to have one of those bills to check.”

Kerk stood up to go. “Take them all, I won’t be seeing you again until after you’ve won. I’ll be at the Casino of course, but don’t recognize me. It would be much better if they didn’t know where your money was coming from or how much you had.”

Then he was gone, after a bone-crushing handclasp that closed on Jason’s hand like vise jaws. Jason was alone with the money. Fanning the bills out like a hand of cards he stared at their sepia and gold faces, trying to get the reality through his head. Twenty-seven million credits. What was to stop him from just walking out the door with them and vanishing. Nothing really, except his own sense of honor.

Kerk Pyrrus, the man with the same last name as the planet he came from, was the universe’s biggest fool. Or he knew just what he was doing. From the way the interview had gone the latter seemed the better bet.

“He *knows* I would much rather gamble with the money than steal it,” he said wryly.

Slipping a small gun into his waistband holster and pocketing the money he went out.

Chapter 2

The robot teller at the bank just pinged with electronic shock when he presented one of the bills and flashed a panel that directed him to see Vice President Wain. Wain was a smooth customer who bugged his eyes and lost some of his tan when he saw the sheaf of bills.

“You ... wish to deposit these with us?” he asked while his fingers unconsciously stroked them.

“Not today,” Jason said. “They were paid to me as a debt. Would you please check that they are authentic and change them? I’d like five hundred thousand credit notes.”

Both of his inner chest pockets were packed tight when he left the bank. The bills were good and he felt like a walking mint. This was the first time in his entire life that carrying a large sum of money made him uncomfortable. Waving to a passing helicab he went directly to the Casino, where he knew he would be safe—for a while.

Cassylia Casino was the playspot of the nearby cluster of star systems. It was the first time Jason had seen it, though he knew its type well. He had spent most of his adult life in casinos like this on other worlds. The decor differed but they were always the same. Gambling and socialities in public—and behind the scenes all the private vice you could afford. Theoretically no-limit games, but that was true only up to a certain point. When the house was really hurt the honest games stopped being square and the big winner had to watch his step very carefully. These were the odds Jason dinAlt had played against countless times before. He was wary but not very concerned.

The dining room was almost empty and the major-domo quickly rushed to the side of the relaxed stranger in the richly cut clothes. Jason was lean and dark, looking more like the bored scion of some rich family than a professional gambler. This appearance was important and he cultivated it. The cuisine looked good and the cellar turned out to be wonderful. He had a professional talk with the sommelier while waiting for the soup, then settled down to enjoy his meal.

He ate leisurely and the large dining room was filled before he was through. Watching the entertainment over a long cigar killed some more time. When he finally went to the gaming rooms they were filled and active.

Moving slowly around the room he dropped a few thousand credits. He scarcely noticed how he played, giving more attention to the feel of the games. The play all seemed honest and none of the equipment was rigged. That could be changed very quickly, he realized. Usually it wasn’t necessary, house percentage was enough to assure a profit.

Once he saw Kerk out of the corner of his eye but he paid him no attention. The ambassador was losing small sums steadily at seven-and-silver and seemed to be impatient. Probably waiting for Jason to begin playing seriously. He smiled and strolled on slowly.

Jason settled on the dice table as he usually did. It was the surest way to make small winnings. *And if I feel it tonight I can clean this casino out!* That was his secret, the power that won for him steadily—and every once in a while enabled him to make a killing and move on quickly before the hired thugs came to get the money back.

The dice reached him and he threw an eight the hard way. Betting was light and he didn't push himself, just kept away from the sevens. He made the point and passed a natural. Then he crapped out and the dice moved on.

Sitting there, making small automatic bets while the dice went around the table, he thought about the power. *Funny, after all the years of work we still don't know much about psi. They can train people a bit, and improve skills a bit—but that's all.*

He was feeling strong tonight, he knew that the money in his pocket gave him the extra lift that sometimes helped him break through. With his eyes half closed he picked up the dice—and let his mind gently caress the pattern of sunken dots. Then they shot out of his hand and he stared at a seven.

It was there.

Stronger than he had felt it in years. The stiff weight of those million-credit notes had done it. The world all around was sharp-cut clear and the dice was completely in his control. He knew to the tenth-credit how much the other players had in their wallets and was aware of the cards in the hands of the players behind him.

Slowly, carefully, he built up the stakes.

There was no effort to the dice, they rolled and sat up like trained dogs. Jason took his time and concentrated on the psychology of the players and the stick man. It took almost two hours to build his money on the table to seven hundred thousand credits. Then he caught the stick man signaling they had a heavy winner. He waited until the hard-eyed man strolled over to watch the game, then he smiled happily, bet all his table stakes—and blew it on one roll of the dice. The house man smiled happily, the stick man relaxed—and out of the corner of his eye Jason saw Kerk turning a dark purple.

Sweating, pale, his hand trembling ever so slightly, Jason opened the front of his jacket and pulled out one of the envelopes of new bills. Breaking the seal with his finger he dropped two of them on the table.

"Could we have a no-limit game?" he asked, "I'd like to—win back some of my money."

The stick man had trouble controlling his smile now, he glanced across at the house man who nodded a quick *yes*. They had a sucker and they meant to clean him. He had been playing from his wallet all evening, now he was cracking into a sealed envelope to try for what he had lost. A thick envelope too, and probably not his money. Not that the house cared in the least. To them money had no loyalties. The play went on with the Casino in a very relaxed mood.

Which was just the way Jason wanted it. He needed to get as deep into them as he could before someone realized *they* might be on the losing end. The rough stuff would start and he wanted to put it off as long as possible. It would be hard to win smoothly then—and his *psi* power might go as quickly as it had come. That had happened before.

He was playing against the house now, the two other players were obvious shills, and a crowd had jammed solidly around to watch. After losing and winning a bit he hit a streak of naturals and his pile of gold chips tottered higher and higher. There was nearly a billion there, he estimated roughly. The dice were still falling true, though he

was soaked with sweat from the effort. Betting the entire stack of chips he reached for the dice. The stick man reached faster and hooked them away.

“House calls for new dice,” he said flatly.

Jason straightened up and wiped his hands, glad of the instant’s relief. This was the third time the house had changed dice to try and break his winning streak, it was their privilege. The hard-eyed Casino man opened his wallet as he had done before and drew out a pair at random. Stripping off their plastic cover he threw them the length of the table to Jason. They came up a natural seven and Jason smiled.

When he scooped them up the smile slowly faded. The dice were transparent, finely made, evenly weighted on all sides—and crooked.

The pigment on the dots of five sides of each die was some heavy metal compound, probably lead. The sixth side was a ferrous compound. They would roll true unless they hit a magnetic field—that meant the entire surface of the table could be magnetized. He could never have spotted the difference if he hadn’t *looked* at the dice with his mind. But what could he do about it?

Shaking them slowly he glanced quickly around the table. There was what he needed. An ashtray with a magnet in its base to hold it to the metal edge of the table. Jason stopped shaking the dice and looked at them quizzically, then reached over and grabbed the ashtray. He dropped the base against his hand.

As he lifted the ashtray there was a concerted gasp from all sides. The dice were sticking there, upside down, box cars showing.

“Are these what you call honest dice?” he asked.

The man who had thrown out the dice reached quickly for his hip pocket. Jason was the only one who saw what happened next. He was watching that hand closely, his own fingers near his gun butt. As the man dived into his pocket a hand reached out of the crowd behind him. From its square-cut size it could have belonged to only one person. The thick thumb and index finger clamped swiftly around the house man’s wrist, then they were gone. The man screamed shrilly and held up his arm, his hand dangling limp as a glove from the broken wrist bones.

With his flank well protected, Jason could go on with the game. “The old dice if you don’t mind,” he said quietly.

Dazedly the stick man pushed them over. Jason shook quickly and rolled. Before they hit the table he realized he couldn’t control them—the transient *psi* power had gone.

End over end they turned. And faced up seven.

Counting the chips as they were pushed over to him he added up a bit under two billion credits. They would be winning that much if he left the game now—but it wasn’t the three billion that Kerk needed. Well, it would have to be enough. As he reached for the chips he caught Kerk’s eye across the table and the other man shook his head in a steady *no*.

“Let it ride,” Jason said wearily, “one more roll.”

He breathed on the dice, polished them on his cuff, and wondered how he had ever gotten into this spot. Billions riding on a pair of dice. That was as much as the annual income of some planets. The only reason there *could* be stakes like that was because

the planetary government had a stake in the Casino. He shook as long as he could, reaching for the control that wasn't there—then let fly.

Everything else had stopped in the Casino and people were standing on tables and chairs to watch. There wasn't a sound from that large crowd. The dice bounced back from the board with a clatter loud in the silence and tumbled over the cloth.

A five and a one. Six. He still had to make his point. Scooping up the dice Jason talked to them, mumbled the ancient oaths that brought luck and threw again.

It took five throws before he made the six.

The crowd echoed his sigh and their voices rose quickly. He wanted to stop, take a deep breath, but he knew he couldn't. Winning the money was only part of the job—they now had to get away with it. It had to look casual. A waiter was passing with a tray of drinks. Jason stopped him and tucked a hundred-credit note in his pocket.

"Drinks are on me," he shouted while he pried the tray out of the waiter's hands. Well-wishers cleared the filled glasses away quickly and Jason piled the chips onto the tray. They more than loaded it, but Kerk appeared that moment with a second tray.

"I'll be glad to help you, sir, if you will permit me," he said.

Jason looked at him, and laughed permission. It was the first time he had a clear look at Kerk in the Casino. He was wearing loose, purple evening pajamas over what must have been a false stomach. The sleeves were long and baggy so he looked fat rather than muscular. It was a simple but effective disguise.

Carefully carrying the loaded trays, surrounded by a crowd of excited patrons, they made their way to the cashier's window. The manager himself was there, wearing a sickly grin. Even the grin faded when he counted the chips.

"Could you come back in the morning," he said, "I'm afraid we don't have that kind of money on hand."

"What's the matter," Kerk shouted, "trying to get out of paying him? You took *my* money easy enough when I lost—it works both ways!"

The onlookers, always happy to see the house lose, growled their disagreement. Jason finished the matter in a loud voice.

"I'll be reasonable, give me what cash you have and I'll take a check for the balance."

There was no way out. Under the watchful eye of the gleeful crowd the manager packed an envelope with bills and wrote a check. Jason took a quick glimpse at it, then stuffed it into an inside pocket. With the envelope under one arm he followed Kerk towards the door.

Because of the onlookers there was no trouble in the main room, but just as they reached the side entrance two men moved in, blocking the way.

"Just a moment—" one said. He never finished the sentence. Kerk walked into them without slowing and they bounced away like tenpins. Then Kerk and Jason were out of the building and walking fast.

"Into the parking lot," Kerk said. "I have a car there."

When they rounded the corner there was a car bearing down on them. Before Jason could get his gun clear of the holster Kerk was in front of him. His arm came up and

his big ugly gun burst through the cloth of his sleeve and jumped into his hand. A single shot killed the driver and the car swerved and crashed. The other two men in the car died coming out of the door, their guns dropping from their hands.

After that they had no trouble. Kerk drove at top speed away from the Casino, the torn sleeve of his pajamas whipping in the breeze, giving glimpses of the big gun back in the holster.

“When you get the chance,” Jason said, “you’ll have to show me how that trick holster works.”

“When we get the chance,” Kerk answered as he dived the car into the city access tube.

Chapter 3

The building they stopped at was one of the finer residences in Cassylia. As they had driven, Jason counted the money and separated his share. Almost sixteen million credits. It still didn't seem quite real. When they got out in front of the building he gave Kerk the rest.

"Here's your three billion, don't think it was easy," he said.

"It could have been worse," was his only answer.

The recorded voice scratched in the speaker over the door.

"Sire Ellus has retired for the night, would you please call again in the morning. All appointments are made in advance—"

The voice broke off as Kerk pushed the door open. He did it almost effortlessly with the flat of his hand. As they went in Jason looked at the remnants of torn and twisted metal that hung in the lock and wondered again about his companion.

Strength—more than physical strength—he's like an elemental force. I have the feeling that nothing can stop him.

It made him angry—and at the same time fascinated him. He didn't want out of the deal until he found out more about Kerk and his planet. And "they" who had died for the money he gambled.

Sire Ellus was old, balding and angry, not at all used to having his rest disturbed. His complaints stopped suddenly when Kerk threw the money down on the table.

"Is the ship being loaded yet, Ellus? Here's the balance due." Ellus only fumbled the bills for a moment before he could answer Kerk's question.

"The ship—but, of course. We began loading when you gave us the deposit. You'll have to excuse my confusion, this is a little irregular. We never handle transactions of this size in cash."

"That's the way I like to do business," Kerk answered him, "I've canceled the deposit, this is the total sum. Now how about a receipt."

Ellus had made out the receipt before his senses returned. He held it tightly while he looked uncomfortably at the three billion spread out before him.

"Wait—I can't take it now, you'll have to return in the morning, to the bank. In normal business fashion," Ellus decided firmly.

Kerk reached over and gently drew the paper out of Ellus' hand.

"Thanks for the receipt," he said. "I won't be here in the morning so this will be satisfactory. And if you're worried about the money I suggest you get in touch with some of your plant guards or private police. You'll feel a lot safer."

When they left through the shattered door Ellus was frantically dialing numbers on his screen. Kerk answered Jason's next question before he could ask it.

"I imagine you would like to live to spend that money in your pocket, so I've booked two seats on an interplanetary ship," he glanced at the car clock. "It leaves in about

two hours so we have plenty of time. I'm hungry, let's find a restaurant. I hope you have nothing at the hotel worth going back for. It would be a little difficult."

"Nothing worth getting killed for," Jason said. "Now where can we go to eat—there are a few questions I would like to ask you."

They circled carefully down to the transport levels until they were sure they hadn't been followed. Kerk nosed the car into a darkened loading dock where they abandoned it.

"We can always get another car," he said, "and they probably have this one spotted. Let's walk back to the freightway, I saw a restaurant there as we came by."

Dark and looming shapes of overland freight carriers filled the parking lot. They picked their way around the man-high wheels and into the hot and noisy restaurant. The drivers and early morning workers took no notice of them as they found a booth in the back and dialed a meal.

Kerk chiseled a chunk of meat off the slab in front of him and popped it cheerfully into his mouth. "Ask your questions," he said. "I'm feeling much better already."

"What's in this ship you arranged for tonight—what kind of a cargo was I risking my neck for?"

"I thought you were risking your neck for money," Kerk said dryly. "But be assured it was in a good cause. That cargo means the survival of a world. Guns, ammunition, mines, explosives and such."

Jason choked over a mouthful of food. "Gun-running! What are you doing, financing a private war? And how can you talk about survival with a lethal cargo like that? Don't try and tell me they have a peaceful use. Who are you killing?"

Most of the big man's humor had vanished, he had that grim look Jason knew well.

"Yes, peaceful would be the right word. Because that is basically all we want. Just to live in peace. And it is not *who* are we killing—it is *what* we are killing."

Jason pushed his plate away with an angry gesture. "You're talking in riddles," he said. "What you say has no meaning."

"It has meaning enough," Kerk told him, "but only on one planet in the universe. Just how much do you know about Pyrrus?"

"Absolutely nothing."

For a moment Kerk sat wrapped in memory, scowling distantly. Then he went on.

"Mankind doesn't belong on Pyrrus—yet has been there for almost three hundred years now. The age expectancy of my people is sixteen years. Of course most adults live beyond that, but the high child mortality brings the average down.

"It is everything that a humanoid world should not be. The gravity is nearly twice Earth normal. The temperature can vary daily from arctic to tropic. The climate—well you have to experience it to believe it. Like nothing you've seen anywhere else in the galaxy."

"I'm frightened," Jason said dryly. "What do you have—methane or chlorine reactions? I've been down on planets like that—"

Kerk slammed his hand down hard on the table. The dishes bounced and the table legs creaked. “Laboratory reactions!” he growled. “They look great on a bench—but what happens when you have a world filled with those compounds? In an eye-wink of galactic time all the violence is locked up in nice, stable compounds. The atmosphere may be poisonous for an oxygen breather, but taken by itself it’s as harmless as weak beer.

“There is only one setup that is pure poison as a planetary atmosphere. Plenty of H₂O, the most universal solvent you can find, plus free oxygen to work on—”

“Water and oxygen!” Jason broke in. “You mean Earth—or a planet like Cassylia here? That’s preposterous.”

“Not at all. Because you were born in this kind of environment you accept it as right and natural. You take it for granted that metals corrode, coastlines change, and storms interfere with communication. These are normal occurrences on oxygen-water worlds. On Pyrrus these conditions are carried to the nth degree.

“The planet has an axial tilt of almost forty-two degrees, so there is a tremendous change in temperature from season to season. This is one of the prime causes of a constantly changing icecap. The weather generated by this is spectacular to say the least.”

“If that’s all,” Jason said, “I don’t see why—”

“That’s *not* all—it’s barely the beginning. The open seas perform the dual destructive function of supplying water vapor to keep the weather going, and building up gigantic tides. Pyrrus’ two satellites, Samas and Bessos, combine at times to pull the oceans up into thirty meter tides. And until you’ve seen one of these tides lap over into an active volcano you’ve seen nothing.

“Heavy elements are what brought us to Pyrrus—and these same elements keep the planet at a volcanic boil. There have been at least thirteen super-novas in the immediate stellar neighborhood. Heavy elements can be found on most of their planets of course—as well as completely unbreathable atmospheres. Long-term mining and exploitation can’t be done by anything but a self-sustaining colony. Which meant Pyrrus. Where the radioactive elements are locked in the planetary core, surrounded by a shell of lighter ones. While this allows for the atmosphere men need, it also provides unceasing volcanic activity as the molten plasma forces its way to the surface.”

For the first time Jason was silent. Trying to imagine what life could be like on a planet constantly at war with itself.

“I’ve saved the best for last,” Kerk said with grim humor. “Now that you have an idea of what the environment is like—think of the kind of life forms that would populate it. I doubt if there is one off-world species that would live a minute. Plants and animals on Pyrrus are *tough*. They fight the world and they fight each other. Hundreds of thousands of years of genetic weeding-out have produced things that would give even an electronic brain nightmares. Armor-plated, poisonous, claw-tipped and fanged-mouthed. That describes everything that walks, flaps or just sits and grows. Ever see a plant with teeth—that bite? I don’t think you want to. You’d have to be on Pyrrus and that means you would be dead within seconds of leaving the ship. Even I’ll have to take a refresher course before I’ll be able to go outside the

landing buildings. The unending war for survival keeps the life forms competing and changing. Death is simple, but the ways of dealing it too numerous to list.”

Unhappiness rode like a weight on Kerk’s broad shoulders. After long moments of thought he moved visibly to shake it off. Returning his attention to his food and mopping the gravy from his plate, he voiced part of his feelings.

“I suppose there is no logical reason why we should stay and fight this endless war. Except that Pyrrus is our home.” The last piece of gravy-soaked bread vanished and he waved the empty fork at Jason.

“Be happy you’re an off-worlder and will never have to see it.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Jason said as calmly as he could. “You see, I’m going back with you.”

Chapter 4

“Don’t talk stupidly,” Kerk said as he punched for a duplicate order of steak. “There are much simpler ways of committing suicide. Don’t you realize that you’re a millionaire now? With what you have in your pocket you can relax the rest of your life on the pleasure planets. Pyrrus is a death world, not a sightseeing spot for jaded tourists. I cannot permit you to return with me.”

Gamblers who lose their tempers don’t last long. Jason was angry now. Yet it showed only in a negative way. In the lack of expression on his face and the calmness of his voice.

“Don’t tell me what I can or cannot do, Kerk Pyrrus. You’re a big man with a fast gun—but that doesn’t make you my boss. All you can do is stop me from going back on your ship. But I can easily afford to get there another way. And don’t try to tell me I want to go to Pyrrus for sightseeing when you have no idea of my real reasons.”

Jason didn’t even try to explain his reasons, they were only half realized and too personal. The more he traveled, the more things looked the same to him. The old, civilized planets sank into a drab similarity. Frontier worlds all had the crude sameness of temporary camps in a forest. Not that the galactic worlds bored him. It was just that he had found their limitations—yet had never found his own. Until he met Kerk he had acknowledged no man his superior, or even his equal. This was more than egotism. It was facing facts. Now he was forced to face the fact that there was a whole world of people who might be superior to him. Jason could never rest content until he had been there and seen for himself. Even if he died in the attempt.

None of this could be told to Kerk. There were other reasons he would understand better.

“You’re not thinking ahead when you prevent me from going to Pyrrus,” Jason said. “I’ll not mention any moral debt you owe me for winning that money you needed. But what about the next time? If you needed that much lethal goods once, you’ll probably need it again some day. Wouldn’t it be better to have me on hand—old tried and true—than dreaming up some new and possibly unreliable scheme?”

Kerk chewed pensively on the second serving of steak. “That makes sense. And I must admit I hadn’t thought of it before. One failing we Pyrrans have is a lack of interest in the future. Staying alive day by day is enough trouble. So we tend to face emergencies as they arrive and let the dim future take care of itself. You can come. I hope you will still be alive when we need you. As Pyrran ambassador to a lot of places I officially invite you to our planet. All expenses paid. On the condition you obey completely all our instructions regarding your personal safety.”

“Conditions accepted,” Jason said. And wondered why he was so cheerful about signing his own death warrant.

Kerk was shoveling his way through his third dessert when his alarm watch gave a tiny hum. He dropped his fork instantly and stood up. “Time to go,” he said. “We’re on schedule now.” While Jason scrambled to his feet, he jammed coins into the meter until the *paid* light came on. Then they were out the door and walking fast.

Jason wasn’t at all surprised when they came on a public escalator just behind the restaurant. He was beginning to realize that since leaving the Casino their every

move had been carefully planned and timed. Without a doubt the alarm was out and the entire planet being searched for them. Yet so far they hadn't noticed the slightest sign of pursuit. This wasn't the first time Jason had to move just one jump ahead of the authorities—but it was the first time he had let someone else lead him by the hand while he did it. He had to smile at his own automatic agreement. He had been a loner for so many years that he found a certain inverse pleasure in following someone else.

"Hurry up," Kerk growled after a quick glance at his watch. He set a steady, killing pace up the escalator steps. They went up five levels that way—without seeing another person—before Kerk relented and let the escalator do the work.

Jason prided himself on keeping in condition. But the sudden climb, after the sleepless night, left him panting heavily and soaked with sweat. Kerk, cool of forehead and breathing normally, didn't show the slightest sign that he had been running.

They were at the second motor level when Kerk stepped off the slowly rising steps and waved Jason after him. As they came through the exit to the street a car pulled up to the curb in front of them. Jason had enough sense not to reach for his gun. At the exact moment they reached the car the driver opened the door and stepped out. Kerk passed him a slip of paper without saying a word and slipped in behind the wheel. There was just time for Jason to jump in before the car pulled away. The entire transfer had taken less than three seconds.

There had been only a glimpse of the driver in the dim light, but Jason had recognized him. Of course he had never seen the man before, but after knowing Kerk he couldn't mistake the compact strength of a native Pyrran.

"That was the receipt from Ellus you gave him," Jason said.

"Of course. That takes care of the ship and the cargo. They'll be off-planet and safely away before the casino check is traced to Ellus. So now let's look after ourselves. I'll explain the plan in detail so there will be no slip-ups on your part. I'll go through the whole thing once and if there are any questions you'll ask them when I'm finished."

The tones of command were so automatic that Jason found himself listening in quiet obedience. Though one part of his mind wanted him to smile at the quick assumption of his incompetence.

Kerk swung the car into the steady line of traffic heading out of the city to the spaceport. He drove easily while he talked.

"There is a search on in the city, but we're well ahead of that. I'm sure the Cassylians don't want to advertise their bad sportsmanship so there won't be anything as crude as a roadblock. But the port will be crawling with every agent they have. They know once the money gets off-planet it is gone forever. When we make a break for it they will be sure we still have the goods. So there will be no trouble with the munition ship getting clear."

Jason sounded a little shocked. "You mean you're setting us up as clay pigeons to cover the take-off of the ship."

"You could put it that way. But since we have to get off-planet anyway, there is no harm in using our escape as a smokescreen. Now shut up until I've finished, like I told you. One more interruption and I dump you by the road."

Jason was sure he would. He listened intently—and quietly—as Kerk repeated word for word what he had said before, then continued.

“The official car gate will probably be wide open with the traffic through it. And a lot of the agents will be in plain clothes. We might even get onto the field without being recognized, though I doubt it. It is of no importance. We will drive through the gate and to the take-off pad. The *Pride of Darkhan*, for which we hold tickets, will be sounding its two-minute siren and unhooking the gangway. By the time we get to our seats the ship will take off.”

“That’s all very fine,” Jason said. “But what will the guards be doing all this time?”

“Shooting at us and each other. We will take advantage of the confusion to get aboard.”

This answer did nothing to settle Jason’s mind, but he let it slide for the moment. “All right—say we *do* get aboard. Why don’t they just prevent take-off until we have been dragged out and stood against a wall?”

Kerk spared him a contemptuous glance before he returned his eyes to the road. “I said the ship was the *Pride of Darkhan*. If you had studied this system at all, you would know what that means. Cassylia and Darkhan are sister planets and rivals in every way. It has been less than two centuries since they fought an intra-system war that almost destroyed both of them. Now they exist in an armed-to-the-teeth neutrality that neither dare violate. The moment we set foot aboard the ship we are on Darkhan territory. There is no extradition agreement between the planets. Cassylia may want us—but not badly enough to start another war.”

That was all the explanation there was time for. Kerk swung the car out of the rush of traffic and onto a bridge marked *Official Cars Only*. Jason had a feeling of nakedness as they rolled under the harsh port lights towards the guarded gate ahead.

It was closed.

Another car approached the gate from the inside and Kerk slowed their car to a crawl. One of the guards talked to the driver of the car inside the port, then waved to the gate attendant. The barrier gate began to swing inwards and Kerk jammed down on the accelerator.

Everything happened at once. The turbine howled, the spinning tires screeched on the road and the car crashed open the gate. Jason had a vanishing glimpse of the open-mouthed guards, then they were skidding around the corner of a building. A few shots popped after them, but none came close.

Driving with one hand, Kerk reached under the dash and pulled out a gun that was the twin of the monster strapped to his arm. “Use this instead of your own,” he said. “Rocket-propelled explosive slugs. Make a great bang. Don’t bother shooting at anyone—I’ll take care of that. Just stir up a little action and make them keep their distance. Like this.”

He fired a single, snap-shot out the side window and passed the gun to Jason almost before the slug hit. An empty truck blew up with a roar, raining pieces on the cars around and sending their drivers fleeing in panic.

After that it was a nightmare ride through a madhouse. Kerk drove with an apparent contempt for violent death. Other cars followed them and were lost in wheel-raising

turns. They careened almost the full length of the field, leaving a trail of smoking chaos.

Then the pursuit was all behind them and the only thing ahead was the slim spire of the *Pride of Darkhan*.

The *Pride* was surrounded by a strong wire fence as suited the begrudged status of her planetary origin. The gate was closed and guarded by soldiers with leveled guns, waiting for a shot at the approaching car. Kerk made no attempt to come near them. Instead he fed the last reserves of power to the car and headed for the fence. "Cover your face," he shouted.

Jason put his arms in front of his head just as they hit.

Torn metal screamed, the fence buckled, wrapped itself around the car, but did not break. Jason flew off the seat and into the padded dash. By the time Kerk had the warped door open, he realized that the ride was over. Kerk must have seen the spin of his eyeballs because he didn't talk, just pulled Jason out and threw him onto the hood of the ruined car.

"Climb over the buckled wire and make a run for the ship," he shouted.

If there was any doubt what he meant, he set Jason an example of fine roadwork. It was inconceivable that someone of his bulk could run so fast, yet he did. He moved more like a charging tank than a man. Jason shook the fog from his head and worked up some speed himself. Nevertheless, he was barely halfway to the ship when Kerk hit the gangway. It was already unhooked from the ship, but the shocked attendants stopped rolling it away as the big man bounded up the steps.

At the top he turned and fired at the soldiers who were charging through the open gate. They dropped, crawled, and returned his fire. Very few shot at Jason's running form.

The scene in front of Jason cranked over in slow motion. Kerk standing at the top of the ramp, coolly returning the fire that splashed all about. He could have found safety in an instant through the open port behind him. The only reason he stayed there was to cover Jason.

"Thanks—" Jason managed to gasp as he made the last few steps up the gangway, jumped the gap and collapsed inside the ship.

"You're perfectly welcome," Kerk said as he joined him, waving his gun to cool it off.

A grim-jawed ship's officer stood back out of range of fire from the ground and looked them both up and down. "And just what is going on here?" he growled.

Kerk tested the barrel with a wet thumb, then let the gun slide back into its holster. "We are law-abiding citizens of a different system who have committed no criminal acts. The savages of Cassylia are too barbarous for civilized company. Therefore we are going to Darkhan—here are our tickets—in whose sovereign territory I believe we are at this moment." This last was added for the benefit of the Cassylvian officer who had just stumbled to the top of the gangway and was raising his gun.

The soldier couldn't be blamed. He saw these badly wanted criminals getting away. Aboard a Darkhan ship as well. Anger got the best of him and he brought his gun up.

“Come out of there, you scum. You’re not escaping that easily. Come out slow with your hands up or I’ll blast you—”

It was a frozen moment of time that stretched and stretched without breaking. The pistol covered Kerk and Jason. Neither of them attempted to reach for their own guns.

The gun twitched a bit as the ship’s officer moved, then steadied back on the two men. The Darkhan spaceman hadn’t gone far, just a pace across the lock. This was enough to bring him next to a red box set flush with the wall. With a single, swift gesture he flipped up the cover and poised his thumb over the button inside. When he smiled his lips peeled back to show all of his teeth. He had made up his mind, and it was the arrogance of the Cassylian officer that had been the deciding factor.

“Fire a single shot into Darkhan territory and I press this button,” he shouted. “And you know what this button does—every one of your ships has them as well. Commit a hostile act against this ship and *someone* will press a button. Every control rod will be blown out of the ship’s pile at that instant and half your filthy city will go up in the explosion.” His smile was chiseled on his face and there was no doubt he would do what he said. “Go ahead—fire. I think I would enjoy pressing this.”

The take-off siren was hooting now, the *close lock* light blinking an angry message from the bridge. Like four actors in a grim drama they faced each other an instant more.

Then the Cassylian officer, growling with unvoicable frustrated anger, turned and leaped back to the steps.

“All passengers board ship. Forty-five seconds to take-off. Clear the port.” The ship’s officer slammed shut the cover of the box and locked it as he talked. There was barely time to make the acceleration couches before the *Pride of Darkhan* cleared ground.

Chapter 5

Once the ship was in orbit the captain sent for Jason and Kerk. Kerk took the floor and was completely frank about the previous night's activities. The only fact of importance he left out was Jason's background as a professional gambler. He drew a beautiful picture of two lucky strangers whom the evil forces of Cassylia wanted to deprive of their gambling profits. All this fitted perfectly the captain's preconceptions of Cassylia. In the end he congratulated his officer on the correctness of his actions and began the preparation of a long report to his government. He gave the two men his best wishes as well as the liberty of the ship.

It was a short trip. Jason barely had time to catch up on his sleep before they grounded on Darkhan. Being without luggage they were the first ones through customs. They left the shed just in time to see another ship landing in a distant pit. Kerk stopped to watch it and Jason followed his gaze. It was a gray, scarred ship. With the stubby lines of a freighter—but sporting as many guns as a cruiser.

"Yours, of course," Jason said.

Kerk nodded and started towards the ship. One of the locks opened as they came up but no one appeared. Instead a remote-release folding ladder rattled down to the ground. Kerk swarmed up it and Jason followed glumly. Somehow, he felt, this was overdoing the no-frills-and-nonsense attitude.

Jason was catching on to Pyrran ways though. The reception aboard ship for the ambassador was just what he expected. Nothing. Kerk closed the lock himself and they found couches as the take-off horn sounded. The main jets roared and acceleration smashed down on Jason.

It didn't stop. Instead it grew stronger, squeezing the air out of his lungs and the sight from his eyes. He screamed but couldn't hear his own voice through the roaring in his ears. Mercifully he blacked out.

When consciousness returned the ship was at zero-G. Jason kept his eyes closed and let the pain seep out of his body. Kerk spoke suddenly, he was standing next to the couch.

"My fault, Meta, I should have told you we had a 1-G passenger aboard. You might have eased up a bit on your usual bone-breaking take-off."

"It doesn't seem to have harmed him much—but what's he doing here?"

Jason felt mild surprise that the second voice was a girl's. But he wasn't interested enough to go to the trouble of opening his sore eyes.

"Going to Pyrrus. I tried to talk him out of it, of course, but I couldn't change his mind. It's a shame, too, I would like to have done more for him. He's the one who got the money for us."

"Oh, that's awful," the girl said. Jason wondered why it was *awful*. It didn't make sense to his groggy mind. "It would have been much better if he stayed on Darkhan," the girl continued. "He's very nice-looking. I think it's a shame he has to die."

That was too much for Jason. He pried one eye open, then the other. The voice belonged to a girl about twenty-one who was standing next to the bed, gazing down at Jason. She was beautiful.

Jason's eyes opened wider as he realized she was *very* beautiful—with the kind of beauty never found in the civilized galaxy. The women he had known all ran to pale skin, hollow shoulders, gray faces covered with tints and dyes. They were the product of centuries of breeding weaknesses back into the race, as the advance of medicine kept alive more and more non-survival types.

This girl was the direct opposite in every way. She was the product of survival on Pyrrus. The heavy gravity that produced bulging muscles in men, brought out firm strength in straplike female muscles. She had the figure of a goddess, tanned skin and perfectly formed face. Her hair, which was cut short, circled her head like a golden crown. The only unfeminine thing about her was the gun she wore in a bulky forearm holster. When she saw Jason's eyes open she smiled at him. Her teeth were as even and as white as he had expected.

"I'm Meta, pilot of this ship. And you must be—"

"Jason dinAlt. That was a lousy take-off, Meta."

"I'm really very sorry," she laughed. "But being born on a two-G planet does make one a little immune to acceleration. I save fuel too, with the synergy curve—"

Kerk gave a noncommittal grunt. "Come along, Meta, we'll take a look at the cargo. Some of the new stuff will plug the gaps in the perimeter."

"Oh yes," she said, almost clapping her hands with happiness. "I read the specs, they're simply wonderful."

Like a schoolgirl with a new dress. Or a box of candy. That's a great attitude to have towards bombs and flame-throwers. Jason smiled wryly at the thought as he groaned off the couch. The two Pyrrans had gone and he pulled himself painfully through the door after them.

It took him a long time to find his way to the hold. The ship was big and apparently empty of crew. Jason finally found a man sleeping in one of the brightly lit cabins. He recognized him as the driver who had turned the car over to them on Cassylia. The man, who had been sleeping soundly a moment before, opened his eyes as soon as Jason drifted into the room. He was wide awake.

"How do I get to the cargo hold?" Jason asked.

The other told him, closed his eyes and went instantly back to sleep before Jason could even say thanks.

In the hold, Kerk and Meta had opened some of the crates and were chortling with joy over their lethal contents. Meta, a pressure canister in her arms, turned to Jason as he came through the door.

"Just look at this," she said. "This powder in here—why you can eat it like dirt, with less harm. Yet it is instantly deadly to all forms of vegetable life ..." She stopped suddenly as she realized Jason didn't share her extreme pleasure. "I'm sorry. I forgot for a moment there that you weren't a Pyrran. So you don't really understand, do you?"

Before he could answer, the PA speaker called her name.

“Jump time,” she said. “Come with me to the bridge while I do the equations. We can talk there. I know so little about any place except Pyrrus that I have a million questions to ask.”

Jason followed her to the bridge where she relieved the duty officer and began taking readings for the jump-setting. She looked out of place among the machines, a sturdy but supple figure in a simple, one-piece shipsuit. Yet there was no denying the efficiency with which she went about her job.

“Meta, aren’t you a little young to be the pilot of an interstellar ship?”

“Am I?” She thought for a second. “I really don’t know how old pilots are supposed to be. I have been piloting for about three years now and I’m almost twenty. Is that younger than usual?”

Jason opened his mouth—then laughed. “I suppose that all depends on what planet you’re from. Some places you would have trouble getting licensed. But I’ll bet things are different on Pyrrus. By their standards you must rank as an old lady.”

“Now you’re making a joke,” Meta said serenely as she fed a figure into the calculator. “I’ve seen old ladies on some planets. They are wrinkled and have gray hair. I don’t know how old they are, I asked one but she wouldn’t tell me her age. But I’m sure they must be older than anyone on Pyrrus, no one looks like that there.”

“I don’t mean old that way,” Jason groped for the right word. “Not old—but grown-up, mature. An adult.”

“Everyone is grown-up,” she answered. “At least soon after they leave the wards. And they do that when they’re six. My first child is grown-up, and the second one would be, too, only he’s dead. So I *surely* must be.”

That seemed to settle the question for her, though Jason’s thoughts jumped with the alien concepts and background, inherent behind her words.

Meta punched in the last setting, and the course tape began to chunk out of the case. She turned her attention back to Jason. “I’m glad you’re aboard this trip, though I am sorry you are going to Pyrrus. But we’ll have lots of time to talk. There are so many things I want to find out about other planets, and why people go around acting the way they do. Not at all like home where you *know* why people are doing things all the time.” She frowned over the tape for a moment, then turned her attention back to Jason. “What is your home planet like?”

One after another the usual lies he told people came to his lips, and were pushed away. Why bother lying to a girl who really didn’t care if you were serf or noble? To her there were only two kinds of people in the galaxy—Pyrrans, and the rest. For the first time since he had fled from Porgorstors and he found himself telling someone the truth of his origin.

“My home planet? Just about the stuffiest, dullest, dead-end in the universe. You can’t believe the destructive decay of a planet that is mainly agrarian, caste-conscious and completely satisfied with its own boring existence. Not only is there no change—but no one *wants* change. My father was a farmer, so I should have been a farmer too—if I had listened to the advice of my betters. It was unthinkable, as well as forbidden for me to do anything else. And everything I wanted to do was against the law. I was fifteen before I learned to read—out of a book stolen from a noble school.

After that there was no turning back. By the time I stowed aboard an off-world freighter at nineteen I must have broken every law on the planet. Happily. Leaving home for me was just like getting out of prison.”

Meta shook her head at the thought. “I just can’t imagine a place like that. But I’m sure I wouldn’t like it there.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t,” Jason laughed. “So once I was in space, with no law-abiding talents or skills, I just wandered into one thing and another. In this age of technology I was completely out of place. Oh, I suppose I could have done well in some army, but I’m not so good at taking orders. Whenever I gambled I did well, so little by little I just drifted into it. People are the same everywhere, so I manage to make out well wherever I end up.”

“I know what you mean about people being alike—but they are so *different*,” she said. “I’m not being clear at all, am I? What I mean is that at home I know what people will do and why they do it at the same time. People on all the other planets do act alike, as you said, yet I have very much trouble understanding why. For instance, I like to try the local food when we set down on a planet, and if there is time I always do. There are bars and restaurants near every spaceport so I go there. And I always have trouble with the men. They want to buy me drinks, hold my hand—”

“Well, a single girl in those port joints has to expect a certain amount of interest from the men.”

“Oh, I know that,” she said. “What I don’t understand is why they don’t listen when I tell them I am not interested and to go away. They just laugh and pull up a chair, usually. But I have found that one thing works wherever I am. I tell them if they don’t stop bothering me I’ll break their arm.”

“Does that stop them?” Jason asked.

“No, of course not. But after I break their arm they go away. And the others don’t bother me either. It’s a lot of fuss to go through and the food is usually awful.”

Jason didn’t laugh. Particularly when he realized that this girl *could* break the arm of any spaceport thug in the galaxy. She was a strange mixture of naivete and strength, unlike anyone he had ever met before. Once again he realized that he *had* to visit the planet that produced people like her and Kerk.

“Tell me about Pyrrus,” he asked. “Why is it that you and Kerk assume automatically that I will drop dead as soon as I land? What is the planet like?”

All the warmth was gone from her face now. “I can’t tell you. You will have to see for yourself. I know that much after visiting some of the other worlds. Pyrrus is like nothing you galaxy people have ever experienced. You won’t really believe it until it is too late. Will you promise me something?”

“No,” he answered. “At least not until after I hear what it is and decide.”

“Don’t leave the ship when we land. You *should* be safe enough aboard, and I’ll be flying a cargo out within a few weeks.”

“I’ll promise nothing of the sort. I’ll leave when I want to leave.” Jason knew there was logic in her words, but his back was up at her automatic superiority.

Meta finished the jump settings without another word. There was a tension in the room that prevented them both from talking.

It was the next shipday before he saw her again, then it was completely by accident. She was in the astrogation dome when he entered, looking up at the sparkling immensity of the jump sky. For the first time he saw her off duty, wearing something other than a shipsuit. This was a loose, soft robe that accentuated her beauty.

She smiled at him. "The stars are so wonderful," she said. "Come look." Jason came close to her and with an unthinking, almost automatic movement, put his arm around her. Neither did she resent it, for she covered his hand with hers. Then they kissed and it was just the way he knew it would be.

Chapter 6

After that they were together constantly. When Meta was on duty he brought her meals to the bridge and they talked. Jason learned little more about her world since, by unspoken agreement, they didn't discuss it. He talked of the many planets he had visited and the people he had known. She was an appreciative listener and the time went quickly by. They enjoyed each other's company and it was a wonderful trip.

Then it ended.

There were fourteen people aboard the ship, yet Jason had never seen more than two or three at a time. There was a fixed rotation of duties that they followed in the ship's operation. When not on duty the Pyrrans minded their own business in an intense and self-sufficient manner. Only when the ship came out of jump and the PA barked *assembly* did they all get together.

Kerk was giving orders for the landing and questions were snapped back and forth. It was all technical and Jason didn't bother following it. It was the attitude of the Pyrrans that drew his attention. Their talk tended to be faster now as were their motions. They were like soldiers preparing for battle.

Their sameness struck Jason for the first time. Not that they looked alike or did the same things. It was the *way* they moved and reacted that caused the striking similarity. They were like great, stalking cats. Walking fast, tense and ready to spring at all times, their eyes never still for an instant.

Jason tried to talk to Meta after the meeting, but she was almost a stranger. She answered in monosyllables and her eyes never met his, just brushed over them and went on. There was nothing he could really say so she moved to leave. He started to put his hand out to stop her—then thought better of it. There would be other times to talk.

Kerk was the only one who took any notice of him—and then only to order him to an acceleration couch.

Meta's landings were infinitely worse than her take-offs. At least when she landed on Pyrrus. There were sudden acceleration surges in every direction. At one point there was a free fall that seemed endless. There were loud thuds against the hull that shook the framework of the ship. It was more like a battle than a landing, and Jason wondered how much truth there was in that.

When the ship finally landed Jason didn't even know it. The constant 2 G's felt like deceleration. Only the descending moan of the ship's engines convinced him they were down. Unbuckling the straps and sitting up was an effort.

Two G's don't seem that bad—at first. Walking required the same exertion as would carrying a man of his own weight on his shoulders. When Jason lifted his arm to unlatch the door it was heavy as two arms. He shuffled slowly towards the main lock.

They were all there ahead of him, two of the men rolling transparent cylinders from a nearby room. From their obvious weight and the way they clanged when they bumped, Jason knew they were made of transparent metal. He couldn't conceive any possible use for them. Empty cylinders a meter in diameter, longer than a man. One

end solid, the other hinged and sealed. It wasn't until Kerk spun the sealing wheel and opened one of them that their use became apparent.

"Get in," Kerk said. "When you're locked inside you'll be carried out of the ship."

"Thank you, no," Jason told him. "I have no particular desire to make a spectacular landing on your planet sealed up like a packaged sausage."

"Don't be a fool," was Kerk's snapped answer. "We're *all* going out in these tubes. We've been away too long to risk the surface without reorientation."

Jason did feel a little foolish as he saw the others getting into tubes. He picked the nearest one, slid into it feet first, and pulled the lid closed. When he tightened the wheel in the center, it squeezed down against a flexible seal. Within a minute the CO₂ content in the closed cylinder went up and an air regenerator at the bottom hummed into life.

Kerk was the last one in. He checked the seals on all the other tubes first, then jabbed the air-lock override release. As it started cycling he quickly sealed himself in the remaining cylinder. Both inner and outer locks ground slowly open and dim light filtered in through sheets of falling rain.

For Jason, the whole thing seemed an anticlimax. All this preparation for absolutely nothing. Long, impatient minutes passed before a lift truck appeared driven by a Pyrran. He loaded the cylinders onto his truck like so much dead cargo. Jason had the misfortune to be buried at the bottom of the pile so he could see absolutely nothing when they drove outside.

It wasn't until the man-carrying cylinders had been dumped in a metal-walled room, that Jason saw his first native Pyrran life.

The lift truck driver was swinging a thick outer door shut when something flew in through the entrance and struck against the far wall. Jason's eye was caught by the motion, he looked to see what it was when it dropped straight down towards his face.

Forgetful of the metal cylinder wall, he flinched away. The creature struck the transparent metal and clung to it. Jason had the perfect opportunity to examine it in every detail.

It was almost too horrible to be believable. As though it were a bearer of death stripped to the very essentials. A mouth that split the head in two, rows of teeth, serrated and pointed. Leathery, claw-tipped wings, longer claws on the limbs that tore at the metal wall.

Terror rose up in Jason as he saw that the claws were tearing gouges in the transparent metal. Wherever the creature's saliva touched the metal clouded and chipped under the assault of the teeth.

Logic said these were just scratches on the thick tube. They couldn't matter. But blind, unreasoning fear sent Jason curling away as far as he could. Shrinking inside himself, seeking escape.

Only when the flying creature began dissolving did he realize the nature of the room outside. Sprays of steaming liquid came from all sides, raining down until the cylinders were covered. After one last clash of its jaws, the Pyrran animal was washed off and carried away. The liquid drained away through the floor and a second and third shower followed.

While the solutions were being pumped away, Jason fought to bring his emotions into line. He was surprised at himself. No matter how frightful the creature had been, he couldn't understand the fear it could generate through the wall of the sealed tube. His reaction was all out of proportion to the cause. Even with the creature destroyed and washed out of sight it took all of his will power to steady his nerves and bring his breathing back to normal.

Meta walked by outside and he realized the sterilization process was finished. He opened his own tube and climbed wearily out. Meta and the others had gone by this time and only a hawk-faced stranger remained, waiting for him.

"I'm Brucco, in charge of the adaptation clinic. Kerk told me who you were. I'm sorry you're here. Now come along, I want some blood samples."

"Now I feel right at home," Jason said. "The old Pyrran hospitality." Brucco only grunted and stamped out. Jason followed him down a bare corridor into a sterile lab.

The double gravity was tiring, a constant drag on sore muscles. While Brucco ran tests on the blood sample, Jason rested. He had almost dozed off into a painful sleep when Brucco returned with a tray of bottles and hypodermic needles.

"Amazing," he announced. "Not an antibody in your serum that would be of any use on this planet. I have a batch of antigens here that will make you sick as a beast for at least a day. Take off your shirt."

"Have you done this often?" Jason asked. "I mean juice up an outlander so he can enjoy the pleasures of your world?"

Brucco jammed in a needle that felt like it grated on the bone. "Not often at all. Last time was years ago. A half-dozen researchers from some institute, willing to pay well for the chance to study the local life forms. We didn't say no. Always need more galaxy currency."

Jason was already beginning to feel light-headed from the shots. "How many of them lived?" he mumbled vaguely.

"One. We got him off in time. Made them pay in advance of course."

At first Jason thought the Pyrran was joking. Then he remembered they had very little interest in humor of any kind. If one-half of what Meta and Kerk had told him was true, six to one odds weren't bad at all.

There was a bed in the next room and Brucco helped him to it. Jason felt drugged and probably was. He fell into a deep sleep and into the dream.

Fear and hatred mixed in equal parts and washed over him red hot. If this was a dream, he never wanted to sleep again. If it wasn't a dream, he wanted to die. He tried to fight up against it, but only sank in more deeply. There was no beginning and no end to the fear and no way to escape.

When consciousness returned Jason could remember no detail of the nightmare. Just the fear remained. He was soaked with sweat and ached in every muscle. It must have been the massive dose of shots, he finally decided, that and the brutal gravity. That didn't take the taste of fear out of his mouth, though.

Brucco stuck his head in the door then and looked Jason up and down. "Thought you were dead," he said. "Slept the clock around. Don't move, I'll get something to pick you up."

The pickup was in the form of another needle and a glassful of evil-looking fluid. It settled his thirst, but made him painfully aware of gnawing hunger.

"Want to eat?" Brucco asked. "I'll bet you do. I've speeded up your metabolism so you'll build muscle faster. Only way you'll ever beat the gravity. Give you quite an appetite for a while though."

Brucco ate at the same time and Jason had a chance to ask some questions. "When do I get a chance to look around your fascinating planet? So far this trip has been about as interesting as a jail term."

"Relax and enjoy your food. Probably be months before you're able to go outside. If at all."

Jason felt his jaw hanging and closed it with a snap. "Could you possibly tell me why?"

"Of course. You will have to go through the same training course that our children take. It takes them six years. Of course it's their first six years of life. So you might think that you, as an adult, could learn faster. Then again they have the advantage of heredity. All I can say is you'll go outside these sealed buildings when you're ready."

Brucco had finished eating while he talked, and sat staring at Jason's bare arms with growing disgust. "The first thing we want to get you is a gun," he said. "It gives me a sick feeling to see someone without one."

Of course Brucco wore his own gun continually, even within the sealed buildings.

"Every gun is fitted to its owner and would be useless on anyone else," Brucco said. "I'll show you why." He led Jason to an armory jammed with deadly weapons. "Put your arm in this while I make the adjustments."

It was a boxlike machine with a pistol grip on the side. Jason clutched the grip and rested his elbow on a metal loop. Brucco fixed pointers that touched his arm, then copied the results from the meters. Reading the figures from his list he selected various components from bins and quickly assembled a power holster and gun. With the holster strapped to his forearm and the gun in his hand, Jason noticed for the first time they were connected by a flexible cable. The gun fitted his hand perfectly.

"This is the secret of the power holster," Brucco said, tapping the flexible cable. "It is perfectly loose while you are using the weapon. But when you want it returned to the holster—" Brucco made an adjustment and the cable became a stiff rod that whipped the gun from Jason's hand and suspended it in midair.

"Then the return." The rod-cable whirled and snapped the gun back into the holster. "The drawing action is the opposite of this, of course."

"A great gadget," Jason said, "but how *do* I draw? Do I whistle or something for the gun to pop out?"

"No, it is not sonic control," Brucco answered with a sober face. "It is much more precise than that. Here, take your left hand and grasp an imaginary gun butt. Tense your trigger finger. Do you notice the pattern of the tendons in the wrist? Sensitive

actuators touch the tendons in your right wrist. They ignore all patterns except the one that says *hand ready to receive gun*. After a time the mechanism becomes completely automatic. When you want the gun—it is in your hand. When you don't—it is in the holster."

Jason made grasping motions with his right hand, crooked his index finger. There was a sudden, smashing pain against his hand and a loud roar. The gun was in his hand—half the fingers were numb—and smoke curled up from the barrel.

"Of course there are only blank charges in the gun until you learn control. Guns are *always* loaded. There is no safety. Notice the lack of a trigger guard. That enables you to bend your trigger finger a slight bit more when drawing so the gun will fire the instant it touches your hand."

It was without a doubt the most murderous weapon Jason had ever handled, as well as being the hardest to manage. Working against the muscle-burning ache of high gravity, he fought to control the devilish device. It had an infuriating way of vanishing into the holster just as he was about to pull the trigger. Even worse was the tendency to leap out before he was quite ready. The gun went to the position where his hand should be. If the fingers weren't correctly placed, they were crashed aside. Jason only stopped the practice when his entire hand was one livid bruise.

Complete mastery would come with time, but he could already understand why the Pyrrans never removed their guns. It would be like removing a part of your own body. The movement of gun from holster to hand was too fast for him to detect. It was certainly faster than the neural current that shaped the hand into the gun-holding position. For all apparent purposes it was like having a lightning bolt in your fingertip. Point the finger and *blamm*, there's the explosion.

Brucco had left Jason to practice alone. When his aching hand could take no more, he stopped and headed back towards his own quarters. Turning a corner he had a quick glimpse of a familiar figure going away from him.

"Meta! Wait for a second—I want to talk to you."

She turned impatiently as he shuffled up, going as fast as he could in the doubled gravity. Everything about her seemed different from the girl he had known on the ship. Heavy boots came as high as her knees, her figure was lost in bulky coveralls of some metallic fabric. The trim waist was bulged out by a belt of canisters. Her very expression was coldly distant.

"I've missed you," he said. "I hadn't realized you were in this building." He reached for her hand but she moved it out of his reach.

"What is it you want?" she asked.

"What is it I want!" he echoed with barely concealed anger. "This is Jason, remember me? We're friends. It is allowed for friends to talk without 'wanting' anything."

"What happened on the ship has nothing to do with what happens on Pyrrus." She started forward impatiently as she talked. "I have finished my reconditioning and must return to work. You'll be staying here in the sealed buildings so I won't be seeing you."

"Why don't you say 'with the rest of the children'—that's what your tone implies? And don't try walking out, there are some things we have to settle first—"

Jason made the mistake of putting out his hand to stop her. He didn't really know what happened next. One instant he was standing—the next he sprawled suddenly on the floor. His shoulder was badly bruised, and Meta had vanished down the corridor.

Limping back to his own room he cursed women in general and Meta in particular. Dropping onto his rock-hard bed he tried to remember the reasons that had brought him here in the first place. And weighed them against the perpetual torture of the gravity, the fear-filled dreams it inspired, the automatic contempt of these people for any outsider. He quickly checked the growing tendency to feel sorry for himself. By Pyrran standards he *was* soft and helpless. If he wanted them to think any better of him, he would have to change a good deal.

He sank into a fatigue-drugged sleep then, that was broken only by the screaming fear of his dreams.

Chapter 7

In the morning Jason awoke with a bad headache and the feeling he had never been to sleep. As he took some of the carefully portioned stimulants that Brucco had given him, he wondered again about the combination of factors that filled his sleep with such horror.

“Eat quickly,” Brucco told him when they met in the dining room. “I can no longer spare you time for individual instruction. You will join the regular classes and take the prescribed courses. Only come to me if there is some special problem that the instructors or trainers can’t handle.”

The classes—as Jason should have expected—were composed of stern-faced little children. With their compact bodies and no-nonsense mannerisms they were recognizably Pyrran. But they were still children enough to consider it very funny to have an adult in their classes. Jammed behind one of the tiny desks, the red-faced Jason did not think it was much of a joke.

All resemblance to a normal school ended with the physical form of the classroom. For one thing, every child—no matter how small—packed a gun. And the courses were all involved with survival. The only possible grade in a curriculum like this was one hundred per cent and students stayed with a lesson until they mastered it perfectly. No courses were offered in the normal scholastic subjects. Presumably these were studied after the child graduated survival school and could face the world alone. Which was a logical and cold-hearted way of looking at things. In fact, logical and cold-hearted could describe any Pyrran activity.

Most of the morning was spent on the operation of one of the medikits that strapped around the waist. This was a poison analyzer that was pressed over a puncture wound. If any toxins were present, the antidote was automatically injected on the site. Simple in operation but incredibly complex in construction. Since all Pyrrans serviced their own equipment—you could then only blame yourself if it failed—they had to learn the construction and repair of all the devices. Jason did much better than the child students, though the effort exhausted him.

In the afternoon he had his first experience with a training machine. His instructor was a twelve-year-old boy, whose cold voice didn’t conceal his contempt for the soft off-worlder.

“All the training machines are physical duplicates of the real surface of the planet, corrected constantly as the life forms change. The only difference between them is the varying degree of deadliness. This first machine you will use is of course the one infants are put into—”

“You’re too kind,” Jason murmured. “Your flattery overwhelms me.” The instructor continued, taking no notice of the interruption.

“... Infants are put into as soon as they can crawl. It is real in substance, though completely deactivated.”

Training machine was the wrong word, Jason realized as they entered through the thick door. This was a chunk of the outside world duplicated in an immense

chamber. It took very little suspension of reality for him to forget the painted ceiling and artificial sun high above and imagine himself outdoors at last. The scene *seemed* peaceful enough. Though clouds banking on the horizon threatened a violent Pyrran storm.

“You must wander around and examine things,” the instructor told Jason.
 “Whenever you touch something with your hand, you will be told about it. Like this—”

The boy bent over and pushed his finger against a blade of the soft grass that covered the ground. Immediately a voice barked from hidden speakers.

“Poison grass. Boots to be worn at all times.”

Jason kneeled and examined the grass. The blade was tipped with a hard, shiny hook. He realized with a start that every single blade of grass was the same. The soft green lawn was a carpet of death. As he straightened up he glimpsed something under a broad-leafed plant. A crouching, scale-covered animal, whose tapered head terminated in a long spike.

“What’s *that* in the bottom of my garden?” he asked. “You certainly give the babies pleasant playmates.” Jason turned and realized he was talking to the air, the instructor was gone. He shrugged and petted the scaly monstrosity.

“Horndevil,” the impersonal voice said from midair. “Clothing and shoes no protection. Kill it.”

A sharp *crack* shattered the silence as Jason’s gun went off. The horndevil fell on its side, keyed to react to the blank charge.

“Well ... I *am* learning,” Jason said, and the thought pleased him. The words *kill it* had been used by Brucco while teaching him to use the gun. Their stimulus had reached an unconscious level. He was aware of wanting to shoot only after he had heard the shot. His respect for Pyrran training techniques went up.

Jason spent a thoroughly unpleasant afternoon wandering in the child’s garden of horror. Death was everywhere. While all the time the disembodied voice gave him stern advice in simple language. So he could do unto, rather than being done in. He had never realized that violent death could come in so many repulsive forms. *Everything* here was deadly to man—from the smallest insect to the largest plant.

Such singleness of purpose seemed completely unnatural. Why was this planet so alien to human life? He made a mental note to ask Brucco. Meanwhile he tried to find one life form that wasn’t out for his blood. He didn’t succeed. After a long search he found the only thing that when touched didn’t elicit deadly advice. This was a chunk of rock that projected from a meadow of poison grass. Jason sat on it with a friendly feeling and pulled his feet up. An oasis of peace. Some minutes passed while he rested his gravity-weary body.

“ROTFUNGUS—DO NOT TOUCH!”

The voice blasted at twice its normal volume and Jason leaped as if he had been shot. The gun was in his hand, nosing about for a target. Only when he bent over and looked closely at the rock where he had been sitting, did he understand. There were flaky gray patches that hadn’t been there when he sat down.

“Oh you tricky devils!” he shouted at the machine. “How many kids have you frightened off that rock after they thought they had found a little peace!” He resented the snide bit of conditioning, but respected it at the same time. Pyrrans learned very early in life that there was no safety on this planet—except that which they provided for themselves.

While he was learning about Pyrrus he was gaining new insight into the Pyrrans as well.

Chapter 8

Days turned into weeks in the school, cut off from the world outside. Jason almost became proud of his ability to deal death. He recognized all the animals and plants in the nursery room and had been promoted to a trainer where the beasts made sluggish charges at him. His gun picked off the attackers with dull regularity. The constant, daily classes were beginning to bore him as well.

Though the gravity still dragged at him, his muscles were making great efforts to adjust. After the daily classes he no longer collapsed immediately into bed. Only the nightmares got worse. He had finally mentioned them to Brucco, who mixed up a sleeping potion that took away most of their effect. The dreams were still there, but Jason was only vaguely aware of them upon awakening.

By the time Jason had mastered all the gadgetry that kept the Pyrrans alive, he had graduated to a most realistic trainer that was only a hair-breadth away from the real thing. The difference was just in quality. The insect poisons caused swelling and pain instead of instant death. Animals could cause bruises and tear flesh, but stopped short of ripping off limbs. You couldn't get killed in this trainer, but could certainly come very close to it.

Jason wandered through this large and rambling jungle with the rest of the five-year-olds. There was something a bit humorous, yet sad, about their unchildlike grimness. Though they still might laugh in their quarters, they realized there was no laughing outside. To them survival was linked up with social acceptance and desirability. In this way Pyrrus was a simple black-and-white society. To prove your value to yourself and your world, you only had to stay alive. This had great importance in racial survival, but had very stultifying effects on individual personality. Children were turned into like-faced killers, always on the alert to deal out death.

Some of the children graduated into the outside world and others took their places. Jason watched this process for a while before he realized that all of those from the original group he had entered with were gone. That same day he looked up the chief of the adaptation center.

"Brucco," Jason asked, "how long do you plan to keep me in this kindergarten shooting gallery?"

"You're not being 'kept' here," Brucco told him in his usual irritated tone. "You will be here until you qualify for the outside."

"Which I have a funny feeling will be never. I can now field strip and reassemble every one of your blasted gadgets in the dark. I am a dead shot with this cannon. At this present moment, if I had to, I could write a book on the Complete Flora and Fauna of Pyrrus, and How to Kill It. Perhaps I don't do as well as my six-year-old companions, but I have a hunch I do about as good a job now as I ever will. Is that true?"

Brucco squirmed with the effort to be evasive, yet didn't succeed. "I think, that is, you know you weren't born here, and—"

"Come, come," Jason said with glee, "a straight-faced old Pyrran like you shouldn't try to lie to one of the weaker races that specialize in that sort of thing. It goes without saying that I'll always be sluggish with this gravity, as well as having other

inborn handicaps. I admit that. We're not talking about that now. The question is—will I improve with more training, or have I reached a peak of my own *development* now?"

Brucco sweated. "With the passage of time there will be improvement of course—"

"Sly devil!" Jason wagged a finger at him. "Yes or no, now. Will I improve *now* by more training *now*?"

"No," Brucco said, and still looked troubled. Jason sized him up like a poker hand.

"Now let's think about that. I won't improve—yet I'm still stuck here. That's no accident. So you must have been ordered to keep me here. And from what I have seen of this planet, admittedly very little, I would say that Kerk ordered you to keep me here. Is that right?"

"He was only doing it for your own sake," Brucco explained, "trying to keep you alive."

"The truth is out," Jason said, "so let us now forget about it. I didn't come here to shoot robots with your offspring. So please show me the street door. Or is there a graduating ceremony first? Speeches, handing out school pins, sabers overhead—"

"Nothing like that," Brucco snapped. "I don't see how a grown man like you can talk such nonsense all the time. There is none of that, of course. Only some final work in the partial survival chamber. That is a compound that connects with the outside—really is a part of the outside—except the most violent life forms are excluded. And even some of those manage to find their way in once in a while."

"When do I go?" Jason shot the question.

"Tomorrow morning. Get a good night's sleep first. You'll need it."

There was one bit of ceremony attendant with the graduation. When Jason came into his office in the morning, Brucco slid a heavy gun clip across the table.

"These are live bullets," he said. "I'm sure you'll be needing them. After this your gun will always be loaded."

They came up to a heavy air lock, the only locked door Jason had seen in the center. While Brucco unlocked it and threw the bolts, a sober-faced eight-year-old with a bandaged leg limped up.

"This is Grif," Brucco said. "He will stay with you, wherever you go, from now on."

"My personal bodyguard?" Jason asked, looking down at the stocky child who barely reached his waist.

"You might call him that." Brucco swung the door open. "Grif tangled with a sawbird, so he won't be able to do any real work for a while. You yourself admitted that you will never be able to equal a Pyrran, so you should be glad of a little protection."

"Always a kind word, that's you, Brucco," Jason said. He bent over and shook hands with the boy. Even the eight-year-olds had a bone-crushing grip.

The two of them entered the lock and Brucco swung the inner door shut behind them. As soon as it was sealed the outer door opened automatically. It was only partly open when Grif's gun blasted twice. Then they stepped out onto the surface of Pyrrus, over the smoking body of one of its animals.

Very symbolic, Jason thought. He was also bothered by the realization that he hadn't remembered to look for something coming in. Then, too, he couldn't even identify the beast from its charred remains. He glanced around, hoping he would be able to fire first himself, next time.

This was an unfulfilled hope. The few beasts that came their way were always seen first by the boy. After an hour of this, Jason was so irritated that he blasted an evil-looking thorn plant out of existence. He hoped that Grif wouldn't look too closely at it. Of course the boy did.

"That plant wasn't close. It is stupid to waste good ammunition on a plant," Grif said.

There was no real trouble during the day. Jason ended by being bored, though soaked by the frequent rainstorms. If Grif was capable of carrying on a conversation, he didn't show it. All Jason's gambits failed. The following day went the same way. On the third day, Brucco appeared and looked Jason carefully up and down.

"I don't like to say it, but I suppose you are as ready to leave now as you ever will be. Change the virus filter noseplugs every day. Always check boots for tears and metalcloth suiting for rips. Medikit supplies renewed once a week."

"And wipe my nose and wear my galoshes. Anything else?" Jason asked.

Brucco started to say something, then changed his mind. "Nothing that you shouldn't know well by now. Keep alert. And ... good luck." He followed up the words with a crushing handshake that was totally unexpected. As soon as the numbness left Jason's hand, he and Grif went out through the large entrance lock.

Chapter 9

Real as they had been, the training chambers had not prepared him for the surface of Pyrrus. There was the basic similarity of course. The feel of the poison grass underfoot and the erratic flight of a stingwing in the last instant before Grif blasted it. But these were scarcely noticeable in the crash of the elements around him.

A heavy rain was falling, more like a sheet of water than individual drops. Gusts of wind tore at it, hurling the deluge into his face. He wiped his eyes clear and could barely make out the conical forms of two volcanoes on the horizon, vomiting out clouds of smoke and flame. The reflection of this inferno was a sullen redness on the clouds that raced by in banks above them.

There was a rattle on his hard hat and something bounced off to splash to the ground. He bent over and picked up a hailstone as thick as his thumb. A sudden flurry of hail hammered painfully at his back and neck, he straightened hurriedly.

As quickly as it started the storm was over. The sun burned down, melting the hailstones and sending curls of steam up from the wet street. Jason sweated inside his armored clothing. Yet before they had gone a block it was raining again and he shook with chill.

Grif trudged steadily along, indifferent to the weather or the volcanoes that rumbled on the horizon and shook the ground beneath their feet. Jason tried to ignore his discomfort and match the boy's pace.

The walk was a depressing one. The heavy, squat buildings loomed grayly through the rain, more than half of them in ruins. They walked on a pedestrian way in the middle of the street. The occasional armored trucks went by on both sides of them. The midstreet sidewalk puzzled Jason until Grif blasted something that hurtled out of a ruined building towards them. The central location gave them some chance to see what was coming. Suddenly Jason was very tired.

"Grif, this city of yours is sure down at the heels. I hope the other ones are in better shape."

"I don't know what you mean talking about heels. But there are no other cities. Some mining camps that can't be located inside the perimeter. But no other cities."

This surprised Jason. He had always visualized the planet with more than one city. There were a *lot* of things he didn't know about Pyrrus, he realized suddenly. All of his efforts since landing had been taken up with the survival studies. There were a number of questions he wanted to ask. But ask them of somebody other than his grouchy eight-year-old bodyguard. There was one person who would be best equipped to tell him what he wanted to know.

"Do you know Kerk?" he asked the boy. "Apparently he's your ambassador to a lot of places, but his last name—"

"Sure, everybody knows Kerk. But he's busy, you shouldn't see him."

Jason shook a finger at him. "Minder of my body you may be. But minder of my soul you are not. What do you say I call the shots and you go along to shoot the monsters? O.K.?"

They took shelter from a sudden storm of fist-sized hailstones. Then, with ill grace, Grif led the way to one of the larger, central buildings. There were more people here and some of them even glanced at Jason for a minute, before turning back to their business. Jason dragged himself up two flights of stairs before they reached a door marked CO-ORDINATION AND SUPPLY.

“Kerk in here?” Jason asked.

“Sure,” the boy told him. “He’s in charge.”

“Fine. Now you get a nice cold drink, or your lunch, or something, and meet me back here in a couple of hours. I imagine Kerk can do as good a job of looking after me as you can.”

The boy stood doubtfully for a few seconds, then turned away. Jason wiped off some more sweat and pushed through the door.

There were a handful of people in the office beyond. None of them looked up at Jason or asked his business. Everything has a purpose on Pyrrus. If he came there—he must have had a good reason. No one would ever think to ask him what he wanted. Jason, used to the petty officialdom of a thousand worlds, waited for a few moments before he understood. There was only one other door. He shuffled over and opened it.

Kerk looked up from a desk strewn about with papers and ledgers. “I was wondering when you would show up,” he said.

“A lot sooner if you hadn’t prevented it,” Jason told him as he dropped wearily into a chair. “It finally dawned on me that I could spend the rest of my life in your blood-thirsty nursery school if I didn’t do something about it. So here I am.”

“Ready to return to the ‘civilized’ worlds, now that you’ve seen enough of Pyrrus?”

“I am not,” Jason said. “And I’m getting very tired of everyone telling me to leave. I’m beginning to think that you and the rest of the Pyrrans are trying to hide something.”

Kerk smiled at the thought. “What could we have to hide? I doubt if any planet has as simple and one-directional an existence as ours.”

“If that’s true, then you certainly wouldn’t mind answering a few direct questions about Pyrrus?”

Kerk started to protest, then laughed. “Well done. I should know better by now than to argue with you. What do you want to know?”

Jason tried to find a comfortable position on the hard chair, then gave up. “What’s the population of your planet?” he asked.

For a second Kerk hesitated, then said, “Roughly thirty thousand. That is not very much for a planet that has been settled this long, but the reason for that is obvious.”

“All right, population thirty thousand,” Jason said. “Now how about surface control of your planet. I was surprised to find out that this city within its protective wall—the perimeter—is the only one on the planet. Let’s not consider the mining camps, since they are obviously just extensions of the city. Would you say then, that you people control more or less of the planet’s surface than you did in the past?”

Kerk picked up a length of steel pipe from the desk, that he used as a paperweight, and toyed with it as he thought. The thick steel bent like rubber at his touch, as he concentrated on his answer.

“That’s hard to say offhand. There must be records of that sort of thing, though I wouldn’t know where to find them. It depends on so many factors—”

“Let’s forget that for now then,” Jason said. “I have another question that’s really more relevant. Wouldn’t you say that the population of Pyrrus is declining steadily, year after year?”

There was a sharp *twang* as the steel snapped in Kerk’s fingers, the pieces dropping to the floor. He stood, over Jason, his hands extended towards the smaller man, his face flushed and angry.

“Don’t ever say that,” he roared. “Don’t let me ever hear you say that again!”

Jason sat as quietly as he could, talking slowly and picking out each word with care. His life hung in the balance.

“Don’t get angry, Kerk. I meant no harm. I’m on your side, remember? I can talk to you because you’ve seen much more of the universe than the Pyrrans who have never left the planet. You are used to discussing things. You know that words are just symbols. We can talk and know you don’t have to lose your temper over mere words—”

Kerk slowly lowered his arms and stepped away. Then he turned and poured himself a glass of water from a bottle on the desk. He kept his back turned to Jason while he drank.

Very little of the sweat that Jason wiped from his sopping face was caused by the heat in the room.

“I’m ... sorry I lost my temper,” Kerk said, dropping heavily into his chair. “Doesn’t usually happen. Been working hard lately, must have got my temper on edge.” He made no mention of what Jason had said.

“Happens to all of us,” Jason told him. “I won’t begin to describe the condition my nerves were in when I hit this planet. I’m finally forced to admit that everything you said about Pyrrus is true. It is the most deadly spot in the system. And only native-born Pyrrans could possibly survive here. I can manage to fumble along a bit after my training, but I know I would never stand a chance on my own. You probably know I have an eight-year-old as a bodyguard. Gives a good idea of my real status here.”

Anger suppressed, Kerk was back in control of himself now. His eyes narrowed in thought. “Surprises me to hear you say that. Never thought I would hear you admit that anyone could be better than you at anything. Isn’t that why you came here? To prove that you were as good as any native-born Pyrran?”

“Score one for your side,” Jason admitted. “I didn’t think it showed that much. And I’m glad to see your mind isn’t as muscle-bound as your body. Yes, I’ll admit that was probably my main reason for coming, that and curiosity.”

Kerk was following his own train of thoughts, and puzzled where they were leading him. “You came here to prove that you were as good as any native-born Pyrran. Yet now you admit that any eight-year-old can outdraw you. That just doesn’t stack up with what I know about you. If you give with one hand, you must be taking back with the other. In what way do you still feel your natural superiority?”

Jason thought a long time before answering.

“I’ll tell you,” he finally said. “But don’t snap my neck for it. I’m gambling that your civilized mind can control your reflexes. Because I have to talk about things that are strictly taboo on Pyrrus.

“In your people’s eyes I’m a weakling because I come from off-world. Realize though, that this is also my strength. I can see things that are hidden from you by long association. You know, the old business of not being able to see the forest for the trees in the way.” Kerk nodded agreement and Jason went on.

“To continue the analogy further, I landed from an airship, and at first all I *could* see was the forest. To me certain facts are obvious. I think that you people know them too, only you keep your thoughts carefully repressed. They are hidden thoughts that are completely taboo. I am going to say one of them out loud now and hope you can control yourself well enough to not kill me.”

Kerk’s great hands tightened on the arms of his chair, the only sign that he had heard. Jason talked quietly, as smoothly and easily as a lancet probing into a brain.

“Human beings are losing the war on Pyrrus. There is no chance they can win. They could leave for another planet, but that wouldn’t be victory. Yet, if they stay and continue this war, they only prolong a particularly bloody form of racial suicide. With each generation the population drops. Until eventually the planet will win.”

One arm of Kerk’s plastic and steel chair tore loose under the crushing grasp of his fingers. He didn’t notice it. The rest of his body was rock-still and his eyes fixed on Jason.

Looking away from the fractured chair, Jason sought for the right words.

“This is not a real war, but a disastrous treating of symptoms. Like cutting off cancerous fingers one by one. The only result can be ultimate death. None of you seem to realize that. All you see are the trees. It has never occurred to you that you could treat the *causes* of this war and end it forever.”

Kerk dropped the arm of the chair clattering to the floor. He sat up, astonished. “What the devil do you mean? You sound like a grubber.”

Jason didn’t ask what a grubber was—but he filed the name.

“Call me a Pyrran by adoption. I want this planet to survive as much as you do. I think this war can be ended by finding the *causes*—and changing them, whatever they are.”

“You’re talking nonsense,” Kerk said. “This is just an alien world that must be battled. The causes are self-obvious facts of existence.”

“No, they’re not,” Jason insisted. “Consider for a second. When you are away for any length of time from this planet, you must take a refresher course. To see how things have changed for the worse while you were gone. Well, that’s a linear progression. If things get worse when you extend into the future, then they have to get better if you extend into the past. It is also good theory—though I don’t know if the facts will bear me out—to say that if you extend it far enough into the past you will reach a time when mankind and Pyrrus were not at war with each other.”

Kerk was beyond speech now, only capable of sitting and listening while Jason drove home the blows of inescapable logic.

“There is evidence to support this theory. Even you will admit that I, if I am no match for Pyrran life, am surely well versed in it. And all Pyrran flora and fauna I’ve seen have one thing in common. They’re not functional. *None* of their immense armory of weapons is used against each other. Their toxins don’t seem to operate against Pyrran life. They are good only for dispensing death to Homo sapiens. And *that* is a physical impossibility. In the three hundred years that men have been on this planet, the life forms couldn’t have naturally adapted in this manner.”

“But they *have* done it!” Kerk bellowed.

“You are so right,” Jason told him calmly. “And if they have done it there must be some agency at work. Operating how—I have no idea. But something has caused the life on Pyrrus to declare war, and I’d like to find out what that something is. What was the dominant life form here when your ancestors landed?”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t know,” Kerk said. “You’re not suggesting, are you, that there are sentient beings on Pyrrus other than those of human descent? Creatures who are organizing the planet to battle us?”

“I’m not suggesting it—you are. That means you’re getting the idea. I have no idea what caused this change, but I would sure like to find out. Then see if it can be changed back. Nothing promised, of course. You’ll agree, though, that it is worth investigating.”

Fist smacking into his palm, his heavy footsteps shaking the building, Kerk paced back and forth the length of the room. He was at war with himself. New ideas fought old beliefs. It was so sudden—and so hard not to believe.

Without asking permission Jason helped himself to some chilled water from the bottle, and sank back into the chair, exhausted. Something whizzed in through the open window, tearing a hole in the protective screen. Kerk blasted it without changing stride, without even knowing he had done it.

The decision didn’t take long. Geared to swift activity, the big Pyrran found it impossible not to decide quickly. The pacing stopped and a finger stabbed at Jason.

“I don’t say you have convinced me, but I find it impossible to find a ready answer to your arguments. So until I do, we will have to operate as if they are true. Now what do you plan to do, what *can* you do?”

Jason ticked the points off on his fingers. “One, I’ll need a place to live and work that is well protected. So instead of spending my energies on just remaining alive I can devote some study to this project. Two, I want someone to help me—and act as a bodyguard at the same time. And someone, please, with a little more scope of interest than my present watchdog. I would suggest Meta for the job.”

“Meta?” Kerk was surprised. “She is a space pilot and defense-screen operator, what good could she possibly be on a project like this?”

“The most good possible. She has had experience on other worlds and can shift her point of view—at least a bit. And she must know as much about this planet as any other educated adult and can answer any questions I ask.” Jason smiled. “In addition to which she is an attractive girl, whose company I enjoy.”

Kerk grunted. “I was wondering if you would get around to mentioning that last reason. The others make sense though, so I’m not going to argue. I’ll round up a

replacement for her and have Meta sent here. There are plenty of sealed buildings you can use.”

After talking to one of the assistants from the outer office, Kerk made some calls on the screen. The correct orders were quickly issued. Jason watched it all with interest.

“Pardon me for asking,” he finally said. “But are you the dictator of this planet? You just snap your fingers and they all jump.”

“I suppose it looks that way,” Kerk admitted. “But that is just an illusion. No one is in complete charge on Pyrrus, neither is there anything resembling a democratic system. After all, our total population is about the size of an army division. Everyone does the job they are best qualified for. Various activities are separated into departments with the most qualified person in charge. I run Co-ordination and Supply, which is about the loosest category. We fill in the gaps between departments and handle procuring from off-planet.”

Meta came in then and talked to Kerk. She completely ignored Jason’s presence. “I was relieved and sent here,” she said. “What is it? Change in flight schedule?”

“You might call it that,” Kerk said. “As of now you are dismissed from all your old assignments and assigned to a new department: Investigation and Research. That tired-looking fellow there is your department head.”

“A sense of humor,” Jason said. “The only native-born one on Pyrrus. Congratulations, there’s hope for the planet yet.”

Meta glanced back and forth between them. “I don’t understand. I can’t believe it. I mean a new department—why?”

“I’m sorry,” Kerk said. “I didn’t mean to be cruel. I thought perhaps you might feel more at ease. What I said was true. Jason has a way—or may have a way—to be of immense value to Pyrrus. Will you help him?”

Meta had her composure back. And a little anger. “Do I have to? Is that an order? You know I have work to do. I’m sure you will realize it is more important than something a person from *off-planet* might imagine. He can’t really understand—”

“Yes. It’s an order.” The snap was back in Kerk’s voice. Meta flushed at the tone.

“Perhaps I can explain,” Jason broke in. “After all the whole thing is my idea. But first I would like your co-operation. Will you take the clip out of your gun and give it to Kerk?”

Meta looked frightened, but Kerk nodded in solemn agreement. “Just for a few minutes, Meta. I have my gun so you will be safe here. I think I know what Jason has in mind, and from personal experience I’m afraid he is right.”

Reluctantly Meta passed over the clip and cleared the charge in the gun’s chamber. Only then did Jason explain.

“I have a theory about life on Pyrrus, and I’m afraid I’ll have to shatter some illusions when I explain. To begin with, the fact must be admitted that your people are slowly losing the war here and will eventually be destroyed—”

Before he was half through the sentence, Meta’s gun was directed between his eyes and she was wildly snapping the trigger. There was only hatred and revulsion in her expression. Kerk took her by the shoulders and sat her in his chair, before anything

worse happened. It took a while before she could calm down enough to listen to Jason's words. It is not easy to have the carefully built-up falsehoods of a lifetime shattered. Only the fact that she had seen something of other worlds enabled her to listen at all.

The light of unreason was still in her eyes when he had finished, telling her the things he and Kerk had discussed. She sat tensely, pushed forward against Kerk's hands, as if they were the only things that stopped her from leaping at Jason.

"Maybe that is too much to assimilate at one sitting," Jason said. "So let's put it in simpler terms. I believe we can find a reason for this unrelenting hatred of humans. Perhaps we don't smell right. Maybe I'll find an essence of crushed Pyrran bugs that will render us immune when we rub it in. I don't know yet. But whatever the results, we *must* make the investigation. Kerk agrees with me on that."

Meta looked at Kerk and he nodded agreement. Her shoulders slumped in sudden defeat. She whispered the words.

"I ... can't say I agree, or even understand all that you said. But I'll help you. If Kerk thinks that it is the right thing."

"I do," he said. "Now, do you want the clip back for your gun? Not planning to take any more shots at Jason?"

"That was foolish of me," she said coldly while she reloaded the gun. "I don't need a gun. If I had to kill him, I could do it with my bare hands."

"I love you, too," Jason smiled at her. "Are you ready to go now?"

"Of course." She brushed a fluffy curl of hair into place. "First we'll find a place where you can stay. I'll take care of that. After that the work of the new department is up to you."

Chapter 10

There were empty rooms in one of the computer buildings. These were completely sealed to keep stray animal life out of the delicate machinery. While Meta checked a bed-roll out of stores, Jason painfully dragged a desk, table and chairs in from a nearby empty office. When she returned with a pneumatic bed he instantly dropped on it with a grateful sigh. Her lip curled a bit at his obvious weakness.

“Get used to the sight,” he said. “I intend to do as much of my work as I can, while maintaining a horizontal position. You will be my strong right arm. And right now, Right Arm, I wish you could scare me up something to eat. I also intend to do most of my eating in the previously mentioned prone condition.”

Snorting with disgust, Meta stamped out. While she was gone, Jason chewed the end of a stylus thoughtfully, then made some careful notes.

After they had finished the almost-tasteless meal he began the search.

“Meta, where can I find historical records of Pyrrus?”

“I’ve never heard of any ... I really don’t know.”

“But there has to be something—*somewhere*,” he insisted. “Even if your present-day culture devotes all of its time and energies to survival, you can be sure it wasn’t always that way. All the time it was developing, people were keeping records, making notes. Now where do we look? Do you have a library here?”

“Of course,” she said. “We have an excellent technical library. But I’m sure there wouldn’t be any of *that* sort of thing there.”

Trying not to groan, Jason stood up. “Let me be the judge of that. Just lead the way.”

Operation of the library was completely automatic. A projected index gave the call number for any text that had to be consulted. The tape was delivered to the charge desk thirty seconds after the number had been punched. Returned tapes were dropped through a hopper and refiled automatically. The mechanism worked smoothly.

“Wonderful,” Jason said, pushing away from the index. “A tribute to technological ingenuity. Only it contains nothing of any value to us. Just reams of textbooks.”

“What *else* should be in a library?” Meta sounded sincerely puzzled.

Jason started to explain, then changed his mind. “Later we will go into that,” he said. “Much later. Now we have to find a lead. Is it possible that there are any tapes—or even printed books—that aren’t filed through this machine?”

“It seems unlikely, but we could ask Poli. He lives here somewhere and is in charge of the library—filing new books and tending the machinery.”

The single door into the rear of the building was locked, and no amount of pounding could rouse the caretaker.

“If he’s alive, this should do it,” Jason said. He pressed the out-of-order button on the control panel. It had the desired affect. Within five minutes the door opened and Poli dragged himself through it.

Death usually came swiftly on Pyrrus. If wounds slowed a man down, the ever-ready forces of destruction quickly finished the job. Poli was the exception to this rule. Whatever had attacked him originally had done an efficient job. Most of the lower part of his face was gone. His left arm was curled and useless. The damage to his body and legs had left him with the bare capability to stumble from one spot to the next.

Yet he still had one good arm as well as his eyesight. He could work in the library and relieve a fully fit man. How long he had been dragging the useless husk of a body around the building, no one knew. In spite of the pain that filled his red-rimmed, moist eyes, he had stayed alive. Growing old, older than any other Pyrran as far as Jason had seen. He tottered forward and turned off the alarm that had called him.

When Jason started to explain the old man took no notice. Only after the librarian had rummaged a hearing aid out of his clothes, did Jason realize he was deaf as well. Jason explained again what he searched for. Poli nodded and printed his answer on a tablet.

there are many old books—in the storerooms below

Most of the building was taken up by the robot filing and sorting apparatus. They moved slowly through the banks of machinery, following the crippled librarian to a barred door in the rear. He pointed to it. While Jason and Meta fought to open the age-incrusted bars, he wrote another note on his tablet.

not opened for many years, rats

Jason's and Meta's guns appeared reflexively in their hands as they read the message. Jason finished opening the door by himself. The two native Pyrrans stood facing the opening gap. It was well they did. Jason could never have handled what came through that door.

He didn't even open it for himself. Their sounds at the door must have attracted all the vermin in the lower part of the building. Jason had thrown the last bolt and started to pull on the handle—when the door was *pushed* open from the other side.

Open the gateway to hell and see what comes out. Meta and Poli stood shoulder to shoulder firing into the mass of loathsomeness that boiled through the door. Jason jumped to one side and picked off the occasional animal that came his way. The destruction seemed to go on forever.

Long minutes passed before the last clawed beast made its death rush. Meta and Poli waited expectantly for more, they were happily excited by this chance to deal destruction. Jason felt a little sick after the silent ferocious attack. A ferocity that the Pyrrans reflected. He saw a scratch on Meta's face where one of the beasts had caught her. She seemed oblivious to it.

Pulling out his medikit, Jason circled the piled bodies. Something stirred in their midst and a crashing shot ploughed into it. Then he reached the girl and pushed the analyzer probes against the scratch. The machine clicked and Meta jumped as the antitoxin needle stabbed down. She realized for the first time what Jason was doing.

"Thank you," she said.

Poli had a powerful battery lamp and, by unspoken agreement, Jason carried it. Crippled though he was, the old man was still a Pyrran when it came to handling a gun. They slowly made their way down the refuse-laden stairs.

“What a stench,” Jason grimaced.

At the foot of the stairs they looked around. There *had* been books and records there at one time. They had been systematically chewed, eaten and destroyed for decades.

“I like the care you take with your old books,” Jason said disgustedly.

“They could have been of no importance,” Meta said coolly, “or they would be filed correctly in the library upstairs.”

Jason wandered gloomily through the rooms. Nothing remained of any value. Fragments and scraps of writing and printing. Never enough in one spot to bother collecting. With the toe of one armored boot, he kicked angrily at a pile of debris, ready to give up the search. There was a glint of rusty metal under the dirt.

“Hold this!” He gave the light to Meta and began scratching aside the rubble. A flat metal box with a dial lock built into it, was revealed.

“Why that’s a log box!” Meta said, surprised.

“That’s what I thought,” Jason said.

Chapter 11

RESEALING the cellar, they carried the box back to Jason's new office. Only after spraying with decontaminant, did they examine it closely. Meta picked out engraved letters on the lid.

"S. T. POLLUX VICTORY—that must be the name of the spacer this log came from. But I don't recognize the class, or whatever it is the initials *S. T.* stand for."

"Stellar Transport," Jason told her, as he tried the lock mechanism. "I've heard of them but I've never seen one. They were built during the last wave of galactic expansion. Really nothing more than gigantic metal containers, put together in space. After they were loaded with people, machinery and supplies, they would be towed to whatever planetary system had been chosen. These same tugs and one-shot rockets would brake the *S. T.*'s in for a landing. Then leave them there. The hull was a ready source of metal and the colonists could start right in building their new world. And they were *big*. All of them held at least fifty thousand people ..."

Only after he said it, did he realize the significance of his words. Meta's deadly stare drove it home. There were now less people on Pyrrus than had been in the original settlement.

And human population, without rigid birth controls, usually increased geometrically. Jason suddenly remembered Meta's itchy trigger finger.

"But we can't be sure how many people were aboard this one," he said hurriedly. "Or even if this is the log of the ship that settled Pyrrus. Can you find something to pry this open with? The lock is corroded into a single lump."

Meta took her anger out on the box. Her fingers managed to force a gap between lid and bottom. She wrenched at it. Rusty metal screeched and tore. The lid came off in her hands and a heavy book thudded to the table.

The cover legend destroyed all doubt.

LOG OF S. T. POLLUX VICTORY. OUTWARD BOUND—SETANI TO PYRRUS.
55,000 SETTLERS ABOARD.

Meta couldn't argue now. She stood behind Jason with tight-clenched fists and read over his shoulder as he turned the brittle, yellowed pages. He quickly skipped through the opening part that covered the sailing preparations and trip out. Only when he had reached the actual landing did he start reading slowly. The impact of the ancient words leaped out at him.

"Here it is," Jason shouted. "Proof positive that we're on the right trail. Even *you* will have to admit that. Read it, right here."

... Second day since the tugs left, we are completely on our own now. The settlers still haven't grown used to this planet, though we have orientation talks every night. As well as the morale agents who I have working twenty hours a day. I suppose I really can't blame the people, they all lived in the underways of Setani and I doubt if they saw the sun once a year. This planet has weather with a vengeance, worse than anything I've seen on a hundred other planets. Was I wrong during the original planning stages not to insist on settlers from one of the agrarian worlds? People who could handle the outdoors.

These citified Setanians are afraid to go out in the rain. But of course they have adapted completely to their native 1.5 gravity so the two gee here doesn't bother them much. That was the factor that decided us. Anyway—too late now to do anything about it. Or about the unending cycle of rain, snow, hail, hurricanes and such. Answer will be to start the mines going, sell the metals and build completely enclosed cities.

The only thing on this forsaken planet that isn't actually against us are the animals. A few large predators at first, but the guards made short work of them. The rest of the wild life leaves us alone. Glad of that! They have been fighting for existence so long that I have never seen a more deadly looking collection. Even the little rodents no bigger than a man's hand are armored like tanks ...

"I don't believe a word of it," Meta broke in. "That can't be Pyrrus he's writing about ..." Her words died away as Jason wordlessly pointed to the title on the cover.

He continued scanning the pages, flipping them quickly. A sentence caught his eye and he stopped. Jamming his finger against the place, he read aloud.

"... And troubles keep piling up. First Har Palo with his theory that the vulcanism is so close to the surface that the ground keeps warm and the crops grow so well. Even if he is right—what can we do? We must be self-dependent if we intend to survive. And now this other thing. It seems that the forest fire drove a lot of new species our way. Animals, insects and even birds have attacked the people. (Note for Har: check if possible seasonal migration might explain attacks.) There have been fourteen deaths from wounds and poisoning. We'll have to enforce the rules for insect lotion at all times. And I suppose build some kind of perimeter defense to keep the larger beasts out of the camp.'

"This is a beginning," Jason said. "At least now we are aware of the real nature of the battle we're engaged in. It doesn't make Pyrrus any easier to handle, or make the life forms less dangerous, to know that they were once better disposed towards mankind. All this does is point the way. Something took the peaceful life forms, shook them up, and turned this planet into one big deathtrap for mankind. That *something* is what I want to uncover."

Chapter 12

Further reading of the log produced no new evidence. There was a good deal more information about the early animal and plant life and how deadly they were, as well as the first defenses against them. Interesting historically, but of no use whatsoever in countering the menace. The captain apparently never thought that life forms were altering on Pyrrus, believing instead that dangerous beasts were being discovered. He never lived to change his mind. The last entry in the log, less than two months after the first attack, was very brief. And in a different handwriting.

Captain Kurkowski died today, of poisoning following an insect bite. His death is greatly mourned.

The “why” of the planetary revulsion had yet to be uncovered.

“Kerk must see this book,” Jason said. “He should have some idea of the progress being made. Can we get transportation—or do we walk to city hall?”

“Walk, of course,” Meta said.

“Then you bring the book. At two G’s I find it very hard to be a gentleman and carry the packages.”

They had just entered Kerk’s outer office when a shrill screaming burst out of the phone-screen. It took Jason a moment to realize that it was a mechanical signal, not a human voice.

“What is it?” he asked.

Kerk burst through the door and headed for the street entrance. Everyone else in the office was going the same way. Meta looked confused, leaning towards the door, then looking back at Jason.

“What does it mean? Can’t you tell me?” He shook her arm.

“Sector alarm. A major breakthrough of some kind at the perimeter. Everyone but other perimeter guards has to answer.”

“Well, go then,” he said. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be all right.”

His words acted like a trigger release. Meta’s gun was in her hand and she was gone before he had finished speaking. Jason sat down wearily in the deserted office.

The unnatural silence in the building began to get on his nerves. He shifted his chair over to the phone-screen and switched it on to *receive*. The screen exploded with color and sound. At first Jason could make no sense of it at all. Just a confused jumble of faces and voices. It was a multi-channel set designed for military use. A number of images were carried on the screen at one time, rows of heads or hazy backgrounds where the user had left the field of view. Many of the heads were talking at the same time and the babble of their voices made no sense whatsoever.

After examining the controls and making a few experiments, Jason began to understand the operation. Though all stations were on the screen at all times, their audio channels could be controlled. In that way two, three or more stations could be hooked together in a link-up. They would be in round-robin communication with each other, yet never out of contact with the other stations.

Identification between voice and sound was automatic. Whenever one of the pictured images spoke, the image would glow red. By trial and error Jason brought in the audio for the stations he wanted and tried to follow the course of the attack.

Very quickly he realized this was something out of the ordinary. In some way, no one made it clear, a section of the perimeter had been broken through and emergency defenses had to be thrown up to encapsulate it. Kerk seemed to be in charge, at least he was the only one with an override transmitter. He used it for general commands. The many, tiny images faded and his face appeared on top of them, filling the entire screen.

“All perimeter stations send twenty-five per cent of your complement to Area Twelve.”

The small images reappeared and the babble increased, red lights flickering from face to face.

“... Abandon the first floor, acid bombs can’t reach.”

“If we hold we’ll be cut off, but salient is past us on the west flank. Request support.”

“DON’T MERVV ... IT’S USELESS!”

“... And the napalm tanks are almost gone. Orders?”

“The truck is still there, get it to the supply warehouse, you’ll find replacements ...”

Out of the welter of talk, only the last two fragments made any sense. Jason had noticed the signs below when he came in. The first two floors of the building below him were jammed with military supplies. This was his chance to get into the act.

Just sitting and watching was frustrating. Particularly when it was a desperate emergency. He didn’t overvalue his worth, but he was sure there was always room for another gun.

By the time he had dragged himself down to the street level a turbo-truck had slammed to a stop in front of the loading platform. Two Pyrrans were rolling out drums of napalm with reckless disregard for their own safety. Jason didn’t dare enter that maelstrom of rolling metal. He found he could be of use tugging the heavy drums into position on the truck while the others rolled them up. They accepted his aid without acknowledgment.

It was exhausting, sweaty work, hauling the leaden drums into place against the heavy gravity. After a minute Jason worked by touch through a red haze of hammering blood. He realized the job was done only when the truck suddenly leaped forward and he was thrown to the floor. He lay there, his chest heaving. As the driver hurled the heavy vehicle along, all Jason could do was bounce around in the bottom. He could see well enough, but was still gasping for breath when they braked at the fighting zone.

To Jason, it was a scene of incredible confusion. Guns firing, flames, men and women running on all sides. The napalm drums were unloaded without his help and the truck vanished for more. Jason leaned against a wall of a half-destroyed building and tried to get his bearings. It was impossible. There seemed to be a great number of small animals: he killed two that attacked him. Other than that he couldn’t determine the nature of the battle.

A Pyrran, tan face white with pain and exertion, stumbled up. His right arm, wet with raw flesh and dripping blood, hung limply at his side. It was covered with freshly applied surgical foam. He held his gun in his left hand, a stump of control cable dangling from it. Jason thought the man was looking for medical aid. He couldn't have been more wrong.

Clenching the gun in his teeth, the Pyrran clutched a barrel of napalm with his good hand and hurled it over on its side. Then, with the gun once more in his hand, he began to roll the drum along the ground with his feet. It was slow, cumbersome work, but he was still in the fight.

Jason pushed through the hurrying crowd and bent over the drum. "Let me do it," he said. "You can cover us both with your gun."

The man wiped the sweat from his eyes with the back of his arm and blinked at Jason. He seemed to recognize him. When he smiled it was a grimace of pain, empty of humor. "Do that. I can still shoot. Two half men—maybe we equal one whole." Jason was laboring too hard to even notice the insult.

An explosion had blasted a raw pit in the street ahead. Two people were at the bottom, digging it even deeper with shovels. The whole thing seemed meaningless. Just as Jason and the wounded man rolled up the drum the diggers leaped out of the excavation and began shooting down into its depths. One of them turned, a young girl, barely in her teens.

"Praise Perimeter!" she breathed. "They found the napalm. One of the new horrors is breaking through towards Thirteen, we just found it." Even as she talked she swiveled the drum around, kicked the easy-off plug, and began dumping the gelid contents into the hole. When half of it had gurgled down, she kicked the drum itself in. Her companion pulled a flare from his belt, lit it, and threw it after the drum.

"Back quick. They don't like heat," he said.

This was putting it very mildly. The napalm caught, tongues of flame and roiling, greasy smoke climbed up to the sky. Under Jason's feet the earth shifted and moved. *Something* black and long stirred in the heart of the flame, then arched up into the sky over their heads. In the midst of the searing heat it still moved with alien, jolting motions. It was immense, at least two meters thick and with no indication of its length. The flames didn't stop it at all, just annoyed it.

Jason had some idea of the thing's length as the street cracked and buckled for fifty meters on each side of the pit. Great loops of the creature began to emerge from the ground. He fired his gun, as did the others. Not that it seemed to have any effect. More and more people were appearing, armed with a variety of weapons. Flame-throwers and grenades seemed to be the most effective.

"Clear the area ... we're going to saturate it. Fall back."

The voice was so loud it jarred Jason's ear. He turned and recognized Kerk, who had arrived with truckloads of equipment. He had a power speaker on his back, the mike hung in front of his lips. His amplified voice brought an instant reaction from the crowd. They began to move.

There was still doubt in Jason's mind what to do. Clear the area? But what area? He started towards Kerk, before he realized that the rest of the Pyrrans were going in the opposite direction. Even under two gravities they *moved*.

Jason had a naked feeling of being alone on the stage. He was in the center of the street, and the others had vanished. No one remained. Except the wounded man Jason had helped. He stumbled towards Jason, waving his good arm. Jason couldn't understand what he said. Kerk was shouting orders again from one of the trucks. They had started to move too. The urgency struck home and Jason started to run.

It was too late. On all sides the earth was buckling, cracking, as more loops of the underground thing forced its way into the light. Safety lay ahead. Only in front of it rose an arch of dirt-encrusted gray.

There are seconds of time that seem to last an eternity. A moment of subjective time that is grabbed and stretched to an infinite distance. This was one of those moments. Jason stood, frozen. Even the smoke in the sky hung unmoving. The high-standing loop of alien life was before him, every detail piercingly clear.

Thick as a man, ribbed and gray as old bark. Tendrils projected from all parts of it, pallid and twisting lengths that writhed slowly with snakelike life. Shaped like a plant, yet with the motions of an animal. And cracking, splitting. This was the worst.

Seams and openings appeared. Splintering, gaping mouths that vomited out a horde of pallid animals. Jason heard their shriekings, shrill yet remote. He saw the needlelike teeth that lined their jaws.

The paralysis of the unknown held him there. He should have died. Kerk was thundering at him through the power speaker, others were firing into the attacking creature. Jason knew nothing.

Then he was shot forward, pushed by a rock-hard shoulder. The wounded man was still there, trying to get Jason clear. Gun clenched in his jaws he dragged Jason along with his good arm. Towards the creature. The others stopped firing. They saw his plan and it was a good one.

A loop of the thing arched into the air, leaving an opening between its body and the ground. The wounded Pyrran planted his feet and tightened his muscles. One-handed, with a single thrust, he picked Jason off the ground and sent him hurtling under the living arch. Moving tendrils brushed fire along his face, then he was through, rolling over and over on the ground. The wounded Pyrran leaped after him.

It was too late. There had been a chance for one person to get out. The Pyrran could have done it easily—instead he had pushed Jason first. The thing was aware of movement when Jason brushed its tendrils. It dropped and caught the wounded man under its weight. He vanished from sight as the tendrils wrapped around him and the animals swarmed over. His trigger must have pulled back to full automatic because the gun kept firing a long time after he should have been dead.

Jason crawled. Some of the fanged animals ran towards him, but were shot. He knew nothing about this. Then rude hands grabbed him up and pulled him forward. He slammed into the side of a truck and Kerk's face was in front of his, flushed and angry. One of the giant fists closed on the front of Jason's clothes and he was lifted off his feet, shaken like a limp bag of rags. He offered no protest and could not have even if Kerk had killed him.

When he was thrown to the ground, someone picked him up and slid him into the back of the truck. He did not lose consciousness as the truck bounced away, yet he could not move. In a moment the fatigue would go away and he would sit up. That was all he was, just a little tired. Even as he thought this he passed out.

Chapter 13

“Just like old times,” Jason said when Brucco came into the room with a tray of food. Without a word Brucco served Jason and the wounded men in the other beds, then left. “Thanks,” Jason called after his retreating back.

A joke, a twist of a grin, like it always was. Sure. But even as he grinned and his lips shaped a joke, Jason felt them like a veneer on the outside. Something plastered on with a life of its own. Inside he was numb and immovable. His body was stiff as his eyes still watched that arch of alien flesh descend and smother the one-armed Pyrran with its million burning fingers.

He could feel himself under the arch. After all, hadn’t the wounded man taken his place? He finished the meal without realizing that he ate.

Ever since that morning, when he had recovered consciousness, it had been like this. He knew that he should have died out there in that battle-torn street. *His* life should have been snuffed out, for making the mistake of thinking that he could actually help the battling Pyrrans. Instead of being underfoot and in the way. If it hadn’t been for Jason, the man with the wounded arm would have been brought here to the safety of the reorientation buildings. He knew he was lying in the bed that belonged to that man.

The man who had given his life for Jason’s.

The man whose name he didn’t even know.

There were drugs in the food and they made him sleep. The medicated pads soaked the pain and rawness out of the burns where the tentacles had seared his face. When he awoke the second time, his touch with reality had been restored.

A man had died so he could live. Jason faced the fact. He couldn’t restore that life, no matter how much he wanted to. What he could do was make the man’s death worth while. If it can be said that any death was worth while ... He forced his thoughts from that track.

Jason knew what he had to do. His work was even more important now. If he could solve the riddle of this deadly world, he could repay in part the debt he owed.

Sitting up made his head spin and he held to the edge of the bed until it slowed down. The others in the room ignored him as he slowly and painfully dragged on his clothes. Brucco came in, saw what he was doing, and left again without a word.

Dressing took a long time, but it was finally done. When Jason finally left the room he found Kerk waiting for him.

“Kerk ... I want to tell you ...”

“Tell me *nothing*!” The thunder of Kerk’s voice bounced back from the ceiling and walls. “I’m telling *you*. I’ll tell you once and that will be the end of it. You’re not wanted on Pyrrus, Jason dinAlt, neither you nor your precious off-world schemes are wanted here. I let you convince me once with your twisted tongue. Helped you at the expense of more important work. I should have known what the result of your ‘logic’ would be. Now I’ve seen. Welf died so you could live. He was twice the man you will ever be.”

“Welf? Was that his name?” Jason asked stumblingly. “I didn’t know—”

“You didn’t even know.” Kerk’s lips pulled back from his teeth in a grimace of disgust. “You didn’t even know his name—yet he died that you might continue your miserable existence.” Kerk spat, as if the words gave a vile flavor to his speech, and stamped towards the exit lock. Almost as an afterthought he turned back to Jason.

“You’ll stay here in the sealed buildings until the ship returns in two weeks. Then you will leave this planet and never come back. If you do, I’ll kill you instantly. With pleasure.” He started through the lock.

“Wait,” Jason shouted. “You can’t decide like that. You haven’t even seen the evidence I’ve uncovered. Ask Meta—” The lock thumped shut and Kerk was gone.

The whole thing was just too stupid. Anger began to replace the futile despair of a moment before. He was being treated like an irresponsible child, the importance of his discovery of the log completely ignored.

Jason turned and saw for the first time that Brucco was standing there. “Did you hear that?” Jason asked him.

“Yes. And I quite agree. You can consider yourself lucky.”

“Lucky!” Jason was the angry one now. “Lucky to be treated like a moronic child, with contempt for everything I do—”

“I said lucky,” Brucco snapped. “Welf was Kerk’s only surviving son. Kerk had high hopes for him, was training him to take his place eventually.” He turned to leave but Jason called after him.

“Wait. I’m sorry about Welf. I can’t be any sorrier knowing that he was Kerk’s son. But at least it explains why Kerk is so quick to throw me out—as well as the evidence I have uncovered. The log of the ship—”

“I know, I’ve seen it,” Brucco said. “Meta brought it in. Very interesting historical document.”

“That’s all you can see it as—an historical document? The significance of the planetary change escapes you?”

“It doesn’t escape me,” Brucco answered briefly, “but I cannot see that it has any relevancy today. The past is unchangeable and we must fight in the present. That is enough to occupy all our energies.”

Jason felt too exhausted to argue the point any more. He ran into the same stone wall with all the Pyrrans. Theirs was a logic of the moment. The past and the future unchangeable, unknowable—and uninteresting. “How is the perimeter battle going?” he asked, wanting to change the subject.

“Finished. Or in the last stages at least,” Brucco was almost enthusiastic as he showed Jason some stereos of the attackers. He did not notice Jason’s repressed shudder.

“This was one of the most serious breakthroughs in years, but we caught it in time. I hate to think what would have happened if they hadn’t been detected for a few weeks more.”

“What are those things?” Jason asked. “Giant snakes of some kind?”

“Don’t be absurd,” Brucco snorted. He tapped the stereo with his thumbnail. “Roots. That’s all. Greatly modified, but still roots. They came in under the perimeter barrier, much deeper than anything we’ve had before. Not a real threat in themselves as they have very little mobility. Die soon after being cut. The danger came from their being used as access tunnels. They’re bored through and through with animal runs, and two or three species of beasts live in a sort of symbiosis inside.

“Now we know what they are we can watch for them. The danger was they could have completely undermined the perimeter and come in from all sides at once. Not much we could have done then.”

The edge of destruction. Living on the lip of a volcano. The Pyrrans took satisfaction from any day that passed without total annihilation. There seemed no way to change their attitude. Jason let the conversation die there. He picked up the log of the *Pollux Victory* from Brucco’s quarters and carried it back to his room. The wounded Pyrrans there ignored him as he dropped onto the bed and opened the book to the first page.

For two days he did not leave his quarters. The wounded men were soon gone and he had the room to himself. Page by page he went through the log, until he knew every detail of the settlement of Pyrrus. His notes and cross-references piled up. He made an accurate map of the original settlement, superimposed over a modern one. They didn’t match at all.

It was a dead end. With one map held over the other, what he had suspected was painfully clear. The descriptions of terrain and physical features in the log were accurate enough. The city had obviously been moved since the first landing. Whatever records had been kept would be in the library—and he had exhausted that source. Anything else would have been left behind and long since destroyed.

Rain lashed against the thick window above his head, lit suddenly by a flare of lightning. The unseen volcanoes were active again, vibrating the floor with their rumblings deep in the earth.

The shadow of defeat pressed heavily down on Jason. Rounding his shoulders and darkening, even more, the overcast day.

Chapter 14

Jason spent one depressed day lying on his bunk counting rivets, forcing himself to accept defeat. Kerk's order that he was not to leave the sealed building tied his hands completely. He felt himself close to the answer—but he was never going to get it.

One day of defeat was all he could take. Kerk's attitude was completely emotional, untempered by the slightest touch of logic. This fact kept driving home until Jason could no longer ignore it. Emotional reasoning was something he had learned to mistrust early in life. He couldn't agree with Kerk in the slightest—which meant he had to utilize the ten remaining days to solve the problem. If it meant disobeying Kerk, it would still have to be done.

He grabbed up his notepad with a new enthusiasm. His first sources of information had been used up, but there must be others. Chewing the scribe and needling his brain, he slowly built up a list of other possibilities. Any idea, no matter how wild, was put down. When the page was filled he wiped the long shots and impossibles—such as consulting off-world historical records. This was a Pyrran problem, and had to be settled on this planet or not at all.

The list worked down to two probables. Either old records, notebooks or diaries that individual Pyrrans might have in their possession, or verbal histories that had been passed down the generations by word of mouth. The first choice seemed to be the most probable and he acted on it at once. After a careful check of his medikit and gun he went to see Brucco.

"What's new and deadly in the world since I left?" he asked.

Brucco glared at him. "You can't go out, Kerk has forbidden it."

"Did he put you in charge of guarding me to see if I obeyed?" Jason's voice was quiet and cold.

Brucco rubbed his jaw and frowned in thought. Finally he just shrugged. "No, I'm not guarding you—nor do I want the job. As far as I know this is between you and Kerk and it can stay that way. Leave whenever you want. And get yourself killed quietly some place so there will be an end to the trouble you cause once and for all."

"I love you, too," Jason said. "Now brief me on the wildlife."

The only new mutation that routine precautions wouldn't take care of was a slate-colored lizard that spit a fast nerve poison with deadly accuracy. Death took place in seconds if the saliva touched any bare skin. The lizards had to be looked out for, and shot before they came within range. An hour of lizard-blasting in a training chamber made him proficient in the exact procedure.

Jason left the sealed buildings quietly and no one saw him go. He followed the map to the nearest barracks, shuffling tiredly through the dusty streets. It was a hot, quiet afternoon, broken only by rumblings from the distance, and the occasional crack of his gun.

It was cool inside the thick-walled barracks buildings, and he collapsed onto a bench until the sweat dried and his heart stopped pounding. Then he went to the nearest recreation room to start his search.

Before it began it was finished. None of the Pyrrans kept old artifacts of any kind and thought the whole idea was very funny. After the twentieth negative answer Jason was ready to admit defeat in this line of investigation. There was as much chance of meeting a Pyrran with old documents as finding a bundle of grandfather's letters in a soldier's kit bag.

This left a single possibility—verbal histories. Again Jason questioned with the same lack of results. The fun had worn off the game for the Pyrrans and they were beginning to growl. Jason stopped while he was still in one piece. The commissary served him a meal that tasted like plastic paste and wood pulp. He ate it quickly, then sat brooding over the empty tray, hating to admit to another dead end. Who could supply him with answers? All the people he had talked to were so young. They had no interest or patience for story-telling. That was an old folks' hobby—and there were no oldsters on Pyrrus.

With one exception that he knew of, the librarian, Poli. It was a possibility. A man who worked with records and books might have an interest in some of the older ones. He might even remember reading volumes now destroyed. A very slim lead indeed, but one that had to be pursued.

Walking to the library almost killed Jason. The torrential rains made the footing bad, and in the dim light it was hard to see what was coming. A snapper came in close enough to take out a chunk of flesh before he could blast it. The antitoxin made him dizzy and he lost some blood before he could get the wound dressed. He reached the library, exhausted and angry.

Poli was working on the guts of one of the catalogue machines. He didn't stop until Jason had tapped him on the shoulder. Switching on his hearing aid, the Pyrran stood quietly, crippled and bent, waiting for Jason to talk.

"Have you any old papers or letters that you have kept for your personal use?"

A shake of the head, *no*.

"What about stories—you know, about great things that have happened in the past, that someone might have told you when you were young?" Negative.

Results negative. Every question was answered by a shake of Poli's head, and very soon the old man grew irritated and pointed to the work he hadn't finished.

"Yes, I know you have work to do," Jason said. "But this is important." Poli shook his head an angry *no* and reached to turn off his hearing aid. Jason groped for a question that might get a more positive answer. There was something tugging at his mind, a word he had heard and made a note of, to be investigated later. Something that Kerk had said ...

"That's it!" It was right there—on the tip of his tongue. "Just a second, Poli, just one more question. What is a 'grubber'? Have you ever seen one or know what they do, or where they can be found—"

The words were cut off as Poli whirled and lashed the back of his good arm into Jason's face. Though the man was aged and crippled, the blow almost fractured Jason's jaw, sending him sliding across the floor. Through a daze he saw Poli hobbling towards him, making thick bubbling noises in his ruined throat; what remained of his face twisted and working with anger.

This was no time for diplomacy. Moving as fast as he could, with the high-G, foot-slapping shuffle, Jason headed for the sealed door. He was no match for any Pyrran in hand-to-hand combat, young and small or old and crippled. The door thunked open, as he went through, and barely closed in Poli's face.

Outside the rain had turned to snow and Jason trudged wearily through the slush, rubbing his sore jaw and turning over the only fact he had. *Grubber* was a key—but to what? And who did he dare ask for more information? Kerk was the man he had talked to best, but not any more. That left only Meta as a possible source. He wanted to see her at once, but sudden exhaustion swept through him. It took all of his strength to stumble back to the school buildings.

In the morning he ate and left early. There was only a week left. It was impossible to hurry and he cursed as he dragged his double-weight body to the assignment center. Meta was on night perimeter duty and should be back to her quarters soon. He shuffled over there and was lying on her bunk when she came in.

"Get out," she said in a flat voice. "Or do I throw you out?"

"Patience, please," he said as he sat up. "Just resting here until you came back. I have a single question, and if you will answer it for me I'll go and stop bothering you."

"What is it?" she asked, tapping her foot with impatience. But there was also a touch of curiosity in her voice. Jason thought carefully before he spoke.

"Now *please*, don't shoot me. You know I'm an off-worlder with a big mouth, and you have heard me say some awful things without taking a shot at me. Now I have another one. Will you please show your superiority to the other people of the galaxy by holding your temper and not reducing me to component atoms?"

His only answer was a tap of the foot, so he took a deep breath and plunged in.

"What is a 'grubber'?"

For a long moment she was quiet, unmoving. Then she curled her lips back in disgust. "You find the most repulsive topics."

"That may be so," he said, "but it still doesn't answer my question."

"It's ... well, the sort of thing people just don't talk about."

"I do," he assured her.

"Well, I *don't*! It's the most disgusting thing in the world, and that's all I'm going to say. Talk to Krannon, but not to me." She had him by the arm while she talked and he was half dragged to the hall. The door slammed behind him and he muttered "*lady wrestler*" under his breath. His anger ebbed away as he realized that she had given him a clue in spite of herself. Next step, find out who or what Krannon was.

Assignment center listed a man named Krannon, and gave his shift number and work location. It was close by and Jason walked there. A large, cubical, and windowless building, with the single word *food* next to each of the sealed entrances. The small entrance he went through was a series of automatic chambers that cycled him through ultrasonics, ultraviolet, antibio spray, rotating brushes and three final rinses. He was finally admitted, damper but much cleaner to the central area. Men and robots were stacking crates and he asked one of the men for Krannon. The man looked him up and down coldly and spat on his shoes before answering.

Krannon worked in a large storage bay by himself. He was a stocky man in patched coveralls whose only expression was one of intense gloom. When Jason came in he stopped hauling bales and sat down on the nearest one. The lines of unhappiness were cut into his face and seemed to grow deeper while Jason explained what he was after. All the talk of ancient history on Pyrrus bored him as well and he yawned openly. When Jason finished he yawned again and didn't even bother to answer him.

Jason waited a moment, then asked again. "I said do you have any old books, papers, records or that sort of thing?"

"You sure picked the right guy to bother, off-worlder," was his only answer. "After talking to me you're going to have nothing but trouble."

"Why is that?" Jason asked.

"Why?" For the first time he was animated with something besides grief. "I'll tell you why! I made one mistake, just one, and I get a life sentence. For life—how would you like that? Just me alone, being by myself all the time. Even taking orders from the grubbers."

Jason controlled himself, keeping the elation out of his voice. "Grubbers? What are grubbers?"

The enormity of the question stopped Krannon, it seemed impossible that there could be a man alive who had never heard of grubbers. Happiness lifted some of the gloom from his face as he realized that he had a captive audience who would listen to his troubles.

"Grubbers are traitors—that's what they are. Traitors to the human race and they ought to be wiped out. Living in the jungle. The things they do with the animals—"

"You mean they're people ... Pyrrans like yourself?" Jason broke in.

"Not like *me*, mister. Don't make that mistake again if you want to go on living. Maybe I dozed off on guard once so I got stuck with this job. That doesn't mean I like it or like them. They stink, really stink, and if it wasn't for the food we get from them they'd all be dead tomorrow. That's the kind of killing job I could really put my heart into."

"If they supply you with food, you must give them something in return?"

"Trade goods, beads, knives, the usual things. Supply sends them over in cartons and I take care of the delivery."

"How?" Jason asked.

"By armored truck to the delivery site. Then I go back later to pick up the food they've left in exchange."

"Can I go with you on the next delivery?"

Krannon frowned over the idea for a minute. "Yeah, I suppose it's all right if you're stupid enough to come. You can help me load. They're between harvests now, so the next trip won't be for eight days—"

"But that's after the ship leaves—it'll be too late. Can't you go earlier?"

"Don't tell me your troubles, mister," Krannon grumbled, climbing to his feet. "That's when I go and the date's not changing for you."

Jason realized he had got as much out of the man as was possible for one session. He started for the door, then turned.

“One thing,” he asked. “Just what do these savages—the grubbers—look like?”

“How do I know,” Krannon snapped. “I trade with them, I don’t make love to them. If I ever saw one, I’d shoot him down on the spot.” He flexed his fingers and his gun jumped in and out of his hand as he said it. Jason quietly let himself out.

Lying on his bunk, resting his gravity-weary body, he searched for a way to get Krannon to change the delivery date. His millions of credits were worthless on this world without currency. If the man couldn’t be convinced, he had to be bribed. With what? Jason’s eyes touched the locker where his off-world clothing still hung, and he had an idea.

It was morning before he could return to the food warehouse—and one day closer to his deadline. Krannon didn’t bother to look up from his work when Jason came in.

“Do you want this?” Jason asked, handing the outcast a flat gold case inset with a single large diamond. Krannon grunted and turned it over in his hands.

“A toy,” he said. “What is it good for?”

“Well, when you press this button you get a light.” A flame appeared through a hole in the top. Krannon started to hand it back.

“What do I need a little fire for? Here, keep it.”

“Wait a second,” Jason said, “that’s not all it does. When you press the jewel in the center one of these comes out.” A black pellet the size of his fingernail dropped into his palm. “A grenade, made of solid ulranite. Just squeeze it hard and throw. Three seconds later it explodes with enough force to blast open this building.”

This time Krannon almost smiled as he reached for the case. Destructive and death-dealing weapons are like candy to a Pyrran. While he looked at it Jason made his offer.

“The case and bombs are yours if you move the date of your next delivery up to tomorrow—and let me go with you.”

“Be here at 0500,” Krannon said. “We leave early.”

Chapter 15

The truck rumbled up to the perimeter gate and stopped. Krannon waved to the guards through the front window, then closed a metal shield over it. When the gates swung open the truck—really a giant armored tank—ground slowly forward. There was a second gate beyond the first, that did not open until the interior one was closed. Jason looked through the second-driver’s periscope as the outer gate lifted. Automatic flame-throwers flared through the opening, cutting off only when the truck reached them. A scorched area ringed the gate, beyond that the jungle began. Unconsciously Jason shrank back in his seat.

All the plants and animals he had seen only specimens of, existed here in profusion. Thorn-ringed branches and vines laced themselves into a solid mat, through which the wild life swarmed. A fury of sound hurled at them, thuds and scratchings rang on the armor. Krannon laughed and closed the switch that electrified the outer grid. The scratchings died away as the beasts completed the circuit to the grounded hull.

It was slow-speed, low-gear work tearing through the jungle. Krannon had his face buried in the periscope mask and silently fought the controls. With each mile the going seemed to get better, until he finally swung up the periscope and opened the window armor. The jungle was still thick and deadly, but nothing like the area immediately around the perimeter. It appeared as if most of the lethal powers of Pyrrus were concentrated in the single area around the settlement. Why? Jason asked himself. Why this intense and planetary hatred?

The motors died and Krannon stood up, stretching. “We’re here,” he said. “Let’s unload.”

There was bare rock around the truck, a rounded hillock that projected from the jungle, too smooth and steep for vegetation to get a hold. Krannon opened the cargo hatches and they pushed out the boxes and crates. When they finished Jason slumped down, exhausted, onto the pile.

“Get back in, we’re leaving,” Krannon said.

“You are, I’m staying right here.”

Krannon looked at him coldly. “Get in the truck or I’ll kill you. No one stays out here. For one thing you couldn’t live an hour alone. But worse than that the grubbers would get you. Kill you at once, of course, but that’s not important. But you have equipment that we can’t allow into their hands. You want to see a grubber with a gun?”

While the Pyrran talked, Jason’s thoughts had rushed ahead. He hoped that Krannon was as thick of head as he was fast of reflex.

Jason looked at the trees, let his gaze move up through the thick branches. Though Krannon was still talking, he was automatically aware of Jason’s attention. When Jason’s eyes widened and his gun jumped into his hand, Krannon’s own gun appeared and he turned in the same direction.

“There—in the top!” Jason shouted, and fired into the tangle of branches. Krannon fired, too. As soon as he did, Jason hurled himself backwards, curled into a ball, rolling down the inclined rock. The shots had covered the sounds of his movements,

and before Krannon could turn back the gravity had dragged him down the rock into the thick foliage. Crashing branches slapped at him, but slowed his fall. When he stopped moving he was lost in the tangle. Krannon's shots came too late to hit him.

Lying there, tired and bruised, Jason heard the Pyrran cursing him out. He stamped around on the rock, fired a few shots, but knew better than to enter the trees. Finally he gave up and went back to the truck. The motor gunned into life and the treads clanked and scraped down the rock and back into the jungle. There were muted rumblings and crashes that slowly died away.

Then Jason was alone.

Up until that instant he hadn't realized quite how alone he would be. Surrounded by nothing but death, the truck already vanished from sight. He had to force down an overwhelming desire to run after it. What was done was done.

This was a long chance to take, but it was the only way to contact the grubbers. They were savages, but still they had come from human stock. And they hadn't sunk so low as to stop the barter with the civilized Pyrrans. He had to contact them, befriend them. Find out how they had managed to live safely on this madhouse world.

If there had been another way to lick the problem, he would have taken it; he didn't relish the role of martyred hero. But Kerk and his deadline had forced his hand. The contact had to be made fast and this was the only way.

There was no telling where the savages were, or how soon they would arrive. If the woods weren't too lethal he could hide there, pick his time to approach them. If they found him among the supplies, they might skewer him on the spot with a typical Pyrran reflex.

Walking warily he approached the line of trees. Something moved on a branch, but vanished as he came near. None of the plants near a thick-trunked tree looked poisonous, so he slipped behind it. There was nothing deadly in sight and it surprised him. He let his body relax a bit, leaning against the rough bark.

Something soft and choking fell over his head, his body was seized in a steel grip. The more he struggled the tighter it held him until the blood thundered in his ears and his lungs screamed for air.

Only when he grew limp did the pressure let up. His first panic ebbed a little when he realized that it wasn't an animal that attacked him. He knew nothing about the grubbers, but they were human so he still had a chance.

His arms and legs were tied, the power holster ripped from his arm. He felt strangely naked without it. The powerful hands grabbed him again and he was hurled into the air, to fall face down across something warm and soft. Fear pressed in again, it was a large animal of some kind. And all Pyrran animals were deadly.

When the animal moved off, carrying him, panic was replaced by a feeling of mounting elation. The grubbers had managed to work out a truce of some kind with at least one form of animal life. He had to find out how. If he could get that secret—and get it back to the city—it would justify all his work and pain. It might even justify Welf's death if the age-old war could be slowed or stopped.

Jason's tightly bound limbs hurt terribly at first, but grew numb with the circulation shut off. The jolting ride continued endlessly, he had no way of measuring the time. A rainfall soaked him, then he felt his clothes steaming as the sun came out.

The ride was finally over. He was pulled from the animal's back and dumped down. His arms dropped free as someone loosed the bindings. The returning circulation soaked him in pain as he lay there, struggling to move. When his hands finally obeyed him he lifted them to his face and stripped away the covering, a sack of thick fur. Light blinded him as he sucked in breath after breath of clean air.

Blinking against the glare, he looked around. He was lying on a floor of crude planking, the setting sun shining into his eyes through the doorless entrance of the building. There was a ploughed field outside, stretching down the curve of hill to the edge of the jungle. It was too dark to see much inside the hut.

Something blocked the light of the doorway, a tall animallike figure. On second look Jason realized it was a man with long hair and thick beard. He was dressed in furs, even his legs were wrapped in fur leggings. His eyes were fixed on his captive, while one hand fondled an ax that hung from his waist.

"Who're you? What y'want?" the bearded man asked suddenly.

Jason picked his words slowly, wondering if this savage shared the same hair-trigger temper as the city dwellers.

"My name is Jason. I come in peace. I want to be your friend ..."

"Lies!" the man grunted, and pulled the ax from his belt. "Junkman tricks. I saw y'hide. Wait to kill me. Kill you first." He tested the edge of the blade with a horny thumb, then raised it.

"Wait!" Jason said desperately. "You don't understand."

The ax swung down.

"I'm from off-world and—"

A solid thunk shook him as the ax buried itself in the wood next to his head. At the last instant the man had twitched it aside. He grabbed the front of Jason's clothes and pulled him up until their faces touched.

"S'true?" he shouted. "Y'from off-world?" His hand opened and Jason dropped back before he could answer. The savage jumped over him, towards the dim rear of the hut.

"Rhes must know of this," he said as he fumbled with something on the wall. Light sprang out.

All Jason could do was stare. The hairy, fur-covered savage was operating a communicator. The calloused, dirt-encrusted fingers deftly snapped open the circuits, dialed a number.

Chapter 16

It made no sense. Jason tried to reconcile the modern machine with the barbarian and couldn't. Who was he calling? The existence of one communicator meant there was at least another. Was Rhes a person or a thing?

With a mental effort he grabbed hold of his thoughts and braked them to a stop. There was something new here, factors he hadn't counted on. He kept reassuring himself there was an explanation for everything, once you had your facts straight.

Jason closed his eyes, shutting out the glaring rays of the sun where it cut through the tree tops, and reconsidered his facts. They separated evenly into two classes; those he had observed for himself, and those he had learned from the city dwellers. This last class of "facts" he would hold, to see if they fitted with what he learned. There was a good chance that most, or all, of them would prove false.

"Get up," the voice jarred into his thoughts. "We're leaving."

His legs were still numb and hardly usable. The bearded man snorted in disgust and hauled him to his feet, propping him against the outer wall. Jason clutched the knobby bark of the logs when he was left alone. He looked around, soaking up impressions.

It was the first time he had been on a farm since he had run away from home. A different world with a different ecology, but the similarity was apparent enough to him. A new-sown field stretched down the hill in front of the shack. Ploughed by a good farmer. Even, well cast furrows that followed the contour of the slope. Another, larger log building was next to this one, probably a barn.

There was a snuffling sound behind him and Jason turned quickly—and froze. His hand called for the missing gun and his finger tightened down on a trigger that wasn't there.

It had come out of the jungle and padded up quietly behind him. It had six thick legs with clawed feet that dug into the ground. The two-meter long body was covered with matted yellow and black fur, all except the skull and shoulders. These were covered with overlapping horny plates. Jason could see all this because the beast was that close.

He waited to die.

The mouth opened, a froglike division of the hairless skull, revealing double rows of jagged teeth.

"Here, Fido," the bearded man said, coming up behind Jason and snapping his fingers at the same time. The thing bounded forward, brushing past the dazed Jason, and rubbed his head against the man's leg. "Nice doggy," the man said, his fingers scratching under the edge of the carapace where it joined the flesh.

The bearded man had brought two of the riding animals out of the barn, saddled and bridled. Jason barely noticed the details of smooth skin and long legs as he swung up on one. His feet were quickly lashed to the stirrups. When they started the skull-headed beast followed them.

"Nice doggy!" Jason said, and for no reason started to laugh. The bearded man turned and scowled at him until he was quiet.

By the time they entered the jungle it was dark. It was impossible to see under the thick foliage, and they used no lights. The animals seemed to know the way. There were scraping noises and shrill calls from the jungle around them, but it didn't bother Jason too much. Perhaps the automatic manner in which the other man undertook the journey reassured him. Or the presence of the "dog" that he felt rather than saw. The trip was a long one, but not too uncomfortable.

The regular motion of the animal and his fatigue overcame Jason and he dozed into a fitful sleep, waking with a start each time he slumped forward. In the end he slept sitting up in the saddle. Hours passed this way, until he opened his eyes and saw a square of light before them. The trip was over.

His legs were stiff and galled with saddle sores. After his feet were untied getting down was an effort, and he almost fell. A door opened and Jason went in. It took his eyes some moments to get used to the light, until he could make out the form of a man on the bed before him.

"Come over here and sit down." The voice was full and strong, accustomed to command. The body was that of an invalid. A blanket covered him to the waist, above that the flesh was sickly white, spotted with red nodules, and hung loosely over the bones. There seemed to be nothing left of the man except skin and skeleton.

"Not very nice," the man on the bed said, "but I've grown used to it." His tone changed abruptly. "Naxa said you were from off-world. Is that true?"

Jason nodded yes, and his answer stirred the living skeleton to life. The head lifted from the pillow and the red-rimmed eyes sought his with a desperate intensity.

"My name is Rhes and I'm a ... grubber. Will you help me?"

Jason wondered at the intensity of Rhes' question, all out of proportion to the simple content of its meaning. Yet he could see no reason to give anything other than the first and obvious answer that sprang to his lips.

"Of course I'll help you, in whatever way I can. As long as it involves no injury to anyone else. What do you want?"

The sick man's head had fallen back limply, exhausted, as Jason talked. But the fire still burned in the eyes.

"Feel assured ... I want to injure no others," Rhes said. "Quite the opposite. As you see I am suffering from a disease that our remedies will not stop. Within a few more days I will be dead. Now I have seen ... the city people ... using a device, they press it over a wound or an animal bite. Do you have one of these machines?"

"That sounds like a description of the medikit." Jason touched the button at his waist that dropped the medikit into his hand. "I have mine here. It analyzes and treats most ..."

"Would you use it on me?" Rhes broke in, his voice suddenly urgent.

"I'm sorry," Jason said. "I should have realized." He stepped forward and pressed the machine over one of the inflamed areas on Rhes' chest. The operation light came on and the thin shaft of the analyzer probe slid down. When it withdrew the device hummed, then clicked three times as three separate hypodermic needles lanced into the skin. Then the light went out.

“Is that all?” Rhes asked, as he watched Jason stow the medikit back in his belt.

Jason nodded, then looked up and noticed the wet marks of tears on the sick man’s face. Rhes became aware at the same time and brushed at them angrily.

“When a man is sick,” he growled, “the body and all its senses become traitor. I don’t think I have cried since I was a child—but you must realize it’s not myself I’m crying for. It’s the untold thousands of my people who have died for lack of that little device you treat so casually.”

“Surely you have medicines, doctors of your own?”

“Herb doctors and witch doctors,” Rhes said, consigning them all to oblivion with a chop of his hand. “The few hard-working and honest men are hampered by the fact that the faith healers can usually cure better than their strongest potion.”

The talking had tired Rhes. He stopped suddenly and closed his eyes. On his chest, the inflamed areas were already losing their angry color as the injections took affect. Jason glanced around the room, looking for clues to the mystery of these people.

Floor and walls were made of wood lengths fitted together, free of paint or decoration. They looked simple and crude, fit only for the savages he had expected to meet. Or were they crude? The wood had a sweeping, flamelike grain. When he bent close he saw that wax had been rubbed over the wood to bring out this pattern. Was this the act of savages—or of artistic men seeking to make the most of simple materials? The final effect was far superior to the drab paint and riveted steel rooms of the city-dwelling Pyrrans. Wasn’t it true that both ends of the artistic scale were dominated by simplicity? The untutored aborigine made a simple expression of a clear idea, and created beauty. At the other extreme, the sophisticated critic rejected over-elaboration and decoration and sought the truthful clarity of uncluttered art. At which end of the scale was he looking now?

These men were savages, he had been told that. They dressed in furs and spoke a slurred and broken language, at least Naxa did. Rhes admitted he preferred faith healers to doctors. But, if all this were true, where did the communicator fit into the picture? Or the glowing ceiling that illuminated the room with a soft light?

Rhes opened his eyes and stared at Jason, as if seeing him for the first time. “Who are you?” he asked. “And what are you doing here?”

There was a cold menace in his words and Jason understood why. The city Pyrrans hated the “grubbers” and, without a doubt, the feeling was mutual. Naxa’s ax had proved that. Naxa had entered silently while they talked, and stood with his fingers touching the haft of this same ax. Jason knew his life was still in jeopardy, until he gave an answer that satisfied these men.

He couldn’t tell the truth. If they once suspected he was spying among them to aid the city people, it would be the end. Nevertheless, he had to be free to talk about the survival problem.

The answer hit him as soon as he had stated the problem. All this had only taken an instant to consider, as he turned back to face the invalid, and he answered at once. Trying to keep his voice normal and unconcerned.

“I’m Jason dinAlt, an ecologist, so you see I have the best reasons in the universe for visiting this planet—”

“What is an ecologist?” Rhes broke in. There was nothing in his voice to indicate whether he meant the question seriously, or as a trap. All traces of the ease of their earlier conversation were gone, his voice had the deadliness of a stingwing’s poison. Jason chose his words carefully.

“Simply stated, it is that branch of biology that considers the relations between organisms and their environment. How climatic and other factors affect the life forms, and how the life forms in turn affect each other and the environment.” That much Jason knew was true—but he really knew very little more about the subject so he moved on quickly.

“I heard reports of this planet, and finally came here to study it firsthand. I did what work I could in the shelter of the city, but it wasn’t enough. The people there think I’m crazy, but they finally agreed to let me make a trip out here.”

“What arrangements have been made for your return?” Naxa snapped.

“None,” Jason told him. “They seemed quite sure that I would be killed instantly and had no hope of me coming back. In fact, they refused to let me go and I had to break away.”

This answer seemed to satisfy Rhes and his face cracked into a mirthless smile. “They would think that, those junkmen. Can’t move a meter outside their own walls without an armor-plated machine as big as a barn. What did they tell you about us?”

Again Jason knew a lot depended on his answer. This time he thought carefully before speaking.

“Well ... perhaps I’ll get that ax in the back of my neck for saying this ... but I have to be honest. You must know what they think. They told me you were filthy and ignorant savages who smelled. And you ... well, had curious customs you practiced with the animals. In exchange for food, they traded you beads and knives ...”

Both Pyrrans broke into a convulsion of laughter at this. Rhes stopped soon, from weakness, but Naxa laughed himself into a coughing fit and had to splash water over his head from a gourd jug.

“That I believe well enough,” Rhes said, “it sounds like the stupidity they would talk. Those people know nothing of the world they live in. I hope the rest of what you said is true, but even if it is not, you are welcome here. You are from off-world, that I know. No junkman would have lifted a finger to save my life. You are the first off-worlder my people have ever known and for that you are doubly welcome. We will help you in any way we can. My arm is your arm.”

These last words had a ritual sound to them, and when Jason repeated them, Naxa nodded at the correctness of this. At the same time, Jason felt that they were more than empty ritual. Interdependence meant survival on Pyrrus, and he knew that these people stood together to the death against the mortal dangers around them. He hoped the ritual would include him in that protective sphere.

“That is enough for tonight,” Rhes said. “The spotted sickness had weakened me, and your medicine has turned me to jelly. You will stay here, Jason. There is a blanket, but no bed at least for now.”

Enthusiasm had carried Jason this far, making him forget the two-gee exertions of the long day. Now fatigue hit him a physical blow. He had dim memories of refusing food and rolling in the blanket on the floor. After that, oblivion.

Chapter 17

Every square inch of his body ached where the doubled gravity had pressed his flesh to the unyielding wood of the floor. His eyes were gummy and his mouth was filled with an indescribable taste that came off in chunks. Sitting up was an effort and he had to stifle a groan as his joints cracked.

“Good day, Jason,” Rhes called from the bed. “If I didn’t believe in medicine so strongly, I would be tempted to say there is a miracle in your machine that has cured me overnight.”

There was no doubt that he was on the mend. The inflamed patches had vanished and the burning light was gone from his eyes. He sat, propped up on the bed, watching the morning sun melt the night’s hailstorm into the fields.

“There’s meat in the cabinet there,” he said, “and either water or visk to drink.”

The visk proved to be a distilled beverage of extraordinary potency that instantly cleared the fog from Jason’s brain, though it did leave a slight ringing in his ears. And the meat was a tenderly smoked joint, the best food he had tasted since leaving Darkhan. Taken together they restored his faith in life and the future. He lowered his glass with a relaxed sigh and looked around.

With the pressures of immediate survival and exhaustion removed, his thoughts returned automatically to his problem. What were these people really like—and how had they managed to survive in the deadly wilderness? In the city he had been told they were savages. Yet there was a carefully tended and repaired communicator on the wall. And by the door a crossbow—that fired machined metal bolts, he could see the tool marks still visible on their shanks. The one thing he needed was more information. He could start by getting rid of some of his misinformation.

“Rhes, you laughed when I told you what the city people said, about trading you trinkets for food. What do they really trade you?”

“Anything within certain limits,” Rhes said. “Small manufactured items, such as electronic components for our communicators. Rustless alloys we can’t make in our forges, cutting tools, atomic electric converters that produce power from any radioactive element. Things like that. Within reason they’ll trade anything we ask that isn’t on the forbidden list. They need the food badly.”

“And the items on the forbidden list—?”

“Weapons, of course, or anything that might be made into a powerful weapon. They know we make gunpowder so we can’t get anything like large castings or seamless tubing we could make into heavy gun barrels. We drill our own rifle barrels by hand, though the crossbow is quiet and faster in the jungle. Then they don’t like us to know very much, so the only reading matter that gets to us are tech maintenance manuals, empty of basic theory.

“The last banned category you know about—medicine. This is the one thing I cannot understand, that makes me burn with hatred with every death they might have prevented.”

“I know their reasons,” Jason said.

“Then tell me, because I can think of none.”

“Survival—it’s just that simple. I doubt if you realize it, but they have a decreasing population. It is just a matter of years before they will be gone. Whereas your people at least must have a stable—if not slightly growing population—to have existed without their mechanical protections. So in the city they hate you and are jealous of you at the same time. If they gave you medicine and you prospered, you would be winning the battle they have lost. I imagine they tolerate you as a necessary evil, to supply them with food, otherwise they wish you were all dead.”

“It makes sense,” Rhes growled, slamming his fist against the bed. “The kind of twisted logic you expect from junkmen. They use us to feed them, give us the absolute minimum in return, and at the same time cut us off from the knowledge that will get us out of this hand to mouth existence. Worse, far worse, they cut us off from the stars and the rest of mankind.” The hatred on his face was so strong that Jason unconsciously drew back.

“Do you think we are savages here, Jason? We act and look like animals because we have to fight for existence on an animal level. Yet we know about the stars. In that chest over there, sealed in metal, are over thirty books, all we have. Fiction most of them, with some history and general science thrown in. Enough to keep alive the stories of the settlement here and the rest of the universe outside. We see the ships land in the city and we know that up there are worlds we can only dream about and never see. Do you wonder that we hate these beasts that call themselves men, and would destroy them in an instant if we could? They are right to keep weapons from us—for sure as the sun rises in the morning we would kill them to a man if we were able, and take over the things they have withheld from us.”

It was a harsh condemnation, but essentially a truthful one. At least from the point of view of the outsiders. Jason didn’t try to explain to the angry man that the city Pyrrans looked on their attitude as being the only possible and logical one. “How did this battle between your two groups ever come about?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Rhes said, “I’ve thought about it many times, but there are no records of that period. We do know that we are all descended from colonists who arrived at the same time. Somewhere, at some time, the two groups separated. Perhaps it was a war, I’ve read about them in the books. I have a partial theory, though I can’t prove it, that it was the location of the city.”

“Location—I don’t understand.”

“Well, you know the junkmen, and you’ve seen where their city is. They managed to put it right in the middle of the most savage spot on this planet. You know they don’t care about any living thing except themselves, shoot and kill is their only logic. So they wouldn’t consider where to build their city, and managed to build it in the stupidest spot imaginable. I’m sure my ancestors saw how foolish this was and tried to tell them so. That would be reason enough for a war, wouldn’t it?”

“It might have been—if that’s really what happened,” Jason said. “But I think you have the problem turned backwards. It’s a war between native Pyrran life and humans, each fighting to destroy the other. The life forms change continually, seeking that final destruction of the invader.”

“Your theory is even wilder than mine,” Rhes said. “That’s not true at all. I admit that life isn’t too easy on this planet ... if what I have read in the books about other planets is true ... but it doesn’t change. You have to be fast on your feet and keep your eyes

open for anything bigger than you, but you can survive. Anyway, it doesn't really matter why. The junkmen always look for trouble and I'm happy to see that they have enough."

Jason didn't try to press the point. The effort of forcing Rhes to change his basic attitudes wasn't worth it—even if possible. He hadn't succeeded in convincing anyone in the city of the lethal mutations even when they could observe all the facts. Rhes could still supply information though.

"I suppose it's not important who started the battle," Jason said for the other man's benefit, not meaning a word of it, "but you'll have to agree that the city people are permanently at war with all the local life. Your people, though, have managed to befriend at least two species that I have seen. Do you have any idea how this was done?"

"Naxa will be here in a minute," Rhes said, pointing to the door, "as soon as he's taken care of the animals. Ask him. He's the best talker we have."

"Talker?" Jason asked. "I had the opposite idea about him. He didn't talk much, and what he did say was, well ... a little hard to understand at times."

"Not that kind of talking," Rhes broke in impatiently. "The talkers look after the animals. They train the dogs and doryms, and the better ones like Naxa are always trying to work with other beasts. They dress crudely, but they have to. I've heard them say that the animals don't like chemicals, metal or tanned leather, so they wear untanned furs for the most part. But don't let the dirt fool you, it has nothing to do with his intelligence."

"Doryms? Are those your carrying beasts—the kind we rode coming here?"

Rhes nodded. "Doryms are more than pack animals, they're really a little bit of everything. The large males pull the ploughs and other machines, while the younger animals are used for meat. If you want to know more, ask Naxa, you'll find him in the barn."

"I'd like to do that," Jason said, standing up. "Only I feel undressed without my gun—"

"Take it, by all means, it's in that chest by the door. Only watch out what you shoot around here."

Naxa was in the rear of the barn, filing down one of the spadelike toenails of a dorym. It was a strange scene. The fur-dressed man with the great beast—and the contrast of a beryllium-copper file and electroluminescent plates lighting the work.

The dorym opened its nostrils and pulled away when Jason entered; Naxa patted its neck and talked softly until it quieted and stood still, shivering slightly.

Something stirred in Jason's mind, with the feeling of a long unused muscle being stressed. A hauntingly familiar sensation.

"Good morning," Jason said. Naxa grunted something and went back to his filing. Watching him for a few minutes, Jason tried to analyze this new feeling. It itched and slipped aside when he reached for it, escaping him. Whatever it was, it had started when Naxa had talked to the dorym.

"Could you call one of the dogs in here, Naxa? I'd like to see one closer up."

Without raising his head from his work, Naxa gave a low whistle. Jason was sure it couldn't have been heard outside of the barn. Yet within a minute one of the Pyrran dogs slipped quietly in. The talker rubbed the beast's head, mumbling to it, while the animal looked intently into his eyes.

The dog became restless when Naxa turned back to work on the dorym. It prowled around the barn, sniffing, then moved quickly towards the open door. Jason called it back.

At least he meant to call it. At the last moment he said nothing. Nothing aloud. On sudden impulse he kept his mouth closed—only he called the dog with his mind. Thinking the words *come here*, directing the impulse at the animal with all the force and direction he had ever used to manipulate dice. As he did it he realized it had been a long time since he had even considered using his psi powers.

The dog stopped and turned back towards him.

It hesitated, looking at Naxa, then walked over to Jason.

Seen this closely the beast was a nightmare hound. The hairless protective plates, tiny red-rimmed eyes, and countless, saliva-dripping teeth did little to inspire confidence. Yet Jason felt no fear. There was a rapport between man and animal that was understood. Without conscious thought he reached out and scratched the dog along the back, where he knew it itched.

"Didn't know y're a talker," Naxa said. As he watched them, there was friendship in his voice for the first time.

"I didn't know either—until just now," Jason said. He looked into the eyes of the animal before him, scratched the ridged and ugly back, and began to understand.

The talkers must have well developed psi facilities, that was obvious now. There is no barrier of race or alien form when two creatures share each other's emotions. Empathy first, so there would be no hatred or fear. After that direct communication. The talkers might have been the ones who first broke through the barrier of hatred on Pyrrus and learned to live with the native life. Others could have followed their example—this might explain how the community of "grubbers" had been formed.

Now that he was concentrating on it, Jason was aware of the soft flow of thoughts around him. The consciousness of the dorym was matched by other like patterns from the rear of the barn. He knew without going outside that more of the big beasts were in the field back there.

"This is all new to me," Jason said. "Have you ever thought about it, Naxa? What does it feel like to be a talker? I mean, do you *know* why it is you can get the animals to obey you while other people have no luck at all?"

Thinking of this sort troubled Naxa. He ran his fingers through his thick hair and scowled as he answered. "Nev'r thought about it. Just do it. Just get t'know the beast real good, then y'can guess what they're going t'do. That's all."

It was obvious that Naxa had never thought about the origin of his ability to control the animals. And if he hadn't—probably no one else had. They had no reason to. They simply accepted the powers of talkers as one of the facts of life.

Ideas slipped towards each other in his mind, like the pieces of a puzzle joining together. He had told Kerk that the native life of Pyrrus had joined in battle against

mankind, he didn't know why. Well—he still didn't know why, but he was getting an idea of the “how.”

“About how far are we from the city?” Jason asked. “Do you have an idea how long it would take us to get there by dorym?”

“Half a day there—half back. Why? Y'want to go?”

“I don't want to get into the city, not yet. But I would like to get close to it,” Jason told him.

“See what Rhes say,” was Naxa's answer.

Rhes granted instant permission without asking any questions. They saddled up and left at once, in order to complete the round trip before dark.

They had been traveling less than an hour before Jason knew they were going in the direction of the city. With each minute the feeling grew stronger. Naxa was aware of it too, stirring in the saddle with unvoiced feelings. They had to keep touching and reassuring their mounts which were growing skittish and restless.

“This is far enough,” Jason said. Naxa gratefully pulled to a stop.

The wordless thought beat through Jason's mind, filling it. He could feel it on all sides—only much stronger ahead of them in the direction of the unseen city. Naxa and the doryms reacted in the same way, restlessly uncomfortable, not knowing the cause.

One thing was obvious now. The Pyrran animals were sensitive to psi radiation—probably the plants and lower life forms as well. Perhaps they communicated by it, since they obeyed the men who had a strong control of it. And in this area was a wash of psi radiation such as he had never experienced before. Though his personal talents specialized in psychokinesis—the mental control of inanimate matter—he was still sensitive to most mental phenomena. Watching a sports event he had many times felt the unanimous accord of many minds expressing the same thought. What he felt now was like that.

Only terribly different. A crowd exulted at some success on the field, or groaned at a failure. The feeling fluxed and changed as the game progressed. Here the wash of thought was unending, strong and frightening. It didn't translate into words very well. It was part hatred, part fear—and all destruction.

“*KILL THE ENEMY*” was as close as Jason could express it. But it was more than that. An unending river of mental outrage and death.

“Let's go back now,” he said, suddenly battered and sickened by the feelings he had let wash through him. As they started the return trip he began to understand many things.

His sudden unspeakable fear when the Pyrran animal had attacked him that first day on the planet. And his recurrent nightmares that had never completely ceased, even with drugs. Both of these were his reaction to the hatred directed at the city. Though for some reason he hadn't felt it directly up to now, enough had reached through to him to get a strong emotional reaction.

Rhes was asleep when they got back and Jason couldn't talk to him until morning. In spite of his fatigue from the trip, he stayed awake late into the night, going over in his

mind the discoveries of the day. Could he tell Rhes what he had found out? Not very well. If he did that, he would have to explain the importance of his discovery and what he meant to use it for. Nothing that aided the city dwellers would appeal to Rhes in the slightest. Best to say nothing until the entire affair was over.

Chapter 18

After breakfast he told Rhes that he wanted to return to the city.

“Then you have seen enough of our barbarian world, and wish to go back to your friends. To help them wipe us out perhaps?” Rhes said it lightly, but there was a touch of cold malice behind his words.

“I hope you don’t really think that,” Jason told him. “You must realize that the opposite is true. I would like to see this civil war ended and your people getting all the benefits of science and medicine that have been withheld. I’ll do everything I can to bring that about.”

“They’ll never change,” Rhes said gloomily, “so don’t waste your time. But there is one thing you must do, for your protection and ours. Don’t admit, or even hint, that you’ve talked to any grubbers!”

“Why not?”

“Why not! Suffering death are you that simple! They will do anything to see that we don’t rise too high, and would much prefer to see us all dead. Do you think they would hesitate to kill you if they as much as suspected you had contacted us? They realize—even if you don’t—that you can singlehandedly alter the entire pattern of power on this planet. The ordinary junkman may think of us as being only one step above the animals, but the leaders don’t. They know what we need and what we want. They could probably guess just what it is I am going to ask you.

“Help us, Jason dinAlt. Get back among those human pigs and lie. Say you never talked to us, that you hid in the forest and we attacked you and you had to shoot to save yourself. We’ll supply some recent corpses to make that part of your story sound good. Make them believe you, and even after you think you have them convinced keep on acting the part because they will be watching you. Then tell them you have finished your work and are ready to leave. Get safely off Pyrrus, to another planet, and I promise you anything in the universe. Whatever you want you shall have. Power, money—*anything*.

“This is a rich planet. The junkmen mine and sell the metal, but we could do it much better. Bring a spaceship back here and land anywhere on this continent. We have no cities, but our people have farms everywhere, they will find you. We will then have commerce, trade—on our own. This is what we all want and we will work hard for it. And *you* will have done it. Whatever you want we will give. That is a promise and we do not break our promises.”

The intensity and magnitude of what he described rocked Jason. He knew that Rhes spoke the truth and the entire resources of the planet would be his, if he did as asked. For one second he was tempted, savoring the thought of what it would be like. Then came realization that it would be a half answer, and a poor one at that. If these people had the strength they wanted, their first act would be the attempted destruction of the city men. The result would be bloody civil war that would probably destroy them both. Rhes’ answer was a good one—but only half an answer.

Jason had to find a better solution. One that would stop *all* the fighting on this planet and allow the two groups of humans to live in peace.

“I will do nothing to injure your people, Rhes—and everything in my power to aid them,” Jason said.

This half answer satisfied Rhes, who could see only one interpretation of it. He spent the rest of the morning on the communicator, arranging for the food supplies that were being brought to the trading site.

“The supplies are ready and we have sent the signal,” he said. “The truck will be there tomorrow and you will be waiting for it. Everything is arranged as I told you. You’ll leave now with Naxa. You must reach the meeting spot before the trucks.”

Chapter 19

“Trucks almost here. Y’know what to do?” Naxa asked.

Jason nodded, and looked again at the dead man. Some beast had torn his arm off and he had bled to death. The severed arm had been tied into the shirt sleeve, so from a distance it looked normal. Seen close up this limp arm, plus the white skin and shocked expression on the face, gave Jason an unhappy sensation. He liked to see his corpses safely buried. However he could understand its importance today.

“Here they’re. Wait until his back’s turned,” Naxa whispered.

The armored truck had three powered trailers in tow this time. The train ground up the rock slope and whined to a stop. Krannon climbed out of the cab and looked carefully around before opening up the trailers. He had a lift robot along to help him with the loading.

“Now!” Naxa hissed.

Jason burst into the clearing, running, shouting Krannon’s name. There was a crackling behind him as two of the hidden men hurled the corpse through the foliage after him. He turned and fired without stopping, setting the thing afire in midair.

There was the crack of another gun as Krannon fired, his shot jarred the twice-dead corpse before it hit the ground. Then he was lying prone, firing into the trees behind the running Jason.

Just as Jason reached the truck there was a whirring in the air and hot pain ripped into his back, throwing him to the ground. He looked around as Krannon dragged him through the door, and saw the metal shaft of a crossbow bolt sticking out of his shoulder.

“Lucky,” the Pyrran said. “An inch lower would have got your heart. I warned you about those grubbers. You’re lucky to get off with only this.” He lay next to the door and snapped shots into the now quiet wood.

Taking out the bolt hurt much more than it had going in. Jason cursed the pain as Krannon put on a dressing, and admired the singleness of purpose of the people who had shot him. They had risked his life to make his escape look real. And also risked the chance that he might turn against them after being shot. They did a job completely and thoroughly and he cursed them for their efficiency.

Krannon climbed warily out of the truck, after Jason was bandaged. Finishing the loading quickly, he started the train of trailers back towards the city. Jason had an anti-pain shot and dozed off as soon as they started.

While he slept, Krannon must have radioed ahead, because Kerk was waiting when they arrived. As soon as the truck entered the perimeter he threw open the door and dragged Jason out. The bandage pulled and Jason felt the wound tear open. He ground his teeth together; Kerk would not have the satisfaction of hearing him cry out.

"I told you to stay in the buildings until the ship left. Why did you leave? Why did you go outside? You talked to the grubbers—didn't you?" With each question he shook Jason again.

"I didn't talk to—anyone." Jason managed to get the words out. "They tried to take me, I shot two—hid out until the trucks came back."

"Got another one then," Krannon said. "I saw it. Good shooting. Think I got some, too. Let him go Kerk, they shot him in the back before he could reach the truck."

That's enough explanations, Jason thought to himself. Don't overdo it. Let him make up his mind later. Now's the time to change the subject. There's one thing that will get his mind off the grubbers.

"I've been fighting your war for you Kerk, while you stayed safely inside the perimeter." Jason leaned back against the side of the truck as the other loosened his grip. "I've found out what your battle with this planet is really about—and how you can win it. Now let me sit down and I'll tell you."

More Pyrrans had come up while they talked. None of them moved now. Like Kerk, they stood frozen, looking at Jason. When Kerk talked, he spoke for all of them.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. Pyrrus is fighting you—actively and consciously. Get far enough out from this city and you can feel the waves of hatred that are directed at it. No, that's wrong—you can't because you've grown up with it. But I can, and so could anyone else with any sort of psi sensitivity. There is a message of war being beamed against you constantly. The life forms of this planet are psi-sensitive, and respond to that order. They attack and change and mutate for your destruction. And they'll keep on doing so until you are all dead. Unless you can stop the war."

"How?" Kerk snapped the word and every face echoed the question.

"By finding whoever or whatever is sending that message. The life forms that attack you have no reasoning intelligence. They are being ordered to do so. I think I know how to find the source of these orders. After that it will be a matter of getting across a message, asking for a truce and an eventual end to all hostilities."

A dead silence followed his words as the Pyrrans tried to comprehend the ideas. Kerk moved first, waving them all away.

"Go back to your work. This is my responsibility and I'll take care of it. As soon as I find out what truth there is here—if any—I'll make a complete report." The people drifted away silently, looking back as they went.

Chapter 20

FROM the beginning now,” Kerk said. “And leave out nothing.”

“There is very little more that I can add to the physical facts. I saw the animals, understood the message. I even experimented with some of them and they reacted to my mental commands. What I must do now is track down the source of the orders that keep this war going.

“I’ll tell you something that I have never told anyone else. I’m not only lucky at gambling. I have enough psi ability to alter probability in my favor. It’s an erratic ability that I have tried to improve for obvious reasons. During the past ten years I managed to study at all of the centers that do psi research. Compared to other fields of knowledge it is amazing how little they know. Basic psi talents can be improved by practice, and some machines have been devised that act as psionic amplifiers. One of these, used correctly, is a very good directional indicator.”

“You want to build this machine?” Kerk asked.

“Exactly. Build it and take it outside the city in the ship. Any signal strong enough to keep this centuries-old battle going should be strong enough to track down. I’ll follow it, contact the creatures who are sending it, and try to find out why they are doing it. I assume you’ll go along with any reasonable plan that will end this war?”

“Anything reasonable,” Kerk said coldly. “How long will it take you to build this machine?”

“Just a few days if you have all the parts here,” Jason told him.

“Then do it. I’m canceling the flight that’s leaving now and I’ll keep the ship here, ready to go. When the machine is built I want you to track the signal and report back to me.”

“Agreed,” Jason said, standing up. “As soon as I have this hole in my back looked at I’ll draw up a list of things needed.”

A grim, unsmiling man named Skop was assigned to Jason as a combination guide and guard. He took his job very seriously, and it didn’t take Jason long to realize that he was a prisoner-at-large. Kerk had accepted his story, but that was no guarantee that he believed it. At a single word from him, the guard could turn executioner.

The chill thought hit Jason that undoubtedly this was what would happen. Whether Kerk accepted the story or not—he couldn’t afford to take a chance. As long as there was the slightest possibility Jason had contacted the grubbers, he could not be allowed to leave the planet alive. The woods people were being simple if they thought a plan this obvious might succeed. Or had they just gambled on the very long chance it might work? *They* certainly had nothing to lose by it.

Only half of Jason’s mind was occupied with the work as he drew up a list of materials he would need for the psionic direction finder. His thoughts plodded in tight circles, searching for a way out that didn’t exist. He was too deeply involved now to just leave. Kerk would see to that. Unless he could find a way to end the war and settle the grubber question he was marooned on Pyrrus for life. A very short life.

When the list was ready he called Supply. With a few substitutions, everything he might possibly need was in stock, and would be sent over. Skop sank into an

apparent doze in his chair and Jason, his head propped against the pull of gravity by one arm, began a working sketch of his machine.

Jason looked up suddenly, aware of the silence. He could hear machinery in the building and voices in the hall outside. What kind of silence then—?

Mental silence. He had been so preoccupied since his return to the city that he hadn't noticed the complete lack of any kind of psi sensation. The constant wash of animal reactions was missing, as was the vague tactile awareness of his PK. With sudden realization he remembered that it was always this way inside the city.

He tried to listen with his mind—and stopped almost before he began. There was a constant press of thought about him that he was made aware of when he reached out. It was like being in a vessel far beneath the ocean, with your hand on the door that held back the frightening pressure. Touching the door, without opening it, you could feel the stresses, the power pushing in and waiting to crush you. It was this way with the psi pressure on the city. The unvoiced hate-filled screams of Pyrrus would instantly destroy any mind that received them. Some function of his brain acted as a psi-circuit breaker, shutting off awareness before his mind could be blasted. There was just enough leak-through to keep him aware of the pressure—and supply the raw materials for his constant nightmares.

There was only one fringe benefit. The lack of thought pressure made it easier for him to concentrate. In spite of his fatigue the diagram developed swiftly.

Meta arrived late that afternoon, bringing the parts he had ordered. She slid the long box onto the workbench, started to speak, but changed her mind and said nothing. Jason looked up at her and smiled.

“Confused?” he asked.

“I don't know what you mean,” she said, “I'm not confused. Just annoyed. The regular trip has been canceled and our supply schedule will be thrown off for months to come. And instead of piloting or perimeter assignment all I can do is stand around and wait for you. Then take some silly flight following your directions. Do you wonder that I'm annoyed?”

Jason carefully set the parts out on the chassis before he spoke. “As I said, you're confused. I can point out how you're confused—which will make you even more confused. A temptation that I frankly find hard to resist.”

She looked across the bench at him, frowning. One finger unconsciously curling and uncurling a short lock of hair. Jason liked her this way. As a Pyrran operating at full blast she had as much personality as a gear in a machine. Once out of that pattern she reminded him more of the girl he had known on that first flight to Pyrrus. He wondered if it was possible to really get across to her what he meant.

“I'm not being insulting when I say ‘confused,’ Meta. With your background you couldn't be any other way. You have an insular personality. Admittedly, Pyrrus is an unusual island with a lot of high-power problems that you are an expert at solving. That doesn't make it any less of an island. When you face a cosmopolitan problem you are confused. Or even worse, when your island problems are put into a bigger context. That's like playing your own game, only having the rules change constantly as you go along.”

“You’re talking nonsense,” she snapped at him. “Pyrrus isn’t an island and battling for survival is definitely not a game.”

“I’m sorry,” he smiled. “I was using a figure of speech, and a badly chosen one at that. Let’s put the problem on more concrete terms. Take an example. Suppose I were to tell you that over there, hanging from the doorframe, was a stingwing—”

Meta’s gun was pointing at the door before he finished the last word. There was a crash as the guard’s chair went over. He had jumped from a half-doze to full alertness in an instant, his gun also searching the doorframe.

“That was just an example,” Jason said. “There’s really nothing there.” The guard’s gun vanished and he scowled a look of contempt at Jason, as he righted the chair and dropped into it.

“You both have proved yourself capable of handling a Pyrran problem.” Jason continued. “But what if I said that there is a thing hanging from the doorframe that *looks* like a stingwing, but is really a kind of large insect that spins a fine silk that can be used to weave clothes?”

The guard glared from under his thick eyebrows at the empty doorframe, his gun whined part way out, then snapped back into the holster. He growled something inaudible at Jason, then stamped into the outer room, slamming the door behind him. Meta frowned in concentration and looked puzzled.

“It couldn’t be anything except a stingwing,” she finally said. “Nothing else could possibly look like that. And even if it didn’t spin silk, it would bite if you got near, so you would have to kill it.” She smiled with satisfaction at the indestructible logic of her answer.

“Wrong again,” Jason said. “I just described the mimic-spinner that lives on Stover’s Planet. It imitates the most violent forms of life there, does such a good job that it has no need for other defenses. It’ll sit quietly on your hand and spin for you by the yard. If I dropped a shipload of them here on Pyrrus, you never could be sure when to shoot, could you?”

“But they are not here now,” Meta insisted.

“Yet they could be quite easily. And if they were, all the rules of your game would change. Getting the idea now? There are some fixed laws and rules in the galaxy—but they’re not the ones you live by. Your rule is war unending with the local life. I want to step outside your rule book and end that war. Wouldn’t you like that? Wouldn’t you like an existence that was more than just an endless battle for survival? A life with a chance for happiness, love, music, art—all the enjoyable things you have never had the time for.”

All the Pyrran sternness was gone from her face as she listened to what he said, letting herself follow these alien concepts. He had put his hand out automatically as he talked, and had taken hers. It was warm and her pulse fast to his touch.

Meta suddenly became conscious of his hand and snapped hers away, rising to her feet at the same time. As she started blindly towards the door, Jason’s voice snapped after her.

“The guard, Skop, ran out because he didn’t want to lose his precious two-value logic. It’s all he has. But you’ve seen other parts of the galaxy, Meta, you know there is a lot

more to life than kill-and-be-killed on Pyrrus. You feel it is true, even if you won't admit it."

She turned and ran out the door.

Jason looked after her, his hand scraping the bristle on his chin thoughtfully. "Meta, I have the faint hope that the woman is winning over the Pyrran. I think that I saw—perhaps for the first time in the history of this bloody war-torn city—a tear in one of its citizen's eyes."

Chapter 21

“Drop that equipment and Kerk will undoubtedly pull both your arms off,” Jason said. “He’s over there now, looking as sorry as possible that I ever talked him into this.”

Skop cursed under the bulky mass of the psi detector, passing it up to Meta who waited in the open port of the spaceship. Jason supervised the loading, and blasted all the local life that came to investigate. Horndevils were thick this morning and he shot four of them. He was last aboard and closed the lock behind him.

“Where are you going to install it?” Meta asked.

“You tell me,” Jason said. “I need a spot for the antenna where there will be no dense metal in front of the bowl to interfere with the signal. Thin plastic will do, or if worst comes to worst I can mount it outside the hull with a remote drive.”

“You may have to,” she said. “The hull is an unbroken unit, we do all viewing by screen and instruments. I don’t think ... wait ... there is one place that might do.”

She led the way to a bulge in the hull that marked one of the lifeboats. They went in through the always-open lock, Skop struggling after them with the apparatus.

“These lifeboats are half buried in the ship,” Meta explained. “They have transparent front ports covered by friction shields that withdraw automatically when the boat is launched.”

“Can we pull back the shields now?”

“I think so,” she said. She traced the launching circuits to a junction box and opened the lid. When she closed the shield relay manually, the heavy plates slipped back into the hull. There was a clear view, since most of the viewport projected beyond the parent ship.

“Perfect,” Jason said. “I’ll set up here. Now how do I talk to you in the ship?”

“Right here,” she said. “There’s a pre-tuned setting on this communicator. Don’t touch anything else—and particularly not this switch.” She pointed to a large pull-handle set square into the center of the control board. “Emergency launching. Two seconds after that is pulled the lifeboat is shot free. And it so happens this boat has no fuel.”

“Hands off for sure,” Jason said. “Now have Husky there run me in a line with ship’s power and I’ll get this stuff set up.”

The detector was simple, though the tuning had to be precise. A dish-shaped antenna pulled in the signal for the delicately balanced detector. There was a sharp fall-off on both sides of the input so direction could be precisely determined. The resulting signal was fed to an amplifier stage. Unlike the electronic components of the first stage, this one was drawn in symbols on white paper. Carefully glued-on input and output leads ran to it.

When everything was ready and clamped into place, Jason nodded to Meta’s image on the screen. “Take her up—and easy please. None of your nine-G specials. Go into a slow circle around the perimeter, until I tell you differently.”

Under steady power the ship lifted and grabbed for altitude, then eased into its circular course. They made five circuits of the city before Jason shook his head.

“The thing seems to be working fine, but we’re getting too much noise from all the local life. Get thirty kilometers out from the city and start a new circuit.”

The results were better this time. A powerful signal came from the direction of the city, confined to less than a degree of arc. With the antenna fixed at a right angle to the direction of the ship’s flight, the signal was fairly constant. Meta rotated the ship on its main axis, until Jason’s lifeboat was directly below.

“Going fine now,” he said. “Just hold your controls as they are and keep the nose from drifting.”

After making a careful mark on the setting circle, Jason turned the receiving antenna through one hundred eighty degrees of arc. As the ship kept to its circle, he made a slow collecting sweep of any signals beamed at the city. They were halfway around before he got a new signal.

It was there all right, narrow but strong. Just to be sure he let the ship complete two more sweeps, and he noted the direction on the gyro-compass each time. They coincided. The third time around he called to Meta.

“Get ready for a full right turn, or whatever you call it. I think I have our bearing. Get ready—*now*.”

It was a slow turn and Jason never lost the signal. A few times it wavered, but he brought it back on. When the compass settled down Meta pushed on more power.

They set their course towards the native Pyrrans.

An hour’s flight at close to top atmospheric speed brought no change. Meta complained, but Jason kept her on course. The signal never varied and was slowly picking up strength. They crossed the chain of volcanoes that marked the continental limits, the ship bucking in the fierce thermals. Once the shore was behind and they were over water, Skop joined Meta in grumbling. He kept his turret spinning, but there was very little to shoot at this far from land.

When the islands came over the horizon the signal began to dip.

“Slow now,” Jason called. “Those islands ahead look like our source!”

A continent had been here once, floating on Pyrrus’ liquid core. Pressures changed, land masses shifted, and the continent had sunk beneath the ocean. All that was left now of the teeming life of that land mass was confined to a chain of islands, once the mountain peaks of the highest range of mountains. These islands, whose sheer, sides rose straight from the water, held the last inhabitants of the lost continent. The weeded-out descendants, of the victors of uncountable violent contests. Here lived the oldest native Pyrrans.

“Come in lower,” Jason signaled. “Towards that large peak. The signals seem to originate there.”

They swooped low over the mountain, but nothing was visible other than the trees and sun-blasted rock.

The pain almost took Jason’s head off. A blast of hatred that drove through the amplifier and into his skull. He tore off the phones, and clutched his skull between his hands. Through watering eyes he saw the black cloud of flying beasts hurtle up

from the trees below. He had a single glimpse of the hillside beyond, before Meta blasted power to the engines and the ship leaped away.

“We’ve found them!” Her fierce exultation faded as she saw Jason through the communicator. “Are you all right? What happened?”

“Feel ... burned out ... I’ve felt a psi blast before, but nothing like that! I had a glimpse of an opening, looked like a cave mouth, just before the blast hit. Seemed to come from there.”

“Lie down,” Meta said. “I’ll get you back as fast as I can. I’m calling ahead to Kerk, he has to know what happened.”

A group of men were waiting in the landing station when they came down. They stormed out as soon as the ship touched, shielding their faces from the still-hot tubes. Kerk burst in as soon as the port was cracked, peering around until he spotted Jason stretched out on an acceleration couch.

“Is it true?” he barked. “You’ve traced the alien criminals who started this war?”

“Slow, man, slow,” Jason said. “I’ve traced the source of the psi message that keeps your war going. I’ve found no evidence as to who started this war, and certainly wouldn’t go so far as to call them criminals—”

“I’m tired of your word-play,” Kerk broke in. “You’ve found these creatures and their location has been marked.”

“On the chart,” Meta said, “I could fly there blindfolded.”

“Fine, fine,” Kerk said, rubbing his hands together so hard they could hear the harsh rasp of the callouses. “It takes a real effort to grasp the idea that, after all these centuries, the war might be coming to an end. But it’s possible now. Instead of simply killing off these self-renewing legions of the damned that attack us, we can get to the leaders. Search them out, carry the war to them for a change—and blast their stain from the face of this planet!”

“Nothing of the sort!” Jason said, sitting up with an effort. “Nothing doing! Since I came to this planet I have been knocked around, and risked my life ten times over. Do you think I have done this just to satisfy your blood-thirsty ambitions? It’s peace I’m after—not destruction. You promised to contact these creatures, attempt to negotiate with them. Aren’t you a man of honor who keeps his word?”

“I’ll ignore the insult—though I’d have killed you for it at any other time,” Kerk said. “You’ve been of great service to our people, we are not ashamed to acknowledge an honest debt. At the same time—do not accuse me of breaking promises that I never made. I recall my exact words. I promised to go along with any reasonable plan that would end this war. That is just what I intend to do. Your plan to negotiate a peace is not reasonable. Therefore we are going to destroy the enemy.”

“Think first,” Jason called after Kerk, who had turned to leave. “What is wrong with trying negotiation or an armistice? Then, if that fails, you can try your way.”

The compartment was getting crowded as other Pyrrans pushed in. Kerk, almost to the door, turned back to face Jason.

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong with armistice,” he said. “It’s a coward’s way out, that’s what it is. It’s all right for you to suggest it, you’re from off-world and don’t know any

better. But do you honestly think I could entertain such a defeatist notion for one instant? When I speak, I speak not only for myself, but for all of us here. We don't mind fighting, and we know how to do it. We know that if this war was over we could build a better world here. At the same time, if we have the choice of continued war or a cowardly peace—*we vote for war*. This war will only be over when the enemy is utterly destroyed!"

The listening Pyrrans shouted in agreement, and when Kerk pushed out through the crowd some of them patted his shoulder as he went by. Jason slumped back on the couch, worn out by his exertions and exhausted by the attempt to win the violent Pyrrans over to a peaceful point of view.

When he looked up they were gone—all except Meta. She had the same look of blood-thirsty elation as the others, but it drained away when she glanced at him.

"What about it, Meta?" he asked bitterly. "No doubts? Do you think that destruction is the only way to end this war?"

"I don't know," she said. "I can't be sure. For the first time in my life I find myself with more than one answer to the same question."

"Congratulations," he said. "It's a sign of growing up."

Chapter 22

Jason stood to one side and watched the deadly cargo being loaded into the hold of the ship. The Pyrrans were in good humor as they stowed away riot guns, grenades and gas bombs. When the back-pack atom bomb was put aboard one of them broke into a marching song, and the others picked it up. Maybe they were happy, but the approaching carnage only filled Jason with an intense gloom. He felt that somehow he was a traitor to life. Perhaps the life form he had found needed destroying—and perhaps it didn't. Without making the slightest attempt at conciliation, destruction would be plain murder.

Kerk came out of the operations building and the starter pumps could be heard whining inside the ship. They would leave within minutes. Jason forced himself into a foot-dragging rush and met Kerk halfway to the ship.

"I'm coming with you, Kerk. You owe me at least that much for finding them."

Kerk hesitated, not liking the idea. "This is an operational mission," he said. "No room for observers, and the extra weight— And it's too late to stop us Jason, you know that."

"You Pyrrans are the worst liars in the universe," Jason said. "We both know that ship can lift ten times the amount it's carrying today. Now ... do you let me come, or forbid me without reason at all?"

"Get aboard," Kerk said. "But keep out of the way or you'll get trampled."

This time, with a definite destination ahead, the flight was much faster. Meta took the ship into the stratosphere, in a high ballistic arc that ended at the islands. Kerk was in the co-pilot's seat, Jason sat behind them where he could watch the screens. The landing party, twenty-five volunteers, were in the hold below with the weapons. All the screens in the ship were switched to the forward viewer. They watched the green island appear and swell, then vanish behind the flames of the braking rockets. Jockeying the ship carefully, Meta brought it down on a flat shelf near the cave mouth.

Jason was ready this time for the blast of mental hatred—but it still hurt. The gunners laughed and killed gleefully as every animal on the island closed in on the ship. They were slaughtered by the thousands, and still more came.

"Do you have to do this?" Jason asked. "It's murder—carnage, just butchering those beasts like that."

"Self-defense," Kerk said. "They attack us and they get killed. What could be simpler? Now shut up, or I'll throw you out there with them."

It was a half an hour before the gunfire slackened. Animals still attacked them, but the mass assaults seemed to be over. Kerk spoke into the intercom.

"Landing party away—and watch your step. They know we're here and will make it as hot as they can. Take the bomb into that cave and see how far back it runs. We can always blast them from the air, but it'll do no good if they're dug into solid rock. Keep your screen open, leave the bomb and pull back at once if I tell you to. Now move."

The men swarmed down the ladders and formed into open battle formation. They were soon under attack, but the beasts were picked off before they could get close. It didn't take long for the man at point to reach the cave. He had his pickup trained in front of him, and the watchers in the ship followed the advance.

"Big cave," Kerk grunted. "Slants back and down. What I was afraid of. Bomb dropped on that would just close it up. With no guarantee that anything sealed in it, couldn't eventually get out. We'll have to see how far down it goes."

There was enough heat in the cave now to use the infra-red filters. The rock walls stood out harshly black and white as the advance continued.

"No signs of life since entering the cave," the officer reported. "Gnawed bones at the entrance and some bat droppings. It looks like a natural cave—so far."

Step by step the advance continued, slowing as it went. Insensitive as the Pyrrans were to psi pressure, even they were aware of the blast of hatred being continuously leveled at them. Jason, back in the ship, had a headache that slowly grew worse instead of better.

"*Watch out!*" Kerk shouted, staring at the screen with horror.

The cave was filled from wall to wall with pallid, eyeless animals. They poured from tiny side passages and seemed to literally emerge from the ground. Their front ranks dissolved in flame, but more kept pressing in. On the screen the watchers in the ship saw the cave spin dizzily as the operator fell. Pale bodies washed up and concealed the lens.

"Close ranks—flame-throwers and gas!" Kerk bellowed into the mike.

Less than half of the men were alive after that first attack. The survivors, protected by the flame-throwers, set off the gas grenades. Their sealed battle armor protected them while the section of cave filled with gas. Someone dug through the bodies of their attackers and found the pickup.

"Leave the bomb there and withdraw," Kerk ordered. "We've had enough losses already."

A different man stared out of the screen. The officer was dead. "Sorry, sir," he said, "but it will be just as easy to push ahead as back as long as the gas grenades hold out. We're too close now to pull back."

"That's an order," Kerk shouted, but the man was gone from the screen and the advance continued.

Jason's fingers hurt where he had them clamped to the chair arm. He pulled them loose and massaged them. On the screen the black and white cave flowed steadily towards them. Minute after minute went by this way. Each time the animals attacked again, a few more gas grenades were used up.

"Something ahead—looks different," the panting voice cracked from the speaker. The narrow cave slowly opened out into a gigantic chamber, so large the roof and far walls were lost in the distance.

"What are those?" Kerk asked. "Get a searchlight over to the right there."

The picture on the screen was fuzzy and hard to see now, dimmed by the layers of rock in-between. Details couldn't be made out clearly, but it was obvious this was something unusual.

“Never saw ... anything quite like them before,” the speaker said. “Look like big plants of some kind, ten meters tall at least—yet they’re moving. Those branches, tentacles or whatever they are, keep pointing towards us and I get the darkest feeling in my head ...”

“Blast one, see what happens,” Kerk said.

The gun fired and at the same instant an intensified wave of mental hatred rolled over the men, dropping them to the ground. They rolled in pain, blacked out and unable to think or fight the underground beasts that poured over them in renewed attack.

In the ship, far above, Jason felt the shock to his mind and wondered how the men below could have lived through it. The others in the control room had been hit by it as well. Kerk pounded on the frame of the screen and shouted to the unhearing men below.

“Pull back, come back ...”

It was too late. The men only stirred slightly as the victorious Pyrran animals washed over them, clawing for the joints in their armor. Only one man moved, standing up and beating the creatures away with his bare hands. He stumbled a few feet and bent over the writhing mass below him. With a heave of his shoulders he pulled another man up. The man was dead but his shoulder pack was still strapped to his back. Bloody fingers fumbled at the pack, then both men were washed back under the wave of death.

“That was the bomb!” Kerk shouted to Meta. “If he didn’t change the setting, it’s still on ten-second minimum. Get out of here!”

Jason had just time to fall back on the acceleration couch before the rockets blasted. The pressure leaned on him and kept mounting. Vision blacked out but he didn’t lose consciousness. Air screamed across the hull, then the sound stopped as they left the atmosphere behind.

Just as Meta cut the power a glare of white light burst from the screens. They turned black instantly as the hull pickups burned out. She switched filters into place, then pressed the button that rotated new pickups into position.

Far below, in the boiling sea, a climbing cloud of mushroom-shaped flame filled the spot where the island had been seconds before. The three of them looked at it, silently and unmoving. Kerk recovered first.

“Head for home, Meta, and get operations on the screen. Twenty-five men dead, but they did their job. They knocked out those beasts—whatever they were—and ended the war. I can’t think of a better way for a man to die.”

Meta set the orbit, then called operations.

“Trouble getting through,” she said. “I have a robot landing beam response, but no one is answering the call.”

A man appeared on the empty screen. He was beaded with sweat and had a harried look in his eyes. “Kerk,” he said, “is that you? Get the ship back here at once. We need her firepower at the perimeter. All blazes broke loose a minute ago, a general attack from every side, worse than I’ve ever seen.”

“What do you mean?” Kerk stammered in unbelief. “The war is over—we blasted them, destroyed their headquarters completely.”

“The war is going like it never has gone before,” the other snapped back. “I don’t know what you did, but it stirred up the stewpot of hell here. Now stop talking and get the ship back!”

Kerk turned slowly to face Jason, his face pulled back in a look of raw animal savagery.

“You—! You did it! I should have killed you the first time I saw you. I wanted to, now I know I was right. You’ve been like a plague since you came here, sowing death in every direction. I knew you were wrong, yet I let your twisted words convince me. And look what has happened. First you killed Welf. Then you murdered those men in the cave. Now this attack on the perimeter—all who die there, you will have killed!”

Kerk advanced on Jason, step by slow step, hatred twisting his features. Jason backed away until he could retreat no further, his shoulders against the chart case. Kerk’s hand lashed out, not a fighting blow, but an open slap. Though Jason rolled with it, it still battered him and stretched him full length on the floor. His arm was against the chart case, his fingers near the sealed tubes that held the jump matrices.

Jason seized one of the heavy tubes with both hands and pulled it out. He swung it with all his strength into Kerk’s face. It broke the skin on his cheekbone and forehead and blood ran from the cuts. But it didn’t slow or stop the big man in the slightest. His smile held no mercy as he reached down and dragged Jason to his feet.

“Fight back,” he said, “I will have that much more pleasure as I kill you.” He drew back the granite fist that would tear Jason’s head from his shoulders.

“Go ahead,” Jason said, and stopped struggling. “Kill me. You can do it easily. Only don’t call it justice. Welf died to save me. But the men on the island died because of your stupidity. I wanted peace and you wanted war. Now you have it. Kill me to soothe your conscience, because the truth is something you can’t face up to.”

With a bellow of rage Kerk drove the pile-driver fist down.

Meta grabbed the arm in both her hands and hung on, pulling it aside before the blow could land. The three of them fell together, half crushing Jason.

“Don’t do it,” she screamed. “Jason didn’t want those men to go down there. That was your idea. You can’t kill him for that!”

Kerk, exploding with rage, was past hearing. He turned his attention to Meta, tearing her from him. She was a woman and her supple strength was meager compared to his great muscles. But she was a Pyrran woman and she did what no off-worlder could. She slowed him for a moment, stopped the fury of his attack until he could rip her hands loose and throw her aside. It didn’t take him long to do this, but it was just time enough for Jason to get to the door.

Jason stumbled through, and jammed shut the lock behind him. A split second after he had driven the bolt home Kerk’s weight plunged into the door. The metal screamed and bent, giving way. One hinge was torn loose and the other held only by a shred of metal. It would go down on the next blow.

Jason wasn’t waiting for that. He hadn’t stayed to see if the door would stop the raging Pyrran. No door on the ship could stop him. Fast as possible, Jason went

down the gangway. There was no safety on the ship, which meant he had to get off it. The lifeboat deck was just ahead.

Ever since first seeing them, he had given a lot of thought to the lifeboats. Though he hadn't looked ahead to this situation, he knew a time might come when he would need transportation of his own. The lifeboats had seemed to be the best bet, except that Meta had told him they had no fuel. She had been right in one thing—the boat he had been in had empty tanks, he had checked. There were five other boats, though, that he hadn't examined. He had wondered about the idea of useless lifeboats and come to what he hoped was a correct conclusion.

This spaceship was the only one the Pyrrans had. Meta had told him once that they always had planned to buy another ship, but never did. Some other necessary war expense managed to come up first. One ship was really enough for their uses. The only difficulty lay in the fact they had to keep that ship in operation or the Pyrran city was dead. Without supplies they would be wiped out in a few months. Therefore the ship's crew couldn't conceive of abandoning their ship. No matter what kind of trouble she got into, they couldn't leave her. When the ship died, so did their world.

With this kind of thinking, there was no need to keep the lifeboats fueled. Not all of them, at least. Though it stood to reason at least one of them held fuel for short flights that would have been wasteful for the parent ship. At this point Jason's chain of logic grew weak. Too many "ifs." *If* they used the lifeboats at all, one of them should be fueled. *If* they did, it would be fueled now. And *if* it were fueled—which one of the six would it be? Jason had no time to go looking. He had to be right the first time.

His reasoning had supplied him with an answer, the last of a long line of suppositions. If a boat were fueled, it should be the one nearest to the control cabin. The one he was diving towards now. His life depended on this string of guesses.

Behind him the door went down with a crash. Kerk bellowed and leaped. Jason hurled himself through the lifeboat port with the nearest thing to a run he could manage under the doubled gravity. With both hands he grabbed the emergency launching handle and pulled down.

An alarm bell rang and the port slammed shut, literally in Kerk's face. Only his Pyrran reflexes saved him from being smashed by it.

Solid-fuel launchers exploded and blasted the lifeboat clear of the parent ship. Their brief acceleration slammed Jason to the deck, then he floated as the boat went into free fall. The main drive rockets didn't fire.

In that moment Jason learned what it was like to know he was dead. Without fuel the boat would drop into the jungle below, falling like a rock and blasting apart when it hit. There was no way out.

Then the rockets caught, roared, and he dropped to the deck, bruising his nose. He sat up, rubbing it and grinning. There was fuel in the tanks—the delay in starting had only been part of the launching cycle, giving the lifeboat time to fall clear of the ship. Now to get it under control. He pulled himself into the pilot's seat.

The altimeter had fed information to the autopilot, leveling the boat off parallel to the ground. Like all lifeboat controls these were childishly simple, designed to be used by novices in an emergency. The autopilot could not be shut off, it rode along

with the manual controls, tempering foolish piloting. Jason hauled the control wheel into a tight turn and the autopilot gentled it to a soft curve.

Through the port he could see the big ship blaring fire in a much tighter turn. Jason didn't know who was flying it or what they had in mind—he took no chances.

Jamming the wheel forward into a dive he cursed as they eased into a gentle drop. The larger ship had no such restrictions. It changed course with a violent maneuver and dived on him. The forward turret fired and an explosion at the stern rocked the little boat. This either knocked out the autopilot or shocked it into submission. The slow drop turned into a power dive and the jungle billowed up.

Jason pulled the wheel back and there was just time to get his arms in front of his face before they hit.

Thundering rockets and cracking trees ended in a great splash. Silence followed and the smoke drifted away. High above, the spaceship circled hesitantly. Dropping a bit as if wanting to go down and investigate. Then rising again as the urgent message for aid came from the city. Loyalty won and she turned and spewed fire towards home.

Chapter 23

Tree branches had broken the lifeboat's fall, the bow rockets had burned out in emergency blast, and the swamp had cushioned the landing a bit. It was still a crash. The battered cylinder sank slowly into the stagnant water and thin mud of the swamp. The bow was well under before Jason managed to kick open the emergency hatch in the waist.

There was no way of knowing how long it would take for the boat to go under, and Jason was in no condition to ponder the situation. Concussed and bloody, he had just enough drive left to get himself out. Wading and falling he made his way to firmer land, sitting down heavily as soon as he found something that would support him.

Behind him the lifeboat bubbled and sank under the water. Bubbles of trapped air kept rising for a while, then stopped. The water stilled and, except for the broken branches and trees, there was no sign that a ship had ever come this way.

Insects whined across the swamp, and the only sound that broke the quiet of the woods beyond was the cruel scream of an animal pulling down its dinner. When that had echoed away in tiny waves of sound everything was silent.

Jason pulled himself out of the half trance with an effort. His body felt like it had been through a meat grinder, and it was almost impossible to think with the fog in his head. After minutes of deliberation he figured out that the medikit was what he needed. The easy-off snap was very difficult and the button release didn't work. He finally twisted his arm around until it was under the orifice and pressed the entire unit down. It buzzed industriously, though he couldn't feel the needles, he guessed it had worked. His sight spun dizzily for a while then cleared. Pain-killers went to work and he slowly came out of the dark cloud that had enveloped his brain since the crash.

Reason returned and loneliness rode along with it. He was without food, friendless, surrounded by the hostile forces of an alien planet. There was a rising panic that started deep inside of him, that took concentrated effort to hold down.

"Think, Jason, don't emote," he said it aloud to reassure himself, but was instantly sorry, because his voice sounded weak in the emptiness, with a ragged edge of hysteria to it. Something caught in his throat and he coughed to clear it, spitting out blood. Looking at the red stain he was suddenly angry. Hating this deadly planet and the incredible stupidity of the people who lived on it. Cursing out loud was better and his voice didn't sound as weak now. He ended up shouting and shaking his fist at nothing in particular, but it helped. The anger washed away the fear and brought him back to reality.

Sitting on the ground felt good now. The sun was warm and when he leaned back he could almost forget the unending burden of doubled gravity. Anger had carried away fear, rest erased fatigue. From somewhere in the back of his mind there popped up the old platitude. *Where there's life, there's hope*. He grimaced at the triteness of the words, at the same time realizing that a basic truth lurked there.

Count his assets. Well battered, but still alive. None of the bruises seemed very important, and no bones were broken. His gun was still working, it dipped in and out of the power holster as he thought about it. Pyrrans made rugged equipment. The

medikit was operating as well. If he kept his senses, managed to walk in a fairly straight line and could live off the land, there was a fair chance he might make it back to the city. What kind of a reception would be waiting for him there was a different matter altogether. He would find that out after he arrived. Getting there had first priority.

On the debit side there stood the planet Pyrrus. Strength-sapping gravity, murderous weather, and violent animals. Could he survive? As if to add emphasis to his thoughts, the sky darkened over and rain hissed into the forest, marching towards him. Jason scrambled to his feet and took a bearing before the rain closed down visibility. A jagged chain of mountains stood dimly on the horizon, he remembered crossing them on the flight out. They would do as a first goal. After he had reached them, he would worry about the next leg of the journey.

Leaves and dirt flew before the wind in quick gusts, then the rain washed over him. Soaked, chilled, already bone-tired, he pitted the tottering strength of his legs against the planet of death.

When nightfall came it was still raining. There was no way of being sure of the direction, and no point in going on. If that wasn't enough, Jason was on the ragged edge of exhaustion. It was going to be a wet night. All the trees were thick-boled and slippery, he couldn't have climbed them on a one-G world. The sheltered spots that he investigated, under fallen trees and beneath thick bushes, were just as wet as the rest of the forest. In the end he curled up on the leeward side of a tree, and fell asleep, shivering, with the water dripping off him.

The rain stopped around midnight and the temperature fell sharply. Jason woke sluggishly from a dream in which he was being frozen to death, to find it was almost true. Fine snow was sifting through the trees, powdering the ground and drifting against him. The cold bit into his flesh, and when he sneezed it hurt his chest. His aching and numb body only wanted rest, but the spark of reason that remained in him, forced him to his feet. If he lay down now, he would die. Holding one hand against the tree so he wouldn't fall, he began to trudge around it. Step after shuffling step, around and around, until the terrible cold eased a bit and he could stop shivering. Fatigue crawled up him like a muffling, gray blanket. He kept on walking, half the time with his eyes closed. Opening them only when he fell and had to climb painfully to his feet again.

The sun burned away the snow clouds at dawn. Jason leaned against his tree and blinked up at the sky with sore eyes. The ground was white in all directions, except around the tree where his stumbling feet had churned a circle of black mud. His back against the smooth trunk, Jason sank slowly down to the ground, letting the sun soak into him.

Exhaustion had him light-headed, and his lips were cracked from thirst. Almost continuous coughing tore at his chest with fingers of fire. Though the sun was still low it was hot already, burning his skin dry. Dry and hot.

It wasn't right. This thought kept nagging at his brain until he admitted it. Turned it over and over and looked at it from all sides. What wasn't right? The way he felt.

Pneumonia. He had all the symptoms.

His dry lips cracked and blood moistened them when he smiled. He had avoided all the animal perils of Pyrrus, all the big carnivores and poisonous reptiles, only to be laid low by the smallest beast of them all. Well, he had the remedy for this one, too. Rolling up his sleeve with shaking fingers, he pressed the mouth of the medikit to his bare arm. It clicked and began to drone an angry whine. That meant something, he knew, but he just couldn't remember what. Holding it up he saw that one of the hypodermics was projecting halfway from its socket. Of course. It was empty of whatever antibiotic the analyzer had called for. It needed refilling.

Jason hurled the thing away with a curse, and it splashed into a pool and was gone. End of medicine, end of medikit, end of Jason dinAlt. Single-handed battler against the perils of deathworld. Strong-hearted stranger who could do as well as the natives. It had taken him all of one day on his own to get his death warrant signed.

A choking growl echoed behind him. He turned, dropped and fired in the same motion. It was all over before his conscious mind was aware it had happened. Pyrran training had conditioned his reflexes on the pre-cortical level. Jason gaped at the ugly beast dying not a meter from him and realized he had been trained well.

His first reaction was unhappiness that he had killed one of the grubber dogs. When he looked closer he realized this animal was slightly different in markings, size and temper. Though most of its forequarters were blown away, blood pumping out in dying spurts, it kept trying to reach Jason. Before the eyes glazed with death it had struggled its way almost to his feet.

It wasn't quite a grubber dog, though chances were it was a wild relative. Bearing the same relation as dog to wolf. He wondered if there were any other resemblances between wolves and this dead beast. Did they hunt in packs, too?

As soon as the thought hit him he looked up—not a moment too soon. The great forms were drifting through the trees, closing in on him. When he shot two, the others snarled with rage and sank back into the forest. They didn't leave. Instead of being frightened by the deaths they grew even more enraged.

Jason sat with his back to the tree and waited until they came close before he picked them off. With each shot and dying scream the outraged survivors howled the louder. Some of them fought when they met, venting their rage. One stood on his hind legs and raked great strips of bark from a tree. Jason aimed a shot at it, but he was too far away to hit.

There were advantages to having a fever, he realized. Logically he knew he would live only to sunset, or until his gun was empty. Yet the fact didn't bother him greatly. Nothing really mattered. He slumped, relaxed completely, only raising his arm to fire, then letting it drop again. Every few minutes he had to move to look in back of the tree, and kill any of them that were stalking him in the blind spot. He wished dimly that he were leaning against a smaller tree, but it wasn't worth the effort to go to one.

Sometime in the afternoon he fired his last shot. It killed an animal he had allowed to get close. He had noticed he was missing the longer shots. The beast snarled and dropped, the others that were close pulled back and howled in sympathy. One of them exposed himself and Jason pulled the trigger.

There was only a slight click. He tried again, in case it was just a misfire, but there was still only the click. The gun was empty, as was the spare clip pouch at his belt. There were vague memories of reloading, though he couldn't remember how many times he had done it.

This, then, was the end. They had all been right, Pyrrus was a match for him. Though they shouldn't talk. It would kill them all in the end, too. Pyrrans never died in bed. Old Pyrrans never died, they just got et.

Now that he didn't have to force himself to stay alert and hold the gun, the fever took hold. He wanted to sleep and he knew it would be a long sleep. His eyes were almost closed as he watched the wary carnivores slip closer to him. The first one crept close enough to spring, he could see the muscles tensing in its leg.

It leaped. Whirling in midair and falling before it reached him. Blood ran from its gaping mouth and the short shaft of metal projected from the side of his head.

The two men walked out of the brush and looked down at him. Their mere presence seemed to have been enough for the carnivores, because they all vanished.

Grubbers. He had been in such a hurry to reach the city that he had forgotten about the grubbers. It was good that they were here and Jason was very glad they had come. He couldn't talk very well, so he smiled to thank them. But this hurt his lips too much so he went to sleep.

Chapter 24

For a strange length of time after that, there were only hazy patches of memory that impressed themselves on Jason. A sense of movement and large beasts around him. Walls, wood-smoke, the murmur of voices. None of it meant very much and he was too tired to care. It was easier and much better just to let go.

“About time,” Rhes said. “A couple more days lying there like that and we would have buried you, even if you were still breathing.”

Jason blinked at him, trying to focus the face that swam above him. He finally recognized Rhes, and wanted to answer him. But talking only brought on a spell of body-wracking coughing. Someone held a cup to his lips and sweet fluid trickled down his throat. He rested, then tried again.

“How long have I been here?” The voice was thin and sounded far away. Jason had trouble recognizing it for his own.

“Eight days. And why didn’t you listen when I talked to you?” Rhes said.

“You should have stayed near the ship when you crashed. Didn’t you remember what I said about coming down anywhere on this continent? No matter, too late to worry about that. Next time listen to what I say. Our people moved fast and reached the site of the wreck before dark. They found the broken trees and the spot where the ship had sunk, and at first thought whoever had been in it had drowned. Then one of the dogs found your trail, but lost it again in the swamps during the night. They had a fine time with the mud and the snow and didn’t have any luck at all in finding the spoor again. By the next afternoon they were ready to send for more help when they heard your firing. Just made it, from what I hear. Lucky one of them was a talker and could tell the wild dogs to clear out. Would have had to kill them all otherwise, and that’s not healthy.”

“Thanks for saving my neck,” Jason said. “That was closer than I like to come. What happened after? I was sure I was done for, I remember that much. Diagnosed all the symptoms of pneumonia. Guaranteed fatal in my condition without treatment. Looks like you were wrong when you said most of your remedies were useless—they seemed to work well on me.”

His voice died off as Rhes shook his head in a slow *no*, lines of worry sharp-cut into his face. Jason looked around and saw Naxa and another man. They had the same deeply unhappy expressions as Rhes.

“What is it?” Jason asked, feeling the trouble. “If your remedies didn’t work—what did? Not my medikit. That was empty. I remember losing it or throwing it away.”

“You were dying,” Rhes said slowly. “We couldn’t cure you. Only a junkman medicine machine could do that. We got one from the driver of the food truck.”

“But how?” Jason asked, dazed. “You told me the city forbids you medicine. He couldn’t give you his own medikit. Not unless he was—”

Rhes nodded and finished the sentence. “Dead. Of course he was dead. I killed him myself, with a great deal of pleasure.”

This hit Jason hard. He sagged against the pillows and thought of all those who had died since he had come to Pyrrus. The men who had died to save him, died so he could live, died because of his ideas. It was a burden of guilt that he couldn't bear to think about. Would it stop with Krannon—or would the city people try to avenge his death?

“Don't you realize what that means!” he gasped out the words. “Krannon's death will turn the city against you. There'll be no more supplies. They'll attack you when they can, kill your people—”

“Of course we know that!” Rhes leaned forward, his voice hoarse and intense. “It wasn't an easy decision to come to. We have always had a trading agreement with the junkmen. The trading trucks were inviolate. This was our last and only link to the galaxy outside and eventual hope of contacting them.”

“Yet you broke that link to save me—why?”

“Only you can answer that question completely. There was a great attack on the city and we saw their walls broken, they had to be moved back at one place. At the same time the spaceship was over the ocean, dropping bombs of some kind—the flash was reported. Then the ship returned and *you* left it in a smaller ship. They fired at you but didn't kill you. The little ship wasn't destroyed either, we are starting to raise it now. What does it all mean? We had no way of telling. We only knew it was something vitally important. You were alive, but would obviously die before you could talk. The small ship might be repaired to fly, perhaps that was your plan and that is why you stole it for us. We *couldn't* let you die, not even if it meant all-out war with the city. The situation was explained to all of our people who could be reached by screen and they voted to save you. I killed the junkman for his medicine, then rode two doryms to death to get here in time.

“Now tell us—what does it mean? What is your plan? How will it help us?”

Guilt leaned on Jason and stifled his mouth. A fragment of an ancient legend cut across his mind, about the jonah who wrecked the spacer so all in it died, yet he lived. Was that he? Had he wrecked a world? Could he dare admit to these people that he had taken the lifeboat only to save his own life?

The three Pyrrans leaned forward, waiting for his words. Jason closed his eyes so he wouldn't see their faces. What could he tell them? If he admitted the truth they would undoubtedly kill him on the spot, considering it only justice. He wasn't fearful for his own life any more, but if he died the other deaths would all have been in vain. And there still was a way to end this planetary war. All the facts were available now, it was just a matter of putting them together. If only he wasn't so tired, he could see the solution. It was right there, lurking around a corner in his brain, waiting to be dragged out.

Whatever he did, he couldn't admit the truth now. If he died all hope died. He had to lie to gain time, then find the true solution as soon as he was able. That was all he could do.

“You were right,” Jason said haltingly. “The small ship has an interstellar drive in it. Perhaps it can still be saved. Even if it can't there is another way. I can't explain now, but I will tell you when I am rested. Don't worry. The fight is almost over.”

They laughed and pounded each other on the back. When they came to shake his hand as well, he closed his eyes and made believe he was asleep. It is very hard to be a hypocrite if you aren't trained for it.

Rhes woke him early the next morning. "Do you feel well enough to travel?" he asked.

"Depends what you mean by travel," Jason told him. "If you mean under my own power, I doubt if I could get as far as that door."

"You'll be carried," Rhes broke in. "We have a litter swung between two doryms. Not too comfortable, but you'll get there. But only if you think you are well enough to move. We called all the people within riding distance and they are beginning to gather. By this afternoon we will have enough men and doryms to pull the ship out of the swamp."

"I'll come," Jason said, pushing himself to a sitting position. The effort exhausted him, bringing a wave of nausea. Only by leaning his full weight against the wall could he keep from falling back. He sat, propped there, until he heard shouts and the stamping of heavy feet outside, and they came to carry him out.

The trip drained away his small store of energy, and he fell into an exhausted sleep. When he opened his eyes the doryms were standing knee deep in the swamp and the salvage operation had begun. Ropes vanished out of sight in the water while lines of struggling animals and men hauled at them. The beasts bellowed, the men cursed as they slipped and fell. All of the Pyrrans tugging on the lines weren't male, women were there as well. Shorter on the average than the men, they were just as brawny. Their clothing was varied and many-colored, the first touch of decoration Jason had seen on this planet.

Getting the ship up was a heart-breaking job. The mud sucked at it and underwater roots caught on the vanes. Divers plunged time and again into the brown water to cut them free. Progress was incredibly slow, but the work never stopped. Jason's brain was working even slower. The ship would be hauled up eventually—what would he do then? He had to have a new plan by that time, but thinking was impossible work. His thoughts corkscrewed and he had to fight down the rising feeling of panic.

The sun was low when the ship's nose finally appeared above the water. A ragged cheer broke out at first sight of that battered cone of metal and they went ahead with new energy.

Jason was the first one who noticed the dorym weaving towards them. The dogs saw it, of course, and ran out and sniffed. The rider shouted to the dogs and kicked angrily at the sides of his mount. Even at this distance Jason could see the beast's heaving sides and yellow foam-flecked hide. It was barely able to stagger now and the man jumped down, running ahead on foot. He was shouting something as he ran that couldn't be heard above the noise.

There was a single moment when the sounds slacked a bit and the running man's voice could be heard. He was calling the same word over and over again. It sounded like *wait*, but Jason couldn't be sure. Others had heard him though, and the result was instantaneous. They stopped, unmoving, where they were. Many of those holding the ropes let go of them. Only the quick action of the anchor men kept the ship from sliding back under, dragging the harnessed doryms with it. A wave of silence washed across the swamp in the wake of the running man's shouts. They could be heard clearly now.

“Quake! Quake on the way! South—only safe way is south!”

One by one the ropes dropped back into the water and the Pyrrans turned to wade to solid land. Before they were well started Rhes’ voice cracked out.

“Stay at work! Get the ship up, it’s our only hope now. I’ll talk to Hananas, find out how much time we have.”

These solitary people were unused to orders. They stopped and milled about, reason fighting with the urgent desire to run. One by one they stepped back to the ropes as they worked out the sense of Rhes’ words. As soon as it was clear the work would continue he turned away.

“What is it? What’s happening?” Jason called to him as he ran by.

“It’s Hananas,” Rhes said, stopping by the litter, waiting for the newcomer to reach him. “He’s a quakeman. They know when quakes are coming, before they happen.”

Hananas ran up, panting and tired. He was a short man, built like a barrel on stubby legs, a great white beard covering his neck and the top of his chest. Another time Jason might have laughed at his incongruous waddle, but not now. There was a charged difference in the air since the little man had arrived.

“Why didn’t ... you have somebody near a plate? I called all over this area without an answer. Finally ... had to come myself—”

“How much time do we have?” Rhes cut in. “We have to get that ship up before we pull out.”

“Time! Who knows about time!” the graybeard cursed. “Get out or you’re dead.”

“Calm down, Han,” Rhes said in a quieter voice, taking the oldster’s arms in both his hands. “You know what we’re doing here—and how much depends on getting the ship up. Now how does it feel? This going to be a fast one or a slow one?”

“Fast. Faster than anything I felt in a long time. She’s starting far away though, if you had a plate here I bet Mach or someone else up near the firelands would be reporting new eruptions. It’s on the way and, if we don’t get out soon, we’re not getting out t’all.”

There was a burble of water as the ship was hauled out a bit farther. No one talked now and there was a fierce urgency in their movements. Jason still wasn’t sure exactly what had happened.

“Don’t shoot me for a foreigner,” he said, “but just what is wrong? Are you expecting earthquakes here, are you sure?”

“Sure!” Hananas screeched. “Of course I’m sure. If I wasn’t sure I wouldn’t be a quakeman. It’s on the way.”

“There’s no doubt of that,” Rhes added. “I don’t know how you can tell on your planet when quakes or vulcanism are going to start, machines maybe. We have nothing like that. But quakemen, like Hananas here, always know about them before they happen. If the word can be passed fast enough, we get away. The quake is coming all right, the only thing in doubt is how much time we have.”

The work went on and there was a good chance they would die long before it was finished. All for nothing. The only way Jason could get them to stop would be to

admit the ship was useless. He would be killed then and the grubbier chances would die with him. He chewed his lip as the sun set and the work continued by torchlight.

Hananas paced around, grumbling under his breath, halting only to glance at the northern horizon. The people felt his restlessness and transmitted it to the animals. Dogfights broke out and the doryms pulled reluctantly at their harnesses. With each passing second their chances grew slimmer and Jason searched desperately for a way out of the trap of his own constructing.

“Look—” someone said, and they all turned. The sky to the north was lit with a red light. There was a rumble in the ground that was felt more than heard. The surface of the water blurred, then broke into patterns of tiny waves. Jason turned away from the light, looking at the water and the ship. It was higher now, the top of the stern exposed. There was a gaping hole here, blasted through the metal by the spaceship’s guns.

“Rhes,” he called, his words jammed together in the rush to get them out. “Look at the ship, at the hole blasted in her stern. I landed on the rockets and didn’t know how badly she was hit. But the guns hit the star drive!”

Rhes gaped at him unbelievably as he went on. Improvising, playing by ear, trying to manufacture lies that rang of the truth.

“I watched them install the drive—it’s an auxiliary to the other engines. It was bolted to the hull right there. It’s gone now, blown up. The boat will never leave this planet, much less go to another star.”

He couldn’t look Rhes in the eyes after that. He sank back into the furs that had been propped behind him, feeling the weakness even more. Rhes was silent and Jason couldn’t tell if his story had been believed. Only when the Pyrran bent and slashed the nearest rope did he know he had won.

The word passed from man to man and the ropes were cut silently. Behind them the ship they had labored so hard over, sank back into the water. None of them watched. Each was locked in his own world of thought as they formed up to leave. As soon as the doryms were saddled and packed they started out, Hananas leading the way. Within minutes they were all moving, a single file that vanished into the darkness.

Jason’s litter had to be left behind, it would have been smashed to pieces in the night march. Rhes pulled him up into the saddle before him, locking his body into place with a steel-hard arm. The trek continued.

When they left the swamp they changed directions sharply. A little later Jason knew why, when the southern sky exploded. Flames lit the scene brightly, ashes sifted down and hot lumps of rock crashed into the trees. They steamed when they hit, and if it hadn’t been for the earlier rain they would have been faced with a forest fire as well.

Something large loomed up next to the line of march, and when they crossed an open space Jason looked at it in the reflected light from the sky.

“Rhes—” he choked, pointing. Rhes looked at the great beast moving next to them, shaggy body and twisted horns as high as their shoulders, then looked away. He wasn’t frightened or apparently interested. Jason looked around then and began to understand.

All of the fleeing animals made no sound, that's why he hadn't noticed them before. But on both sides dark forms ran between the trees. Some he recognized, most of them he didn't. For a few minutes a pack of wild dogs ran near them, even mingling with the domesticated dogs. No notice was taken. Flying things flapped overhead. Under the greater threat of the volcanoes all other battles were forgotten. Life respected life. A herd of fat, piglike beasts with curling tusks, blundered through the line. The doryms slowed, picking their steps carefully so they wouldn't step on them. Smaller animals sometimes clung to the backs of the bigger ones, riding untouched a while, before they leaped off.

Pounded mercilessly by the saddle, Jason fell wearily into a light sleep. It was shot through with dreams of the rushing animals, hurrying on forever in silence. With his eyes open or shut he saw the same endless stream of beasts.

It all meant something, and he frowned as he tried to think what. Animals running, Pyrran animals.

He sat bolt upright suddenly, wide awake, staring down in comprehension.

"What is it?" Rhes asked.

"Go on," Jason said. "Get us out of this, and get us out safely. I told you the lifeboat wasn't the only answer. I know how your people can get what they want—end the war now. There is a way, and I know how it can be done."

Chapter 25

There were few coherent memories of the ride. Some things stood out sharply like the spaceship-sized lump of burning scoria that had plunged into a lake near them, showering the line with hot drops of water. But mostly it was just a seemingly endless ride, with Jason still too weak to care much about it. By dawn the danger area was behind them and the march had slowed to a walk. The animals had vanished as the quake was left behind, going their own ways, still in silent armistice.

The peace of mutually shared danger was over, Jason found that out when they stopped to rest and eat. He and Rhes went to sit on the soft grass, near a fallen tree. A wild dog had arrived there first. It lay under the log, muscles tensed, the ruddy morning light striking a red glint from its eyes. Rhes faced it, not three meters away, without moving a muscle. He made no attempt to reach one of his weapons or to call for help. Jason stood still as well, hoping the Pyrran knew what he was doing.

With no warning at all the dog sprang straight at them. Jason fell backwards as Rhes pushed him aside. The Pyrran dropped at the same time—only now his hand held the long knife, yanked from the sheath strapped to his thigh. With unseen speed the knife came up, the dog twisted in midair, trying to bite it. Instead it sank in behind the dog's forelegs, the beast's own weight tearing a deadly gaping wound the length of its body. It was still alive when it hit the ground, but Rhes was astraddle it, pulling back the bony-plated head to cut the soft throat underneath.

The Pyrran carefully cleaned his knife on the dead animal's fur, then returned it to the sheath. "They're usually no trouble," he said quietly, "but it was excited. Probably lost the rest of the pack in the quake." His actions were the direct opposite of the city Pyrrans. He had not looked for trouble nor started the fight. Instead he had avoided it as long as he could. But when the beast charged it had been neatly and efficiently dispatched. Now, instead of gloating over his victory, he seemed troubled over an unnecessary death.

It made sense. Everything on Pyrrus made sense. Now he knew how the deadly planetary battle had started—and he knew how it could be ended. All the deaths had *not* been in vain. Each one had helped him along the road a little more towards the final destination. There was just one final thing to be done.

Rhes was watching him now, and he knew they shared the same thoughts. "Explain yourself," Rhes said. "What did you mean when you said we could wipe out the junkmen and get our freedom?"

Jason didn't bother to correct the misquote, it was best they consider him a hundred per cent on their side.

"Get the others together and I'll tell you. I particularly want to see Naxa and any other talkers who are here."

They gathered quickly when the word was passed. All of them knew that the junkman had been killed to save this off-worlder, that their hope of salvation lay with him. Jason looked at the crowd of faces turned towards him and reached for the right words to tell them what had to be done. It didn't help to know that many of them would be killed doing it.

“The small star ship can’t be used,” he said. “You all saw that it was ruined beyond repair. But that was the easy way out. The hard way is still left. Though some of you may die, in the long run it will be the best solution.

“We are going to invade the city, break through the perimeter. I know how it can be done ...”

A mutter of sound spread across the crowd. Some of them looked excited, happy with the thought of killing their hereditary enemies. Others stared at Jason as if he were mad. A few were dazed at the magnitude of the thought, this carrying of the battle to the stronghold of the heavily armed enemy. They quieted when Jason raised his hand.

“I know it sounds impossible,” he said. “But let me explain. Something must be done—and now is the time to do it. The situation can only get worse from now on. The city Pyrr ... the junkmen can get along without your food, their concentrates taste awful but they sustain life. But they are going to turn against you in every way they can. No more metals for your tools or replacements for your electronic equipment. Their hatred will probably make them seek out your farms and destroy them from the ship. All of this won’t be comfortable—and there will be worse to come. In the city they are losing their war against this planet. Each year there are less of them, and some day they will all be dead. Knowing how they feel I am sure they will destroy their ship first, and the entire planet as well, if that is possible.”

“How can we stop them?” someone called out.

“By hitting *now*,” Jason answered. “I know all the details of the city and I know how the defenses are set up. Their perimeter is designed to protect them from animal life, but we could break through it if we were really determined.”

“What good would that do?” Rhes snapped. “We crack the perimeter and they draw back—then counter-attack in force. How can we stand against their weapons?”

“We won’t have to. Their spaceport touches the perimeter, and I know the exact spot where the ship stands. That is the place where we will break through. There is no formal guard on the ship and only a few people in the area. We will capture the ship. Whether we can fly it or not is unimportant. Who controls the ship controls Pyrrus. Once there we threaten to destroy it if they don’t meet our terms. They have the choice of mass suicide or co-operation. I hope they have the brains to co-operate.”

His words shocked them into silence for an instant, then they surged into a wave of sound. There was no agreement, just excitement, and Rhes finally brought them to order.

“Quiet!” he shouted. “Wait until Jason finishes before you decide. We still haven’t heard how this proposed invasion is to be accomplished.”

“The plan I have depends on the talkers.” Jason said. “Is Naxa there?” He waited until the fur-wrapped man had pushed to the front. “I want to know more about the talkers, Naxa. I know you can speak to doryms and the dogs here—but what about the wild animals? Can you make them do what you want?”

“They’re animals ... course we can talk t’them. Th’more talkers, th’more power. Make ‘em do just what we want.”

“Then the attack will work,” Jason said excitedly. “Could you get your talkers all on one side of the city—the opposite side from the spaceport—and stir the animals up? Make them attack the perimeter?”

“Could we!” Naxa shouted, carried away by the idea. “We’d bring in animals from all over, start th’biggest attack they ev’r saw!”

“Then that’s it. Your talkers will launch the attack on the far side of the perimeter. If you keep out of sight, the guards will have no idea that it is anything more than an animal attack. I’ve seen how they work. As an attack mounts they call for reserves inside the city and drain men away from the other parts of the perimeter. At the height of the battle, when they have all their forces committed across the city, I’ll lead the attack that will break through and capture the ship. That’s the plan and it’s going to work.”

Jason sat down then, half fell down, drained of strength. He lay and listened as the debate went back and forth, Rhes ordering it and keeping it going. Difficulties were raised and eliminated. No one could find a basic fault with the plan. There were plenty of flaws in it, things that might go wrong, but Jason didn’t mention them. These people wanted his idea to work and they were going to make it work.

It finally broke up and they moved away. Rhes came over to Jason.

“The basics are settled,” he said. “All here are in agreement. They are spreading the word by messenger to all the talkers. The talkers are the heart of the attack, and the more we have, the better it will go off. We don’t dare use the screens to call them, there is a good chance that the junkmen can intercept our messages. It will take five days before we are ready to go ahead.”

“I’ll need all of that time if I’m to be any good,” Jason said. “Now let’s get some rest.”

Chapter 26

“It’s a strange feeling,” Jason said. “I’ve never really seen the perimeter from this side before. Ugly is about the only word for it.”

He lay on his stomach next to Rhes, looking through a screen of leaves, downhill towards the perimeter. They were both wrapped in heavy furs, in spite of the midday heat, with thick leggings and leather gauntlets to protect their hands. The gravity and the heat were already making Jason dizzy, but he forced himself to ignore this.

Ahead, on the far side of a burnt corridor, stood the perimeter. A high wall, of varying height and texture, seemingly made of everything in the world. It was impossible to tell what it had originally been constructed of. Generations of attackers had bruised, broken, and undermined it. Repairs had been quickly made, patches thrust roughly into place and fixed there. Crude masonry crumbled and gave way to a rat’s nest of woven timbers. This overlapped a length of pitted metal, large plates riveted together. Even this metal had been eaten through and bursting sandbags spilled out of a jagged hole. Over the surface of the wall detector wires and charged cables looped and hung. At odd intervals automatic flame-throwers thrust their nozzles over the wall above and swept the base of the wall clear of any life that might have come close.

“Those flame things can cause us trouble,” Rhes said. “That one covers the area where you want to break in.”

“It’ll be no problem,” Jason assured him. “It may look like it is firing a random pattern, but it’s really not. It varies a simple sweep just enough to fool an animal, but was never meant to keep men out. Look for yourself. It fires at regularly repeated two, four, three and one minute intervals.”

They crawled back to the hollow where Naxa and the others waited for them. There were only thirty men in the party. What they had to do could only be done with a fast, light force. Their strongest weapon was surprise. Once that was gone their other weapons wouldn’t hold out for seconds against the city guns. Everyone looked uncomfortable in the fur and leather wrappings, and some of the men had loosened them to cool off.

“Wrap up,” Jason ordered. “None of you have been this close to the perimeter before and you don’t understand how deadly it is here. Naxa is keeping the larger animals away and you all can handle the smaller ones. That isn’t the danger. Every thorn is poisoned, and even the blades of grass carry a deadly sting. Watch out for insects of any kind and once we start moving breathe only through the wet cloths.”

“He’s right,” Naxa snorted. “N’ver been closer’n this m’self. Death, death up by that wall. Do like ‘e says.”

They could only wait then, honing down already needle-sharp crossbow bolts, and glancing up at the slowly moving sun. Only Naxa didn’t share the unrest. He sat, eyes unfocused, feeling the movement of animal life in the jungle around them.

“On the way,” he said. “Biggest thing I ‘ver heard. Not a beast ‘tween here and the mountains, ain’t howlin’ ‘is lungs out, runnin’ towards the city.”

Jason was aware of part of it. A tension in the air and a wave of intensified anger and hatred. It would work, he knew, if they could only keep the attack confined to a small area. The talkers had seemed sure of it. They had stalked out quietly that morning, a thin line of ragged men, moving out in a mental sweep that would round up the Pyrran life and send it charging against the city.

"They hit!" Naxa said suddenly.

The men were on their feet now, staring in the direction of the city. Jason had felt the twist as the attack had been driven home, and knew that this was it. There was the sound of shots and a heavy booming far away. Thin streamers of smoke began to blow above the treetops.

"Let's get into position," Rhes said.

Around them the jungle howled with an echo of hatred. The half-sentient plants writhed and the air was thick with small flying things. Naxa sweated and mumbled as he turned back the animals that crashed towards them. By the time they reached the last screen of foliage before the burned-out area, they had lost four men. One had been stung by an insect, Jason got the medikit to him in time, but he was so sick he had to turn back. The other three were bitten or scratched and treatment came too late. Their swollen, twisted bodies were left behind on the trail.

"Dam' beasts hurt m'head," Naxa muttered. "When we go in?"

"Not yet," Rhes said. "We wait for the signal."

One of the men carried the radio. He sat it down carefully, then threw the aerial over a branch. The set was shielded so no radiation leaked out to give them away. It was turned on, but only a hiss of atmospheric static came from the speaker.

"We could have timed it—" Rhes said.

"No we couldn't," Jason told him. "Not accurately. We want to hit that wall at the height of the attack, when our chances are best. Even if they hear the message it won't mean a thing to them inside. And a few minutes later it won't matter."

The sound from the speaker changed. A voice spoke a short sentence, then cut off.

"Bring me three barrels of flour."

"Let's go," Rhes urged as he started forward.

"Wait," Jason said, taking him by the arm. "I'm timing the flame-thrower. It's due in ... *there!*" A blast of fire sprayed the ground, then turned off. "We have four minutes to the next one—we hit the long period!"

They ran, stumbling in the soft ashes, tripping over charred bones and rusted metal. Two men grabbed Jason under the arm and half-carried him across the ground. It hadn't been planned that way, but it saved precious seconds. They dropped him against the wall and he fumbled out the bombs he had made. The charges from Krannon's gun, taken when he was killed, had been hooked together with a firing circuit. All the moves had been rehearsed carefully and they went smoothly now.

Jason had picked the metal wall as being the best spot to break in. It offered the most resistance to the native life, so the chances were it wouldn't be reinforced with sandbags or fill, the way other parts of the wall were. If he was wrong, they were all dead.

The first men had slapped their wads of sticky congealed sap against the wall. Jason pressed the charges into them and they stuck, a roughly rectangular pattern as high as a man. While he did this the detonating wire was run out to its length and the raiders pressed back against the base of the wall. Jason stumbled through the ashes to the detonator, fell on it and pressed the switch at the same time.

Behind him a thundering bang shook the wall and red flame burst out. Rhes was the first one there, pulling at the twisted and smoking metal with his gloved hands. Others grabbed on and bent the jagged pieces aside. The hole was filled with smoke and nothing was visible through it. Jason dove into the opening, rolled on a heap of rubble and smacked into something solid. When he blinked the smoke from his eyes he looked around him.

He was inside the city.

The others poured through now, picking him up as they charged in so he wouldn't be trampled underfoot. Someone spotted the spaceship and they ran that way.

A man ran around the corner of a building towards them. His Pyrran reflexes sent him springing into the safety of a doorway the same moment he saw the invaders. But they were Pyrrans, too. The man slumped slowly back onto the street, three metal bolts sticking out of his body. They ran on without stopping, running between the low storehouses. The ship stood ahead.

Someone had reached it ahead of them, they could see the outer hatch slowly grinding shut. A hail of bolts from the bows crashed into it with no effect.

"Keep going!" Jason shouted. "Get next to the hull before he reaches the guns."

This time three men didn't make it. The rest of them were under the belly of the ship when every gun let go at once. Most of them were aimed away from the ship, still the scream of shells and electric discharges was ear-shattering. The three men still in the open dissolved under the fire. Whoever was inside the ship had hit all the gun trips at once, both to knock out the attackers and summon aid. He would be on the screen now, calling for help. Their time was running out.

Jason reached up and tried to open the hatch, while the others watched. It was locked from the inside. One of the men brushed him aside and pulled at the inset handle. It broke off in his hand but the hatch remained closed.

The big guns had stopped now and they could hear again.

"Did anyone get the gun from that dead man?" he asked. "It would blow this thing open."

"No," Rhes said, "we didn't stop."

Before the words were out of his mouth two men were running back towards the buildings, angling away from each other. The ship's guns roared again, a string of explosions cut across one man. Before they could change direction and find the other man he had reached the buildings.

He returned quickly, darting into the open to throw the gun to them. Before he could dive back to safety the shells caught him.

Jason grabbed up the gun as it skidded almost to his feet. They heard the sound of wide-open truck turbines screaming towards them as he blasted the lock. The

mechanism sighed and the hatch sagged open. They were all through the air lock before the first truck appeared. Naxa stayed behind with the gun, to hold the lock until they could take the control room.

Everyone climbed faster than Jason, once he had pointed them the way, so the battle was over when he got there. The single city Pyrran looked like a pin-cushion. One of the techs had found the gun controls and was shooting wildly, the sheer quantity of his fire driving the trucks back.

“Someone get on the radio and tell the talkers to call the attack off,” Jason said. He found the communications screen and snapped it on. Kerk’s wide-eyed face stared at him from the screen.

“*You!*” Kerk said, breathing the word like a curse.

“Yes, it’s me,” Jason answered. He talked without looking up, while his hands were busy at the control board. “Listen to me, Kerk—and don’t doubt anything I say. I may not know how to fly one of these ships, but I do know how to blow them up. Do you hear that sound?” He flipped over a switch and the faraway whine of a pump droned faintly. “That’s the main fuel pump. If I let it run—which I won’t right now—it could quickly fill the drive chamber with raw fuel. Pour in so much that it would run out of the stern tubes. Then what do you think would happen to your one and only spacer if I pressed the firing button? I’m not asking you what would happen to me, since you don’t care—but you need this ship the way you need life itself.”

There was only silence in the cabin now, the men who had won the ship turned to face him. Kerk’s voice grated loudly through the room.

“What do you want, Jason—what are you trying to do? Why did you lead those animals in here ...” His voice cracked and broke as anger choked him and spilled over.

“Watch your tongue, Kerk,” Jason said with soft menace. “These *men* you are talking about are the only ones on Pyrrus who have a spaceship. If you want them to share it with you, you had better learn to talk nicely. Now come over here at once—and bring Brucco and Meta.” Jason looked at the older man’s florid and swollen face and felt a measure of sympathy. “Don’t look so unhappy, it’s not the end of the world. In fact, it might be the beginning of one. And another thing, leave this channel open when you go. Have it hooked into every screen in the city so everyone can see what happens here. Make sure it’s taped too, for replay.”

Kerk started to say something, but changed his mind before he did. He left the screen, but the set stayed alive. Carrying the scene in the control room to the entire city.

Chapter 27

The fight was over. It had ended so quickly the fact hadn't really sunk in yet. Rhes rubbed his hand against the gleaming metal of the control console, letting the reality of touch convince him. The other men milled about, looking out through the viewscreens or soaking in the mechanical strangeness of the room.

Jason was physically exhausted, but he couldn't let it show. He opened the pilot's medbox and dug through it until he found the stimulants. Three of the little gold pills washed the fatigue from his body, and he could think clearly again.

"Listen to me," he shouted. "The fight's not over yet. They'll try anything to take this ship back and we have to be ready. I want one of the techs to go over these boards until he finds the lock controls. Make sure all the air locks and ports are sealed. Send men to check them if necessary. Turn on all the screens to scan in every direction, so no one can get near the ship. We'll need a guard in the engine room, my control could be cut if they broke in there. And there had better be a room-by-room search of the ship, in case someone else is locked in with us."

The men had something to do now and felt relieved. Rhes split them up into groups and set them to work. Jason stayed at the controls, his hand next to the pump switch. The battle wasn't over yet.

"There's a truck coming," Rhes called, "going slow."

"Should I blast it?" the man at the gun controls asked.

"Hold your fire," Jason said, "until we can see who it is. If it's the people I sent for, let them through."

As the truck came on slowly, the gunner tracked it with his sights. There was a driver and three passengers. Jason waited until he was positive who they were.

"Those are the ones," he said. "Stop them at the lock, Rhes, make them come in one at a time. Take their guns as they enter, then strip them of *all* their equipment. There is no way of telling what could be a concealed weapon. Be specially careful of Brucco—he's the thin one with a face like an ax edge—make sure you strip him clean. He's a specialist in weapons and survival. And bring the driver too, we don't want him reporting back about the broken air lock or the state of our guns."

Waiting was hard. His hand stayed next to the pump switch, even though he knew he could never use it. Just as long as the others thought he would.

There were stampings and muttered curses in the corridor; the prisoners were pushed in. Jason had one look at their deadly expressions and clenched fists before he called to Rhes.

"Keep them against the wall and watch them. Bowmen keep your weapons up." He looked at the people who had once been his friends and who now swam in hatred for him. Meta, Kerk, Brucco. The driver was Skop, the man Kerk had once appointed to guard him. He looked ready to explode now that the roles had been reversed.

"Pay close attention," Jason said, "because your lives depend upon it. Keep your backs to the wall and don't attempt to come any closer to me than you are now. If you

do, you will be shot instantly. If we were alone, any one of you could undoubtedly reach me before I threw this switch. But we're not. You have Pyrran reflexes and muscles—but so do the bowmen. Don't gamble. Because it won't be a gamble. It will be suicide. I'm telling you this for your own protection. So we can talk peacefully without one of you losing his temper and suddenly getting shot. *There is no way out of this.* You are going to be forced to listen to everything I say. You can't escape or kill me. The war is over."

"And we lost—and all because of you ... you *traitor!*" Meta snarled.

"Wrong on both counts," Jason said blandly. "I'm not a traitor because I owe my allegiance to all men on this planet, both inside the perimeter and out. I never pretended differently. As to losing—why you haven't lost anything. In fact you've won. Won your war against this planet, if you will only hear me out." He turned to Rhes, who was frowning in angry puzzlement. "Of course your people have won also, Rhes. No more war with the city, you'll get medicine, off-planet contact—everything you want."

"Pardon me for being cynical," Rhes said, "but you're promising the best of all possible worlds for everyone. That will be a little hard to deliver when our interests are opposed so."

"You strike through to the heart of the matter," Jason said. "Thank you. This mess will be settled by seeing that everyone's interests are not opposed. Peace between the city and farms, with an end to the useless war you have been fighting. Peace between mankind and the Pyrran life forms—because that particular war is at the bottom of all your troubles."

"The man's mad," Kerk said.

"Perhaps. You'll judge that after you hear me out. I'm going to tell you the history of this planet, because that is where both the trouble and the solution lie.

"When the settlers landed on Pyrrus three hundred years ago they missed the one important thing about this planet, the factor that makes it different from any other planet in the galaxy. They can't be blamed for the oversight, they had enough other things to worry about. The gravity was about the only thing familiar to them, the rest of the environment was a shocking change from the climate-controlled industrial world they had left. Storms, vulcanism, floods, earthquakes—it was enough to drive them insane, and I'm sure many of them did go mad. The animal and insect life was a constant annoyance, nothing at all like the few harmless and protected species they had known. I'm sure they never realized that the Pyrran life was telepathic as well—"

"That again!" Brucco snapped. "True or not, it is of no importance. I was tempted to agree with your theory of psionic-controlled attack on us, but the deadly fiasco you staged proved that theory wrong."

"I agree," Jason answered. "I was completely mistaken when I thought some outside agency directed the attack on the city with psionic control. It seemed a logical theory at the time and the evidence pointed that way. The expedition to the island *was* a deadly fiasco—only don't forget that attack was the direct opposite of what I wanted to have done. If I had gone into the cave myself none of the deaths would have been necessary. I think it would have been discovered that the plant creatures were nothing more than an advanced life form with unusual psi ability. They simply resonated strongly to the psionic attack on the city. I had the idea backwards thinking they instigated the battle. We'll never know the truth, though, because they

are destroyed. But their deaths did prove one thing. It allows us to find the real culprits, the creatures who are leading, directing and inspiring the war against the city."

"Who?" Kerk breathed the question, rather than spoke it.

"Why *you* of course," Jason told him. "Not you alone, but all of your people in the city. Perhaps you don't like this war. However you are responsible for it, and keep it going."

Jason had to force back a smile as he looked at their dumfounded expressions. He had to prove his point quickly, before even his allies began to think him insane.

"Here is how it works. I said Pyrran life was telepathic—and I meant all life. Every single insect, plant and animal. At one time in this planet's violent history these psionic mutations proved to be survival types. They existed when other species died, and in the end I'm sure they co-operated in wiping out the last survivors of the non-psi strains. Co-operation is the key word here. Because while they still competed against each other under normal conditions, they worked together against anything that threatened them as a whole. When a natural upheaval or a tidal wave threatened them, they fled from it in harmony.

"You can see a milder form of this same behavior on any planet that is subject to forest fires. But here, mutual survival was carried to an extreme because of the violent conditions. Perhaps some of the life forms even developed precognition like the human quakemen. With this advance warning the larger beasts fled. The smaller ones developed seeds, or burrs or eggs, that could be carried to safety by the wind or in the animals' fur, thus insuring racial survival. I know this is true, because I watched it myself when we were escaping a quake."

"Admitted—all your points admitted," Brucco shouted. "But what does it have to do with *us*? So all the animals run away together, what does that have to do with the war?"

"They do more than run away together," Jason told him. "They work together against any natural disaster that threatens them all. Some day I'm sure, ecologists will go into raptures over the complex adjustments that occur here in the advent of blizzards, floods, fires and other disasters. There is only one reaction we really care about now, though. That's the one directed towards the city people. Don't you realize yet—they treat you all as another natural disaster!"

"We'll never know exactly how it came about, though there is a clue in that diary I found, dating from the first days on this planet. It said that a forest fire seemed to have driven new species towards the settlers. Those weren't new beasts at all—just old ones with new attitudes. Can't you just imagine how those protected, over-civilized settlers acted when faced with a forest fire? They panicked of course. If the settlers were in the path of the fire, the animals must have rushed right through their camp. Their reaction would undoubtedly have been to shoot the fleeing creatures down.

"When they did that they classified themselves as a natural disaster. Disasters take any form. Bipedes with guns could easily be included in the category. The Pyrran animals attacked, were shot, and the war began. The survivors kept attacking and informed all the life forms what the fight was about. The radioactivity of this planet

must cause plenty of mutations—and the favorable, survival mutation was now one that was deadly to man. I'll hazard a guess that the psi function even instigates mutations, some of the deadlier types are just too one-sided to have come about naturally in a brief three hundred years.

"The settlers, of course, fought back, and kept their status as a natural disaster intact. Through the centuries they improved their killing methods, not that it did the slightest good, as you know. You city people, their descendants, are heirs to this heritage of hatred. You fight and are slowly being defeated. How can you possibly win against the biologic reserves of a planet that can recreate itself each time to meet any new attack?"

Silence followed Jason's words. Kerk and Meta stood white-faced as the impact of the disclosure sunk in. Brucco mumbled and checked points off on his fingers, searching for weak spots in the chain of reason. The fourth city Pyrran, Skop, ignored all these foolish words that he couldn't understand—or want to understand—and would have killed Jason in an instant if there had been the slightest chance of success.

It was Rhes who broke the silence. His quick mind had taken in the factors and sorted them out. "There's one thing wrong," he said. "What about us? We live on the surface of Pyrrus without perimeters or guns. Why aren't we attacked as well? We're human, descended from the same people as the junkmen."

"You're not attacked," Jason told him, "because you don't identify yourself as a natural disaster. Animals can live on the slopes of a dormant volcano, fighting and dying in natural competition. But they'll flee together when the volcano erupts. That eruption is what makes the mountain a natural disaster. In the case of human beings, it is their thoughts that identify them as life form or disaster. Mountain or volcano. In the city everyone radiates suspicion and death. They enjoy killing, thinking about killing, and planning for killing. This is natural selection, too, you realize. These are the survival traits that work best in the city. Outside the city men think differently. If they are threatened individually, they fight, as will any other creature. Under more general survival threats they co-operate completely with the rules for universal survival that the city people break."

"How did it begin—this separation, I mean, between the two groups?" Rhes asked.

"We'll probably never know," Jason said. "I think your people must have originally been farmers, or psionic sensitives who were not with the others during some natural disaster. They would, of course, act correctly by Pyrran standards, and survive. This would cause a difference of opinion with the city people who saw killing as the answer. It's obvious, whatever the reason, that two separate communities were established early, and soon separated except for the limited amount of barter that benefited both."

"I still can't believe it," Kerk mumbled. "It makes a terrible kind of truth, every step of the way, but I still find it hard to accept. There *must* be another explanation."

Jason shook his head slowly. "None. This is the only one that works. We've eliminated the other ones, remember? I can't blame you for finding it hard to believe, since it is in direct opposition to everything you've understood to be true in the past. It's like altering a natural law. As if I gave you proof that gravity didn't really exist, that it was a force altogether different from the immutable one we know, one you

could get around when you understood how. You'd want more proof than words. Probably want to see someone walking on air."

"Which isn't such a bad idea at that," he added, turning to Naxa. "Do you hear any animals around the ship now? Not the ones you're used to, but the mutated, violent kind that live only to attack the city."

"Place's crawling with 'em," Naxa said, "just lookin' for somethin' t'kill."

"Could you capture one?" Jason asked. "Without getting yourself killed, I mean."

Naxa snorted contempt as he turned to leave. "Beast's not born yet, that'll hurt me."

They stood quietly, each one wrapped tightly around by his own thoughts, while they waited for Naxa to return. Jason had nothing more to say. He would do one more thing to try and convince them of the facts, after that it would be up to each of them to reach a conclusion.

The talker returned quickly with a stingwing, tied by one leg to a length of leather. It flapped and shrieked as he carried it in.

"In the middle of the room, away from everybody," Jason told him. "Can you get that beast to sit on something and not flap around?"

"My hand good enough?" he asked, flipping the creature up so it clung to the back of his gauntlet. "That's how I caught it."

"Does anyone doubt that this is a real stingwing?" Jason asked. "I want to make sure you all believe there is no trickery here."

"The thing is real," Brucco said. "I can smell the poison in the wing-claws from here." He pointed to the dark marks on the leather where the liquid had dripped. "If that eats through the gloves, he's a dead man."

"Then we agree it's real," Jason said. "Real and deadly, and the only test of the theory will be if you people from the city can approach it like Naxa here."

They drew back automatically when he said it. Because they knew that stingwing was synonymous with death. Past, present and future. You don't change a natural law. Meta spoke for all of them.

"We ... can't. This man lives in the jungle, like an animal himself. Somehow he's learned to get near them. But you can't expect us to."

Jason spoke quickly, before the talker could react to the insult. "Of course I expect you to. That's the whole idea. If you don't hate the beast and expect it to attack you—why it won't. Think of it as a creature from a different planet, something harmless."

"I can't," she said. "It's a *stingwing*!"

As they talked Brucco stepped forward, his eyes fixed steadily on the creature perched on the glove. Jason signaled the bowmen to hold their fire. Brucco stopped at a safe distance and kept looking steadily at the stingwing. It rustled its leathery wings uneasily and hissed. A drop of poison formed at the tip of each great poison claw on its wings. The control room was filled with a deadly silence.

Slowly he raised his hand. Carefully putting it out, over the animal. The hand dropped a little, rubbed the stingwing's head once, then fell back to his side. The animal did nothing except stir slightly under the touch.

There was a concerted sigh, as those who had been unknowingly holding their breath breathed again.

“How did you do it?” Meta asked in a hushed voice.

“Hm-m-m, what?” Brucco said, apparently snapping out of a daze. “Oh, touching the thing. Simple, really. I just pretended it was one of the training aids I use, a realistic and harmless duplicate. I kept my mind on that single thought and it worked.” He looked down at his hand, then back to the stingwing. His voice quieter now, as if he spoke from a distance. “It’s not a training aid you know. It’s real. Deadly. The off-worlder is right. He’s right about everything he said.”

With Brucco’s success as an example, Kerk came close to the animal. He walked stiffly, as if on the way to his execution, and runnels of sweat poured down his rigid face. But he believed and kept his thoughts directed away from the stingwing and he could touch it unharmed.

Meta tried but couldn’t fight down the horror it raised when she came close. “I am trying,” she said, “and I do believe you now—but I just can’t do it.”

Skop screamed when they all looked at him, shouted it was all a trick, and had to be clubbed unconscious when he attacked the bowmen.

Understanding had come to Pyrrus.

Chapter 28

“What do we do now?” Meta asked. Her voice was troubled, questioning. She voiced the thoughts of all the Pyrrans in the room, and the thousands who watched in their screens.

“What will we do?” They turned to Jason, waiting for an answer. For the moment their differences were forgotten. The people from the city were staring expectantly at him, as were the crossbowmen with half-lowered weapons. This stranger had confused and changed the old world they had known, and presented them with a newer and stranger one, with alien problems.

“Hold on,” he said, raising his hand. “I’m no doctor of social ills. I’m not going to try and cure this planet full of muscle-bound sharpshooters. I’ve just squeezed through up to now, and by the law of averages I should be ten times dead.”

“Even if all you say is true, Jason,” Meta said, “you are still the only person who can help us. What will the future be like?”

Suddenly weary, Jason slumped into the pilot’s chair. He glanced around at the circle of people. They seemed sincere. None of them even appeared to have noticed that he no longer had his hand on the pump switch. For the moment at least, the war between city and farm was forgotten.

“I’ll give you my conclusions,” Jason said, twisting in the chair, trying to find a comfortable position for his aching bones. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking the last day or two, searching for the answer. The very first thing I realized, was that the perfect and logical solution wouldn’t do at all. I’m afraid the old ideal of the lion lying down with the lamb doesn’t work out in practice. About all it does is make a fast lunch for the lion. Ideally, now that you all know the real causes of your trouble, you should tear down the perimeter and have the city and forest people mingle in brotherly love. Makes just as pretty a picture as the one of lion and lamb. And would undoubtedly have the same result. Someone would remember how really filthy the grubbers are, or how stupid junkmen can be, and there would be a fresh corpse cooling. The fight would spread and the victors would be eaten by the wildlife that swarmed over the undefended perimeter. No, the answer isn’t that easy.”

As the Pyrrans listened to him they realized where they were, and glanced around uneasily. The guards raised their crossbows again, and the prisoners stepped back to the wall and looked surly.

“See what I mean?” Jason asked. “Didn’t take long did it?” They all looked a little sheepish at their unthinking reactions.

“If we’re going to find a decent plan for the future, we’ll have to take inertia into consideration. Mental inertia for one. Just because you know a thing is true in theory, doesn’t make it true in fact. The barbaric religions of primitive worlds hold not a germ of scientific fact, though they claim to explain all. Yet if one of these savages has all the logical ground for his beliefs taken away—he doesn’t stop believing. He then calls his mistaken beliefs ‘faith’ because he knows they are right. And he knows they are right because he has faith. This is an unbreakable circle of false logic that can’t be touched. In reality, it is plain mental inertia. A case of

thinking ‘what always was’ will also ‘always be.’ And not wanting to blast the thinking patterns out of the old rut.

“Mental inertia alone is not going to cause trouble—there is cultural inertia, too. Some of you in this room believe my conclusions and would like to change. But will all your people change? The unthinking ones, the habit-ridden, reflex-formed people who *know* what is now, will always be. They’ll act like a drag on whatever plans you make, whatever attempts you undertake to progress with the new knowledge you have.”

“Then it’s useless—there’s no hope for our world?” Rhes asked.

“I didn’t say that,” Jason answered. “I merely mean that your troubles won’t end by throwing some kind of mental switch. I see three courses open for the future, and the chances are that all three will be going on at the same time.

“First—and best—will be the rejoining of city and farm Pyrrans into the single human group they came from. Each is incomplete now, and has something the other one needs. In the city here you have science and contact with the rest of the galaxy. You also have a deadly war. Out there in the jungle, your first cousins live at peace with the world, but lack medicine and the other benefits of scientific knowledge, as well as any kind of cultural contact with the rest of mankind. You’ll both have to join together and benefit from the exchange. At the same time you’ll have to forget the superstitious hatred you have of each other. This will only be done outside of the city, away from the war. Every one of you who is capable should go out voluntarily, bringing some fraction of the knowledge that needs sharing. You won’t be harmed if you go in good faith. And you will learn how to live *with* this planet, rather than against it. Eventually you’ll have civilized communities that won’t be either ‘grubber’ or ‘junkman.’ They’ll be Pyrran.”

“But what about our city here?” Kerk asked.

“It’ll stay right here—and probably won’t change in the slightest. In the beginning you’ll need your perimeter and defenses to stay alive, while the people are leaving. And after that it will keep going because there are going to be any number of people here who you won’t convince. They’ll stay and fight and eventually die. Perhaps you will be able to do a better job in educating their children. What the eventual end of the city will be, I have no idea.”

They were silent as they thought about the future. On the floor Skop groaned but did not move. “Those are two ways,” Meta said. “What is the third?”

“The third possibility is my own pet scheme,” Jason smiled. “And I hope I can find enough people to go along with me. I’m going to take my money and spend it all on outfitting the best and most modern spacer, with every weapon and piece of scientific equipment I can get my hands on. Then I’m going to ask for Pyrran volunteers to go with me.”

“What in the world for?” Meta frowned.

“Not for charity, I expect to make my investment back, and more. You see, after these past few months, I can’t possibly return to my old occupation. Not only do I have enough money now to make it a waste of time, but I think it would be an unending bore. One thing about Pyrrus—if you live—is that it spoils you for the quieter places. So I’d like to take this ship that I mentioned and go into the business of opening up

new worlds. There are thousands of planets where men would like to settle, only getting a foothold on them is too rough or rugged for the usual settlers. Can you imagine a planet a Pyrran couldn't lick after the training you've had here? And enjoy doing it?

"There would be more than pleasure involved, though. In the city your lives have been geared for continual deadly warfare. Now you're faced with the choice of a fairly peaceful future, or staying in the city to fight an unnecessary and foolish war. I offer the third alternative of the occupation you know best, that would let you accomplish something constructive at the same time.

"Those are the choices. Whatever you decide is up to each of you personally."

Before anyone could answer, livid pain circled Jason's throat. Skop had regained consciousness and surged up from the floor. He pulled Jason from the chair with a single motion, holding him by the neck, throttling him.

"Kerk! Meta!" Skop shouted hoarsely. "Grab guns! Open the locks—our people'll be here, kill the grubbers and their lies!"

Jason tore at the fingers that were choking the life out of him, but it was like pulling at bent steel bars. He couldn't talk and the blood hammered in his ears.

Meta hurtled forward like an uncoiled spring and the crossbows twanged. One bolt caught her in the leg, the other transfixed her upper arm. But she had been shot as she jumped and her inertia carried her across the room, to her fellow Pyrran and the dying off-worlder.

She raised her good arm and chopped down with the edge of her hand.

It caught Skop a hard blow on the biceps and his arm jumped spasmodically, his hand leaping from Jason's throat.

"What are you doing?" he shouted in strange terror to the wounded girl who fell against him. He pushed her away, still clutching Jason with his other hand. She didn't answer. Instead she chopped again, hard and true, the edge of her hand catching Skop across the windpipe, crushing it. He dropped Jason and fell to the floor, retching and gasping.

Jason watched the end through a haze, barely conscious.

Skop struggled to his feet, turned pain-filled eyes to his friends.

"You're wrong," Kerk said. "Don't do it."

The sound the wounded man made was more animal than human. When he dived towards the guns on the far side of the room the crossbows twanged like harps of death.

When Brucco went over to help Meta no one interfered. Jason gasped air back into his lungs, breathing in life. The watching glass eye of the viewer carried the scene to everyone in the city.

"Thanks, Meta ... for understanding ... as well as helping." Jason had to force the words out.

"Skop was wrong and you were right, Jason," she said. Her voice broke for a second as Brucco snapped off the feathered end of the steel bolt with his fingers, and pulled

the shaft out of her arm. “I can’t stay in the city, only people who feel as Skop did will be able to do that. And I’m afraid I can’t go into the forest—you saw what luck I had with the stingwing. If it’s all right I’d like to come with you. I’d like to very much.”

It hurt when he talked so Jason could only smile, but she knew what he meant.

Kerk looked down in unhappiness at the body of the dead man. “He was wrong—but I know how he felt. I can’t leave the city, not yet. Someone will have to keep things in hand while the changes are taking place. Your ship is a good idea, Jason, you’ll have no shortage of volunteers. Though I doubt if you’ll get Brucco to go with you.”

“Of course not,” Brucco snapped, not looking up from the compression bandage he was tying. “There’s enough to do right here on Pyrrus. The animal life, quite a study to be made, probably have every ecologist in the galaxy visiting here.”

Kerk walked slowly to the screen overlooking the city. No one attempted to stop him. He looked out at the buildings, the smoke still curling up from the perimeter, and the limitless sweep of green jungle beyond.

“You’ve changed it all, Jason,” he said. “We can’t see it now, but Pyrrus will never be the way it was before you came. For better or worse.”

“Better,” Jason croaked, and rubbed his aching throat. “Now get together and end this war so people will really believe it.”

Rhes turned and after an instant’s hesitation, extended his hand to Kerk. The gray-haired Pyrran felt the same repugnance himself about touching a grubber.

They shook hands then because they were both strong men.

Planet Of The Damned

Chapter 1

A man said to the universe:

"Sir, I exist!"

"However" replied the universe,

"The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation."

STEPHEN CRANE

Sweat covered Brion's body, trickling into the tight loincloth that was the only garment he wore. The light fencing foil in his hand felt as heavy as a bar of lead to his exhausted muscles, worn out by a month of continual exercise. These things were of no importance. The cut on his chest, still dripping blood, the ache of his overstrained eyes—even the soaring arena around him with the thousands of spectators—were trivialities not worth thinking about. There was only one thing in his universe: the button-tipped length of shining steel that hovered before him, engaging his own weapon. He felt the quiver and scrape of its life, knew when it moved and moved himself to counteract it. And when he attacked, it was always there to beat him aside.

A sudden motion. He reacted—but his blade just met air. His instant of panic was followed by a small sharp blow high on his chest.

"Touch!" A world-shaking voice bellowed the word to a million waiting loudspeakers, and the applause of the audience echoed back in a wave of sound.

"One minute," a voice said, and the time buzzer sounded.

Brion had carefully conditioned the reflex in himself. A minute is not a very large measure of time and his body needed every fraction of it. The buzzer's whirr triggered his muscles into complete relaxation. Only his heart and lungs worked on at a strong, measured rate. His eyes closed and he was only distantly aware of his handlers catching him as he fell, carrying him to his bench. While they massaged his limp body and cleansed the wound, all of his attention was turned inward. He was in reverie, sliding along the borders of consciousness. The nagging memory of the previous night loomed up then, and he turned it over and over in his mind, examining it from all sides.

It was the very unexpectedness of the event that had been so unusual. The contestants in the Twenties needed undisturbed rest, therefore nights in the dormitories were as quiet as death. During the first few days, of course, the rule wasn't observed too closely. The men themselves were too keyed up and excited to rest easily. But as soon as the scores began to mount and eliminations cut into their ranks, there was complete silence after dark. Particularly so on this last night, when only two of the little cubicles were occupied, the thousands of others standing with dark, empty doors.

Angry words had dragged Brion from a deep and exhausted sleep. The words were whispered but clear—two voices, just outside the thin metal of his door. Someone spoke his name.

"... Brion Brandd. Of course not. Whoever said you could was making a big mistake and there is going to be trouble—"

“Don’t talk like an idiot!” The other voice snapped with a harsh urgency, clearly used to command. “I’m here because the matter is of utmost importance, and Brandd is the one I must see. Now stand aside!”

“The Twenties—”

“I don’t give a damn about your games, hearty cheers and physical exercises. This is *important*, or I wouldn’t be here!”

The other didn’t speak—he was surely one of the officials—and Brion could sense his outraged anger. He must have drawn his gun, because the intruder said quickly, “Put that away. You’re being a fool!”

“Out!” was the single snarled word of the response. There was silence then and, still wondering, Brion was once more asleep.

“Ten seconds.”

The voice chopped away Brion’s memories and he let awareness seep back into his body. He was unhappily conscious of his total exhaustion. The month of continuous mental and physical combat had taken its toll. It would be hard to stay on his feet, much less summon the strength and skill to fight and win a touch.

“How do we stand?” he asked the handler who was kneading his aching muscles.

“Four-four. All you need is a touch to win!”

“That’s all he needs too,” Brion grunted, opening his eyes to look at the wiry length of the man at the other end of the long mat. No one who had reached the finals in the Twenties could possibly be a weak opponent, but this one, Irolg, was the pick of the lot. A red-haired mountain of a man, with an apparently inexhaustible store of energy. That was really all that counted now. There could be little art in this last and final round of fencing. Just thrust and parry, and victory to the stronger.

Brion closed his eyes again and knew the moment he had been hoping to avoid had arrived.

Every man who entered the Twenties had his own training tricks. Brion had a few individual ones that had helped him so far. He was a moderately strong chess player, but he had moved to quick victory in the chess rounds by playing incredibly unorthodox games. This was no accident, but the result of years of work. He had a standing order with off-planet agents for archaic chess books, the older the better. He had memorized thousands of these ancient games and openings. This was allowed. Anything was allowed that didn’t involve drugs or machines. Self-hypnosis was an accepted tool.

It had taken Brion over two years to find a way to tap the sources of hysterical strength. Common as the phenomenon seemed to be in the textbooks, it proved impossible to duplicate. There appeared to be an immediate association with the death-trauma, as if the two were inextricably linked into one. Berserkers and juramentados continue to fight and kill though carved by scores of mortal wounds. Men with bullets in the heart or brain fight on, though already clinically dead. Death seemed an inescapable part of this kind of strength. But there was another type that could easily be brought about in any deep trance—hypnotic rigidity. The strength that enables someone in a trance to hold his body stiff and unsupported except at two points, the head and heels. This is physically impossible when conscious. Working with this as a clue, Brion had developed a self-hypnotic technique that allowed him to

tap this reservoir of unknown strength—the source of “second wind,” the survival strength that made the difference between life and death.

It could also kill—exhaust the body beyond hope of recovery, particularly when in a weakened condition as his was now. But that wasn’t important. Others had died before during the Twenties, and death during the last round was in some ways easier than defeat.

Breathing deeply, Brion softly spoke the auto-hypnotic phrases that triggered the process. Fatigue fell softly from him, as did all sensations of heat, cold and pain. He could feel with acute sensitivity, hear, and see clearly when he opened his eyes.

With each passing second the power drew at the basic reserves of life, draining it from his body.

When the buzzer sounded he pulled his foil from his second’s startled grasp, and ran forward. Irolg had barely time to grab up his own weapon and parry Brion’s first thrust. The force of his rush was so great that the guards on their weapons locked, and their bodies crashed together. Irolg looked amazed at the sudden fury of the attack—then smiled. He thought it was a last burst of energy, he knew how close they both were to exhaustion. This must be the end for Brion.

They disengaged and Irolg put up a solid defense. He didn’t attempt to attack, just let Brion wear himself out against the firm shield of his defense.

Brion saw something close to panic on his opponent’s face when the man finally recognized his error. Brion wasn’t tiring. If anything, he was pressing the attack. A wave of despair rolled out from Irolg—Brion sensed it and knew the fifth point was his.

Thrust—thrust—and each time the parrying sword a little slower to return. Then the powerful twist that thrust it aside. In and under the guard. The slap of the button on flesh and the arc of steel that reached out and ended on Irolg’s chest over his heart.

Waves of sound—cheering and screaming—lapped against Brion’s private world, but he was only remotely aware of their existence. Irolg dropped his foil, and tried to shake Brion’s hand, but his legs suddenly gave way. Brion had an arm around him, holding him up, walking towards the rushing handlers. Then Irolg was gone and he waved off his own men, walking slowly by himself.

Except that something was wrong and it was like walking through warm glue. Walking on his knees. No, not walking, falling. At last. He was able to let go and fall.

Chapter 2

Ihjel gave the doctors exactly one day before he went to the hospital. Brion wasn't dead, though there had been some doubt about that the night before. Now, a full day later, he was on the mend and that was all Ihjel wanted to know. He bullied and strong-armed his way to the new Winner's room, meeting his first stiff resistance at the door.

"You're out of order, Winner Ihjel," the doctor said. "And if you keep on forcing yourself in here, where you are not wanted, rank or no rank, I shall be obliged to break your head."

Ihjel had just begun to tell him, in some detail, just how slim his chances were of accomplishing that, when Brion interrupted them both. He recognized the newcomer's voice from the final night in the barracks.

"Let him in, Dr. Caulry," he said. "I want to meet a man who thinks there is something more important than the Twenties."

While the doctor stood undecided, Ihjel moved quickly around him and closed the door in his flushed face. He looked down at the Winner in the bed. There was a drip plugged into each one of Brion's arms. His eyes peered from sooty hollows; the eyeballs were a network of red veins. The silent battle he fought against death had left its mark. His square, jutting jaw now seemed all bone, as did his long nose and high cheekbones. They were prominent landmarks rising from the limp greyness of his skin. Only the erect bristle of his close-cropped hair was unchanged. He had the appearance of having suffered a long and wasting illness.

"You look like sin," Ihjel said. "But congratulations on your victory."

"You don't look so very good yourself—for a Winner," Brion snapped back. His exhaustion and sudden peevish anger at this man let the insulting words slip out. Ihjel ignored them.

But it was true; Winner Ihjel looked very little like a Winner, or even an Anvharian. He had the height and the frame all right, but it was draped in billows of fat—rounded, soft tissue that hung loosely from his limbs and made little limp rolls on his neck and under his eyes. There were no fat men on Anvhar, and it was incredible that a man so gross could ever have been a Winner. If there was muscle under the fat it couldn't be seen. Only his eyes appeared to still hold the strength that had once bested every man on the planet to win the annual games. Brion turned away from their burning stare, sorry now he had insulted the man without good reason. He was too sick, though, to bother about apologizing.

Ihjel didn't care either. Brion looked at him again and felt the impression of things so important that he himself, his insults, even the Twenties were of no more interest than dust motes in the air. It was only a fantasy of a sick mind, Brion knew, and he tried to shake the feeling off. The two men stared at each other, sharing a common emotion.

The door opened soundlessly behind Ihjel and he wheeled about, moving as only an athlete of Anvhar can move. Dr. Caulry was halfway through the door, off balance. Two men in uniform came close behind him. Ihjel's body pushed against them, his

speed and the mountainous mass of his flesh sending them back in a tangle of arms and legs. He slammed the door and locked it in their faces.

"I have to talk to you," he said, turning back to Brion. "Privately," he added, bending over and ripping out the communicator with a sweep of one hand.

"Get out," Brion told him. "If I were able—"

"Well, you're not, so you're just going to have to lie there and listen. I imagine we have about five minutes before they decide to break the door down, and I don't want to waste any more of that. Will you come with me offworld? There's a job that must be done; it's my job, but I'm going to need help. You're the only one who can give me that help.

"Now refuse," he added as Brion started to answer.

"Of course I refuse," Brion said, feeling a little foolish and slightly angry, as if the other man had put the words into his mouth. "Anvhar is my planet—why should I leave? My life is here and so is my work. I also might add that I have just won the Twenties. I have a responsibility to remain."

"Nonsense. I'm a Winner, and I left. What you really mean is you would like to enjoy a little of the ego-inflation you have worked so hard to get. Off Anvhar no one even knows what a Winner is—much less respects one. You will have to face a big universe out there, and I don't blame you for being a little frightened."

Someone was hammering loudly on the door.

"I haven't the strength to get angry," Brion said hoarsely. "And I can't bring myself to admire your ideas when they permit you to insult a man too ill to defend himself."

"I apologize," Ihjel said, with no hint of apology or sympathy in his voice. "But there are more desperate issues involved than your hurt feelings. We don't have much time now, so I want to impress you with an idea."

"An idea that will convince me to go offplanet with you? That's expecting a lot."

"No, this idea won't convince you—but thinking about it will. If you really *consider* it you will find a lot of your illusions shattered. Like everyone else on Anvhar, you're a scientific humanist, with your faith firmly planted in the Twenties. You accept both of these noble institutions without an instant's thought. All of you haven't a single thought for the past, for the untold billions who led the bad life as mankind slowly built up the good life for you to lead. Do you ever think of all the people who suffered and died in misery and superstition while civilization was clicking forward one more slow notch?"

"Of course I don't think about them," Brion retorted. "Why should I? I can't change the past."

"But you can change the future!" Ihjel said. "You owe something to the suffering ancestors who got you where you are today. If Scientific Humanism means anything more than just words to you, you must possess a sense of responsibility. Don't you want to try and pay off a bit of this debt by helping others who are just as backward and disease-ridden today as great-grandfather Troglodyte ever was?"

The hammering on the door was louder. This and the drug-induced buzzing in Brion's ear made thinking difficult. "Abstractly, I of course agree with you," he said haltingly. "But you know there is nothing I can do personally without being

emotionally involved. A logical decision is valueless for action without personal meaning.”

“Then we have reached the crux of the matter,” Ihjel said gently. His back was braced against the door, absorbing the thudding blows of some heavy object on the outside.

“They’re knocking, so I must be going soon. I have no time for details, but I can assure you upon my word of honor as a Winner that there is something you can do. Only you. If you help me we might save seven million human lives. That is a fact.”

The lock burst and the door started to open. Ihjel shouldered it back into the frame for a final instant.

“Here is the idea I want you to consider. Why is it that the people of Anvhar, in a galaxy filled with warring, hate-filled, backward planets, should be the only ones who base their entire existence on a complicated series of games?”

Chapter 3

This time there was no way to hold the door. Ihjel didn't try. He stepped aside and two men stumbled into the room. He walked out behind their backs without saying a word.

"What happened? What did he do?" the doctor asked, rushing in through the ruined door. He swept a glance over the continuous recording dials at the foot of Brion's bed. Respiration, temperature, heart, blood pressure—all were normal. The patient lay quietly and didn't answer him.

For the rest of that day, Brion had much to think about. It was difficult. The fatigue, mixed with the tranquilizers and other drugs, had softened his contact with reality. His thoughts kept echoing back and forth in his mind, unable to escape. What had Ihjel meant? What was that nonsense about Anvhar? Anvhar was that way because—well, it just was. It had come about naturally. Or had it?

The planet had a very simple history. From the very beginning there had never been anything of real commercial interest on Anvhar. Well off the interstellar trade routes, there were no minerals worth digging and transporting the immense distances to the nearest inhabited worlds. Hunting the winter beasts for their pelts was a profitable but very minor enterprise, never sufficient for mass markets. Therefore no organized attempt had ever been made to colonize the planet. In the end it had been settled completely by chance. A number of offplanet scientific groups had established observation and research stations, finding unlimited data to observe and record during Anvhar's unusual yearly cycle. The long-duration observations encouraged the scientific workers to bring their families and, slowly but steadily, small settlements grew up. Many of the fur hunters settled there as well, adding to the small population. This had been the beginning.

Few records existed of those early days, and the first six centuries of Anvharian history were more speculation than fact. The Breakdown occurred about that time, and in the galaxy-wide disruption Anvhar had to fight its own internal battle. When the Earth Empire collapsed it was the end of more than an era. Many of the observation stations found themselves representing institutions that no longer existed. The professional hunters no longer had markets for their furs, since Anvhar possessed no interstellar ships of its own. There had been no real physical hardship involved in the Breakdown as it affected Anvhar, since the planet was completely self-sufficient. Once they had made the mental adjustment to the fact that they were now a sovereign world, not a collection of casual visitors with various loyalties, life continued unchanged. Not easy—living on Anvhar is never easy—but at least without difference on the surface.

The thoughts and attitudes of the people were, however, going through a great transformation. Many attempts were made to develop some form of stable society and social relationship. Again, little record exists of these early trials, other than the fact of their culmination in the Twenties.

To understand the Twenties, you have to understand the unusual orbit that Anvhar tracks around its sun, 70 Ophiuchi. There are other planets in this system, all of them more or less conforming to the plane of the ecliptic. Anvhar is obviously a rogue, perhaps a captured planet of another sun. For the greatest part of its 780-day year it

arcs far out from its primary, in a high-angled sweeping cometary orbit. When it returns there is a brief, hot summer of approximately eighty days before the long winter sets in once more. This severe difference in seasonal change has caused profound adaptations in the native life forms. During the winter most of the animals hibernate, the vegetable life lying dormant as spores or seeds. Some of the warm-blooded herbivores stay active in the snow-covered tropics, preyed upon by fur-insulated carnivores. Though unbelievably cold, the winter is a season of peace in comparison to the summer.

For summer is a time of mad growth. Plants burst into life with a strength that cracks rocks, growing fast enough for the motion to be seen. The snowfields melt into mud and within days a jungle stretches high into the air. Everything grows, swells, proliferates. Plants climb on top of plants, fighting for the life-energy of the sun. Everything is eat and be eaten, grow and thrive in that short season. Because when the first snow of winter falls again, ninety per cent of the year must pass until the next coming of warmth.

Mankind has had to adapt to the Anvharian cycle in order to stay alive. Food must be gathered and stored, enough to last out the long winter. Generation after generation had adapted until they look on the mad seasonal imbalance as something quite ordinary. The first thaw of the almost nonexistent spring triggers a wide-reaching metabolic change in the humans. Layers of subcutaneous fat vanish and half-dormant sweat glands come to life. Other changes are more subtle than the temperature adjustment, but equally important. The sleep center of the brain is depressed. Short naps or a night's rest every third or fourth day becomes enough. Life takes on a hectic and hysterical quality that is perfectly suited to the environment. By the time of the first frost, rapid-growing crops have been raised and harvested, sides of meat either preserved or frozen in mammoth lockers. With this supreme talent of adaptability mankind has become part of the ecology and guaranteed his own survival during the long winter.

Physical survival has been guaranteed. But what about mental survival? Primitive Earth Eskimos can fall into a long doze of half-conscious hibernation. Civilized men might be able to do this, but only for the few cold months of terrestrial midwinter. It would be impossible to do during a winter that is longer than an Earth year. With all the physical needs taken care of, boredom became the enemy of any Anvharian who was not a hunter. And even the hunters could not stay out on solitary trek all winter. Drink was one answer, and violence another. Alcoholism and murder were the twin terrors of the cold season, after the Breakdown.

It was the Twenties that ended all that. When they became a part of normal life the summer was considered just an interlude between games. The Twenties were more than just a contest—they became a way of life that satisfied all the physical, competitive and intellectual needs of this unusual planet. They were a decathlon—rather a double decathlon—raised to its highest power, where contests in chess and poetry composition held equal place with those in ski-jumping and archery. Each year there were two planet-wide contests held, one for men and one for women. This was not an attempt at sexual discrimination, but a logical facing of facts. Inherent differences prevented fair contests—for example, it is impossible for a woman to win a large chess tournament—and this fact was recognized. Anyone could enter for any number of years. There were no scoring handicaps.

When the best man won he was really the best man. A complicated series of playoffs and eliminations kept contestants and observers busy for half the winter. They were only preliminary to the final encounter that lasted a month, and picked a single winner. That was the title he was awarded. Winner. The man—and woman—who had bested every other contestant on the entire planet and who would remain unchallenged until the following year.

Winner. It was a title to take pride in. Brion stirred weakly on his bed and managed to turn so he could look out of the window. Winner of Anvhar. His name was already slated for the history books, one of the handful of planetary heroes. School children would be studying *him* now, just as he had read of the Winners of the past. Weaving daydreams and imaginary adventures around Brion's victories, hoping and fighting to equal them someday. To be a Winner was the greatest honor in the universe.

Outside, the afternoon sun shimmered weakly in a dark sky. The endless icefields soaked up the dim light, reflecting it back as a colder and harsher illumination. A single figure on skis cut a line across the empty plain; nothing else moved. The depression of the ultimate fatigue fell on Brion and everything changed, as if he looked in a mirror at a previously hidden side.

He saw suddenly—with terrible clarity—that to be a Winner was to be absolutely nothing. Like being the best flea, among all the fleas on a single dog.

What was Anvhar after all? An ice-locked planet, inhabited by a few million human fleas, unknown and unconsidered by the rest of the galaxy. There was nothing here worth fighting for; the wars after the Breakdown had left them untouched. The Anvharians had always taken pride in this—as if being so unimportant that no one else even wanted to come near you could possibly be a source of pride. All the other worlds of man grew, fought, won, lost, changed. Only on Anvhar did life repeat its sameness endlessly, like a loop of tape in a player....

Brion's eyes were moist; he blinked. *Tears!* Realization of this incredible fact wiped the maudlin pity from his mind and replaced it with fear. Had his mind snapped in the strain of the last match? These thoughts weren't his. Self-pity hadn't made him a Winner—why was he feeling it now? Anvhar was his universe—how could he even imagine it as a tag-end planet at the outer limb of creation? What had come over him and induced this inverse thinking?

As he thought the question, the answer appeared at the same instant. Winner Ihjel. The fat man with the strange pronouncements and probing questions. Had he cast a spell like some sorcerer—or the devil in *Faust*? No, that was pure nonsense. But he had done something. Perhaps planted a suggestion when Brion's resistance was low. Or used subliminal vocalization like the villain in *Cerebrus Chained*. Brion could find no adequate reason on which to base his suspicions. But he knew, with sure positiveness, that Ihjel was responsible.

He whistled at the sound-switch next to his pillow and the repaired communicator came to life. The duty nurse appeared in the small screen.

"The man who was here today," Brion said, "Winner Ihjel. Do you know where he is? I must contact him."

For some reason this flustered her professional calm. The nurse started to answer, excused herself, and blanked the screen. When it lit again a man in guard's uniform had taken her place.

“You made an inquiry,” the guard said, “about Winner Ihjel. We are holding him here in the hospital, following the disgraceful way in which he broke into your room.”

“I have no charges to make. Will you ask him to come and see me at once?”

The guard controlled his shock. “I’m sorry, Winner—I don’t see how we can. Dr. Caulry left specific orders that you were not to be—”

“The doctor has no control over my personal life.” Brion interrupted. “I’m not infectious, nor ill with anything more than extreme fatigue. I want to see that man. At once.”

The guard took a deep breath, and made a quick decision. “He is on the way up now,” he said, and rung off.

“What did you do to me?” Brion asked as soon as Ihjel had entered and they were alone. “You won’t deny that you have put alien thoughts in my head?”

“No, I won’t deny it. Because the whole point of my being here is to get those ‘alien’ thoughts across to you.”

“Tell me how you did it,” Brion insisted. “I must know.”

“I’ll tell you—but there are many things you should understand first, before you decide to leave Anvhar. You must not only hear them, you will have to believe them. The primary thing, the clue to the rest, is the true nature of your life here. How do you think the Twenties originated?”

Before he answered, Brion carefully took a double dose of the mild stimulant he was allowed. “I don’t think,” he said; “I know. It’s a matter of historical record. The founder of the games was Giroldi, the first contest was held in 378 A.B. The Twenties have been held every year since then. They were strictly local affairs in the beginning, but were soon well established on a planet-wide scale.”

“True enough,” Ihjel said. “But you’re describing *what* happened. I asked you *how* the Twenties originated. How could any single man take a barbarian planet, lightly inhabited by half-mad hunters and alcoholic farmers, and turn it into a smooth-running social machine built around the artificial structure of the Twenties? It just couldn’t be done.”

“But it *was* done!” Brion insisted. “You can’t deny that. And there is nothing artificial about the Twenties. They are a logical way to live a life on a planet like this.”

Ihjel laughed, a short ironic bark. “Very logical,” he said; “but how often does logic have anything to do with the organization of social groups and governments? You’re not thinking. Put yourself in founder Giroldi’s place. Imagine that you have glimpsed the great idea of the Twenties and you want to convince others. So you walk up to the nearest louse-ridden, brawling, superstitious, booze-embalmed hunter and explain clearly. How a program of his favorite sports—things like poetry, archery and chess—can make his life that much more interesting and virtuous. You do that. But keep your eyes open at the same time, and be ready for a fast draw.”

Even Brion had to smile at the absurdity of the suggestion. Of course it couldn’t happen that way. Yet, since it had happened, there must be a simple explanation.

“We can beat this back and forth all day,” Ihjel told him, “and you won’t get the right idea unless—” He broke off suddenly, staring at the communicator. The operation light had come on, though the screen stayed dark. Ihjel reached down a meaty hand and pulled loose the recently connected wires. “That doctor of yours is very curious—

and he's going to stay that way. The truth behind the Twenties is none of his business. But it's going to be yours. You must come to realize that the life you lead here is a complete and artificial construction, developed by Societics experts and put into application by skilled field workers."

"Nonsense!" Brion broke in. "Systems of society can't be dreamed up and forced on people like that. Not without bloodshed and violence."

"Nonsense, yourself," Ihjel told him. "That may have been true in the dawn of history, but not any more. You have been reading too many of the old Earth classics; you imagine that we still live in the Ages of Superstition. Just because fascism and communism were once forced on reluctant populations, you think this holds true for all time. Go back to your books. In exactly the same era democracy and self-government were adapted by former colonial states, like India and the Union of North Africa, and the only violence was between local religious groups. Change is the lifeblood of mankind. Everything we today accept as normal was at one time an innovation. And one of the most recent innovations is the attempt to guide the societies of mankind into something more consistent with the personal happiness of individuals."

"The God complex," Brion said; "forcing human lives into a mold whether they want to be fitted into it or not."

"Societies can be that," Ihjel agreed. "It was in the beginning, and there were some disastrous results of attempts to force populations into a political climate where they didn't belong. They weren't all failures—Anvhar here is a striking example of how good the technique can be when correctly applied. It's not done this way any more, though. As with all of the other sciences, we have found out that the more we know, the more there is to know. We no longer attempt to guide cultures towards what we consider a beneficial goal. There are too many goals, and from our limited vantage point it is hard to tell the good ones from the bad ones. All we do now is try to protect the growing cultures, give a little jolt to the stagnating ones—and bury the dead ones. When the work was first done here on Anvhar the theory hadn't progressed that far. The understandably complex equations that determine just where in the scale from a Type I to a Type V a culture is, had not yet been completed. The technique then was to work out an artificial culture that would be most beneficial for a planet, then bend it into the mold."

"How can that be done?" Brion asked. "How was it done here?"

"We've made some progress—you're finally asking 'how.' The technique here took a good number of agents, and a great deal of money. Personal honor was emphasized in order to encourage dueling, and this led to a heightened interest in the technique of personal combat. When this was well entrenched Girolodi was brought in, and he showed how organized competitions could be more interesting than haphazard encounters. Tying the intellectual aspects onto the framework of competitive sports was a little more difficult, but not overwhelmingly so. The details aren't important; all we are considering now is the end product. Which is you. You're needed very much."

"Why me?" Brion asked. "Why am I special? Because I won the Twenties? I can't believe that. Taken objectively, there isn't that much difference between myself and the ten runner-ups. Why don't you ask one of them? They could do your job as well as I."

“No, they couldn’t. I’ll tell you later why you are the only man I can use. Our time is running out and I must convince you of some other things first.” Ihjel glanced at his watch. “We have less than three hours to dead-deadline. Before that time I must explain enough of our work to you to enable you to decide voluntarily to join us.”

“A very tall order,” Brion said. “You might begin by telling me just who this mysterious ‘we’ is that you keep referring to.”

“The Cultural Relationships Foundation. A non-governmental body, privately endowed, existing to promote peace and ensure the sovereign welfare of independent planets, so that all will prosper from the good will and commerce thereby engendered.”

“Sounds as if you’re quoting,” Brion told him. “No one could possibly make up something that sounds like that on the spur of the moment.”

“I *was* quoting, from our charter of organization. Which is all very fine in a general sense, but I’m talking specifically now. About you. You are the product of a tightly knit and very advanced society. Your individuality has been encouraged by your growing up in a society so small in population that a mild form of government control is necessary. The normal Anvharian education is an excellent one, and participation in the Twenties has given you a general and advanced education second to none in the galaxy. It would be a complete waste of your entire life if you now took all this training and wasted it on some rustic farm.”

“You give me very little credit. I plan to teach—”

“Forget Anvhar!” Ihjel cut him off with a chop of his hand. “This world will roll on quite successfully whether you are here or not. You must forget it, think of its relative unimportance on a galactic scale, and consider instead the existing, suffering hordes of mankind. You must think what you can do to help them.”

“But what can I do—as an individual? The day is long past when a single man, like Caesar or Alexander, could bring about world-shaking changes.”

“True—but not true,” Ihjel said. “There are key men in every conflict of forces, men who act like catalysts applied at the right instant to start a chemical reaction. You might be one of these men, but I must be honest and say that I can’t prove it yet. So in order to save time and endless discussion, I think I will have to spark your personal sense of obligation.”

“Obligation to whom?”

“To mankind, of course, to the countless billions of dead who kept the whole machine rolling along that allows you the full, long and happy life you enjoy today. What they gave to you, you must pass on to others. This is the keystone of humanistic morals.”

“Agreed. And a very good argument in the long run. But not one that is going to tempt me out of this bed within the next three hours.”

“A point of success,” Ihjel said. “You agree with the general argument. Now I apply it specifically to you. Here is the statement I intend to prove. There exists a planet with a population of seven million people. Unless I can prevent it, this planet will be completely destroyed. It is my job to stop that destruction, so that is where I am going now. I won’t be able to do the job alone. In addition to others, I need you. Not anyone like you—but you, and you alone.”

“You have precious little time left to convince me of all that,” Brion told him, “so let me make the job easier for you. The work you do, this planet, the imminent danger of the people there—these are all facts that you can undoubtedly supply. I’ll take a chance that this whole thing is not a colossal bluff, and admit that given time, you could verify them all. This brings the argument back to me again. How can you possibly prove that I am the only person in the galaxy who can help you?”

“I can prove it by your singular ability, the thing I came here to find.”

“Ability? I am different in no way from the other men on my planet.”

“You’re wrong,” Ihjel said. “You are the embodied proof of evolution. Rare individuals with specific talents occur constantly in any species, man included. It has been two generations since an empathetic was last born on Anvhar, and I have been watching carefully most of that time.”

“What in blazes is an empathetic—and how do you recognize it when you have found it?” Brion chuckled, this talk was getting preposterous.

“I can recognize one because I’m one myself—there is no other way. As to how projective empathy works, you had a demonstration of that a little earlier, when you felt those strange thoughts about Anvhar. It will be a long time before you can master that, but receptive empathy is your natural trait. This is mentally entering into the feeling, or what could be called the spirit of another person. Empathy is not thought perception; it might better be described as the sensing of someone else’s emotional makeup, feelings and attitudes. You can’t lie to a trained empathetic, because he can sense the real attitude behind the verbal lies. Even your undeveloped talent has proved immensely useful in the Twenties. You can outguess your opponent because you know his movements even as his body tenses to make them. You accept this without ever questioning it.”

“How do you know?” This was Brion’s understood, but never voiced secret.

Ihjel smiled. “Just guessing. But I won the Twenties too, remember, also without knowing a thing about empathy at the time. On top of our normal training, it’s a wonderful trait to have. Which brings me to the proof we mentioned a minute ago. When you said you would be convinced if I could prove you were the only person who could help me. I *believe* you are—and that is one thing I cannot lie about. It’s possible to lie about a belief verbally, to have a falsely based belief, or to change a belief. But you can’t lie about it to yourself.

“Equally important—you can’t lie about a belief to an empathetic. Would you like to see how I feel about this? ‘See’ is a bad word—there is no vocabulary yet for this kind of thing. Better, would you join me in my feelings? Sense my attitudes, memories and emotions just as I do?”

Brion tried to protest, but he was too late. The doors of his senses were pushed wide and he was overwhelmed.

“Dis ...” Ihjel said aloud. “Seven million people ... hydrogen bombs ... Brion Brandd.” These were just key words, landmarks of association. With each one Brion felt the rushing wave of the other man’s emotions.

There could be no lies here—Ihjel was right in that. This was the raw stuff that feelings are made of, the basic reactions to the things and symbols of memory.

DIS ... DIS ... DIS ... it was a word it was a planet and the word thundered

like a drum a drum the sound
 of its thunder surrounded and
 was a wasteland a planet
 of death a planet where
 living was dying and
 dying was very
 better than
 living

crude barbaric
 backward miserable
 dirty beneath
 consideration
 planet

DIS

hot burning scorching
 wasteland of sands
 and sands and sands and
 sands that burned had
 burned will burn forever
 the people of this planet so
 crude dirty miserable barbaric
 sub-human in-human
 less-than-human

but
 they
 were
 going
 to
 be

DEAD

and DEAD they would be seven million blackened corpses
 that would blacken your dreams all dreams dreams
 forever because those

HYDROGEN BOMBS

were waiting

to kill

them unless .. unless .. unless ..

you Ihjel stopped it you Ihjel (DEATH) you (DEATH)

you (DEATH) alone couldn't do it you (DEATH)

must have

BRION BRANDD wet-behind-the-ears-raw-untrained-

Brion-Brandd-to-help-you he was the only one in the
 galaxy who could finish the job.....

As the flow of sensation died away, Brion realized he was sprawled back weakly on his pillows, soaked with sweat, washed with the memory of the raw emotion. Across from him Ihjel sat with his face bowed in his hands. When he lifted his head Brion saw within his eyes a shadow of the blackness he had just experienced.

“Death,” Brion said. “That terrible feeling of death. It wasn’t just the people of Dis who would die. It was something more personal.”

“Myself,” Ihjel said, and behind this simple word were the repeated echoes of night that Brion had been made aware of with his newly recognized ability. “My own death, not too far away. This is the wonderfully terrible price you must pay for your talent. *Angst* is an inescapable part of empathy. It is a part of the whole unknown field of psi phenomena that seems to be independent of time. Death is so traumatic and final that it reverberates back along the time line. The closer I get, the more aware of it I am. There is no exact feeling of date, just a rough location in time. That is the horror of it. I *know* I will die soon after I get to Dis—and long before the work there is finished. I know the job to be done there, and I know the men who have already failed at it. I also know you are the only person who can possibly complete the work I have started. Do you agree now? Will you come with me?”

“Yes, of course,” Brion said. “I’ll go with you.”

Chapter 4

“I’ve never seen anyone quite as angry as that doctor,” Brion said.

“Can’t blame him.” Ihjel shifted his immense weight and grunted from the console, where he was having a coded conversation with the ship’s brain. He hit the keys quickly, and read the answer from the screen. “You took away his medical moment of glory. How many times in his life will he have a chance to nurse back to rugged smiling health the triumphantly exhausted Winner of the Twenties?”

“Not many, I imagine. The wonder of it is how you managed to convince him that you and the ship here could take care of me as well as his hospital could.”

“I could never convince him of that,” Ihjel said. “But I and the Cultural Relationships Foundation have some powerful friends on Anvhar. I’m forced to admit I brought a little pressure to bear.” He leaned back and read the course tape as it streamed out of the printer. “We have a little time to spare, but I would rather spend it waiting at the other end. We’ll blast as soon as I have you tied down in a stasis field.”

The completeness of the stasis field leaves no impressions on the body or mind. In it there is no weight, no pressure, no pain—no sensation of any kind. Except for a stasis of very long duration, there is no sensation of time. To Brion’s consciousness, Ihjel flipped the switch off with a continuation of the same motion that had turned it on. The ship was unchanged, only outside of the port was the red-shot blankness of jump-space.

“How do you feel?” Ihjel asked.

Apparently the ship was wondering the same thing. Its detector unit, hovering impatiently just outside of Brion’s stasis field, darted down and settled on his bare forearm. The doctor back on Anvhar had given the medical section of the ship’s brain a complete briefing. A quick check of a dozen factors of Brion’s metabolism was compared to the expected norm. Apparently everything was going well, because the only reaction was the expected injection of vitamins and glucose.

“I can’t say I’m feeling wonderful yet,” Brion answered, levering himself higher on the pillows. “But every day it’s a bit better—steady progress.”

“I hope so, because we have about two weeks before we get to Dis. Do you think you’ll be back in shape by that time?”

“No promises,” Brion said, giving a tentative squeeze to one bicep. “It should be enough time, though. Tomorrow I start mild exercise and that will tighten me up again. Now—tell me more about Dis and what you have to do there.”

“I’m not going to do it twice, so just save your curiosity awhile. We’re heading for a rendezvous point now to pick up another operator. This is going to be a three-man team, you, me and an exobiologist. As soon as he is aboard I’ll do a complete briefing for you both at the same time. What you can do now is get your head into the language box and start working on your Disan. You’ll want to speak it perfectly by the time we touchdown.”

With an autohypno for complete recall, Brion had no difficulty in mastering the grammar and vocabulary of Disan. Pronunciation was a different matter altogether. Almost all the word endings were swallowed, muffled or gargled. The language was

rich in glottal stops, clicks and guttural strangling sounds. Ihjel stayed in a different part of the ship when Brion used the voice mirror and analysis scope, claiming that the awful noises interfered with his digestion.

Their ship angled through jump-space along its calculated course. It kept its fragile human cargo warm, fed them and supplied breathable air. It had orders to worry about Brion's health, so it did, checking constantly against its recorded instructions and noting his steady progress. Another part of the ship's brain counted microseconds with moronic fixation, finally closing a relay when a predetermined number had expired in its heart. A light flashed and a buzzer hummed gently but insistently.

Ihjel yawned, put away the report he had been reading, and started for the control room. He shuddered when he passed the room where Brion was listening to a playback of his Disan efforts.

"Turn off that dying brontosaurus and get strapped in," he called through the thin door. "We're coming to the point of optimum possibility and well be dropping back into normal space soon."

The human mind can ponder the incredible distances between the stars, but cannot possibly contain within itself a real understanding of them. Marked out on a man's hand an inch is a large unit of measure. In interstellar space a cubical area with sides a hundred thousand miles long is a microscopically fine division. Light crosses this distance in a fraction of a second. To a ship moving with a relative speed far greater than that of light, this measuring unit is even smaller. Theoretically, it appears impossible to find a particular area of this size. Technologically, it was a repeatable miracle that occurred too often to even be interesting.

Brion and Ihjel were strapped in when the jump-drive cut off abruptly, lurching them back into normal space and time. They didn't unstrap, but just sat and looked at the dimly distant pattern of stars. A single sun, apparently of fifth magnitude, was their only neighbor in this lost corner of the universe. They waited while the computer took enough star sights to triangulate a position in three dimensions, muttering to itself electronically while it did the countless calculations to find their position. A warning bell chimed and the drive cut on and off so quickly that the two acts seemed simultaneous. This happened again, twice, before the brain was satisfied it had made as good a fix as possible and flashed a NAVIGATION POWER OFF light. Ihjel unstrapped, stretched, and made them a meal.

Ihjel had computed their passage time with precise allowances. Less than ten hours after they arrived a powerful signal blasted into their waiting receiver. They strapped in again as the NAVIGATION POWER ON signal blinked insistently.

A ship had paused in flight somewhere relatively near in the vast volume of space. It had entered normal space just long enough to emit a signal of radio query on an assigned wave length. Ihjel's ship had detected this and instantly responded with a verifying signal. The passenger spacer had accepted this assurance and gracefully laid a ten-foot metal egg in space. As soon as this had cleared its jump field the parent ship vanished towards its destination, light years away.

Ihjel's ship climbed up the signal it had received. This signal had been recorded and examined minutely. Angle, strength and Doppler movement were computed to find course and distance. A few minutes of flight were enough to get within range of the far weaker transmitter in the drop-capsule. Homing on this signal was so simple, a

human pilot could have done it himself. The shining sphere loomed up, then vanished out of sight of the viewports as the ship rotated to bring the spacelock into line. Magnetic clamps cut in when they made contact.

“Go down and let the bug-doctor in,” Ihjel said. “I’ll stay and monitor the board in case of trouble.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Get into a suit and open the outer lock. Most of the drop sphere is made of inflatable metallic foil, so don’t bother to look for the entrance. Just cut a hole in it with the oversize can-opener you’ll find in the tool box. After Dr. Morees gets aboard jettison the thing. Only get the radio and locator unit out first—it gets used again.”

The tool did look like a giant can-opener. Brion carefully felt the resilient metal skin that covered the lock entrance, until he was sure there was nothing on the other side. Then he jabbed the point through and cut a ragged hole in the thin foil. Dr. Morees boiled out of the sphere, knocking Brion aside.

“What’s the matter?” Brion asked.

There was no radio on the other’s suit; he couldn’t answer. But he did shake his fist angrily. The helmet ports were opaque, so there was no way to tell what expressions went with the gesture. Brion shrugged and turned back to salvaging the equipment pack, pushing the punctured balloon free and sealing the lock. When pressure was pumped back to ship-normal, he cracked his helmet and motioned the other to do the same.

“You’re a pack of dirty lying dogs!” Dr. Morees said when the helmet came off. Brion was completely baffled. Dr. Lea Morees had long dark hair, large eyes, and a delicately shaped mouth now taut with anger. Dr. Morees was a woman.

“Are you the filthy swine responsible for this atrocity?” Dr. Morees asked menacingly.

“In the control room,” Brion said quickly, knowing when cowardice was preferable to valor. “A man named Ihjel. There’s a lot of him to hate, you can have a good time doing it. I just joined up myself....” He was talking to her back as she stormed from the room. Brion hurried after her, not wanting to miss the first human spark of interest in the trip to date.

“Kidnapped! Lied to, and forced against my will! There is no court in the galaxy that won’t give you the maximum sentence, and I’ll scream with pleasure as they roll your fat body into solitary—”

“They shouldn’t have sent a woman,” Ihjel said, completely ignoring her words. “I asked for a highly qualified exobiologist for a difficult assignment. Someone young and tough enough to do field work under severe conditions. So the recruiting office sends me the smallest female they can find, one who’ll melt in the first rain.”

“I will not!” Lea shouted. “Female resiliency is a well-known fact, and I’m in far better condition than the average woman. Which has nothing to do with what I’m telling you. I was hired for a job in the university on Moller’s World and signed a contract to that effect. Then this bully of an agent tells me the contract has been changed—read subparagraph 189-C or some such nonsense—and I’ll be transhipping. He stuffed me into that suffocating basketball without a by-your-leave and they threw me overboard. If that is not a violation of personal privacy—”

“Cut a new course, Brion,” Ihjel broke in. “Find the nearest settled planet and head us there. We have to drop this woman and find a man for this job. We are going to what is undoubtedly the most interesting planet an exobiologist ever conceived of, but we need a man who can take orders and not faint when it gets too hot.”

Brion was lost. Ihjel had done all the navigating and Brion had no idea how to begin a search like this.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Lea said. “You don’t get rid of me that easily. I placed first in my class, and most of the five hundred other students were male. This is only a man’s universe because the men say so. What is the name of this garden planet where we are going?”

“Dis. I’ll give you a briefing as soon as I get this ship on course.” He turned to the controls and Lea slipped out of her suit and went into the lavatory to comb her hair. Brion closed his mouth, aware suddenly it had been open for a long time. “Is that what you call applied psychology?” he asked.

“Not really. She was going to go along with the job in the end—since she did sign the contract even if she didn’t read the fine print—but not until she had exhausted her feelings. I just shortened the process by switching her onto the male-superiority hate. Most women who succeed in normally masculine fields have a reflexive antipathy there; they have been hit on the head with it so much.”

He fed the course tape into the console and scowled. “But there was a good chunk of truth in what I said. I wanted a young, fit and highly qualified biologist from recruiting. I never thought they would find a female one—and it’s too late to send her back now. Dis is no place for a woman.”

“Why?” Brion asked, as Lea appeared in the doorway.

“Come inside, and I’ll show you both,” Ihjel said.

Chapter 5

“Dis,” Ihjel said, consulting a thick file, “third planet out from its primary, Epsilon Eridani. The fourth planet is Nyjord—remember that, because it is going to be very important. Dis is a place you need a good reason to visit and no reason at all to leave. Too hot, too dry; the temperature in the temperate zones rarely drops below a hundred Fahrenheit. The planet is nothing but scorched rock and burning sand. Most of the water is underground and normally inaccessible. The surface water is all in the form of briny, chemically saturated swamps—undrinkable without extensive processing. All the facts and figures are here in the folder and you can study them later. Right now I want you just to get the idea that this planet is as loathsome and inhospitable as they come. So are the people. This is a solido of a Disan.”

Lea gasped at the three-dimensional representation on the screen. Not at the physical aspects of the man; as a biologist trained in the specialty of alien life she had seen a lot stranger sights. It was the man’s pose, the expression on his face—tensed to leap, his lips drawn back to show all of this teeth.

“He looks as if he wanted to kill the photographer,” she said.

“He almost did—just after the picture was taken. Like all Disans, he has an overwhelming hatred and loathing of offworlders. Not without good reason, though. His planet was settled completely by chance during the Breakdown. I’m not sure of the details, but the overall picture is clear, since the story of their desertion forms the basis of all the myths and animistic religions on Dis.

“Apparently there were large-scale mining operations carried on there once; the world is rich enough in minerals and mining them is very simple. But water came only from expensive extraction processes and I imagine most of the food came from offworld. Which was good enough until the settlement was forgotten, the way a lot of other planets were during the Breakdown. All the records were destroyed in the fighting, and the ore carriers were pressed into military service. Dis was on its own. What happened to the people there is a tribute to the adaptation possibilities of homo sapiens. Individuals died, usually in enormous pain, but the race lived. Changed a good deal, but still human. As the water and food ran out and the extraction machinery broke down, they must have made heroic efforts to survive. They couldn’t do it mechanically, but by the time the last machine collapsed, enough people were adjusted to the environment to keep the race going.

“Their descendants are still there, completely adapted to the environment. Their body temperatures are around a hundred and thirty degrees. They have specialized tissue in the gluteal area for storing water. These are minor changes, compared to the major ones they have done in fitting themselves for this planet. I don’t know the exact details, but the reports are very enthusiastic about symbiotic relationships. They assure us that this is the first time homo sapiens has been an active part of either commensalism or inquilinism other than in the role of host.”

“Wonderful!” Lea exclaimed.

“Is it?” Ihjel scowled. “Perhaps from the abstract scientific point of view. If you can keep notes perhaps you might write a book about it some time. But I’m not interested. I’m sure all these morphological changes and disgusting intimacies will fascinate you, Dr. Morees. But while you are counting blood types and admiring your

thermometers, I hope you will be able to devote a little time to a study of the Disans' obnoxious personalities. We must either find out what makes these people tick—or we are going to have to stand by and watch the whole lot blown up!"

"Going to do what!" Lea gasped. "Destroy them? Wipe out this fascinating genetic pool? Why?"

"Because they are so incredibly loathsome, that's why!" Ihjel said. "These aboriginal hotheads have managed to lay their hands on some primitive cobalt bombs. They want to light the fuse and drop these bombs on Nyjord, the next planet. Nothing said or done can convince them differently. They demand unconditional surrender, or else. This is impossible for a lot of reasons—most important, because the Nyjorders would like to keep their planet for their very own. They have tried every kind of compromise but none of them works. The Disans are out to commit racial suicide. A Nyjord fleet is now over Dis and the deadline has almost expired for the surrender of the cobalt bombs. The Nyjord ships carry enough H-bombs to turn the entire planet into an atomic pile. That is what we must stop."

Brion looked at the *solido* on the screen, trying to make some judgment of the man. Bare, horny feet. A bulky, ragged length of cloth around the waist was the only garment. What looked like a piece of green vine was hooked over one shoulder. From a plaited belt were suspended a number of odd devices made of hand-beaten metal, drilled stone and looped leather. The only recognizable item was a thin knife of unusual design. Loops of piping, flared bells, carved stones tied in senseless patterns of thonging gave the rest of the collection a bizarre appearance. Perhaps they had some religious significance. But the well-worn and handled look of most of them gave Brion an uneasy sensation. If they were used—what in the universe could they be used *for*?

"I can't believe it," he finally concluded. "Except for the exotic hardware, this lowbrow looks as if he has sunk back into the Stone Age. I don't see how his kind can be any real threat to another planet."

"The Nyjorders believe it, and that's good enough for me," Ihjel said. "They are paying our Cultural Relationships Foundation a good sum to try and prevent this war. Since they are our employers, we must do what they ask." Brion ignored this large lie, since it was obviously designed as an explanation for Lea. But he made a mental note to query Ihjel later about the real situation.

"Here are the tech reports." Ihjel dropped them on the table. "Dis has some spacers as well as the cobalt bombs—though these aren't the real threat. A tramp trader was picked up *leaving* Dis. It had delivered a jump-space launcher that can drop those bombs on Nyjord while anchored to the bedrock of Dis. While essentially a peaceful and happy people, the Nyjorders were justifiably annoyed at this and convinced the tramp's captain to give them some more information. It's all here. Boiled down, it gives a minimum deadline by which time the launcher can be set up and start throwing bombs."

"When is that deadline?" Lea asked.

"In ten more days. If the situation hasn't been changed drastically by then, the Nyjorders are going to wipe all life from the face of Dis. I assure you they don't want to do it. But they will drop the bombs in order to assure their own survival."

“What am I supposed to do?” Lea asked, flipping the pages of the report. “I don’t know a thing about nucleonics or jump-space. I’m an exobiologist, with a supplementary degree in anthropology. What help could I possibly be?”

Ihjel looked down at her, stroking his jaw, fingers sunk deep into the rolls of flesh. “My faith in our recruiters is restored,” he said. “That’s a combination that is probably rare—even on Earth. You’re as scrawny as an underfed chicken, but young enough to survive if we keep a close eye on you.” He cut off Lea’s angry protest with a raised hand. “No more bickering. There isn’t time. The Nyjorders must have lost over thirty agents trying to find the bombs. Our foundation has had six people killed—including my late predecessor in charge of the project. He was a good man, but I think he went at this problem the wrong way. I think it is a cultural one, not a physical one.”

“Run it through again with the power turned up,” Lea said, frowning. “All I hear is static.”

“It’s the old problem of genesis. Like Newton and the falling apple, Levy and the hysteresis in the warp field. Everything has a beginning. If we can find out why these people are so hell-bent on suicide we might be able to change the reasons. Not that I intend to stop looking for the bombs or the jump-space generator either. We are going to try anything that will avert this planetary murder.”

“You’re a lot brighter than you look,” Lea said, rising and carefully stacking the sheets of the report. “You can count on me for complete cooperation. Now I’ll study all this in bed if one of you overweight gentlemen will show me to a room with a strong lock on the inside of the door. Don’t call me; I’ll call you when I want breakfast.”

Brion wasn’t sure how much of her barbed speech was humor and how much was serious, so he said nothing. He showed her to an empty cabin—she did lock the door—then looked for Ihjel. The Winner was in the galley adding to his girth with an immense gelatin dessert that filled a good-sized tureen.

“Is she short for a native Terran?” Brion asked. “The top of her head is below my chin.”

“That’s the norm. Earth is a reservoir of tired genes. Weak backs, vermiform appendixes, bad eyes. If they didn’t have the universities and the trained people we need I would never use them.”

“Why did you lie to her about the Foundation?”

“Because it’s a secret—isn’t that reason enough?” Ihjel rumbled angrily, scraping the last dregs from the bowl. “Better eat something. Build up the strength. The Foundation has to maintain its undercover status if it is going to accomplish anything. If she returns to Earth after this it’s better that she should know nothing of our real work. If she joins up, there’ll be time enough to tell her. But I doubt if she will like the way we operate. Particularly since I plan to drop some H-bombs on Dis myself—if we can’t turn off the war.”

“I don’t believe it!”

“You heard me correctly. Don’t bulge your eyes and look moronic. As a last resort I’ll drop the bombs myself rather than let the Nyjorders do it. That might save them.”

“Save them—they’d all be radiated and dead!” Brion’s voice rose in anger.

“Not the Disans. I want to save the Nyjorders. Stop clenching your fists and sit down and have some of this cake. It’s delicious. The Nyjorders are all that counts here. They have a planet blessed by the laws of chance. When Dis was cut off from outside contact, the survivors turned into a gang of swampcrawling homicidals. It did the opposite for Nyjord. You can survive there just by pulling fruit off a tree. The population was small, educated, intelligent. Instead of sinking into an eternal siesta they matured into a vitally different society. Not mechanical—they weren’t even using the wheel when they were rediscovered. They became sort of cultural specialists, digging deep into the philosophical aspects of interrelationship—the thing that machine societies never have had time for. Of course this was ready-made for the Cultural Relationships Foundation, and we have been working with them ever since. Not guiding so much as protecting them from any blows that might destroy this growing idea. But we’ve fallen down on the job. Nonviolence is essential to these people—they have vitality without needing destruction. But if they are forced to blow up Dis for their own survival—against every one of their basic tenets—their philosophy won’t endure. Physically they’ll live on, as just one more dog-eat-dog planet with an A-bomb for any of the competition who drop behind.”

“Sounds like paradise now.”

“Don’t be smug. It’s just another worldful of people with the same old likes, dislikes and hatreds. But they are evolving a way of living together, without violence, that may some day form the key to mankind’s survival. They are worth looking after. Now get below and study your Disan and read the reports. Get it all pat before we land.”

Chapter 6

“Identify yourself, please.” The quiet words from the speaker in no way appeared to coincide with the picture on the screen. The spacer that had matched their orbit over Dis had recently been a freighter. A quick conversion had tacked the hulking shape of a primary weapons turret on top of her hull. The black disc of the immense muzzle pointed squarely at them. Ihjel switched open the ship-to-ship communication channel.

“This is Ihjel. Retinal pattern 490-BJ4-67—which is also the code that is supposed to get me through your blockade. Do you want to check that pattern?”

“There will be no need, thank you. If you will turn on your recorder I have a message relayed to you from Prime-four.”

“Recording and out,” Ihjel said. “Damn! Trouble already, and four days to blowup. Prime-four is our headquarters on Dis. This ship carries a cover cargo so we can land at the spaceport. This is probably a change of plan and I don’t like the smell of it.”

There was something behind Ihjel’s grumbling this time, and without conscious effort Brion could sense the chilling touch of the other man’s *angst*. Trouble was waiting for them on the planet below. When the message was typed by the decoder Ihjel hovered over it, reading each word as it appeared on the paper. When it was finished he only snorted and went below to the galley. Brion pulled the message out of the machine and read it.

IHJEL IHJEL IHJEL SPACEPORT LANDING DANGER NIGHT LANDING
PREFERABLE COORDINATES MAP 46 J92 MN75 REMOTE YOUR SHIP VION
WILL MEET END END END

Dropping into the darkness was safe enough. It was done on instruments, and the Disans were thought to have no detection apparatus. The altimeter dials spun backwards to zero and a soft vibration was the only indication they had landed. All of the cabin lights were off except for the fluorescent glow of the instruments. A white-speckled grey filled the infra-red screen, radiation from the still warm sand and stone. There were no moving blips on it, not the characteristic shape of a shielded atomic generator.

“We’re here first,” Ihjel said, opaqueing the ports and turning on the cabin lights. They blinked at each other, faces damp with perspiration.

“Must you have the ship this hot?” Lea asked, patting her forehead with an already sodden kerchief. Stripped of her heavier clothing, she looked even tinier to Brion. But the thin cloth tunic—reaching barely halfway to her knees—concealed very little. Small she may have appeared to him: unfeminine she was not. Her breasts were full and high, her waist tiny enough to offset the outward curve of her hips.

“Shall I turn around so you can stare at the back too?” she asked Brion. Five days’ experience had taught him that this type of remark was best ignored. It only became worse if he tried to make an intelligent answer.

“Dis is hotter than this cabin,” he said, changing the subject. “By raising the interior temperature we can at least prevent any sudden shock when we go out—”

“I know the theory—but it doesn’t stop me from sweating,” she said curtly.

“Best thing you can do is sweat.” Ihjel said. He looked like a glistening captive balloon in shorts. Finishing a bottle of beer, he took another from the freezer. “Have a beer.”

“No, thank you. I’m afraid it would dissolve the last shreds of tissue and my kidneys would float completely away. On Earth we never—”

“Get Professor Morees’ luggage for her,” Ihjel interrupted. “Vion’s coming, there’s his signal. I’m sending this ship up before any of the locals spot it.”

When he cracked the outer port the puff of air struck them like the exhaust from a furnace, dry and hot as a tongue of flame. Brion heard Lea’s gasp in the darkness. She stumbled down the ramp and he followed her slowly, careful of the weight of packs and equipment he carried. The sand, still hot from the day, burned through his boots. Ihjel came last, the remote-control unit in his hand. As soon as they were clear he activated it and the ramp slipped back like a giant tongue. As soon as the lock had swung shut, the ship lifted and drifted upwards silently towards its orbit, a shrinking darkness against the stars.

There was just enough starlight to see the sandy wastes around them, as wave-filled as a petrified sea. The dark shape of a sand car drew up over a dune and hummed to a stop. When the door opened Ihjel stepped towards it and everything happened at once.

Ihjel broke into a blue nimbus of crackling flame, his skin blackening, charred. He was dead in an instant. A second pillar of flame bloomed next to the car, and a choking scream was cut off at the moment it began. Ihjel died silently.

Brion was diving even as the electrical discharges still crackled in the air. The boxes and packs dropped from him and he slammed against Lea, knocking her to the ground. He hoped she had the sense to stay there and be quiet. This was his only conscious thought, the rest was reflex. He was rolling over and over as fast as he could.

The spitting electrical flames flared again, playing over the bundles of luggage he had dropped. This time Brion was expecting it, pressed flat on the ground a short distance away. He was facing the darkness away from the sand car and saw the brief, blue glow of the ion-rifle discharge. His own gun was in his hand. When Ihjel had given him the missile weapon he had asked no questions, but had just strapped it on. There had been no thought that he would need it this quickly. Holding it firmly before him in both hands, he let his body aim at the spot where the glow had been. A whiplash of explosive slugs ripped the night air. They found their target and something thrashed voicelessly and died.

In the brief instant after he fired, a jarring weight landed on his back and a line of fire circled his throat. Normally he fought with a calm mind, with no thoughts other than of the contest. But Ihjel, a friend, a man of Anvhar, had died a few seconds before, and Brion found himself welcoming this physical violence and pain.

There are many foolish and dangerous things that can be done, such as smoking next to high-octane fuel and putting fingers into electrical sockets. Just as dangerous, and equally deadly, is physically attacking a Winner of the Twenties.

Two men hit Brion together, though this made very little difference. The first died suddenly as hands like steel claws found his neck and in a single spasmodic contraction did such damage to the large blood vessels there that they burst and tiny

hemorrhages filled his brain. The second man had time for a single scream, though he died just as swiftly when those hands closed on his larynx.

Running in a crouch, partially on his knuckles, Brion swiftly made a circle of the area, gun ready. There were no others. Only when he touched the softness of Lea's body did the blood anger seep from him. He was suddenly aware of the pain and fatigue, the sweat soaking his body and the breath rasping in his throat. Holstering the gun, he ran light fingers over her skull, finding a bruised spot on one temple. Her chest was rising and falling regularly. She had struck her head when he pushed her. It had undoubtedly saved her life.

Sitting down suddenly, he let his body relax, breathing deeply. Everything was a little better now, except for the pain at his throat. His fingers found a thin strand on the side of his neck with a knobby weight on the end. There was another weight on his other shoulder and a thin line of pain across his neck. When he pulled on them both, the strangler's cord came away in his hand. It was thin fiber, strong as a wire. When it had been pulled around his neck it had sliced the surface skin and flesh like a knife, halted only by the corded bands of muscle below. Brion threw it from him, into the darkness where it had come from.

He could think again, and he carefully kept his thoughts from the men he had killed. Knowing it was useless, he went to Ihjel's body. A single touch of the scorched flesh was enough. Behind him Lea moaned with returning consciousness and he hurried on to the sand car, stepping over the charred body outside the door. The driver slumped, dead, killed perhaps by the same strangling cord that had sunk into Brion's throat. He laid the man gently on the sand and closed the lids over the staring horror of the eyes. There was a canteen in the car and he brought it back to Lea.

"My head—I've hurt my head," she said groggily.

"Just a bruise," he reassured her. "Drink some of this water and you'll soon feel better. Lie back. Everything's over for the moment and you can rest."

"Ihjel's dead!" Lea said with sudden shocked memory. "They've killed him! What's happened?" she tensed, tried to rise, and he pressed her back gently.

"I'll tell you everything. Just don't try to get up yet. There was an ambush and they killed Vion and the driver of the sand car, as well as Ihjel. Three men did it and they're all dead now too. I don't think there are any more around, but if there are I'll hear them coming. We're just going to wait a few minutes until you feel better, then we're getting out of here in the car."

"Bring the ship down!" There was a thin note of hysteria in her voice. "We can't stay here alone. We don't know where to go or what to do. With Ihjel dead, the whole thing's spoiled. We have to get out...."

There are some things that can't sound gentle, no matter how gently they are said. This was one of them. "I'm sorry, Lea, but the ship is out of our reach right now. Ihjel was killed with an ion gun and it fused the control unit into a solid lump. We must take the car and get to the city. We'll do it now. See if you can stand up—I'll help you."

She rose, not saying anything, and as they walked towards the car a single, reddish moon cleared the hills behind them. In its light Brion saw a dark line bisecting the rear panel of the sand car. He stopped abruptly. "What's the matter?" Lea asked.

The unlocked engine cover could have only one significance and he pushed it open, knowing in advance what he would see. The attackers had been very thorough and fast. In the short time available to them they had killed the driver and the car as well. Ruddy light shone on torn wires, ripped out connections. Repair would be impossible.

“I think we’ll have to walk,” he told her, trying to keep the gloom out of his voice. “This spot is roughly a hundred and fifty kilometres from the city of Hovedstad, where we have to go. We should be able to—”

“We’re going to die. We can’t walk anywhere. This whole planet is a death trap. Let’s get back in the ship!” The shrillness of hysteria was at the edge of her voice, as well as a subtle slurring of sounds.

Brion didn’t try to reason with her or bother to explain. She had a concussion from the blow, that much was obvious. He had her sit and rest while he made what preparations he could for the long walk.

Clothing first. With each passing minute the desert air was growing colder as the day’s heat ebbed away. Lea was beginning to shiver, and he took some heavier clothing from her charred bag and made her pull it on over her light tunic. There was little else that was worth carrying—the canteen from the car and a first-aid kit he found in one of the compartments. There were no maps and no radio. Navigation was obviously done by compass on this almost featureless desert. The car was equipped with an electrically operated gyrocompass, of no use to him now. But he did use it to check the direction of Hovedstad, as he remembered it from the map, and found it lined up perfectly with the tracks the car had cut into the sand. It had come directly from the city. They could find their way by back-tracking.

Time was slipping away. He would have liked to bury Ihjel and the men from the car, but the night hours were too valuable to be wasted. The best he could do was put the three corpses in the car, for protection from the Disan animals. He locked the door and threw the key as far as he could into the blackness. Lea had slipped into a restless sleep and he carefully shook her awake.

“Come,” Brion said. “We have a little walking to do.”

Chapter 7

With the cool air and firmly packed sand under foot, walking should have been easy. Lea spoiled that. The concussion seemed to have temporarily cut off the reasoning part of her brain, leaving a direct connection to her vocal cords. As she stumbled along, only half conscious, she mumbled all of her darkest fears that were better left unvoiced. Occasionally there was relevancy in her complaints. They would lose their way, never find the city, die of thirst, freezing, heat or hunger. Interspersed and entwined with these were fears from her past that still floated, submerged in the timeless ocean of her subconscious. Some Brion could understand, though he tried not to listen. Fears of losing credits, not getting the highest grade, falling behind, a woman alone in a world of men, leaving school, being lost, trampled among the nameless hordes that struggled for survival in the crowded city-states of Earth.

There were other things she was afraid of that made no sense to a man of Anvhar. Who were the alkians that seemed to trouble her? Or what was canceri? Daydle and haydle? Who was Manstan, whose name kept coming up, over and over, each time accompanied by a little moan?

Brion stopped and picked her up in both arms. With a sigh she settled against the hard width of his chest and was instantly asleep. Even with the additional weight he made better time now, and he stretched to his fastest, kilometre-consuming stride to make good use of these best hours.

Somewhere on a stretch of gravel and shelving rock he lost the track of the sand car. He wasted no time looking for it. By carefully watching the glistening stars rise and set he had made a good estimate of the geographic north. Dis didn't seem to have a pole star; however, a boxlike constellation turned slowly around the invisible point of the pole. Keeping this positioned in line with his right shoulder guided him on the westerly course he needed.

When his arms began to grow tired he lowered Lea gently to the ground; she didn't wake. Stretching for an instant, before taking up his burden again, Brion was struck by the terrible loneliness of the desert. His breath made a vanishing mist against the stars; all else was darkness and silence. How distant he was from his home, his people, his planet! Even the constellations of the night sky were different. He was used to solitude, but this was a loneliness that touched some deep-buried instinct. A shiver that wasn't from the desert cold touched lightly along his spine, prickling at the hairs on his neck.

It was time to go on. He shrugged the disquieting sensations off and carefully tied Lea into the jacket he had been wearing. Slung like a pack on his back, it made the walking easier. The gravel gave way to sliding dunes of sand that seemed to continue to infinity. It was a painful, slipping climb to the top of each one, then an equally difficult descent to the black-pooled hollow at the foot of the next.

With the first lightening of the sky in the east he stopped, breath rasping in his chest, to mark his direction before the stars faded. One line scratched in the sand pointed due north, a second pointed out the course they should follow. When they were aligned to his satisfaction he washed his mouth out with a single swallow of water and sat on the sand next to the still form of the girl.

Gold fingers of fire searched across the sky, wiping out the stars. It was magnificent; Brion forgot his fatigue in appreciation. There should be some way of preserving it. A quatrain would be best. Short enough to be remembered, yet requiring attention and skill to compact everything into it. He had scored high with his quatrains in the Twenties. This would be a special one. Taind, his poetry mentor, would have to get a copy.

“What are you mumbling about?” Lea asked, looking up at the craggy blackness of his profile against the reddening sky.

“Poem,” he said. “Shhh. Just a minute.”

It was too much for Lea, coming after the tension and dangers of the night. She began to laugh, laughing even harder when he scowled at her. Only when she heard the tinge of growing hysteria did she make an attempt to break off the laughter. The sun cleared the horizon, washing a sudden warmth over them. Lea gasped.

“Your throat’s been cut! You’re bleeding to death!”

“Not really,” he said, touching his fingertips lightly against the blood-clotted wound that circled his neck. “Just superficial.”

Depression sat on him as he suddenly remembered the battle and death of the previous night. Lea didn’t notice his face; she was busy digging in the pack he had thrown down. He had to use his fingers to massage and force away the grimace of pain that twisted his mouth. Memory was more painful than the wound. How easily he had killed! Three men. How close to the surface of the civilized man the animal dwelled! In countless matches he had used those holds, always drawing back from the exertion of the full killing power. They were part of a game, part of the Twenties. Yet when his friend had been killed he had become a killer himself. He believed in nonviolence and the sanctity of life—until the first test, when he had killed without hesitation. More ironic was the fact he really felt no guilt, even now. Shock at the change, yes. But no more than that.

“Lift your chin,” Lea said, brandishing the antiseptic applicator she had found in the medicine kit. He lifted his chin obligingly and the liquid drew a cool, burning line across his neck. Antibio pills would do a lot more good, since the wound was completely clotted by now, but he didn’t speak his thoughts aloud. For the moment Lea had forgotten herself in taking care of him. He put some of the antiseptic on her scalp bruise and she squeaked, pulling back. They both swallowed the pills.

“That sun is hot already,” Lea said, peeling off her heavy clothing. “Let’s find a nice cool cave or an air-cooled saloon to crawl into for the day.”

“I don’t think there are any here. Just sand. We have to walk—”

“I know we have to walk,” she interrupted. “There’s no need for a lecture about it. You’re as seriously cubical as the Bank of Terra. Relax. Count ten and start again.” Lea was making empty talk while she listened to the memory of hysteria tittering at the fringes of her brain.

“No time for that. We have to keep going.” Brion climbed slowly to his feet after stowing everything in the pack. When he sighted along his marker at the western horizon he saw nothing to mark their course, only the marching dunes. He helped Lea to her feet and began walking slowly towards them.

“Just hold on a second,” Lea called after him. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“In that direction,” he said, pointing. “I hoped there would be some landmarks, but there aren’t. We’ll have to keep on by dead reckoning. The sun will keep us pretty well on course. If we aren’t there by night the stars will be a better guide.”

“All this on an empty stomach? How about breakfast? I’m hungry—and thirsty.”

“No food.” He shook the canteen that gurgled emptily. It had been only partly filled when he found it. “The water’s low and we’ll need it later.”

“I need it now,” she said shortly. “My mouth tastes like an unemptied ashtray and I’m dry as paper.”

“Just a single swallow,” he said after the briefest hesitation. “This is all we have.”

Lea sipped at it with her eyes closed in appreciation. Then he sealed the top and returned it to the pack without taking any himself. They were sweating as they started up the first dune.

The desert was barren of life; they were the only things moving under that merciless sun. Their shadows pointed the way ahead of them, and as the shadows shortened the heat rose. It had an intensity Lea had never experienced before, a physical weight that pushed at her with a searing hand. Her clothing was sodden with perspiration, and it trickled burning into her eyes. The light and heat made it hard to see, and she leaned on the immovable strength of Brion’s arm. He walked on steadily, apparently ignoring the heat and discomfort.

“I wonder if those things are edible—or store water?” Brion’s voice was a harsh rasp. Lea blinked and squinted at the leathery shape on the summit of the dune. Plant or animal, it was hard to tell. It was the size of a man’s head, wrinkled and grey as dried-out leather, knobbed with thick spikes. Brion pushed it up with his toe and they had a brief glimpse of a white roundness, like a shiny taproot, going down into the dune. Then the thing contracted, pulling itself lower into the sand. At the same instant something thin and sharp lashed out through a fold in the skin, striking at Brion’s boot and withdrawing. There was a scratch on the hard plastic, beaded with drops of green liquid.

“Probably poison,” he said, digging his toe into the sand. “This thing is too mean to fool with—without a good reason. Let’s keep going.”

It was before noon when Lea fell down. She really wanted to go on, but her body wouldn’t obey. The thin soles of her shoes were no protection against the burning sand and her feet were lumps of raw pain. Heat hammered down, poured up from the sand and swirled her in an oven of pain. The air she gasped in was molten metal that dried and cracked her mouth. Each pulse of her heart throbbed blood to the wound in her scalp until it seemed her skull would burst with the agony. She had stripped down to the short tunic—in spite of Brion’s insistence that she keep her body protected from the sun—and that clung to her, soaked with sweat. She tore at it in a desperate effort to breathe. There was no escape from the unending heat.

Though the baked sand burned torture into her knees and hands, she couldn’t rise. It took all her strength not to fall further. Her eyes closed and everything swirled in immense circles.

Brion, blinking through slitted eyes, saw her go down. He lifted her, and carried her again as he had the night before. The hot touch of her body shocked his bare arms. Her skin was flushed pink. The tunic was torn open and one pointed breast rose and

fell unevenly with the irregularity of her breathing. Wiping his palm free of sweat and sand, he touched her skin and felt the ominous hot dryness.

Heat-shock, all the symptoms. Dry, flushed skin, the ragged breathing. Her temperature rising quickly as her body stopped fighting the heat and succumbed.

There was nothing he could do here to protect her from the heat. He measured a tiny portion of the remaining water into her mouth and she swallowed convulsively. Her thin clothing was little protection from the sun. He could only take her in his arms and keep on towards the horizon. An outcropping of rock threw a tiny patch of shade and he walked towards it.

The ground here, shielded from the direct rays of the sun, felt almost cool by contrast. Lea opened her eyes when he put her down, peering up at him through a haze of pain. She wanted to apologize to him for her weakness, but no words came from the dried membrane of her throat. His body above her seemed to swim back and forth in the heat waves, swaying like a tree in a high wind.

Shock drove her eyes open, cleared her mind for an instant. He really was swaying. Suddenly she realized how much she had come to depend on the unending solidity of his strength—and now it was failing. All over his body the corded muscles contracted in ridges, striving to keep him erect. She saw his mouth pulled open by the taut cords of his neck, and the gaping, silent scream was more terrible than any sound. Then she herself screamed as his eyes rolled back, leaving only the empty white of the eyeballs staring terribly at her. He went over, back, down, like a felled tree, thudding heavily on the sand. Unconscious or dead, she couldn't tell. She pulled limply at his leg, but couldn't drag his immense weight into the shade.

Brion lay on his back in the sun, sweating. Lea saw this and knew that he was still alive. Yet what was happening? She groped for memory in the red haze of her mind, but could remember nothing from her medical studies that would explain this. On every square inch of his body the sweat glands seethed with sudden activity. From every pore oozed great globules of oily liquid, far thicker than normal perspiration. Brion's arms rippled with motion and Lea gaped, horrified as the hairs there writhed and stirred as though endowed with separate life. His chest rose and fell rapidly, deep, gasping breaths racking his body. Lea could only stare through the dim redness of unreality and wonder if she was going mad before she died.

A coughing fit broke the rhythm of his rasping breath, and when it was over his breathing was easier. The perspiration still covered his body, the individual beads touching and forming tiny streams that trickled down his body and vanished in the sand. He stirred and rolled onto his side, facing her. His eyes were open and normal now as he smiled.

"Didn't mean to frighten you. It caught me suddenly coming at the wrong season and everything. It was a bit of a jar to my system. I'll get you some water now—there's still a bit left."

"What happened? When you looked like that, when you fell...."

"Take two swallows, no more," he said, holding the open canteen to her mouth. "Just summer change, that's all. It happens to us every year on Anvhar—only not that violently, of course. In the winter our bodies store a layer of fat under the skin for insulation, and sweating almost ceases completely. There are a lot of internal changes too. When the weather warms up the process is reversed. The fat is metabolized and the sweat glands enlarge and begin working overtime as the body

prepares for two months of hard work, heat and little sleep. I guess the heat here triggered off the summer change early."

"You mean—you've adapted to this terrible planet?"

"Just about. Though it does feel a little warm. I'll need a lot more water soon, so we can't remain here. Do you think you can stand the sun if I carry you?"

"No, but I won't feel any better staying here." She was light-headed, scarcely aware of what she said. "Keep going, I guess. Keep going."

As soon as she was out of the shadow of the rock the sunlight burst over her again in a wave of hot pain. She fell unconscious at once. Brion picked her up and staggered forward. After a few yards, he began to feel the pull of the sand. He knew he was reaching the end of his strength. He went more slowly and each dune seemed a bit higher than the one before. Giant, sand-scoured rocks pushed through the dunes here and he had to stumble around them. At the base of the largest of these monoliths was a straggling clump of knotted vegetation. He passed it by—then stopped as something tried to penetrate his heat-crazed mind. What was it? A difference. Something about these plants that he hadn't noticed in any of the others he had passed during the day.

It was almost like defeat to turn and push his clumsy feet backwards in his own footprints; to stand blinking helplessly at the plants. Yet they were important. Some of them had been cut off close to the sand. Not broken by any natural cause, but cut sharply and squarely by a knife or blade of some sort. The cut plants were long dried and dead, but a tiny hope flared up in him. This was the first sign that other people were actually alive on this heat-blasted planet. And whatever the plants had been cut for, they might be of aid to him. Food—perhaps drink. His hands trembled at the thought as he dropped Lea heavily into the shade of the rock. She didn't stir.

His knife was sharp, but most of the strength was gone from his hands. Breath rasping in his dried throat, he sawed at the tough stem, finally cutting it through. Raising up the shrub, he saw a thick liquid dripping from the severed end. He braced his hand against his leg, so it wouldn't shake and spill, until his cupped palm was full of sap.

It was wet, even a little cool as it evaporated. Surely it was mostly life-giving water. He had a moment's misgiving as he raised it to his lips, and instead of drinking it merely touched it with the tip of his tongue.

At first nothing—then a searing pain. It stabbed deep into his throat and choked him. His stomach heaved and he vomited bitter bile. On his knees, fighting the waves of pain, he lost body fluid he vitally needed.

Despair was worse than the pain. The plant juice must have some use; there must be a way of purifying it or neutralizing it. But Brion, a stranger on this planet, would be dead long before he found out how to do this.

Weakened by the cramps that still tore at him, he tried not to realize how close to the end he was. Getting the girl on his back seemed an impossible task, and for an instant he was tempted to leave her there. Yet even as he considered this he shouldered her leaden weight and once more went on. Each footstep an effort, he followed his own track up the dune. Painfully he forced his way to the top, and looked at the Disan standing a few feet away.

They were both too surprised by the sudden encounter to react at once. For a breath of time they stared at each other, unmoving. When they reacted it was the same defense of fear. Brion dropped the girl, bringing the gun up from the holster in the return of the same motion. The Disan jerked a belled tube from his waistband and raised it to his mouth.

Brion didn't fire. A dead man had taught him how to train his empathetic sense, and to trust it. In spite of the fear that wanted him to jerk the trigger, a different sense read the unvoiced emotions of the native Disan. There was fear there, and hatred. Welling up around these was a strong desire not to commit violence, this time, to communicate instead. Brion felt and recognized all this in a fraction of a second. He had to act instantly to avoid a tragic happening. A jerk of his wrist threw the gun to one side.

As soon as it was gone he regretted its loss. He was gambling their lives on an ability he still was not sure of. The Disan had the tube to his mouth when the gun hit the ground. He held the pose, unmoving, thinking. Then he accepted Brion's action and thrust the tube back into his waistband.

"Do you have any water?" Brion asked, the guttural Disan words hurting his throat.

"I have water," the man said. He still didn't move. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"We're from offplanet. We had ... an accident. We want to go to the city. The water."

The Disan looked at the unconscious girl and made his decision. Over one shoulder he wore one of the green objects that Brion remembered from the solido. He pulled it off and the thing writhed slowly in his hands. It was alive—a green length a metre long, like a noded section of a thick vine. One end flared out into a petal-like formation. The Disan took a hook-shaped object from his waist and thrust it into the petaled orifice. When he turned the hook in a quick motion the length of green writhed and curled around his arm. He pulled something small and dark out and threw it to the ground, extending the twisting green shape towards Brion. "Put your mouth to the end and drink," he said.

Lea needed the water more, but he drank first, suspicious of the living water source. A hollow below the writhing petals was filling with straw-colored water from the fibrous, reedy interior. He raised it to his mouth and drank. The water was hot and tasted swampy. Sudden sharp pains around his mouth made him jerk the thing away. Tiny glistening white barbs projected from the petals pink-tipped now with his blood. Brion swung towards the Disan angrily—and stopped when he looked at the other man's face. His mouth was surrounded by many small white scars.

"The *vaede* does not like to give up its water, but it always does," the man said.

Brion drank again, then put the *vaede* to Lea's mouth. She moaned without regaining consciousness, her lips seeking reflexively for the life-saving liquid. When she was satisfied Brion gently drew the barbs from her flesh and drank again. The Disan hunkered down on his heels and watched them expressionlessly. Brion handed back the *vaede*, then held some of the clothes so that Lea was in their shade. He settled to the same position as the native and looked closely at him.

Squatting immobile on his heels, the Disan appeared perfectly comfortable under the flaming sun. There was no trace of perspiration on his naked, browned skin. Long hair fell to his shoulders, and startingly blue eyes stared back at Brion from deepset

sockets. The heavy kilt around his loins was the only garment he wore. Once more the vaede rested over his shoulder, still stirring unhappily. Around his waist was the same collection of leather, stone and brass objects that had been in the solido. Two of them now had meaning to Brion: the tube-and-mouthpiece, a blowgun of some kind; and the specially shaped hook for opening the vaede. He wondered if the other strangely formed things had equally practical functions. If you accepted them as artifacts with a purpose—not barbaric decorations—you had to accept their owner as something more than the crude savage he resembled.

“My name is Brion. And you—”

“You may not have my name. Why are you here? To kill my people?”

Brion forced away the memory of last night. Killing was just what he had done. Some expectancy in the man’s manner, some sensed feeling of hope prompted Brion to speak the truth.

“I’m here to stop your people from being killed. I believe in the end of the war.”

“Prove it.”

“Take me to the Cultural Relationships Foundations in the city and I’ll prove it. I can do nothing here in the desert. Except die.”

For the first time there was emotion on the Disan’s face. He frowned and muttered something to himself. There was a fine beading of sweat above his eyebrows now as he fought an internal battle. Coming to a decision, he rose, and Brion stood too.

“Come with me. I’ll take you to Hovedstad. But first you will tell me—are you from Nyjord?”

“No.”

The nameless Disan merely grunted and turned away. Brion shouldered Lea’s unconscious body and followed him. They walked for two hours, the Disan setting a cruel pace, before they reached a wasteland of jumbled rock. The native pointed to the highest tower of sand-eroded stone. “Wait near this,” he said. “Someone will come for you.” He watched while Brion placed the girl’s still body in the shade, and passed over the vaede for the last time. Just before leaving he turned back, hesitating.

“My name is ... Ulv,” he said. Then he was gone.

Brion did what he could to make Lea comfortable, but it was very little. If she didn’t get medical attention soon she would be dead. Dehydration and shock were uniting to destroy her.

Just before sunset he heard clanking, and the throbbing whine of a sand car’s engine coming from the west.

Chapter 8

With each second the noise grew louder, coming their way. The tracks squeaked as the car turned around the rock spire, obviously seeking them out. A large carrier, big as a truck, it stopped before them in a cloud of its own dust and the driver kicked the door open.

“Get in here—and fast!” the man shouted. “You’re letting in all the heat.” He gunned the engine, ready to kick in the gears, and looked at them irritably.

Ignoring the driver’s nervous instructions, Brion carefully placed Lea on the rear seat before he pulled the door shut. The car surged forward instantly, a blast of icy air pouring from the air-cooling vents. It wasn’t cold in the vehicle—but the temperature was at least forty degrees lower than the outer air. Brion covered Lea with all their extra clothing to prevent any further shock to her system. The driver, hunched over the wheel and driving with an intense speed, hadn’t said a word to them since they had entered.

Brion looked up as another man stepped from the engine compartment in the rear of the car. He was thin, harried-looking. And he was pointing a gun.

“Who are you?” he said, without a trace of warmth in his voice.

It was a strange reception, but Brion was beginning to realize that Dis was a strange planet. The other man chewed at his lip nervously while Brion sat, relaxed and unmoving. He didn’t want to startle him into pulling the trigger, and he kept his voice pitched low as he answered.

“My name is Brandd. We landed from space two nights ago and have been walking in the desert ever since. Now don’t get excited and shoot the gun when I tell you this—but both Vion and Ihjel are dead.”

The man with the gun gasped, his eyes widened. The driver threw a single frightened look over his shoulder, then turned quickly back to the wheel. Brion’s probe had hit its mark. If these men weren’t from the Cultural Relationships Foundation they at least knew a lot about it. It seemed safe to assume they were C.R.F. men.

“When they were shot the girl and I escaped. We were trying to reach the city and contact you. You are from the Foundation, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Of course,” the man said, lowering the gun. He stared glassy-eyed into space for a moment, nervously working his teeth against his lip. Startled at his own inattention, he raised the gun again.

“If you’re Brandd, there’s something I want to know.” Rummaging in his breast pocket with his free hand, he brought out a yellow message form. He moved his lips as he reread the message. “Now answer me—if you can—what are the last three events in the ...” He took a quick look at the paper again. “... in the Twenties?”

“Chess finals, rifle prone position, and fencing playoffs. Why?”

The man grunted and slid the pistol back into its holder, satisfied. “I’m Faussel,” he said, and waved the message at Brion. “This is Ihjel’s last will and testament, relayed to us by the Nyjord blockade control. He thought he was going to die and he sure was right. Passed on his job to you. You’re in charge. I was Mervv’s second-in-command, until he was poisoned. I was supposed to work for Ihjel, and now I guess I’m yours.

At least until tomorrow, when we'll have everything packed and get off this hell planet."

"What do you mean, tomorrow?" Brion asked. "It's three days to deadline and we still have a job to do."

Faussel had dropped heavily into one of the seats and he sprang to his feet again, clutching the seat back to keep his balance in the swaying car.

"Three days, three weeks, three minutes—what difference does it make?" His voice rose shrilly with each word, and he had to make a definite effort to master himself before he could go on. "Look. You don't know anything about this. You just arrived and that's your bad luck. My bad luck is being assigned to this death trap and watching the depraved and filthy things the natives do. And trying to be polite to them even when they are killing my friends, and those Nyjord bombers up there with their hands on the triggers. One of those bombardiers is going to start thinking about home and about the cobalt bombs down here and he's going to press that button, deadline or no deadline."

"Sit down, Faussel. Sit down and take a rest." There was sympathy in Brion's voice—but also the firmness of an order. Faussel swayed for a second longer, then collapsed. He sat with his cheek against the window, eyes closed. A pulse throbbed visibly in his temple and his lips worked. He had been under too much tension for too long a time.

This was the atmosphere that hung heavily in the air at the C.R.F. building when they arrived. Despair and defeat. The doctor was the only one who didn't share this mood as he hustled Lea off to the clinic with prompt efficiency. He obviously had enough patients to keep his mind occupied. With the others the feeling of depression was unmistakable. From the instant they had driven through the automatic garage door, Brion had swum in this miasma of defeat. It was omnipresent and hard to ignore.

As soon as he had eaten he went with Faussel into what was to have been Ihjel's office. Through the transparent walls he could see the staff packing the records, crating them for shipment. Faussel seemed less nervous now that he was no longer in command. Brion rejected any idea he had of letting the man know that he himself was only a novice in the foundation. He was going to need all the authority he could muster, since they would undoubtedly hate him for what he was going to do.

"Better take notes of this, Faussel, and have it typed. I'll sign it." The printed word always carried more weight. "All preparations for leaving are to be stopped at once. Records are to be returned to the files. We are going to stay here just as long as we have clearance from the Nyjorders. If this operation is unsuccessful we will all leave together when the time expires. We will take whatever personal baggage we can carry by hand; everything else stays here. Perhaps you don't realize we are here to save a planet—not file cabinets full of papers."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Faussel flush with anger. "As soon as that is typed bring it back. And all the reports as to what has been accomplished on this project. That will be all for now."

Faussel stamped out, and a minute later Brion saw the shocked, angry looks from the workers in the outer office. Turning his back to them, he opened the drawers in the desk, one after another. The top drawer was empty, except for a sealed envelope. It was addressed to Winner Ihjel.

Brion looked at it thoughtfully, then ripped it open. The letter inside was handwritten.

Ihjel:

I've had the official word that you are on the way to relieve me and I am forced to admit I feel only an intense satisfaction. You've had the experience on these outlaw planets and can get along with the odd types. I have been specializing in research for the last twenty years, and the only reason I was appointed planetary supervisor on Nyjord was because of the observation and application facilities. I'm the research type, not the office type; no one has ever denied that.

You're going to have trouble with the staff, so you had better realize that they are all compulsory volunteers. Half are clerical people from my staff. The others a mixed bag of whoever was close enough to be pulled in on this crash assignment. It developed so fast we never saw it coming. And I'm afraid we've done little or nothing to stop it. We can't get access to the natives here, not in the slightest. It's frightening! They don't fit! I've done Poisson Distributions on a dozen different factors and none of them can be equated. The Pareto Extrapolations don't work. Our field men can't even talk to the natives and two have been killed trying. The ruling class is unapproachable and the rest just keep their mouths shut and walk away.

I'm going to take a chance and try to talk to Lig-magte, perhaps I can make him see sense. I doubt if it will work and there is a chance he will try violence with me. The nobility here are very prone to violence. If I get back all right you won't see this note. Otherwise—good-bye, Ihjel. Try to do a better job than I did.

Aston Mervv

P.S. There is a problem with the staff. They are supposed to be saviors, but without exception they all loathe the Disans. I'm afraid I do too.

Brion ticked off the relevant points in the letter. He had to find some way of discovering what Pareto Extrapolations were—without uncovering his own lack of knowledge. The staff would vanish in five minutes if they knew how new he was at the job. Poisson Distribution made more sense. It was used in physics as the unchanging probability of an event that would be true at all times. Such as the numbers of particles that would be given off by a lump of radioactive matter during a short period. From the way Mervv used it in his letter it looked as if the societies people had found measurable applications in societies and groups. At least on other planets. None of the rules seemed to be working on Dis. Ihjel had admitted that, and Mervv's death had proven it. Brion wondered who this Lig-magte was who appeared to have killed Mervv.

A forged cough broke through Brion's concentration, and he realized that Faussel had been standing in front of his desk for some minutes. Brion looked up and mopped perspiration from his face.

"Your air conditioner seems to be out of order," Faussel said. "Should I have the mechanic look at it?"

"There's nothing wrong with the machine; I'm just adapting to Dis's climate. What else do you want, Faussel?"

The assistant had a doubting look that he didn't succeed in hiding. He also had trouble believing the literal truth. He placed the small stack of file folders on the desk.

"These are the reports to date, everything we have uncovered about the Disans. It's not very much; but considering the anti-social attitudes on this lousy world it is the best we could do." A sudden thought hit him, and his eyes narrowed slyly. "It can't be helped, but some of the staff have been wondering out loud about that native that contacted us. How did you get him to help you? We've never gotten to first base with these people, and as soon as you land you have one working for you. You can't stop people from thinking about it, you being a newcomer and a stranger. After all, it looks a little odd—" He broke off in midsentence as Brion looked at him in cold fury.

"I can't stop people from thinking about it—but I can stop them from talking. Our job is to contact the Disans and stop this suicidal war. I have done more in one day than you all have done since you arrived. I have accomplished this because I am better at my work than the rest of you. That is all the information any of you are going to receive. You are dismissed."

White with anger, Faussel turned on his heel and stamped out—to spread the word about what a slave-driver the new director was. They would then all hate him passionately, which was just the way he wanted it. He couldn't risk exposure as the tyro he was. And perhaps a new emotion, other than disgust and defeat, might jar them into a little action. They certainly couldn't do any worse than they had been doing.

It was a tremendous amount of responsibility. For the first time since setting foot on this barbaric planet Brion had time to stop and think. He was taking an awful lot upon himself. He knew nothing about this world, nor about the powers involved in the conflict. Here he sat pretending to be in charge of an organization he had first heard about only a few weeks earlier. It was a frightening situation. Should he slide out from under?

There was just one possible answer, and that was *no*. Until he found someone else who could do better, he seemed to be the one best suited for the job. And Ihjel's opinion had to count for something. Brion had felt the surety of the man's conviction that Brion was the only one who might possibly succeed in this difficult spot.

Let it go at that. If he had any qualms it would be best to put them behind him. Aside from everything else, there was a primary bit of loyalty involved. Ihjel had been an Anvharian and a Winner. Maybe it was a provincial attitude to hold in this big universe—Anvhar was certainly far enough away from here—but honor is very important to a man who must stand alone. He had a debt to Ihjel, and he was going to pay it off.

Once the decision had been made, he felt easier. There was an intercom on the desk in front of him and he leaned with a heavy thumb on the button labeled *Faussel*.

"Yes?" Even through the speaker the man's voice was cold with ill-concealed hatred.

"Who is Lig-magte? And did the former director ever return from seeing him?"

"Magte is a title that means roughly noble or lord. Lig-magte is the local overlord. He has an ugly stoneheap of a building just outside the city. He seems to be the mouthpiece for the group of magter that are pushing this idiotic war. As to your second question, I have to answer yes and no. We found Director Mervv's head

outside the door next morning with all the skin gone. We knew who it was because the doctor identified the bridgework in his mouth. *Do you understand?*”

All pretense of control had vanished, and Faussel almost shrieked the last words. They were all close to cracking up, if he was any example. Brion broke in quickly.

“That will be all, Faussel. Just get word to the doctor that I would like to see him as soon as I can.” He broke the connection and opened the first of the folders. By the time the doctor called he had skimmed the reports and was reading the relevant ones in greater detail. Putting on his warm coat, he went through the outer office. The few workers still on duty turned their backs in frigid silence.

Doctor Stine had a pink and shiny bald head that rose above a thick black beard. Brion had liked him at once. Anyone with enough firmness of mind to keep a beard in this climate was a pleasant exception after what he had met so far.

“How’s the new patient, Doctor?”

Stine combed his beard with stubby fingers before answering. “Diagnosis: heat-syncope. Prognosis: complete recovery. Condition fair, considering the dehydration and extensive sunburn. I’ve treated the burns, and a saline drip is taking care of the other. She just missed going into heat-shock. I have her under sedation now.”

“I’d like to have her up and helping me tomorrow morning. Could she do this—with stimulants or drugs?”

“She could—but I don’t like it. There might be side factors, perhaps long-standing debilitation. It’s a chance.”

“A chance we will have to take. In less than seventy hours this planet is due for destruction. In attempting to avert that tragedy I’m expendable, as is everyone else here. Agreed?”

The doctor grunted deep in his beard and looked Brion’s immense frame up and down. “Agreed,” he said, almost happily. “It is a distinct pleasure to see something beside black defeat around here. I’ll go along with you.”

“Well, you can help me right now. I checked the personnel roster and discovered that out of the twenty-eight people working here there isn’t a physical scientist of any kind—other than yourself.”

“A scruffy bunch of button-pushers and theoreticians. Not worth a damn for field work, the whole bunch of them!” The doctor toed the floor switch on a waste receptacle and spat into it with feeling.

“Then I’m going to depend on you for some straight answers,” Brion said. “This is an un-standard operation, and the standard techniques just don’t begin to make sense. Even Poisson Distributions and Pareto Extrapolations don’t apply here.” Stine nodded agreement and Brion relaxed a bit. He had just relieved himself of his entire knowledge of societics, and it had sounded authentic. “The more I look at it the more I believe that this is a physical problem, something to do with the exotic and massive adjustments the Disans have made to this hellish environment. Could this tie up in any way with their absolutely suicidal attitude towards the cobalt bombs?”

“Could it? Could it?” Dr. Stine paced the floor rapidly on his stocky legs, twining his fingers behind his back. “You are bloody well right it could. Someone is thinking at last and not just punching bloody numbers into a machine and sitting and scratching his behind while waiting for the screen to light up with the answers. Do you know

how Disans exist?" Brion shook his head. "The fools here think it disgusting but I call it fascinating. They have found ways to join a symbiotic relationship with the life forms on this planet. Even a parasitic relationship. You must realize that living organisms will do anything to survive. Castaways at sea will drink their own urine in their need for water. Disgust at this is only the attitude of the overprotected who have never experienced extreme thirst or hunger. Well, here on Dis you have a planet of castaways."

Stine opened the door of the pharmacy. "This talk of thirst makes me dry." With economically efficient motions he poured grain alcohol into a beaker, thinned it with distilled water and flavored it with some crystals from a bottle. He filled two glasses and handed Brion one. It didn't taste bad at all.

"What do you mean by parasitic, Doctor? Aren't we all parasites of the lower life forms? Meat animals, vegetables and such?"

"No, no—you miss the point! I speak of parasitic in the exact meaning of the word. You must realize that to a biologist there is no real difference between parasitism, symbiosis, mutualism, biontergasy, commensalism—"

"Stop, stop!" Brion said. "Those are just meaningless sounds to me. If that is what makes this planet tick I'm beginning to see why the rest of the staff has that lost feeling."

"It is just a matter of degree of the same thing. Look. You have a kind of crustacean living in the lakes here, very much like an ordinary crab. It has large claws in which it holds anemones, tentacled sea animals with no power of motion. The crustacean waves these around to gather food, and eats the pieces they capture that are too big for them. This is biontergasy, two creatures living and working together, yet each capable of existing alone.

"Now, this same crustacean has a parasite living under its shell, a degenerated form of a snail that has lost all powers of movement. A true parasite that takes food from its host's body and gives nothing in return. Inside this snail's gut there is a protozoan that lives off the snail's ingested food. Yet this little organism is not a parasite, as you might think at first, but a symbiote. It takes food from the snail, but at the same time it secretes a chemical that aids the snail's digestion of the food. Do you get the picture? All these life forms exist in a complicated interdependence."

Brion frowned in concentration, sipping at the drink. "It's making some kind of sense now. Symbiosis, parasitism and all the rest are just ways of describing variations of the same basic process of living together. And there is probably a grading and shading between some of these that make the exact relationship hard to define."

"Precisely. Existence is so difficult on this world that the competing forms have almost died out. There are still a few left, preying off the others. It was the cooperating and interdependent life forms that really won out in the race for survival. I say life forms with intent. The creatures here are mostly a mixture of plant and animal, like the lichens you have elsewhere. The Disans have a creature they call a "vaede" that they use for water when traveling. It has rudimentary powers of motion from its animal part, yet uses photosynthesis and stores water like a plant. When the Disans drink from it the thing taps their blood streams for food elements."

"I know," Brion said wryly. "I drank from one. You can see my scars. I'm beginning to comprehend how the Disans fit into the physical pattern of their world, and I realize

it must have all kinds of psychological effects on them. Do you think this has any effect on their social organization?"

"An important one. But maybe I'm making too many suppositions now. Perhaps your researchers upstairs can tell you better; after all, this is their field."

Brion had studied the reports on the social setup and not one word of them made sense. They were a solid maze of unknown symbols and cryptic charts. "Please continue, Doctor," he insisted. "The societics reports are valueless so far. There are factors missing. You are the only one I have talked to so far who can give me any intelligent reports or answers."

"All right then—be it on your own head. The way I see it, you've got no society here at all, just a bunch of rugged individualists. Each one for himself, getting nourishment from the other life forms of the planet. If they have a society, it is orientated towards the rest of the planetary life—instead of towards other human beings. Perhaps that's why your figures don't make sense. They are set up for the human societies. In their relations with each other, these people are completely different."

"What about the magter, the upper-class types who build castles and are causing all this trouble?"

"I have no explanation," Dr. Stine admitted. "My theories hold water and seem logical enough up to this point. But the magter are the exception, and I have no idea why. They are completely different from the rest of the Disans. Argumentative, blood-thirsty, looking for planetary conquest instead of peace. They aren't rulers, not in the real sense. They hold power because nobody else wants it. They grant mining concessions to offworlders because they are the only ones with a sense of property. Maybe I'm going out on a limb. But if you can find out *why* they are so different you may be onto the clue to our difficulties."

For the first time since his arrival Brion began to feel a touch of enthusiasm. Plus a sense of the remote possibility that there might even be a solution to the deadly problem. He drained his glass and stood up.

"I hope you'll wake your patient early, Doctor. You might be as interested in talking to her as I am. If what you told me is true, she could well be our key to the answer. She is Professor Lea Morees, and she is just out from Earth with degrees in exobiology and anthropology, and has a head stuffed with vital facts."

"Wonderful!" Stine said. "I shall take care of the head, not only because it is so pretty but because of its knowledge. Though we totter on the edge of atomic destruction I have a strange feeling of optimism—for the first time since I landed on this planet."

Chapter 9

The guard inside the front entrance of the Foundation building jumped at the thunderous noise and reached for his gun. He dropped his hand sheepishly when he realized it was only a sneeze—though a gargantuan one. Brion came up, sniffing, huddling down into his coat. “I’m going out before I catch pneumonia,” he said. The guard saluted dumbly, and after checking his proximity detector screens he slipped out and the heavy portal thudded shut behind him. The street was still warm from the heat of the day and he sighed happily and opened his coat.

This was partly a reconnaissance trip—and partly a way of getting warmed up. There was little else he could do in the building; the staff had long since retired. He had slept for a half an hour, and had waked refreshed and ready to work. All of the reports he could understand had been read and reread until they were memorized. He could use the time now, while the rest of them were asleep, to get better acquainted with the main city of Dis.

As he walked the dark streets he realized how alien the Disan way of life was to everything he knew. This city—Hovedstad—literally meant “main place” in the native language. And that’s all it was. It was only the presence of the offworlders that made it into a city. Building after building, standing deserted, bore the names of mining companies, traders, space transporters. None of them was occupied now. Some still had lights burning, switched on by automatic apparatus, others were as dark as the Disan structures. There weren’t many of these native constructions and they seemed out of place among the rammed earth and prefab offworld buildings. Brion examined one that was dimly illuminated by the light on the corner of VEGAN SMELTERS, LTD.

It consisted of a single large room, resting right on the ground. There were no windows, and the whole thing appeared to have been constructed of some sort of woven material plastered with stone-hard mud. Nothing was blocking the door and he was thinking seriously of going in when he became aware that he was being followed.

It was only a slight noise, almost lost in the night. Normally it would never have been noticed, but tonight Brion was listening with his entire body. Someone was behind him, swallowed up in the pools of darkness. Brion shrank back against the wall. There was very little chance this could be anyone but a Disan. He had a sudden memory of Mervv’s severed head as it had been discovered outside the door.

Ihjel had helped him train his empathetic sense and he reached out with it. It was difficult working in the dark; he could be sure of nothing. Was he getting a reaction—or just wishing for one? Why did it have a ring of familiarity to it? A sudden idea struck him.

“Ulv,” he said, very softly. “This is Brion.” He crouched, ready for any attack.

“I know,” a voice said softly in the night. “Do not talk. Walk in the direction you were going before.”

Asking questions now would accomplish nothing. Brion turned instantly and did as he was bidden. The buildings grew further apart until he realized from the sand underfoot that he was back in the planet-wide desert. It could be a trap—he hadn’t

recognized the voice behind the whisper—yet he had to take this chance. A darker shape appeared in the dark night near him, and a burning hot hand touched his arm lightly.

“I will walk ahead. Follow close behind me.” The words were louder and this time Brion recognized the voice.

Without waiting for an answer, Ulv turned and his dimly seen shape vanished into the darkness. Brion moved swiftly after him, until they walked side by side over the rolling hills of sand. The sand merged into hard-baked ground, became cracked and scarred with rock-filled gulleys. They followed a deepening gulley that grew into a good-sized ravine. When they turned an angle of the ravine Brion saw a weak yellow light coming from an opening in the hard dirt wall.

Ulv dropped on all fours and vanished through the shoulder-wide hole. Brion followed him, trying to ignore the growing tension and unease he felt. Crawling like this, head down, he was terribly vulnerable. He tried to shrug off the feeling, mentally blaming it on tense nerves.

The tunnel was short and opened into a larger chamber. A sudden scuffle of feet sounded at the same instant that a wave of empathetic hatred struck him. It took vital seconds to fight his way out of the trapping tunnel, to roll clear and bring his gun up. During those seconds he should have died. The Disan poised above him had the short-handled stone hammer raised to strike a skull-crushing blow.

Ulv was clutching the man’s wrist, fighting silently to keep the hammer from falling. Neither combatant said a word, the rasp of their calloused feet on the sand the only sound. Brion backed away from the struggling men, his gun centered on the stranger. The Disan followed him with burning eyes, and dropped the hammer as soon as it was obvious the attack had failed.

“Why did you bring him here?” he growled at Ulv. “Why didn’t you kill him?”

“He is here so we can listen to what he says, Gebk. He is the one I told you of, that I found in the desert.”

“We listen to what he says and then we kill him,” Gebk said with a mirthless grin. The remark wasn’t meant to be humorous, but was made in all seriousness. Brion recognized this and knew that there was no danger for the present moment. He slid the gun away, and for the first time looked around the chamber.

It was domed in shape and was still hot from the heat of the day. Ulv took off the length of cloth he had wrapped around his body against the chill, and refolded it as a kilt, strapping it on under his belt artifacts. He grunted something unintelligible and when a muttered answer came, Brion for the first time became aware of the woman and the child.

The two sat against the far wall, squatting on either side of a heap of fibrous plants. Both were nude, clothed only in the matted hair that fell below their shoulders. The belt of strange tools could not be classified as clothing. Even the child wore a tiny replica of her mother’s. Putting down a length of plant she had been chewing, the woman shuffled over to the tiny fire that illuminated the room. A clay pot stood over it, and from this she ladled three bowls of food for the men. It smelled atrocious, and Brion tried not to taste or smell the sickening mixture while he ate it. He used his fingers, as did the other men, and did not talk while he ate. There was no way to tell if

the silence was ritual or habit. It gave him a chance for a closer look at the Disan way of living.

The cave was obviously hand-made; tool marks could be clearly seen in the hard clay of the walls, except in the portion opposite the entrance. This was covered with a network of roots, rising out of the floor and vanishing into the roof of earth above. Perhaps this was the reason for the cave's existence. The thin roots had been carefully twisted and plaited together until they formed a single swollen root in the center, as thick as a man's arm. From this hung four of the vaedes: Ulv had placed his there before he sat down. The teeth must have instantly sunk in, for it hung unsupported—another link in the Disan life cycle. This appeared to be the source of the vaede's water that nourished the people.

Brion was aware of eyes upon him and turned and smiled at the little girl. She couldn't have been over six years old, but she was already a Disan in every way. She neither returned his smile nor changed her expression, unchildlike in its stolidity. Her hands and jaw never stopped as she worked on the lengths of fibrous plant her mother had placed before her. The child split them with a small tool and removed a pod of some kind. This was peeled—partially by scraping with a different tool, and partially by working between her teeth. It took long minutes to remove the tough rind; the results seemed scarcely worth it. A tiny wriggling object was finally disclosed which the girl instantly swallowed. She then began working on the next pod.

Ulv put down his clay bowl and belched. "I brought you to the city as I told you I would," he said. "Have you done as you said you would?"

"What did he promise?" Gebk asked.

"That he would stop the war. Have you stopped it?"

"I am trying to stop it," Brion said. "But it is not that easy. I'll need some help. It is your life that needs saving—yours and your families'. If you would help me—"

"What is the truth?" Ulv broke in savagely. "All I hear is difference, and there is no longer any way to tell truth. For as long as always we have done as the magter say. We bring them food and they give us the metal and sometimes water when we need it. As long as we do as they ask they do not kill us. They live the wrong way, but I have had bronze from them for my tools. They have told us that they are getting a world for us from the sky people, and that is good."

"It has always been known that the sky people are evil in every way, and only good can come from killing them," Gebk said.

Brion stared back at the two Disans and their obvious hatred. "Then why didn't you kill me, Ulv?" he asked. "That first time in the desert, or tonight when you stopped Gebk?"

"I could have. But there was something more important. What is the truth? Can we believe as we have always done? Or should we listen to this?"

He threw a small sheet of plastic to Brion, no bigger than the palm of his hand. A metal button was fastened to one corner of the wafer, and a simple drawing was imbedded in the wafer. Brion held it to the light and saw a picture of a man's hand squeezing the button between thumb and forefinger. It was a subminiaturized playback; mechanical pressure on the case provided enough current to play the recorded message. The plastic sheet vibrated, acting as a loudspeaker.

Though the voice was thin and scratchy, the words were clearly audible. It was an appeal for the Disan people not to listen to the magter. It explained that the magter had started a war that could have only one ending—the destruction of Dis. Only if the magter were thrown down and their weapons discovered could there be any hope.

“Are these words true?” Ulv asked.

“Yes,” Brion said.

“They are perhaps true,” Gebk said, “but there is nothing that we can do. I was with my brother when these word-things fell out of the sky and he listened to one and took it to the magter to ask them. They killed him, as he should have known they would do. The magter kill us if they know we listen to the words.”

“And the words tell us we will die if we listen to the magter!” Ulv shouted, his voice cracking. Not with fear, but with frustration at the attempt to reconcile two opposite points of view. Up until this time his world had consisted of black and white values, with very few shadings of difference in between.

“There are things you can do that will stop the war without hurting yourself or the magter,” Brion said, searching for a way to enlist their aid.

“Tell us,” Ulv grunted.

“There would be no war if the magter could be contacted, made to listen to reason. They are killing you all. You could tell me how to talk to the magter, how I could understand them—”

“No one can talk to the magter,” the woman broke in. “If you say something different they will kill you as they killed Gebk’s brother. So they are easy to understand. That is the way they are. They do not change.” She put the length of plant she had been softening for the child back into her mouth. Her lips were deeply grooved and scarred from a lifetime of this work, her teeth at the sides worn almost to the bone.

“Mor is right,” Ulv said. “You do not talk to magter. What else is there to do?”

Brion looked at the two men before he spoke, and shifted his weight. The motion brought his fingertips just a few inches from his gun. “The magter have bombs that will destroy Nyjord—this is the next planet, a star in your sky. If I can find where the bombs are, I will have them taken away and there will be no war.”

“You want to aid the devils in the sky against our own people!” Gebk shouted, half rising. Ulv pulled him back to the ground, but there was no more warmth in his voice as he spoke.

“You are asking too much. You will leave now.”

“Will you help me, though? Will you help stop the war?” Brion asked, aware he had gone too far, but unable to stop. Their anger was making them forget the reasons for his being there.

“You ask too much,” Ulv said again. “Go back now. We will talk about it.”

“Will I see you again? How can I reach you?”

“We will find you if we wish to talk to you,” was all Ulv said. If they decided he was lying he would never see them again. There was nothing he could do about it.

“I have made up my mind,” Gebk said, rising to his feet and drawing his cloth up until it covered his shoulders. “You are lying and this is all a lie of the sky people. If I see you again I will kill you.” He stepped to the tunnel and was gone.

There was nothing more to be said. Brion went out next—checking carefully to be sure that Gebk really had left—and Ulv guided him to the spot where the lights of Hovedstad were visible. He did not speak during their return journey and vanished without a word. Brion shivered in the night chill of the air and wrapped his coat more tightly around himself. Depressed, he walked back towards the warmer streets of the city.

It was dawn when he reached the Foundation building; a new guard was at the front entrance. No amount of hammering or threats could convince the man to open until Faussel came down, yawning and blinking with sleep. He was starting some complaint when Brion cut him off curtly and ordered him to finish dressing and report for work at once. Still feeling elated, Brion hurried into his office and cursed the overly efficient character who had turned on his air conditioner to chill the room again. When he turned it off this time he removed enough vital parts to keep it out of order for the duration.

When Faussel came in he was still yawning behind his fist—obviously a low morning-sugar type. “Before you fall on your face, go out and get some coffee,” Brion said. “Two cups. I’ll have a cup too.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Faussel said, drawing himself up stiffly. “I’ll call the canteen if you wish some.” He said it in the iciest tone he could manage this early in the morning.

In his enthusiasm Brion had forgotten the hate campaign he had directed against himself. “Suit yourself,” he said shortly, getting back into the role. “But the next time you yawn there’ll be a negative entry in your service record. If that’s clear—you can brief me on this organization’s visible relations with the Disans. How do they take us?”

Faussel choked and swallowed a yawn. “I believe they look on the C.R.F. people as some species of simpleton, sir. They hate all offworlders; memory of their desertion has been passed on verbally for generations. So by their one-to-one logic we should either hate back or go away. We stay instead. And give them food, water, medicine and artifacts. Because of this they let us remain on sufferance. I imagine they consider us do-gooder idiots, and as long as we cause no trouble they’ll let us stay.” He was struggling miserably to suppress a yawn, so Brion turned his back and gave him a chance to get it out.

“What about the Nyjorders? How much do they know of our work?” Brion looked out the window at dusty buildings, outlined in purple against the violent colors of the desert sunrise.

“Nyjord is a cooperating planet, and has full knowledge at all executive levels. They are giving us all the aid they can.”

“Well, now is the time to ask for more. Can I contact the commander of the blockading fleet?”

“There is a scrambler connection right through to him. I’ll set it up.” Faussel bent over the desk and punched a number into the phone controls. The screen flowed with the black and white patterns of the scrambler.

“That’s all, Faussel,” Brion said. “I want privacy for this talk. What’s the commander’s name?”

“Professor Krafft—he’s a physicist. They have no military men at all, so they called him in for the construction of the bombs and energy weapons. He’s still in charge.” Faussel yawned extravagantly as he went out the door.

The Professor-Commander was very old, with wispy grey hair and a network of wrinkles surrounding his eyes. His image shimmered, then cleared as the scrambler units aligned.

“You must be Brion Brandd,” he said. “I have to tell you how sorry we all are that your friend Ihjel and the two others—had to die, after coming so far to help us. I’m sure you are very happy to have had a friend like that.”

“Why ... yes, of course,” Brion said, reaching for the scattered fragments of his thought processes. It took an effort to remember the first conflict, now that he was worrying about the death of a planet. “It’s very kind of you to mention it. But I would like to find out a few things from you, if I could.”

“Anything at all; we are at your disposal. Before we begin, though, I shall pass on the thanks of our council for your aid in joining us. Even if we are eventually forced to drop the bombs, we shall never forget that your organization did everything possible to avert the disaster.”

Once again Brion was caught off balance. For an instant he wondered if Krafft was being insincere, then recognized the baseness of this thought. The completeness of the man’s humanity was obvious and compelling. The thought passed through Brion’s mind that now he had an additional reason for wanting the war ended without destruction on either side. He very much wanted to visit Nyjord and see these people on their home grounds.

Professor Krafft waited, patiently and silently, while Brion pulled his thoughts together and answered. “I still hope that this thing can be stopped in time. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I want to see Lig-magte and I thought it would be better if I had a legitimate reason. Are you in contact with him?”

Krafft shook his head. “No, not really in contact. When this trouble started I sent him a transceiver so we could talk directly. But he has delivered his ultimatum, speaking for the magter. The only terms he will hear are unconditional surrender. His receiver is on, but he has said that is the only message he will answer.”

“Not much chance of him ever being told that,” Brion said.

“There was—at one time. I hope you realize, Brion, that the decision to bomb Dis was not easily arrived at. A great many people—myself included—voted for unconditional surrender. We lost the vote by a very small margin.”

Brion was getting used to these philosophical body blows and he rolled with the punches now. “Are there any of your people left on this planet? Or do you have any troops I can call on for help? This is still a remote possibility, but if I do find out where the bombs or the launchers are, a surprise raid would knock them out.”

“We have no people left in Hovedstad now—all the ones who weren’t evacuated were killed. But there are commando teams standing by here to make a landing if the weapons are detected. The Disans must depend on secrecy to protect their armament, since we have both the manpower and the technology to reach any

objective. We also have technicians and other volunteers looking for the weapon sites. They have not been successful as yet, and most of them were killed soon after landing.”

Krafft hesitated for a moment. “There is another group you should know about; you will need all the factors. Some of our people are in the desert outside of Hovedstad. We do not officially approve of them, though they have a good deal of popular support. They are mostly young men, operating as raiders, killing and destroying with very little compunction. They are attempting to uncover the weapons by sheer strength of arms.”

This was the best news yet. Brion controlled his voice and kept his expression calm when he spoke. “I don’t know how far I can stretch your cooperation—but could you possibly tell me how to get in touch with them?”

Kraft allowed himself a small smile. “I’ll give you the wave length on which you can reach their radio. They call themselves the ‘Nyjord army.’ When you talk to them you can do me a favor. Pass on a message. Just to prove things aren’t bad enough, they’ve become a little worse. One of our technical crews has detected jump-space energy transmissions in the planetary crust. The Disans are apparently testing their projector, sooner than we had estimated. Our deadline has been revised by one day. I’m afraid there are only two days left before you must evacuate.” His eyes were large with compassion. “I’m sorry. I know this will make your job that much harder.”

Brion didn’t want to think about the loss of a full day from his already close deadline. “Have you told the Disans this yet?”

“No,” Krafft told him. “The decision was reached a few minutes before your call. It is going on the radio to Lig-magte now.”

“Can you cancel the transmission and let me take the message in person?”

“I can do that.” Krafft thought for a moment. “But it would surely mean your death at their hands. They have no hesitation in killing any of our people. I would prefer to send it by radio.”

“If you do that you will be interfering with my plans, and perhaps destroying them under the guise of saving my life. Isn’t my life my own—to dispose of as I will?”

For the first time Professor Krafft was upset. “I’m sorry, terribly sorry. I’m letting my concern and worry wash over into my public affairs. Of course you may do as you please; I could never think of stopping you.” He turned and said something inaudible offscreen. “The call is cancelled. The responsibility is yours. All our wishes for success go with you. End of transmission.”

“End of transmission,” Brion said, and the screen went dark.

“Faussel!” he shouted into the intercom. “Get me the best and fastest sand car we have, a driver who knows his way around, and two men who can handle a gun and know how to take orders. We’re going to get some positive action at last.”

Chapter 10

“It’s suicide,” the taller guard grumbled.

“Mine, not yours, so don’t worry about it,” Brion barked at him. “Your job is to remember your orders and keep them straight. Now—let’s hear them again.”

The guard rolled his eyes up in silent rebellion and repeated in a toneless voice: “We stay here in the car and keep the motor running while you go inside the stone pile there. We don’t let anybody in the car and we try and keep them clear of the car—short of shooting them, that is. We don’t come in, no matter what happens or what it looks like, but wait for you here. Unless you call on the radio, in which case we come in with the automatics going and shoot the place up, and it doesn’t matter who we hit. This will be done only as a last resort.”

“See if you can’t arrange that last resort thing,” the other guard said, patting the heavy blue barrel of his weapon.

“I meant that *last* resort,” Brion said angrily. “If any guns go off without my permission you will pay for it, and pay with your necks. I want that clearly understood. You are here as a rear guard and a base for me to get back to. This is my operation and mine alone—unless I call you in. Understood?”

He waited until all three men had nodded in agreement, then checked the charge on his gun—it was fully loaded. It would be foolish to go in unarmed, but he had to. One gun wouldn’t save him. He put it aside. The button radio on his collar was working and had a strong enough signal to get through any number of walls. He took off his coat, threw open the door and stepped out into the searing brilliance of the Disan noon.

There was only the desert silence, broken by the steady throb of the car’s motor behind him. Stretching away to the horizon in every direction was the eternal desert of sand. The keep stood nearby, solitary, a massive pile of black rock. Brion plodded closer, watching for any motion from the walls. Nothing stirred. The high-walled, irregularly shaped construction sat in a ponderous silence. Brion was sweating now, only partially from the heat.

He circled the thing, looking for a gate. There wasn’t one at ground level. A slanting cleft in the stone could be climbed easily, but it seemed incredible that this might be the only entrance. A complete circuit proved that it was. Brion looked unhappily at the slanting and broken ramp, then cupped his hands and shouted loudly.

“I’m coming up. Your radio doesn’t work any more. I’m bringing the message from Nyjord that you have been waiting to hear.” This was a slight bending of the truth without fracturing it. There was no answer—just the hiss of wind-blown sand against the rock and the mutter of the car in the background. He started to climb.

The rock underfoot was crumbling and he had to watch where he put his feet. At the same time he fought a constant impulse to look up, watching for anything falling from above. Nothing happened. When he reached the top of the wall he was breathing hard; sweat moistened his body. There was still no one in sight. He stood on an unevenly shaped wall that appeared to circle the building. Instead of having a courtyard inside it, the wall was the outer face of the structure, the domed roof rising from it. At varying intervals dark openings gave access to the interior. When Brion

looked down, the sand car was just a dun-colored bump in the desert, already far behind him.

Stooping, he went through the nearest door. There was still no one in sight. The room inside was something out of a madman's funhouse. It was higher than it was wide, irregular in shape, and more like a hallway than a room. At one end it merged into an incline that became a stairwell. At the other it ended in a hole that vanished in darkness below. Light of sorts filtered in through slots and holes drilled into the thick stone wall. Everything was built of the same crumble-textured but strong rock. Brion took the stairs. After a number of blind passages and wrong turns he saw a stronger light ahead, and went on. There was food, metal, even artifacts of the unusual Disan design in the different rooms he passed through. Yet no people. The light ahead grew stronger, and the last passageway opened and swelled out until it led into the large central chamber.

This was the heart of the strange structure. All the rooms, passageways and halls existed just to give form to this gigantic chamber. The walls rose sharply, the room being circular in cross section and growing narrower towards the top. It was a truncated cone, since there was no ceiling; a hot blue disk of sky cast light on the floor below.

On the floor stood a knot of men who stared at Brion.

Out of the corner of his eyes, and with the very periphery of his consciousness, he was aware of the rest of the room—barrels, stores, machinery, a radio transceiver, various bundles and heaps that made no sense at first glance. There was no time to look closer. Every fraction of his attention was focused on the muffled and hooded men.

He had found the enemy.

Everything that had happened to him so far on Dis had been preparation for this moment. The attack in the desert, the escape, the dreadful heat of sun and sand. All this had tempered and prepared him. It had been nothing in itself. Now the battle would begin in earnest.

None of this was conscious in his mind. His fighter's reflexes bent his shoulders, curved his hands before him as he walked softly in balance, ready to spring in any direction. Yet none of this was really necessary. All the danger so far was nonphysical. When he did give conscious thought to the situation he stopped, startled. What was wrong here? None of the men had moved or made a sound. How could he even know they were men? They were so muffled and wrapped in cloth that only their eyes were exposed.

No doubt, however, existed in Brion's mind. In spite of muffled cloth and silence, he knew them for what they were. The eyes were empty of expression and unmoving, yet were filled with the same negative emptiness as those of a bird of prey. They could look on life, death, and the rending of flesh with the same lack of interest and compassion. All this Brion knew in an instant of time, without words being spoken. Between the time he lifted one foot and walked a step he understood what he had to face. There could be no doubt, not to an empathetic.

From the group of silent men poured a frost-white wave of unemotion. An empathetic shares what other men feel. He gets his knowledge of their reaction by sensing lightly their emotions, the surges of interest, hate, love, fear, desire, the sweep of large and small sensations that accompany all thought and action. The

empathetic is always aware of this constant and silent surge, whether he makes the effort to understand it or not. He is like a man glancing across the open pages of a tableful of books. He can see that the type, words, paragraphs, thoughts are there, even without focusing his attention to understand any of it.

Then how does the man feel when he glances at the open books and sees only blank pages? The books are there—the words are not. He turns the pages of one, of the others, flipping the pages, searching for meaning. There is no meaning. All of the pages are blank.

This was the way in which the magter were blank, without emotions. There was a barely sensed surge and return that must have been neural impulses on a basic level—the automatic adjustments of nerve and muscle that keep an organism alive. Nothing more. Brion reached for other sensations, but there was nothing there to grasp. Either these men were without emotions, or they were able to block them from his detection; it was impossible to tell which.

Very little time had passed while Brion made these discoveries. The knot of men still looked at him, silent and unmoving. They weren't expectant, their attitude could not have been called one of interest. But he had come to them and now they waited to find out why. Any questions or statements they spoke would be superfluous, so they didn't speak. The responsibility was his.

"I have come to talk with Lig-magte. Who is he?" Brion didn't like the tiny sound his voice made in the immense room.

One of the men gave a slight motion to draw attention to himself. None of the others moved. They still waited.

"I have a message for you," Brion said, speaking slowly to fill the silence of the room and the emptiness of his thoughts. This had to be handled right. But what was right? "I'm from the Foundation in the city, as you undoubtedly know. I've been talking to the people of Nyjord. They have a message for you."

The silence grew longer. Brion had no intention of making this a monologue. He needed facts to operate, to form an opinion. Looking at the silent forms was telling him nothing. Time stretched taut, and finally Lig-magte spoke.

"The Nyjorders are going to surrender."

It was an impossibly strange sentence. Brion had never realized before how much of the content of speech was made up of emotion. If the man had given it a positive emphasis, perhaps said it with enthusiasm, it would have meant, "Success! The enemy is going to surrender!" This wasn't the meaning.

With a rising inflection on the end it would have been a question. "Are they going to surrender?" It was neither of these. The sentence carried no other message than that contained in the simplest meanings of the separate words. It had intellectual connotations, but these could only be gained from past knowledge, not from the sound of the words. There was only one message they were prepared to receive from Nyjord. Therefore Brion was bringing the message. If that was not the message Brion was bringing the men here were not interested.

This was the vital fact. If they were not interested he could have no further value to them. Since he came from the enemy, he was the enemy. Therefore he would be killed. Because this was vital to his existence, Brion took the time to follow the thought through. It made logical sense—and logic was all he could depend on now.

He could be talking to robots or alien creatures, for all the human response he was receiving.

“You can’t win this war—all you can do is hurry your own deaths.” He said this with as much conviction as he could, realizing at the same time that it was wasted effort. No flicker of response stirred in the men before him. “The Nyjorders know you have the cobalt bombs, and they have detected your jump-space projector. They can’t take any more chances. They have pushed the deadline closer by an entire day. There are one and a half days left before the bombs fall and you are all destroyed. Do you realize what that means—”

“Is that the message?” Lig-magte asked.

“Yes,” Brion said.

Two things saved his life then. He had guessed what would happen as soon as they had his message, though he hadn’t been sure. But even the suspicion had put him on his guard. This, combined with the reflexes of a Winner of the Twenties, was barely enough to enable him to survive.

From frozen mobility Lig-magte had catapulted into headlong attack. As he leaped forward he drew a curved, double-edged blade from under his robes. It plunged unerringly through the spot where Brion’s body had been an instant before.

There had been no time to tense his muscles and jump, just the space of time to relax them and fall to one side. His reasoning mind joined the battle as he hit the floor. Lig-magte plunged by him, turning and bringing the knife down at the same time. Brion’s foot lashed out and caught the other man’s leg, sending him sprawling.

They were both on their feet at the same instant, facing each other. Brion now had his hands clasped before him in the unarmed man’s best defense against a knife, the two arms protecting the body, the two hands joined to beat aside the knife arm from whichever direction it came. The Disan hunched low, flipped the knife quickly from hand to hand, then thrust it again at Brion’s midriff.

Only by the merest fractional margin did Brion evade the attack for the second time. Lig-magte fought with utter violence. Every action was as intense as possible, deadly and thorough. There could be only one end to this unequal contest if Brion stayed on the defensive. The man with the knife had to win.

With the next charge Brion changed tactics. He leaped inside the thrust, clutching for the knife arm. A burning slice of pain cut across his arm, then his fingers clutched the tendoned wrist. They clamped down hard, grinding shut, compressing with the tightening intensity of a closing vise.

It was all he could do simply to hold on. There was no science in it, just his greater strength from exercise and existence on a heavier planet. All of this strength went to his clutching hand, because he held his own life in that hand, forcing away the knife that wanted to terminate it forever. Nothing else mattered—neither the frightening force of the knees that thudded into his body nor the hooked fingers that reached for his eyes to tear them out. He protected his face as well as he could, while the nails tore furrows through his flesh and the cut on his arm bled freely. These were only minor things to be endured. His life depended on the grasp of the fingers of his right hand.

There was a sudden immobility as Brion succeeded in clutching Lig-magte’s other arm. It was a good grip, and he could hold the arm immobilized. They had reached

stasis, standing knee to knee, their faces only a few inches apart. The muffling cloth had fallen from the Disan's face during the struggle, and empty, frigid eyes stared into Brion's. No flicker of emotion crossed the harsh planes of the other man's face. A great puckered white scar covered one cheek and pulled up a corner of the mouth in a cheerless grimace. It was false; there was still no expression here, even when the pain must be growing more intense.

Brion was winning—if none of the watchers broke the impasse. His greater weight and strength counted now. The Disan would have to drop the knife before his arm was dislocated at the shoulder. He didn't do it. With sudden horror Brion realized that he wasn't going to drop it—no matter what happened.

A dull, hideous snap jerked through the Disan's body and the arm hung limp and dead. No expression crossed the man's face. The knife was still locked in the fingers of the paralyzed hand. With his other hand Lig-magte reached across and started to pry the blade loose, ready to continue the battle one-handed. Brion raised his foot and kicked the knife free, sending it spinning across the room.

Lig-magte made a fist of his good hand and crashed it into Brion's groin. He was still fighting, as if nothing had changed. Brion backed slowly away from the man. "Stop it," he said. "You can't win now. It's impossible." He called to the other men who were watching the unequal battle with expressionless immobility. No one answered him.

With a terrible sinking sensation Brion then realized what would happen and what he had to do. Lig-magte was as heedless of his own life as he was of the life of his planet. He would press the attack no matter what damage was done to him. Brion had an insane vision of him breaking the man's other arm, fracturing both his legs, and the limbless broken creature still coming forward. Crawling, rolling, teeth bared, since they were the only remaining weapon.

There was only one way to end it. Brion feinted and the Lig-magte's arm moved clear of his body. The engulfing cloth was thin and through it Brion could see the outlines of the Disan's abdomen and rib cage, the clear location of the great nerve ganglion.

It was the death blow of kara-te. Brion had never used it on a man. In practice he had broken heavy boards, splintering them instantly with the short, precise stroke. The stiffened hand moving forward in a sudden surge, all the weight and energy of his body concentrated in his joined fingertips. Plunging deep into the other's flesh.

Killing, not by accident or in sudden anger. Killing because this was the only way the battle could possibly end.

Like a ruined tower of flesh, the Disan crumpled and fell.

Dripping blood, exhausted, Brion stood over the body of Lig-magte and stared at the dead man's allies.

Death filled the room.

Chapter 11

Facing the silent Disans, Brion's thoughts hurtled about in sweeping circles. There would be no more than an instant's tick of time before the magter avenged themselves bloodily and completely. He felt a fleeting regret for not having brought his gun, then abandoned the thought. There was no time for regrets—what could he do *now*?

The silent watchers hadn't attacked instantly, and Brion realized that they couldn't be positive yet that Lig-magte had been killed. Only Brion himself knew the deadliness of that blow. Their lack of knowledge might buy him a little more time.

"Lig-magte is unconscious, but he will revive quickly," Brion said, pointing at the huddled body. As the eyes turned automatically to follow his finger, he began walking slowly towards the exit. "I did not want to do this, but he forced me to, because he wouldn't listen to reason. Now I have something else to show you, something that I hoped it would not be necessary to reveal."

He was saying the first words that came into his head, trying to keep them distracted as long as possible. He must appear to be only going across the room, that was the feeling he must generate. There was even time to stop for a second and straighten his rumpled clothing and brush the sweat from his eyes. Talking easily, walking slowly towards the hall that led out of the chamber.

He was halfway there when the spell broke and the rush began. One of the magter knelt and touched the body, and shouted a single word:

"Dead!"

Brion hadn't waited for the official announcement. At the first movement of feet, he dived headlong for the shelter of the exit. There was a spatter of tiny missiles on the wall next to him and he had a brief glimpse of raised blowguns before the wall intervened. He went up the dimly lit stairs three at a time.

The pack was just behind him, voiceless and deadly. He could not gain on them—if anything, they were closing the distance as he pushed his already tired body to the utmost. There was no subtlety or trick he could use now, just straightforward flight back the way he had come. A single slip on the irregular steps and it would be all over.

There was someone ahead of him. If the woman had waited a few seconds more he would certainly have been killed; but instead of slashing at him as he went by the doorway, she made the mistake of rushing to the center of the stairs, the knife ready to impale him as he came up. Without slowing, Brion fell onto his hands and easily dodged under the blow. As he passed he twisted and seized her around the waist, picking her from the ground.

When her legs lifted from under her the woman screamed—the first human sound Brion had heard in this human anthill. His pursuers were just behind him, and he hurled the woman into them with all his strength. They fell in a tangle, and Brion used the precious seconds gained to reach the top of the building.

There must have been other stairs and exits, because one of the magter stood between Brion and the way down out of this trap—armed and ready to kill him if he tried to pass.

As he ran towards the executioner, Brion flicked on his collar radio and shouted into it. “I’m in trouble here. Can you—”

The guards in the car must have been waiting for this message. Before he had finished there was the thud of a high-velocity slug hitting flesh and the Disan spun and fell, blood soaking his shoulder. Brion leaped over him and headed for the ramp.

“The next one is me—hold your fire!” he called.

Both guards must have had their telescopic sights zeroed on the spot. They let Brion pass, then threw in a hail of semi-automatic fire that tore chunks from the stone and screamed away in noisy ricochets. Brion didn’t try to see if anyone was braving this hail of covering fire; he concentrated his energies on making as quick and erratic a descent as he could. Above the sounds of the firing he heard the car motor howl as it leaped forward. With their careful aim spoiled, the gunners switched to full automatic and unleashed a hailstorm of flying metal that bracketed the top of the tower.

“Cease ... firing!” Brion gasped into the radio as he ran. The driver was good, and timed his arrival with exactitude. The car reached the base of the tower at the same instant Brion did, and he burst through the door while it was still moving. No orders were necessary. He fell headlong onto a seat as the car swung in a dust-raising turn and ground into high gear, back to the city.

Reaching over carefully, the tall guard gently extracted a bit of pointed wood and fluff from a fold of Brion’s pants. He cracked open the car door, and just as delicately threw it out.

“I knew that thing didn’t touch you,” he said, “since you are still among the living. They’ve got a poison on those blowgun darts that takes all of twelve seconds to work. Lucky.”

Lucky! Brion was beginning to realize just how lucky he was to be out of the trap alive. And with information. Now that he knew more about the magter, he shuddered at his innocence in walking alone and unarmed into the tower. Skill had helped him survive—but better than average luck had been necessary. Curiosity had gotten him in, brashness and speed had taken him out. He was exhausted, battered and bloody—but cheerfully happy. The facts about the magter were arranging themselves into a theory that might explain their attempt at racial suicide. It just needed a little time to be put into shape.

A pain cut across his arm and he jumped, startled, pieces of his thoughts crashing into ruin around him. The gunner had cracked the first-aid box and was swabbing his arm with antiseptic. The knife wound was long, but not deep. Brion shivered while the bandage was going on, then quickly slipped into his coat. The air conditioner whined industriously, bringing down the temperature.

There was no attempt to follow the car. When the black tower had dropped over the horizon the guards relaxed, ran cleaning rods through their guns and compared marksmanship. All of their antagonism towards Brion was gone; they actually smiled at him. He had given them the first chance to shoot back since they had been on this planet.

The ride was uneventful, and Brion was scarcely aware of it. A theory was taking form in his mind. It was radical and startling—yet it seemed to be the only one that fitted the facts. He pushed at it from all sides, but if there were any holes he couldn't find them. What it needed was dispassionate proving or disproving. There was only one person on Dis who was qualified to do this.

Lea was working in the lab when he came in, bent over a low-power binocular microscope. Something small, limbless and throbbing was on the slide. She glanced up when she heard his footsteps, smiling warmly when she recognized him. Fatigue and pain had drawn her face; her skin, glistening with burn ointment, was chapped and peeling.

"I must look a wreck," she said, putting the back of her hand to her cheek. "Something like a well-oiled and lightly cooked piece of beef." She lowered her arm suddenly and took his hand in both of hers. Her palms were warm and slightly moist.

"Thank you, Brion," was all she could say. Her society on Earth was highly civilized and sophisticated, able to discuss any topic without emotion and without embarrassment. This was fine in most circumstances, but made it difficult to thank a person for saving your life. However you tried to phrase it, it came out sounding like a last-act speech from a historical play. There was no doubt, however, as to what she meant. Her eyes were large and dark, the pupils dilated by the drugs she had been given. They could not lie, nor could the emotions he sensed. He did not answer, just held her hand an instant longer.

"How do you feel," he asked, concerned. His conscience twinged as he remembered that he was the one who had ordered her out of bed and back to work today.

"I should be feeling terrible," she said, with an airy wave of her hand. "But I'm walking on top of the world. I'm so loaded with pain-killers and stimulants that I'm high as the moon. All the nerves to my feet feel turned off—it's like walking on two balls of fluff. Thanks for getting me out of that awful hospital and back to work."

Brion was suddenly sorry for having driven her from her sick bed.

"Don't be sorry!" Lea said, apparently reading his mind, but really seeing only his sudden ashamed expression. "I'm feeling no pain. Honestly. I feel a little light-headed and foggy at times, nothing more. And this is the job I came here to do. In fact ... well, it's almost impossible to tell you just how fascinating it all is! It was almost worth getting baked and parboiled for."

She swung back to the microscope, centering the specimen with a turn of the stage adjustment screw. "Poor Ihjel was right when he said this planet was exobiologically fascinating. This is a gastropod, a lot like *Odostomia*, but it has parasitical morphological changes so profound that—"

"There's something else I remember," Brion said, interrupting her enthusiastic lecture, only half of which he could understand. "Didn't Ihjel also hope that you would give some study to the natives as well as their environment? The problem is with the Disans—not with the local wild life."

"But I *am* studying them," Lea insisted. "The Disans have attained an incredibly advanced form of commensalism. Their lives are so intimately connected and integrated with the other life forms that they must be studied in relation to their environment. I doubt if they show as many external physical changes as little eating-foot *Odostomia* on the slide here, but there will surely be a number of psychological

changes and adjustments that will crop up. One of these might be the explanation of their urge for planetary suicide.”

“That may be true—but I don’t think so,” Brion said. “I went on a little expedition this morning and found something that has more immediate relevancy.”

For the first time Lea became aware of his slightly battered condition. Her drug-grooved mind could only follow a single idea at a time and had over-looked the significance of the bandage and dirt.

“I’ve been visiting,” Brion said, forestalling the question on her lips. “The magter are the ones who are responsible for causing the trouble, and I had to see them up close before I could make any decisions. It wasn’t a very pleasant thing, but I found out what I wanted to know. They are different in every way from the normal Disans. I’ve compared them. I’ve talked to Ulv—the native who saved us in the desert—and I can understand him. He is not like us in many ways—he certainly couldn’t be, living in this oven—but he is still undeniably human. He gave us drinking water when we needed it, then brought help. The magter, the upper-class lords of Dis, are the direct opposite. As cold-blooded and ruthless a bunch of murderers as you can possibly imagine. They tried to kill me when they met me, without reason. Their clothes, habits, dwellings, manners—everything about them differs from that of the normal Disan. More important, the magter are as coldly efficient and inhuman as a reptile. They have no emotions, no love, no hate, no anger, no fear—nothing. Each of them is a chilling bundle of thought processes and reactions, with all the emotions removed.”

“Aren’t you exaggerating?” Lea asked. “After all, you can’t be sure. It might just be part of their training not to reveal any emotional state. Everyone must experience emotional states, whether they like it or not.”

“That’s my main point. Everyone does—except the magter. I can’t go into all the details now, so you’ll just have to take my word for it. Even at the point of death they have no fear or hatred. It may sound impossible, but it is true.”

Lea tried to shake the knots from her drug-hazed mind. “I’m dull today,” she said. “You’ll have to excuse me. If these rulers had no emotional responses, that might explain their present suicidal position. But an explanation like this raises more new problems than it supplies answers to the old ones. How did they get this way! It doesn’t seem humanly possible to be without emotions of some kind.”

“Just my point. Not *humanly* possible. I think these ruling class Disans aren’t human at all, like the other Disans. I think they are alien creatures—robots or androids—anything except men. I think they are living in disguise among the normal human dwellers.”

At first Lea started to smile, then her feeling changed when she saw his face. “You are serious?” she asked.

“Never more so. I realize it must sound as if I’ve had my brains bounced around too much this morning. Yet this is the only idea I can come up with that fits all of the facts. Look at the evidence yourself. One simple thing stands out clearly, and must be considered first if any theory is to hold up. That is the magters’ complete indifference to death—their own or anyone else’s. Is that normal to mankind?”

“No—but I can find a couple of explanations that I would rather explore first, before dragging in an alien life form. There may have been a mutation or an inherited disease that has deformed or warped their minds.”

“Wouldn’t that be sort of self-eliminating?” Brion asked. “Anti-survival? People who die before puberty would find it a little difficult to pass on a mutation to their children. But let’s not beat this one point to death—it’s the totality of these people that I find so hard to accept. Any one thing might be explained away, but not the collection of them. What about their complete lack of emotion? Or their manner of dress and their secrecy in general? The ordinary Disan wears a cloth kilt, while the magter cover themselves as completely as possible. They stay in their black towers and never go out except in groups. Their dead are always removed so they can’t be examined. In every way they act like a race apart—and I think they are.”

“Granted for the moment that this outlandish idea might be true, how did they get here? And why doesn’t anyone know about it besides them?”

“Easily enough explained,” Brion insisted. “There are no written records on this planet. After the Breakdown, when the handful of survivors were just trying to exist here, the aliens could have landed and moved in. Any interference could have been wiped out. Once the population began to grow, the invaders found they could keep control by staying separate, so their alien difference wouldn’t be noticed.”

“Why should that bother them?” Lea asked. “If they are so indifferent to death, they can’t have any strong thoughts on public opinion or alien body odor. Why would they bother with such a complex camouflage? And if they arrived from another planet, what has happened to the scientific ability that brought them here?”

“Peace,” Brion said. “I don’t know enough to be able even to guess at answers to half your questions. I’m just trying to fit a theory to the facts. And the facts are clear. The magter are so inhuman they would give me nightmares—if I were sleeping these days. What we need is more evidence.”

“Then get it,” Lea said with finality. “I’m not telling you to turn murderer—but you might try a bit of grave-digging. Give me a scalpel and one of your friends stretched out on a slab and I’ll quickly tell you what he is or is not.” She turned back to the microscope and bent over the eyepiece.

That was really the only way to hack the Gordian knot. Dis had only thirty-six more hours to live, so individual deaths shouldn’t be of any concern. He had to find a dead magter, and if none was obtainable in the proper condition he had to get one of them by violence. For a planetary savior, he was personally doing in an awful lot of the citizenry.

He stood behind Lea, looking down at her thoughtfully while she worked. The back of her neck, lightly covered with gently curling hair, was turned toward him. With one of the about-face shifts the mind is capable of, his thoughts flipped from death to life, and he experienced a strong desire to caress this spot lightly, to feel the yielding texture of female flesh....

Plunging his hands deep into his pockets, he walked quickly to the door. “Get some rest soon,” he called to her. “I doubt if those bugs will give you the answer. I’m going now to see if I can get the full-sized specimen you want.”

“The truth could be anywhere. I’ll stay on these until you come back,” she said, not looking up from the microscope.

Up under the roof was a well-equipped communications room. Brion had taken a quick look at it when he had first toured the building. The duty operator had earphones on—though only one of the phones covered an ear—and was monitoring

through the bands. His shoeless feet were on the edge of the table, and he was eating a thick sandwich held in his free hand. His eyes bulged when he saw Brion in the doorway and he jumped into a flurry of action.

“Hold the pose,” Brion told him; “it doesn’t bother me. And if you make any sudden moves you are liable to break a phone, electrocute yourself, or choke to death. Just see if you can set the transceiver on this frequency for me.” Brion wrote the number on a scratch pad and slid it over to the operator. It was the frequency Professor-Commander Krafft had given him for the radio of the illegal terrorists—the Nyjord army.

The operator plugged in a handset and gave it to Brion. “Circuit open,” he mumbled around a mouthful of still unswallowed sandwich.

“This is Brandd, director of the C.R.F. Come in, please.” He went on repeating this for more than ten minutes before he got an answer.

“What do you want?”

“I have a message of vital urgency for you—and I would also like your help. Do you want any more information on the radio?”

“No. Wait there—we’ll get in touch with you after dark.” The carrier wave went dead.

Thirty-five hours to the end of the world—and all he could do was wait.

Chapter 12

On Brion's desk when he came in, were two neat piles of paper. As he sat down and reached for them he was conscious of an arctic coldness in the air, a frigid blast. It was coming from the air-conditioner grill, which was now covered by welded steel bars. The control unit was sealed shut. Someone was either being very funny or very efficient. Either way, it was cold. Brion kicked at the cover plate until it buckled, then bent it aside. After a careful look into the interior he disconnected one wire and shorted it to another. He was rewarded by a number of sputtering cracks and a quantity of smoke. The compressor moaned and expired.

Faussel was standing in the door with more papers, a shocked expression on his face. "What do you have there?" Brion asked.

Faussel managed to straighten out his face and brought the folders to the desk, arranging them on the piles already there. "These are the progress reports you asked for, from all units. Details to date, conclusions, suggestions, et cetera."

"And the other pile?" Brion pointed.

"Offplanet correspondence, commissary invoices, requisitions." He straightened the edges of the stack while he answered. "Daily reports, hospital log...." His voice died away and stopped as Brion carefully pushed the stack off the edge of the desk into the wastebasket.

"In other words, red tape," Brion said. "Well, it's all filed."

One by one the progress reports followed the first stack into the basket, until the desk was clear. Nothing. It was just what he had expected. But there had always been the off chance that one of the specialists could come up with a new approach. They hadn't; they were all too busy specializing.

Outside the sky was darkening. The front entrance guard had been told to let in anyone who came asking for the director. There was nothing else Brion could do until the Nyjord rebels made contact. Irritation bit at him. At least Lea was doing something constructive; he could look in on her.

He opened the door to the lab with a feeling of pleasant anticipation. It froze and shattered instantly. Her microscope was hooded and she was gone. *She's having dinner*, he thought, or—*she's in the hospital*. The hospital was on the floor below, and he went there first.

"Of course she's here!" Dr. Stine grumbled. "Where else should a girl in her condition be? She was out of bed long enough today. Tomorrow's the last day, and if you want to get any more work out of her before the deadline, you had better let her rest tonight. Better let the whole staff rest. I've been handing out tranquilizers like aspirin all day. They're falling apart."

"The world's falling apart. How is Lea doing?"

"Considering her shape, she's fine. Go in and see for yourself if you won't take my word for it. I have other patients to look at."

"Are you that worried, Doctor?"

“Of course I am! I’m just as prone to the weakness of the flesh as the rest of you. We’re sitting on a ticking bomb and I don’t like it. I’ll do my job as long as it is necessary, but I’ll also be damned glad to see the ships land to pull us out. The only skin that I really feel emotionally concerned about right now is my own. And if you want to be let in on a public secret—the rest of your staff feels the same way. So don’t look forward to too much efficiency.”

“I never did,” Brion said to the retreating back.

Lea’s room was dark, illuminated only by the light of Dis’s moon slanting in through the window. Brion let himself in and closed the door behind him. Walking quietly, he went over to the bed. Lea was sleeping soundly, her breathing gentle and regular. A night’s sleep now would do as much good as all the medication.

He should have gone then; instead, he sat down in the chair placed next to the head of the bed. The guards knew where he was—he could wait here just as well as any place else.

It was a stolen moment of peace on a world at the brink of destruction. He was grateful for it. Everything looked less harsh in the moonlight, and he rubbed some of the tension from his eyes. Lea’s face was ironed smooth by the light, beautiful and young, a direct contrast to everything else on this poisonous world. Her hand was outside of the covers and he took it in his own, obeying a sudden impulse. Looking out of the window at the desert in the distance, he let the peace wash over him, forcing himself to forget for the moment that in one more day life would be stripped from this planet.

Later, when he looked back at Lea he saw that her eyes were open, though she hadn’t moved. How long had she been awake? He jerked his hand away from hers, feeling suddenly guilty.

“Is the boss-man looking after the serfs, to see if they’re fit for the treadmills in the morning?” she asked. It was the kind of remark she had used with such frequency in the ship, though it didn’t sound quite as harsh now. And she was smiling. Yet it reminded him too well of her superior attitude towards rubes from the stellar sticks. Here he might be the director, but on ancient Earth he would be only one more gaping, lead-footed yokel.

“How do you feel?” he asked, realizing and hating the triteness of the words, even as he said them.

“Terrible. I’ll be dead by morning. Reach me a piece of fruit from that bowl, will you? My mouth tastes like an old boot heel. I wonder how fresh fruit ever got here. Probably a gift to the working classes from the smiling planetary murderers on Nyjord.”

She took the apple Brion gave her and bit into it. “Did you ever think of going to Earth?”

Brion was startled. This was too close to his own thoughts about planetary backgrounds. There couldn’t possibly be a connection though. “Never,” he told her. “Up until a few months ago I never even considered leaving Anvhar. The Twenties are such a big thing at home that it is hard to imagine that anything else exists while you are still taking part in them.”

“Spare me the Twenties,” she pleaded. “After listening to you and Ihjel, I know far more about them than I shall ever care to know. But what about Anvhar itself? Do you have big city-states as Earth does?”

“Nothing like that. For its size, it has a very small population. No big cities at all. I guess the largest centers of population are around the schools, packing plants, things like that.”

“Any exobiologists there?” Lea asked, with a woman’s eternal ability to make any general topic personal.

“At the universities, I suppose, though I wouldn’t know for sure. And you must realize that when I say no big cities, I also mean no little cities. We aren’t organized that way at all. I imagine the basic physical unit is the family and the circle of friends. Friends get important quickly, since the family breaks up when children are still relatively young. Something in the genes, I suppose—we all enjoy being alone. I suppose you might call it an inbred survival trait.”

“Up to a point,” she said, biting delicately into the apple. “Carry that sort of thing too far and you end up with no population at all. A certain amount of proximity is necessary for that.”

“Of course it is. And there must be some form of recognized relationship or control—that or complete promiscuity. On Anvhar the emphasis is on personal responsibility, and that seems to take care of the problem. If we didn’t have an adult way of looking at ... things, our kind of life would be impossible. Individuals are brought together either by accident or design, and with this proximity must be some certainty of relations....”

“You’re losing me,” Lea protested. “Either I’m still foggy from the dope, or you are suddenly unable to speak a word of less than four syllables. You know—whenever this happens with you, I get the distinct impression that you are trying to cover up something. For Occam’s sake, be specific! Bring me together two of these hypothetical individuals and tell me what happens.”

Brion took a deep breath. He was in over his head and far from shore. “Well—take a bachelor like myself. Since I like cross-country skiing I make my home in this big house our family has, right at the edge of the Broken Hills. In summer I looked after a drumtum herd, but after slaughtering my time was my own all winter. I did a lot of skiing, and used to work for the Twenties. Sometimes I would go visiting. Then again, people would drop in on me—houses are few and far between on Anvhar. We don’t even have locks on our doors. You accept and give hospitality without qualification. Whoever comes. Male ... female ... in groups or just traveling alone....”

“I get the drift. Life must be dull for a single girl on your iceberg planet. She must surely have to stay home a lot.”

“Only if she wants to. Otherwise she can go wherever she wishes and be welcomed as another individual. I suppose it is out of fashion in the rest of the galaxy—and would probably raise a big laugh on Earth—but a platonic, disinterested friendship between man and woman is an accepted thing on Anvhar.”

“Sounds exceedingly dull. If you are all such cool and distant friends, how do babies get made?”

Brion felt his ears reddening, not sure if he was being teased or not. “The same damn way they get made any place else! But it’s not just a reflexive process like a couple of

rabbits that happen to meet under the same bush. It's the woman's choice to indicate if she is interested in marriage."

"Is marriage the only thing your women are interested in?"

"Marriage or ... anything else. That's up to the girl. We have a special problem on Anvhar—probably the same thing occurs on every planet where the human race has made a massive adaptation. Not all unions are fertile and there is always a large percentage of miscarriages. A large number of births are conceived by artificial insemination. Which is all right when you can't have babies normally. But most women have an emotional bias towards having their husband's children. And there is only one way to find out if this is possible."

Lea's eyes widened. "Are you suggesting that your girls see if a man can father children *before* considering marriage?"

"Of course. Otherwise Anvhar would have been depopulated centuries ago. Therefore the woman does the choosing. If she is interested in a man, she says so. If she is not interested, the man would never think of suggesting anything. It's a lot different from other planets, but so is our planet Anvhar. It works well for us, which is the only test that applies."

"Just about the opposite of Earth," Lea told him, dropping the apple core into a dish and carefully licking the tips of her fingers. "I guess you Anvharians would describe Earth as a planetary hotbed of sexuality. The reverse of your system, and going full blast all the time. There are far too many people there for comfort. Birth control came late and is still being fought—if you can possibly imagine that. There are just too many of the archaic religions still around, as well as crackbrained ideas that have been long entrenched in custom. The world's overcrowded. Men, women, children, a boiling mob wherever you look. And all of the physically mature ones seem to be involved in the Great Game of Love. The male is always the aggressor. Not physically—at least not often—and women take the most outrageous kinds of flattery for granted. At parties there are always a couple of hot breaths of passion fanning your neck. A girl has to keep her spike heels filed sharp."

"She has to *what*?"

"A figure of speech, Brion. Meaning you fight back all the time, if you don't want to be washed under by the flood."

"Sounds rather"—Brion weighed the word before he said it, but could find none other suitable—"repellent."

"From your point of view, it would be. I'm afraid we get so used to it that we even take it for granted. Sociologically speaking...." She stopped and looked at Brion's straight back and almost rigid posture. Her eyes widened and her mouth opened in an unspoken *oh* of sudden realization.

"I'm being a fool," she said. "You weren't speaking generally at all! You had a very specific subject in mind. Namely *me*!"

"Please, Lea, you must understand...."

"But I do!" She laughed. "All the time I thought you were being a frigid and hard-hearted lump of ice, you were really being very sweet. Just playing the game in good old Anvharian style. Waiting for a sign from me. We'd still be playing by different rules if you hadn't had more sense than I, and finally realized that somewhere along

the line we must have got our signals mixed. And I thought you were some kind of frosty offworld celibate.” She let her hand go out and her fingers rustled through his hair. Something she had been wanting to do for a long time.

“I had to,” he said, trying to ignore the light touch of her fingers. “Because I thought so much of you, I couldn’t have done anything to insult you. Such as forcing my attentions on you. Until I began to worry where the insult would lie, since I knew nothing about your planet’s mores.”

“Well, you know now,” she said very softly. “The men aggress. Now that I understand, I think I like your way better. But I’m still not sure of all the rules. Do I explain that yes, Brion, I like you so very much? You are more man, in one great big wide-shouldered lump, than I have ever met before. It’s not quite the time or the place to discuss marriage, but I would certainly like—”

His arms were around her, holding her to him. Her hands clasped him and their lips sought each other’s in the darkness.

“Gently ...” she whispered. “I bruise easily....”

Chapter 13

“He wouldn’t come in, sir. Just hammered on the door and said, *‘I’m here, tell Brandd.’*”

“Good enough,” Brion said, fitting his gun in the holster and sliding the extra clips into his pocket. “I’m going out now, and I should return before dawn. Get one of the wheeled stretchers down here from the hospital. I’ll want it waiting when I get back.”

Outside, the street was darker than he remembered. Brion frowned and his hand moved towards his gun. Someone had put all the nearby lights out of commission. There was just enough illumination from the stars to enable him to make out the dark bulk of a sand car.

“Brion Brandd?” a voice spoke harshly from the car. “Get in.”

The motor roared as soon as he had closed the door. Without lights the sand car churned a path through the city and out into the desert. Though the speed picked up, the driver still drove in the dark, feeling his way with a light touch on the controls. The ground rose, and when they reached the top of a mesa he killed the engine. Neither the driver nor Brion had spoken a word since they left.

A switch snapped and the instrument lights came on. In their dim glow Brion could just make out the other man’s hawklike profile. When he moved, Brion saw that his figure was cruelly shortened. Either accident or a mutated gene had warped his spine, hunching him forward in eternally bent supplication. Warped bodies were rare—his was the first Brion had ever seen. He wondered what series of events had kept him from medical attention all his life. This might explain the bitterness and pain in the man’s voice.

“Did the mighty brains on Nyjord bother to tell you that they have chopped another day off the deadline?” the man asked. “That this world is about to come to an end?”

“Yes, I know,” Brion said. “That’s why I’m asking your group for help. Our time is running out too fast.”

The man didn’t answer; he merely grunted and gave his full attention to the radar pings and glowing screen. The electronic senses reached out as he made a check on all the search frequencies to see if they were being followed.

“Where are we going?” Brion asked.

“Out into the desert.” The driver made a vague wave of his hand. “Headquarters of the army. Since the whole thing will be blown up in another day, I guess I can tell you it’s the only camp we have. All the cars, men and weapons are based there. And Hys. He’s the man in charge. Tomorrow it will be all gone—along with this cursed planet. What’s your business with us?”

“Shouldn’t I be telling Hys that?”

“Suit yourself.” Satisfied with the instrument search, the driver kicked the car to life again and churned on across the desert. “But we’re a volunteer army and we have no secrets from each other. Just from the fools at home who are going to kill this world.” There was a bitterness in his words that he made no attempt to conceal. “They fought among themselves and put off a firm decision so long that now they are forced to commit murder.”

“From what I had heard, I thought that it was the other way around. They call your Nyjord army terrorists.”

“We are. Because we are an army and we’re at war. The idealists at home only understood that when it was too late. If they had backed us in the beginning we would have blown open every black castle on Dis, searched until we found those bombs. But that would have meant wanton destruction and death. They wouldn’t consider that. Now they are going to kill everyone, destroy everything.” He flicked on the panel lights just long enough to take a compass bearing, and Brion saw the tortured unhappiness in his twisted body.

“It’s not over yet,” Brion said. “There is more than a day left, and I think I’m onto something that might stop the war—without any bombs being dropped.”

“You’re in charge of the Cultural Relationships Free Bread and Blankets Foundation, aren’t you? What good can your bunch do when the shooting starts?”

“None. But maybe we can put off the shooting. If you are trying to insult me—don’t bother. My irritation quotient is very high.”

The driver merely grunted at this, slowing down as they ran through a field of broken rock. “What is it you want?” he asked.

“We want to make a detailed examination of one of the magter. Alive or dead, it doesn’t make any difference. You wouldn’t happen to have one around?”

“No. We’ve fought with them often enough, but always on their home grounds. They keep all their casualties, and a good number of ours. What good will it do you anyway? A dead one won’t tell you where the bombs or the jump-space projector is.”

“I don’t see why I should explain that to you—unless you are in charge. You are Hys, aren’t you?”

The driver gave an angry sound, and then was silent while he drove. Finally he asked, “What makes you think that?”

“Call it a hunch. You don’t act very much like a sand-car driver, for one thing. Of course your army may be all generals and no privates—but I doubt it. I also know that time has almost run out for all of us. This is a long ride and it would be a complete waste of time if you just sat out in the desert and waited for me. By driving me yourself you could make your mind up before we arrived. Could have a decision ready as to whether you are going to help me or not. Are you?”

“Yes—I’m Hys. But you still haven’t answered my question. What do you want the body for?”

“We’re going to cut it open and take a good long look. I don’t think the magter are human. They are something living among men and disguised as men—but still not human.”

“Secret aliens?” Hys exploded the words in a mixture of surprise and disgust.

“Perhaps. The examination will tell us that.”

“You’re either stupid or incompetent,” Hys said bitterly. “The heat of Dis has cooked your brains in your head. I’ll be no part of this kind of absurd plan.”

“You must,” Brion said, surprised at his own calmness. He could sense the other man’s interest hidden behind his insulting manner. “I don’t even have to give you my reasons. In another day this world ends and you have no way to stop it. I just might

have an idea that could work, and you can't afford to take any chances—not if you are really sincere. Either you are a murderer, killing Disans for pleasure, or you honestly want to stop the war. Which is it?”

“You'll have your body all right,” Hys grated, hurling the car viciously around a spire of rock. “Not that it will accomplish anything—but I can find no fault with killing another magter. We can fit your operation into our plans without any trouble. This is the last night and I have sent every one of my teams out on raids. We're breaking into as many magter towers as possible before dawn. There is a slim chance that we might uncover something. It's really just shooting in the dark, but it's all we can do now. My own team is waiting and you can ride along with us. The others left earlier. We're going to hit a small tower on this side of the city. We raided it once before and captured a lot of small arms they had stored there. There is a good chance that they may have been stupid enough to store something there again. Sometimes the magter seem to suffer from a complete lack of imagination.”

“You have no idea just how right you are,” Brion told him.

The sand car slowed down now, as they approached a slab-sided mesa that rose vertically from the desert. They crunched across broken rocks, leaving no tracks. A light blinked on the dashboard, and Hys stopped instantly and killed the engine. They climbed out, stretching and shivering in the cold desert night.

It was dark walking in the shadow of the cliff and they had to feel their way along a path through the tumbled boulders. A sudden blaze of light made Brion wince and shield his eyes. Near him, on the ground, was the humming shape of a cancellation projector, sending out a fan-shaped curtain of vibration that absorbed all the light rays falling upon it. This incredible blackness made a lightproof wall for the recessed hollow at the foot of the cliff. In this shelter, under the overhang of rock, were three open sand cars. They were large and armor-plated, warlike in their scarred grey paint. Men sprawled, talked, and polished their weapons. Everything stopped when Hys and Brion appeared.

“Load up,” Hys called out. “We're going to attack now, same plan I outlined earlier. Get Telt over here.” In talking to his own men some of the harshness was gone from his voice. The tall soldiers of Nyjord moved in ready obedience of their commander. They loomed over his bent figure, most of them twice as tall as he, but there was no hesitation in jumping when he commanded. They were the body of the Nyjord striking force—he was the brains.

A square-cut, compact man rolled up to Hys and saluted with a leisurely flick of his hand. He was weighted and slung about with packs and electronic instruments. His pockets bulged with small tools and spare parts.

“This is Telt,” Hys said to Brion. “He'll take care of you. Telt's my personal technical squad. He goes along on all my operations with his meters to test the interiors of the Disan forts. So far he's found no trace of a jump-space generator, or excess radioactivity that might indicate a bomb. Since he's useless and you're useless, you both take care of each other. Use the car we came in.”

Telt's wide face split in a froglike grin; his voice was hoarse and throaty. “Wait. Just wait! Someday those needles gonna flicker and all our troubles be over. What you want me to do with the stranger?”

“Supply him with a corpse—one of the magter,” Hys said. “Take it wherever he wants and then report back here.” Hys scowled at Telt. “Someday your needles will flicker!

Poor fool—this is the last day.” He turned away and waved the men into their sand cars.

“He likes me,” Telt said, attaching a final piece of equipment. “You can tell because he calls me names like that. He’s a great man, Hys is, but they never found out until it was too late. Hand me that meter, will you?”

Brion followed the technician out to the car and helped him load his equipment aboard. When the larger cars appeared out of the darkness, Telt swung around after them. They snaked forward in a single line through the rocks, until they came to the desert of rolling sand dunes. Then they spread out in line abreast and rushed towards their goal.

Telt hummed to himself hoarsely as he drove. He broke off suddenly and looked at Brion. “What you want the dead Dis for?”

“A theory,” Brion answered sluggishly. He had been half napping in the chair, taking the opportunity for some rest before the attack. “I’m still looking for a way to avert the end.”

“You and Hys,” Telt said with satisfaction. “Couple of idealists. Trying to stop a war you didn’t start. They never would listen to Hys. He told them in the beginning exactly what would happen, and he was right. They always thought his ideas were crooked, like him. Growing up alone in the hill camp, with his back too twisted and too old to be fixed when he finally did come out. Ideas twisted the same way. Made himself an authority on war. Hah! War on Nyjord—that’s like being an ice-cube specialist in hell. But he knew all about it, though they never would let him use what he knew. Put granddaddy Krafft in charge instead.”

“But Hys is in charge of an army now?”

“All volunteers, too few of them and too little money. Too little and too damned late to do any good. I’ll tell you we did our best, but it could never be good enough. And for this we get called butchers.” There was a catch in Telt’s voice now, an undercurrent of emotion he couldn’t suppress. “At home they think we like to kill. Think we’re insane. They can’t understand we’re doing the only thing that has to be done—”

He broke off as he quickly locked on the brakes and killed the engine. The line of sand cars had come to a stop. Ahead, just visible over the dunes, was the summit of a dark tower.

“We walk from here,” Telt said, standing and stretching. “We can take our time, because the other boys go in first, soften things up. Then you and I head for the sub-cellar for a radiation check and find you a handsome corpse.”

Walking at first, then crawling when the dunes no longer shielded them, they crept up on the Disan keep. Dark figures moved ahead of them, stopping only when they reached the crumbling black walls. They didn’t use the ascending ramp, but made their way up the sheer outside face of the ramparts.

“Line-throwers,” Telt whispered. “Anchor themselves when the missile hits, have some kind of quick-setting goo. Then we go up the filament with a line-climbing motor. Hys invented them.”

“Is that the way you and I are going in?” Brion asked.

“No, we get out of the climbing. I told you we hit this rock once before. I know the layout inside.” He was moving while he talked, carefully pacing the distance around the base of the tower. “Should be right about here.”

High-pitched keening sliced the air and the top of the magter building burst into flame. Automatic weapons hammered above them. Something fell silently through the night and hit heavily on the ground near them.

“Attack’s started,” Telt shouted. “We have to get through now, while all the creepies are fighting it out on top.” He pulled a plate-shaped object from one of his bags and slapped it hard against the wall. It hung there. He twisted the back of it, pulled something and waved Brion to the ground. “Shaped charge. Should blow straight in, but you never can tell.”

The ground jumped under them and the ringing thud was a giant fist punching through the wall. A cloud of dust and smoke rolled clear and they could see the dark opening in the rock, a tunnel driven into the wall by the directional force of the explosion. Telt shone a light through the hole at the crumbled chamber inside.

“Nothing to worry about from anybody who was leaning against this wall. But let’s get in and out of this black beehive before the ones upstairs come down to investigate.”

Shattered rock was thick on the floor, and they skidded and tumbled over it. Telt pointed the way with his light, down a sharply angled ramp. “Underground chambers in the rock. They always store their stuff down there—”

A smoking, black sphere arced out of the tunnel’s mouth, hitting at their feet. Telt just gaped, but even as it hit the floor Brion was jumping forward. He caught it with the side of his foot, kicking it back into the dark opening of the tunnel. Telt hit the ground next to him as the orange flame of an explosion burst below. Bits of shrapnel rattled from the ceiling and wall behind them.

“Grenades!” Telt gasped. “They’ve only used them once before—can’t have many. Gotta warn Hys.” He plugged a throat mike into the transmitter on his tack and spoke quickly into it. There was a stirring below and Brion poured a rain of fire into the tunnel.

“They’re catching it bad on top, too! We gotta pull out. Go first and I’ll cover you.”

“I came for my Disan—I’m not leaving until I get one.”

“You’re crazy! You’re dead if you stay!”

Telt was scrambling back towards the crumbled entrance as he talked. His back was turned when Brion fired. The magter had appeared silently as the shadow of death. They charged without a sound, running with expressionless faces into the bullets. Two died at once, curling and folding; the third one fell at Brion’s feet. Shot, pierced, dying, but not yet dead. Leaving a crimson track, it hunched closer, lifting its knife to Brion. He didn’t move. How many times must you murder a man? Or was it a man? His mind and body rebelled against the killing, and he was almost ready to accept death himself, rather than kill again.

Telt’s bullets tore through the body and it dropped with grim finality.

“There’s your corpse—now get it out of here!” Telt screeched.

Between them they worked the sodden weight of the dead magter through the hole, their exposed backs crawling with the expectation of instant death. No further attack

came as they ran from the tower, other than a grenade that exploded too far behind them to do any harm.

One of the armored sand cars circled the keep, headlights blazing, keeping up a steady fire from its heavy weapons. The attackers climbed into it as they beat a retreat. Telt and Brion dragged the Disan behind them, struggling through the loose sand towards the circling car. Telt glanced over his shoulder and broke into a shambling run.

"They're following us!" he gasped. "The first time they ever chased us after a raid!"

"They must know we have the body," Brion said.

"Leave it behind ..." Telt choked. "Too heavy to carry ... anyway!"

"I'd rather leave you," Brion said sharply. "Let me have it." He pulled the corpse away from the unresisting Telt and heaved it across his own shoulders. "Now use your gun to cover us!"

Telt threw a rain of slugs back towards the dark figures following them. The driver of the sand car must have seen the flare of their fire, because the truck turned and started towards them. It braked in a choking cloud of dust and ready hands reached to pull them up. Brion pushed the body in ahead of himself and scrambled after it. The truck engine throbbed and they churned away into the blackness, away from the gutted tower.

"You know, that was more like kind of a joke, when I said I'd leave the corpse behind," Telt told Brion. "You didn't believe me, did you?"

"Yes," Brion said, holding the dead weight of the magter against the truck's side. "I thought you meant it."

"Ahhh," Telt protested, "you're as bad as Hys. You take things too seriously."

Brion suddenly realized that he was wet with blood, his clothing sodden. His stomach rose at the thought and he clutched the edge of the sand car. Killing like this was too personal. Talking abstractedly about a body was one thing, but murdering a man, then lifting his dead flesh and feeling his blood warm upon you is an entirely different matter. But the magter weren't human, he knew that. The thought was only mildly comforting.

After they had reached the other waiting sand cars, the raiding party split up. "Each one goes in a different direction," Telt said, "so they can't track us to the base." He clipped a piece of paper next to the compass and kicked the motor into life. "We'll make a big U in the desert and end up in Hovedstad. I got the course here. Then I'll dump you and your friends and beat it back to our camp. You're not still burned at me for what I said, are you? Are you?"

Brion didn't answer. He was staring fixedly out of the side window.

"What's doing?" Telt asked. Brion pointed out at the rushing darkness.

"Over there," he said, pointing to the growing light on the horizon.

"Dawn," Telt said. "Lotta rain on your planet? Didn't you ever see the sun come up before?"

"Not on the last day of a world."

“Lock it up,” Telt grumbled. “You give me the crawls. I know they’re going to be blasted. But at least I know I did everything I could to stop it. How do you think they are going to be feeling at home—on Nyjord—from tomorrow on?”

“Maybe we can still stop it,” Brion said, shrugging off the feeling of gloom. Telt’s only answer was a wordless sound of disgust.

By the time they had cut a large loop in the desert the sun was well up in the sky, the daily heat begun. Their course took them through a chain of low, flinty hills that cut their speed almost to zero. They ground ahead in low gear while Telt sweated and cursed, struggling with the controls. Then they were on firm sand and picking up speed towards the city.

As soon as Brion saw Hovedstad clearly he felt a clutch of fear. From somewhere in the city a black plume of smoke was rising. It could have been one of the deserted buildings aflame, a minor blaze. Yet the closer they came, the greater his tension grew. Brion didn’t dare put it into words himself; it was Telt who vocalized the thought.

“A fire or something. Coming from your area, somewhere close to your building.”

Within the city they saw the first signs of destruction. Broken rubble on the streets. The smell of greasy smoke in their nostrils. More and more people appeared, going in the same direction they were. The normally deserted streets of Hovedstad were now almost crowded. Disans, obvious by their bare shoulders, mixed with the few offworlders who still remained.

Brion made sure the tarpaulin was well wrapped around the body before they pushed the sand car slowly through the growing crowd.

“I don’t like all this publicity,” Telt complained, looking at the people. “It’s the last day, or I’d be turning back. They know our cars; we’ve raided them often enough.” Turning a corner, he braked suddenly, mouth agape.

Ahead was destruction. Black, broken rubble had been churned into desolation. It was still smoking, pink tongues of flame licking over the ruins. A fragment of wall fell with a rumbling crash.

“It’s your building—the Foundation building!” Telt shouted. “They’ve been here ahead of us—must have used the radio to call a raid. They did a job, explosive of some kind.”

Hope was dead. Dis was dead. In the ruin ahead, mixed and broken with other rubble, were the bodies of all the people who had trusted him. Lea ... beautiful and cruelly dead Lea. Doctor Stine, his patients, Faussel, all of them. He had kept them on this planet, and now they were dead. Every one of them. Dead.

Murderer!

Chapter 14

Life was ended. Brion's mind contained nothing but despair and the pain of irretrievable loss. If his brain had been completely the master of his body he would have died there, for at that moment there was no will to live. Unaware of this, his heart continued to beat and the regular motion of his lungs drew in the dreadful sweetness of the smoke-tainted air. With automatic directness his body lived on.

"What you gonna do?" Telt asked, even his natural exuberation stilled by this. Brion only shook his head as the words penetrated. What could he do? What could possibly be done?

"Follow me," a voice said in guttural Disan through the opening of a rear window. The speaker was lost in the crowd before they could turn. Aware now, Brion saw a native move away from the edge of the crowd and turn to look in their direction. It was Ulv.

"Turn the car—that way!" He punched Telt's arm and pointed. "Do it slowly and don't draw any attention to us." For a moment there was hope, which he kept himself from considering. The building was gone, and the people in it all dead. That fact had to be faced.

"What's going on?" Telt asked. "Who was that talked in the window?"

"A native—that one up ahead. He saved my life in the desert, and I think he is on our side. Even though he's a native Disan, he can understand facts that the magter can't. He knows what will happen to this planet." Brion was talking to fill his brain with words so he wouldn't begin to have hope. There was no hope possible.

Ulv moved slowly and naturally through the streets, never looking back. They followed, as far behind as they dared, yet still keeping him in sight. Fewer people were about here among the deserted offworld storehouses. Ulv vanished into one of these; LIGHT METALS TRUST LTD., the sign read above the door. Telt slowed the car.

"Don't stop here," Brion said. "Drive around the corner, and pull up."

Brion climbed out of the car with an ease he did not feel. No one was in sight now, in either direction. Walking slowly back to the corner, he checked the street they had just left. Hot, silent and empty.

A sudden blackness appeared where the door of the warehouse had been, and the sudden flickering motion of a hand. Brion signaled Telt to start, and jumped into the already moving sand car.

"Into that open door—quickly, before anyone sees us!" The car rumbled down a ramp into the dark interior and the door slid shut behind them.

"Ulv! What is it? Where are you?" Brion called, blinking in the murky interior. A grey form appeared beside him.

"I am here."

"Did you—" There was no way to finish the sentence.

"I heard of the raid. The magter called together all of us they could to help them carry explosive. I went along. I could not stop them, and there was no time to warn anyone in the building."

"Then they are all dead?"

"Yes," Ulv nodded. "All except one. I knew I could perhaps save one; I was not sure who. So I took the woman you were with in the desert—she is here now. She was hurt, but not badly, when I brought her out."

Guilty relief flooded through Brion. He shouldn't exult, not with the death of everyone in the Foundation still fresh in his mind. But at that instant he was happy.

"Let me see her," he said to Ulv. He was seized by the sudden fear that there might be a mistake. Perhaps Ulv had saved a different woman.

Ulv led the way across the empty loading bay. Brion followed closely, fighting down the temptation to tell him to hurry. When he saw that Ulv was heading towards an office in the far wall, he could control himself no longer and ran on ahead.

It was Lea, lying unconscious on a couch. Sweat beaded her face and she moaned and stirred without opening her eyes.

"I gave her *sover*, then wrapped her in cloth so no one would know," Ulv said.

Telt was close behind them, looking in through the open door.

"*Sover* is a drug they take from one of their plants," he said. "We got a lot of experience with it. A little makes a good knock-out drug, but it's deadly poison in large doses. I got the antidote in the car; wait and I'll get it." He went out.

Brion sat next to Lea and wiped her face clean of dirt and perspiration. The dark shadows under her eyes were almost black now and her elfin face seemed even thinner. But she was alive—that was the important thing.

Some of the tension drained away from Brion and he could think again. There was still the job to do. After this last experience Lea should be in a hospital bed. But this was impossible. He would have to drag her to her feet and put her back to work. The answer might still be found. Each second ticked away another fraction of the planet's life.

"Good as new in a minute," Telt said, banging down the heavy med box. He watched intently as Ulv left the room. "Hys should know about this renegade. Might be useful as a spy, or for information—though of course it's too late now to do anything, so the hell with it." He pulled a pistol-shaped hypodermic gun from the box and dialed a number on the side. "Now, if you'll roll her sleeve up I'll bring her back to life." He pressed the bell-shaped sterilizing muzzle against her skin and pulled the trigger. The hypo gun hummed briefly, ending its cycle with a loud click.

"Does it work fast?" Brion asked.

"Couple of minutes. Just let her be and she'll come to by herself."

Ulv was in the doorway. "Killer!" he hissed. His blowgun was in his hand, half raised to his mouth.

"He's been in the car—he's seen it!" Telt shouted and grabbed for his gun.

Brion sprang between them, raising his hands. "Stop it! No more killing!" he shouted in Disan. Then he shook his fist at Telt. "Fire that gun and I'll stuff it down your

throat. I'll handle this." He turned to face Ulv, who hadn't brought the blowgun any closer to his lips. This was a good sign—the Disan was still uncertain.

"You have seen the body in the car, Ulv. So you must have seen that it is that of a magter. I killed him myself, because I would rather kill one, or ten, or even a hundred men than have everyone on this planet destroyed. I killed him in a fair fight and now I am going to examine his body. There is something very strange and different about the magter, you know that yourself. If I can find out what it is, perhaps we can make them stop this war, and not bomb Nyjord."

Ulv was still angry, but he lowered the blowgun a little. "I wish there were no offworlders," he said. "I wish that none of you had ever come. Nothing was wrong until you started coming. The magter were the strongest, and they killed; but they also helped. Now they want to fight a war with your weapons, and for this you are going to kill my world. And you want me to help you!"

"Not me—yourself!" Brion said wearily. "There's no going back, that's the one thing we can't do. Maybe Dis would have been better off without offplanet contact. Maybe not. In any case, you have to forget about that. You have contact now with the rest of the galaxy, for better or for worse. You've got a problem to solve, and I'm here to help you solve it."

Seconds ticked by as Ulv, unmoving, fought with questions that were novel to his life. Could killing stop death? Could he help his people by helping strangers to fight and kill them? His world had changed and he didn't like it. He must make a giant effort to change with it.

Abruptly, he pushed the blowgun into a thong at his waist, turned and strode out.

"Too much for my nerves," Telt said, settling his gun back in the holster. "You don't know how happy I'm gonna be when this whole damn thing is over. Even if the planet goes bang, I don't care. I'm finished." He walked out to the sand car, keeping a careful eye on the Disan crouched against the wall.

Brion turned back to Lea, whose eyes were open, staring at the ceiling. He went to her.

"Running," she said, and her voice had a toneless emptiness that screamed louder than any emotion. "They ran by the open door of my room and I could see them when they killed Dr. Stine. Just butchered him like an animal, chopping him down. Then one came into the room and that's all I remember." She turned her head slowly and looked at Brion. "What happened? Why am I here?"

"They're ... dead," he told her. "All of them. After the raid the Disans blew up the building. You're the only one that survived. That was Ulv who came into your room, the Disan we met in the desert. He brought you away and hid you here in the city."

"When do we leave?" she asked in the same empty tones, turning her face to the wall. "When do we get off this planet?"

"Today is the last day. The deadline is midnight. Krafft will have a ship pick us up when we are ready. But we still have our job to do. I've got that body. You're going to have to examine it. We must find out about the magter..."

"Nothing can be done now except leave." Her voice was a dull monotone. "There is only so much that a person can do, and I've done it. Please have the ship come; I want to leave now."

Brion bit his lip in helpless frustration. Nothing seemed to penetrate the apathy into which she had sunk. Too much shock, too much terror, in too short a time. He took her chin in his hand and turned her head to face him. She didn't resist, but her eyes were shining with tears; tears trickled down her cheeks.

"Take me home, Brion, please take me home."

He could only brush her sodden hair back from her face, and force himself to smile at her. The moments of time were running out, faster and faster, and he no longer knew what to do. The examination had to be made—yet he couldn't force her. He looked for the med box and saw that Telt had taken it back to the sand car. There might be something in it that could help—a tranquilizer perhaps.

Telt had some of his instruments open on the chart table and was examining a tape with a pocket magnifier when Brion entered. He jumped nervously and put the tape behind his back, then relaxed when he saw who it was.

"I thought you were the creepie out there, coming for a look," he whispered. "Maybe you trust him—but I can't afford to. Can't even use the radio. I'm getting out of here now. I have to tell Hys!"

"Tell him what?" Brion asked sharply. "What is all the mystery about?"

Telt handed him the magnifier and tape. "Look at that—recording tape from my scintillation counter. Red verticals are five-minute intervals, the wiggly black horizontal line is the radioactivity level. All this where the line goes up and down, that's when we were driving out to the attack. Varying hot level of the rock and ground."

"What's the big peak in the middle?"

"That coincides exactly with our visit to the house of horrors! When we went through the hole in the bottom of the tower!" He couldn't keep the excitement out of his voice.

"Does it mean that...."

"I don't know. I'm not sure. I have to compare it with the other tapes back at base. It could be the stone of the tower—some of these heavy rocks have got a high natural count. There maybe could be a box of instruments there with fluorescent dials. Or it might be one of those tactical atom bombs they threw at us already. Some arms runner sold them a few."

"Or it could be the cobalt bombs?"

"It could be," Telt said, packing his instruments swiftly. "A badly shielded bomb, or an old one with a crack in the skin, could give a trace like that. Just a little radon leaking out would do it."

"Why don't you call Hys on the radio and let him know?"

"I don't want Granddaddy Krafft's listening posts to hear about it. This is our job—if I'm right. And I have to check my old tapes to make sure. But it's gonna be worth a raid, I can feel that in my bones. Let's unload your corpse." He helped Brion with the clumsy, wrapped bundle, then slipped into the driver's seat.

"Hold it," Brion said. "Do you have anything in the med box I can use for Lea? She seems to have cracked. Not hysterical, but withdrawn. Won't listen to reason, won't do anything but lie there and ask to go home."

“Got the potion here,” Telt said, cracking the med box. “Slaughter-syndrome is what our medic calls it. Hit a lot of our boys. Grow up all your life hating the idea of violence, and it goes rough when you have to start killing people. Guys break up, break down, go to pieces lots of different ways. The medic mixed up this stuff. Don’t know how it works, probably tranquilizers and some of the cortex drugs. But it peels off recent memories. Maybe for the last ten, twelve hours. You can’t get upset about what you don’t remember.” He pulled out a sealed package. “Directions on the box. Good luck.”

“Luck,” Brion said, and shook the technician’s calloused hand. “Let me know if the traces are strong enough to be bombs.” He checked the street to make sure it was clear, then pressed the door button. The sand car churned out into the brilliant sunshine and was gone, the throb of its motor dying in the distance. Brion closed the door and went back to Lea. Ulv was still crouched against the wall.

There was a one-shot disposable hypodermic in the box. Lea made no protest when he broke the seal and pressed the needle against her arm. She sighed and her eyes closed again.

When he saw she was resting easily, he dragged in the tarpaulin-wrapped body of the magter. A work-bench ran along one wall and he struggled the corpse up onto it. He unwrapped the tarpaulin and the sightless eyes stared accusingly up into his.

Using his knife, Brion cut away the loose, blood-soaked clothing. Strapped under the clothes, around the man’s waist, was the familiar collection of Disan artifacts. This could have significance either way. Human or humanoid, the creature would still have to live on Dis. Brion threw it aside, along with the clothing. Nude, pierced, bloody, the corpse lay before him.

In every external physical detail the man was human.

Brion’s theory was becoming more preposterous with each discovery. If the magter weren’t alien, how could he explain their complete lack of emotions? A mutation of some kind? He didn’t see how it was possible. There *had* to be something alien about the dead man before him. The future of a world rested on this flimsy hope. If Telt’s lead to the bombs proved to be false, there would be no hope left at all.

Lea was still unconscious when he looked at her again. There was no way of telling how long the coma would last. He would probably have to waken her out of it, but he didn’t want to do it too early. It took an effort to control his impatience, even though he knew the drug needed time in which to work. He finally decided on at least a minimum of an hour before he should try to disturb her. That would be noon—twelve hours before destruction.

One thing he should do was to get in touch with Professor-Commander Krafft. Maybe it was being defeatist, but he had to make sure that they had a way off this planet if the mission failed. Krafft had installed a relay radio that would forward calls from his personal set. If this relay had been in the Foundation building, contact was broken. This had to be found out before it was too late. Brion thumbed on his radio and sent the call. The reply came back instantly.

“This is fleet communications. Will you please keep this circuit open? Commander Krafft is waiting for this call and it is being put directly through to him now.” Krafft’s voice broke in while the operator was still talking.

“Who is making this call—is it anyone from the Foundation?” The old man’s voice was shaky with emotion.

“Brandd here. I have Lea Morees with me....”

“No more? Are there no other survivors from the disaster that destroyed your building?”

“That’s it, other than us it’s a ... complete loss. With the building and all the instruments gone, I have no way to contact our ship in orbit. Can you arrange to get us out of here if necessary?”

“Give me your location. A ship is coming now—”

“I don’t need a ship now,” Brion interrupted. “Don’t send it until I call. If there is a way to stop your destruction I’ll find it. So I’m staying—to the last minute if necessary.”

Krafft was silent. There was only the crackle of an open mike and the sound of breathing. “That is your decision,” he said finally. “I’ll have a ship standing by. But won’t you let us take Miss Morees out now?”

“No. I need her here. We are still working, looking for—”

“What answer can you find that could possibly avert destruction now?” His tone was between hope and despair. Brion couldn’t help him.

“If I succeed—you’ll know. Otherwise, that will be the end of it. End of Transmission.” He switched the radio off.

Lea was sleeping easily when he looked at her, and there was still a good part of the hour left before he could wake her. How could he put it to use? She would need tools, instruments to examine the corpse, and there were certainly none here. Perhaps he could find some in the ruins of the Foundation building. With this thought he had the sudden desire to see the wreckage up close. There might be other survivors. He had to find out. If he could talk to the men he had seen working there....

Ulv was still crouched against the wall in the outer room. He looked up angrily when Brion came over, but said nothing.

“Will you help me again?” Brion asked. “Stay and watch the girl while I go out. I’ll be back at noon.” Ulv didn’t answer. “I am still looking for the way to save Dis,” Brion added.

“Go—I’ll watch the girl!” Ulv spat words in impotent fury. “I do not know what to do. You may be right. Go. She will be safe with me.”

Brion slipped out into the deserted street and, half running, half walking, made his way towards the rubble that had been the Cultural Relationships Foundation. He used a different course from the one they had come by, striking first towards the outer edge of the city. Once there, he could swing and approach from the other side, so there would be no indication where he had come from. The magter might be watching and he didn’t want to lead them to Lea and the stolen body.

Turning a corner, he saw a sand car stopped in the street ahead. There was something familiar about the lines of it. It could be the one he and Telt had used, but he wasn’t sure. He looked around, but the dusty, packed-dirt street was white and empty, shimmering in silence under the sun. Staying close to the wall and watching

carefully, Brion slipped towards the car. When he came close behind it he was positive it was the one he had been in the night before. What was it doing here?

Silence and heat filled the street. Windows and doors were empty, and there was no motion in their shadows. Putting his foot on a bogey wheel, he reached up and grabbed the searing metal rim of the open window. He pulled himself up and stared at Telt's smiling face.

Smiling in death. The lips pulled back to reveal the grinning teeth, the eyes bursting from the head, the features swollen and contorted from the deadly poison. A tiny, tufted dart of wood stuck in the brown flesh on the side of his neck.

Chapter 15

Brion hurled himself backward and sprawled flat in the dust and filth of the road. No poison dart sought him out; the empty silence still reigned. Telt's murderers had come and gone. Moving quickly, using the bulk of the car as a shield, he opened the door and slipped inside.

They had done a thorough job of destruction. All of the controls had been battered into uselessness, the floor was a junk heap of crushed equipment, intertwined with loops of recording tape bulging like mechanical intestines. A gutted machine, destroyed like its driver.

It was easy enough to reconstruct what had happened. The car had been seen when they entered the city—probably by some of the magter who had destroyed the Foundation building. They had not seen where it had gone, or Brion would surely be dead by now. But they must have spotted it when Telt tried to leave the city—and stopped it in the most effective way possible, a dart through the open window into the unsuspecting driver's neck.

Telt dead! The brutal impact of the man's death had driven all thought of its consequences from Brion's mind. Now he began to realize. Telt had never sent word of his discovery of the radioactive trace to the Nyjord army. He had been afraid to use the radio, and had wanted to tell Hys in person, and to show him the tape. Only now the tape was torn and mixed with all the others, the brain that could have analyzed it dead.

Brion looked at the dangling entrails of the radio and spun for the door. Running swiftly and erratically, he fled from the sand car. His own survival and the possible survival of Dis depended on his not being seen near it. He must contact Hys and pass on the information. Until he did that, he was the only offworlder on Dis who knew which magter tower might contain the world-destroying bombs.

Once out of sight of the sand car he went more slowly, wiping the sweat from his streaming face. He hadn't been seen leaving the car, and he wasn't being followed. The streets here weren't familiar, but he checked his direction by the sun and walked at a steady fast pace towards the destroyed building. More of the native Disans were in the streets now. They all noticed him, some even stopped and scowled fiercely at him. With his emphatic awareness he felt their anger and hatred. A knot of men radiated death, and he put his hand on his gun as he passed them. Two of them had their blowguns ready, but didn't use them. By the time he had turned the next corner he was soaked with nervous perspiration.

Ahead was the rubble of the destroyed building. Grounded next to it was the tapered form of a spacer's pinnace. Two men had come from the open lock and were standing at the edge of the burnt area.

Brion's boots grated loudly on the broken wreckage. The men turned quickly towards him, guns raised. Both of them carried ion rifles. They relaxed when they saw his offworld clothes.

"Bloody damned savages!" one of them growled. He was a heavy-planet man, a squashed-down column of muscle and gristle, whose head barely reached Brion's chest. A pushed-back cap had the crossed slide-rule symbol of ship's computer man.

“Can’t blame them, I guess,” the second man said. He wore purser’s insignia. His features were different, but with the same compacted body the two men were as physically alike as twins. Probably from the same home planet. “They’re gonna get their whole world blown out from under them at midnight. Looks as if the poor slob in the streets finally realized what is happening. Hope we’re in jump-space by then. I saw Estrada’s World get it, and I don’t want to see that again, not twice in one lifetime!”

The computer man was looking closely at Brion, head tilted sideways to see his face. “You need transportation offworld?” he asked. “We’re the last ship at the port, and we’re going to boil out of here as soon as the rest of our cargo is aboard. We’ll give you a lift if you need it.”

Only by a tremendous effort at control did Brion conceal the destroying sorrow that overwhelmed him when he looked at that shattered wasteland, the graveyard of so many. “No,” he said. “That won’t be necessary. I’m in touch with the blockading fleet and they’ll pick me up before midnight.”

“You from Nyjord?” the purser growled.

“No,” Brion said, still only half aware of the men. “But there is trouble with my own ship.” He realized that they were looking intently at him, that he owed them some kind of explanation. “I thought I could find a way to stop the war. Now ... I’m not so sure.” He hadn’t intended to be so frank with the spacemen, but the words had been uppermost in his thoughts and had simply slipped out.

The computer man started to say something, but his shipmate speared him in the side with his elbow. “We blast soon—and I don’t like the way these Disans are looking at us. The captain said to find out what caused the fire, then get the hell back. So let’s go.”

“Don’t miss your ship,” the computer man said to Brion, and he started for the pinnace. Then he hesitated and turned. “Sure there’s nothing we can do for you?”

Sorrow would accomplish nothing. Brion fought to sweep the dregs of emotion from his mind and to think clearly. “You can help me,” he said. “I could use a scalpel or any other surgical instrument you might have.” Lea would need those. Then he remembered Telt’s undelivered message. “Do you have a portable radio transceiver? I can pay you for it.”

The computer man vanished inside the rocket and reappeared a minute later with a small package. “There’s a scalpel and a magnetized tweezers in here—all I could find in the med kit. Hope they’ll do.” He reached inside and swung out the metal case of a self-contained transceiver. “Take this, it’s got plenty of range, even on the longer frequencies.”

He raised his hand at Brion’s offer to pay. “My donation,” he said. “If you can save this planet I’ll give you the whole pinnace as well. We’ll tell the captain we lost the radio in some trouble with the natives. Isn’t that right, Moneybags?” He prodded the purser in the chest with a finger that would have punched a hole through a weaker man.

“I read you loud and clear,” the purser said. “I’ll make out an invoice so stating, back in the ship.” They were both in the pinnace then, and Brion had to move fast to get clear of the takeoff blast.

A sense of obligation—the spacemen had felt it too. The realization of this raised Brion’s spirits a bit as he searched through the rubble for anything useful. He recognized part of a wall still standing as a corner of the laboratory. Poking through the ruins, he unearthed broken instruments and a single, battered case that had barely missed destruction. Inside was the binocular microscope, the right tube bent, its lenses cracked and obscured. The left eyepiece still seemed to be functioning. Brion carefully put it back in the case.

He looked at his watch. It was almost noon. These few pieces of equipment would have to do for the dissection. Watched suspiciously by the onlooking Disans, he started back to the warehouse. It was a long, circuitous walk, since he didn’t dare give any clues to his destination. Only when he was positive he had not been observed or followed did he slip through the building’s entrance, locking the door behind him.

Lea’s frightened eyes met his when he went into the office. “A friendly smile here among the cannibals,” she called. Her strained expression gave the lie to the cheeriness of her words. “What has happened? Since I woke up, the great stone face over there”—she pointed to Ulv—“has been telling me exactly nothing.”

“What’s the last thing you can remember?” Brion asked carefully. He didn’t want to tell her too much, lest this bring on the shock again. Ulv had shown great presence of mind in not talking to her.

“If you must know,” Lea said, “I remember quite a lot, Brion Brandd. I shan’t go into details, since this sort of thing is best kept from the natives. For the record then, I can recall going to sleep after you left. And nothing since then. It’s weird. I went to sleep in that lumpy hospital bed and woke up on this couch, feeling simply terrible. With *him* just sitting there and scowling at me. Won’t you please tell me what is going on?”

A partial truth was best, saving all of the details that he could for later. “The magter attacked the Foundation building,” he said. “They are getting angry at all offworlders now. You were still knocked out by a sleeping drug, so Ulv helped bring you here. It’s afternoon now—”

“Of the last day?” She sounded horrified. “While I’m playing Sleeping Beauty the world is coming to an end! Was anyone hurt in the attack? Or killed?”

“There were a number of casualties—and plenty of trouble,” Brion said. He had to get her off the subject. Walking over to the corpse, he threw back the cover from its face. “But this is more important right now. It’s one of the magter. I have a scalpel and some other things here—will you perform an autopsy?”

Lea huddled back on the couch, her arms around herself, looking chilled in spite of the heat of the day. “What happened to the people at the building?” she asked in a thin voice. The injection had removed her memories of the tragedy, but echoes of the strain and shock still reverberated in her mind and body. “I feel so ... exhausted. Please tell me what happened. I have the feeling you’re hiding something.”

Brion sat next to her and took her hands in his, not surprised to find them cold. Looking into her eyes, he tried to give her some of his strength. “It wasn’t very nice,” he said. “You were shaken up by it, I imagine that’s why you feel the way you do now. But—Lea, you’ll have to take my word for this. Don’t ask any more questions. There’s nothing we can do now about it. But we can still find out about the magter. Will you examine the corpse?”

She started to ask something, then changed her mind. When she dropped her eyes Brion felt the thin shiver that went through her body. “There’s something terribly wrong,” she said. “I know that. I guess I’ll have to take your word that it’s best not to ask questions. Help me up, will you, darling? My legs are absolutely liquid.”

Leaning on him, with his arm around her supporting most of her weight, she went slowly across to the corpse. She looked down and shuddered. “Not what you would call a natural death,” she said. Ulv watched intently as she took the scalpel out of its holder. “You don’t have to look at this,” she told him in halting Disan. “Not if you don’t want to.”

“I want to,” he told her, not taking his eyes from the body. “I have never seen a magter dead before, or without covering, like an ordinary person.” He continued to stare fixedly.

“Find me some drinking water, will you, Brion?” Lea said. “And spread the tarp under the body. These things are quite messy.”

After drinking the water she seemed stronger, and could stand without holding onto the table with both hands. Placing the tip of the scalpel just below the magter’s breast bone, she made the long post-mortem incision down to the pubic symphysis. The great, body-length wound gaped open like a red mouth. Across the table Ulv shuddered but didn’t avert his eyes.

One by one she removed the internal organs. Once she looked up at Brion, then quickly returned to work. The silence stretched on and on until Brion had to break it.

“Tell me, can’t you? Have you found out anything?”

His words snapped the thin strand of her strength, and she staggered back to the couch and collapsed onto it. Her bloodstained hands hung over the side, making a strangely terrible contrast to the whiteness of her skin.

“I’m sorry, Brion,” she said. “But there’s nothing, nothing at all. There are minor differences, organic changes I’ve never seen before—his liver is tremendous, for one thing. But changes like this are certainly consistent within the pattern of homo sapiens as adapted to a different planet. He’s a man. Changed, adapted, modified—but still just as human as you or I.”

“How can you be sure?” Brion broke in. “You haven’t examined him completely, have you?” She shook her head. “Then go on. The other organs. His brain. A microscopic examination. Here!” he said, pushing the microscope case towards her with both hands.

She dropped her head onto her forearms and sobbed. “Leave me alone, can’t you! I’m tired and sick and fed up with this awful planet. Let them die. I don’t care! Your theory is false, useless. Admit that! And let me wash the filth from my hands....” Sobbing drowned out her words.

Brion stood over her and drew a shuddering breath. Was he wrong? He didn’t dare think about that. He had to go on. Looking down at the thinness of her bent back, with the tiny projections of her spine showing through the thin cloth, he felt an immense pity—a pity he couldn’t surrender to. This thin, helpless, frightened woman was his only resource. She had to work. He had to *make* her work.

Ihjel had done it—used projective empathy to impress his emotions upon Brion. Now Brion must do it with Lea. He had had some sessions in the art, but not nearly enough to make him proficient. Nevertheless he had to try.

Strength was what Lea needed. Aloud he said simply, “You can do it. You have the will and the strength to finish.” And silently his mind cried out the order to obey, to share his power now that hers was drained and finished.

Only when she lifted her face and he saw the dried tears did he realize that he had succeeded. “You will go on?” he asked quietly.

Lea merely nodded and rose to her feet. She shuffled like a sleepwalker jerked along by invisible strings. Her strength wasn’t her own, and the situation reminded him unhappily of that last event of the Twenties when he had experienced the same kind of draining activity. She wiped her hands roughly on her clothes and opened the microscope case.

“The slides are all broken,” she said.

“This will do,” Brion told her, crashing his heel through the glass partition. Shards tinkled and crashed to the floor. He took some of the bigger pieces and broke them to rough squares that would fit under the clips on the stage. Lea accepted them without a word. Putting a drop of the magter’s blood on the slide, she bent over the eyepiece.

Her hands shook when she tried to adjust the focusing. Using low power, she examined the specimen, squinting through the angled tube. Once she turned the sub-stage mirror a bit to catch the light streaming in the window. Brion stood behind her, fists clenched, forceably controlling his anxiety. “What do you see?” he finally blurted out.

“Phagocytes, platelets ... leucocytes ... everything seems normal.” Her voice was dull, exhausted, her eyes blinking with fatigue as she stared into the tube.

Anger at defeat burned through Brion. Even faced with failure, he refused to accept it. He reached over her shoulder and savagely twisted the turret of microscope until the longest lens was in position. “If you can’t see anything—try the high power! It’s there—I know it’s there! I’ll get you a tissue specimen.” He turned back to the disemboweled cadaver.

His back was turned and he did not see that sudden stiffening of her shoulders, or the sudden eagerness that seized her fingers as they adjusted the focus. But he did feel the wave of emotion that welled from her, impinging directly on his empathetic sense. “What is it?” he called to her, as if she had spoken aloud.

“Something ... something here,” she said, “in this leucocyte. It’s not normal structure, but it’s familiar. I’ve seen something like it before, but I just can’t remember.” She turned away from the microscope and unthinkingly pressed her gory knuckles to her forehead. “I know I’ve seen it before.”

Brion squinted into the deserted microscope and made out a dim shape in the center of the field. It stood out sharply when he focused—the white, jellyfish shape of a single-celled leucocyte. To his untrained eye there was nothing unusual about it. He couldn’t know what was strange, when he had no idea of what was normal.

“Do you see those spherical green shapes grouped together?” Lea asked. Before Brion could answer she gasped, “I remember now!” Her fatigue was forgotten in her excitement. “*Icerya purchasi*, that was the name, something like that. It’s a coccid, a

little scale insect. It had those same shapes collected together within its individual cells.”

“What do they mean? What is the connection with Dis?”

“I don’t know,” she said; “it’s just that they look so similar. And I never saw anything like this in a human cell before. In the coccids, the green particles grow into a kind of yeast that lives within the insect. Not a parasite, but a real symbiote....”

Her eyes opened wide as she caught the significance of her own words. A symbiote—and Dis was the world where symbiosis and parasitism had become more advanced and complex than on any other planet. Lea’s thoughts spun around this fact and chewed at the fringes of the logic. Brion could sense her concentration and absorption. He did nothing to break the mood. Her hands were clenched, her eyes staring unseeingly at the wall as her mind raced.

Brion and Ulv were quiet, watching her, waiting for her conclusions. The pieces were falling into shape at last.

Lea opened her clenched hands and smoothed them on her sodden skirt. She blinked and turned to Brion. “Is there a tool box here?” she asked.

Her words were so unexpected that Brion could not answer for a moment. Before he could say anything she spoke again.

“Not hand tools; that would take too long. Could you find anything like a power saw? That would be ideal.” She turned back to the microscope, and he didn’t try to question her. Ulv was still looking at the body of the magter and had understood nothing of what they had said.

Brion went out into the loading bay. There was nothing he could use on the ground floor, so he took the stairs to the floor above. A corridor here passed by a number of rooms. All of the doors were locked, including one with the hopeful sign TOOL ROOM on it. He battered at the metal door with his shoulder without budging it. As he stepped back to look for another way in, he glanced at his watch.

Two o’clock! In ten hours the bombs would fall on Dis.

The need for haste tore at him. Yet there could be no noise—someone in the street might hear it. He quickly stripped off his shirt and wrapped it in a loose roll around the barrel of his gun, extending it in a loose tube in front of the barrel. Holding the rolled cloth in his left hand, he jammed the gun up tight against the door, the muzzle against the lock. The single shot was only a dull thud, inaudible outside of the building. Pieces of broken mechanism jarred and rattled inside the lock and the door swung open.

When he came back Lea was standing by the body. He held the small power saw with a rotary blade. “Will this do?” he asked. “Runs on its own battery; almost fully charged too.”

“Perfect,” she answered. “You’re both going to have to help me.” She switched into the Disan language. “Ulv, would you find some place where you can watch the street without being seen? Signal me when it is empty. I’m afraid this saw is going to make a lot of noise.”

Ulv nodded and went out into the bay, where he climbed a heap of empty crates so he could peer through the small windows set high in the wall. He looked carefully in both directions, then waved to her to go ahead.

“Stand to one side and hold the cadaver’s chin, Brion,” she said. “Hold it firmly so the head doesn’t shake around when I cut. This is going to be a little gruesome. I’m sorry. But it’ll be the fastest way to cut the bone.” The saw bit into the skull.

Once Ulv waved them into silence, and shrank back himself into the shadows next to the window. They waited impatiently until he gave them the sign to continue again. Brion held steady while the saw cut a circle completely around the skull.

“Finished,” Lea said and the saw dropped from her limp fingers to the floor. She massaged life back into her hands before she finished the job. Carefully and delicately she removed the cap of bone from the magter’s head, exposing his brain to the shaft of light from the window.

“You were right all the time, Brion,” she said. “There is your alien.”

Chapter 16

Ulv joined them as they looked down at the exposed brain of the magter. The thing was so clearly evident that even Ulv noticed it.

"I have seen dead animals and my people dead with their heads open, but I have never seen anything like that before," he said.

"What is it?" Brion asked.

"The invader, the alien you were looking for," Lea told him.

The magter's brain was only two-thirds of what would have been its normal size. Instead of filling the skull completely, it shared the space with a green, amorphous shape. This was ridged somewhat like a brain, but the green shape had still darker nodules and extensions. Lea took her scalpel and gently prodded the dark moist mass.

"It reminds me very much of something that I've seen before on Earth," she said.

"The green-fly—*Drepanosiphum platanoides*—and an unusual organ it has, called the pseudova. Now that I have seen this growth in the magter's skull, I can think of a positive parallel. The fly *Drepanosiphum* also had a large green organ, only it fills half of the body cavity instead of the head. Its identity puzzled biologists for years, and they had a number of complex theories to explain it. Finally someone managed to dissect and examine it. The pseudova turned out to be a living plant, a yeastlike growth that helps with the green-fly's digestion. It produces enzymes that enable the fly to digest the great amounts of sugar it gets from plant juice."

"That's not unusual," Brion said, puzzled. "Termites and human beings are a couple of other creatures whose digestion is helped by internal flora. What's the difference in the green-fly?"

"Reproduction, mainly. All the other gut-living plants have to enter the host and establish themselves as outsiders, permitted to remain as long as they are useful. The green-fly and its yeast plant have a permanent symbiotic relationship that is essential to the existence of both. The plant spores appear in many places throughout the fly's body—but they are *always* in the germ cells. Every egg cell has some, and every egg that grows to maturity is infected with the plant spores. The continuation of the symbiosis is unbroken and guaranteed."

"Do you think those green spheres in the magter's blood cells could be the same kind of thing?" Brion asked.

"I'm sure of it," Lea said. "It must be the same process. There are probably green spheres throughout the magters' bodies, spores or offspring of those things in their brains. Enough will find their way to the germ cells to make sure that every young magter is infected at birth. While the child is growing, so is the symbiote. Probably a lot faster, since it seems to be a simpler organism. I imagine it is well established in the brain pan within the first six months of the infant's life."

"But why?" Brion asked. "What does it do?"

"I'm only guessing now, but there is plenty of evidence that gives us an idea of its function. I'm willing to bet that the symbiote itself is not a simple organism, it's probably an amalgam of plant and animal like most of the other creatures on Dis.

The thing is just too complex to have developed since mankind has been on this planet. The magter must have caught the symbiotic infection eating some Disan animal. The symbiote lived and flourished in its new environment, well protected by a bony skull in a long-lived host. In exchange for food, oxygen and comfort, the brain-symbiote must generate hormones and enzymes that enable the magter to survive. Some of these might aid digestion, enabling the magter to eat any plant or animal life they can lay their hands on. The symbiote might produce sugars, scavenge the blood of toxins—there are so many things it could do. Things it must have done, since the magter are obviously the dominant life form on this planet. They paid a high price for the symbiote, but it didn't matter to race survival until now. Did you notice that the magter's brain is no smaller than normal?"

"It must be—or how else could that brain-symbiote fit in inside the skull with it?" Brion said.

"If the magter's total brain were smaller in volume than normal it could fit into the remaining space in the cranial hollow. But the brain is full-sized—it is just that part of it is missing, absorbed by the symbiote."

"The frontal lobes," Brion said with sudden realization. "This hellish growth has performed a prefrontal lobotomy!"

"It's done even more than that," Lea said, separating the convolutions of the gray matter with her scalpel to uncover a green filament beneath. "These tendrils penetrate further back into the brain, but always remain in the cerebrum. The cerebellum appears to be untouched. Apparently just the higher functions of mankind have been interfered with, selectively. Destruction of the frontal lobes made the magter creatures without emotions or ability for really abstract thought. Apparently they survived better without these. There must have been some horrible failures before the right balance was struck. The final product is a man-plant-animal symbiote that is admirably adapted for survival on this disaster world. No emotions to cause complications or desires that might interfere with pure survival. Complete ruthlessness—mankind has always been strong on this anyway, so it didn't take much of a push."

"The other Disans, like Ulv here, managed to survive without turning into such a creature. So why was it necessary for the magter to go so far?"

"Nothing is necessary in evolution, you know that," Lea said. "Many variations are possible, and all the better ones continue. You might say that Ulv's people survive, but the magter survive better. If offworld contact hadn't been re-established, I imagine that the magter would slowly have become the dominant race. Only they won't have the chance now. It looks as though they have succeeded in destroying both races with their suicidal urge."

"That's the part that doesn't make sense," Brion said. "The magter have survived and climbed right to the top of the evolutionary heap here. Yet they are suicidal. How does it happen they haven't been wiped out before this?"

"Individually, they have been aggressive to the point of suicide. They will attack anything and everything with the same savage lack of emotion. Luckily there are no bigger animals on this planet. So where they have died as individuals, their utter ruthlessness has guaranteed their survival as a group. Now they are faced with a problem that is too big for their half-destroyed minds to handle. Their personal policy has become their planetary policy—and that's never a very smart thing. They

are like men with knives who have killed all the men who were only armed with stones. Now they are facing men with guns, and they are going to keep charging and fighting until they are all dead.

“It’s a perfect case of the utter impartiality of the forces of evolution. Men infected by this Disan life form were the dominant creatures on this planet. The creature in the magters’ brains was a true symbiote then, giving something and receiving something, making a union of symbiotes where all were stronger together than any could be separately. Now this is changed. The magter brain cannot understand the concept of racial death, in a situation where it must understand to be able to survive. Therefore the brain-creature is no longer a symbiote but a parasite.”

“And as a parasite it must be destroyed!” Brion broke in. “We’re not fighting shadows any more,” he exulted. “We’ve found the enemy—and it’s not the magter at all. Just a sort of glorified tapeworm that is too stupid to know when it is killing itself off. Does it have a brain—can it think?”

“I doubt it very much,” Lea said. “A brain would be of absolutely no use to it. So even if it originally possessed reasoning powers they would be gone by now. Symbiotes or parasites that live internally like this always degenerate to an absolute minimum of functions.”

“Tell me about it. What is this thing?” Ulv broke in, prodding the soft form of the brain-symbiote. He had heard all their excited talk but had not understood a word.

“Explain it to him, will you, Lea, as best you can,” Brion said, looking at her, and he realized how exhausted she was. “And sit down while you do it; you’re long overdue for a rest. I’m going to try—” He broke off when he looked at his watch.

It was after four in the afternoon—less than eight hours to go. What was he to do? Enthusiasm faded as he realized that only half of the problem was solved. The bombs would drop on schedule unless the Nyjorders could understand the significance of this discovery. Even if they understood, would it make any difference to them? The threat of the hidden cobalt bombs would not be changed.

With this thought came the guilty realization that he had forgotten completely about Telt’s death. Even before he contacted the Nyjord fleet he must tell Hys and his rebel army what had happened to Telt and his sand car. Also about the radioactive traces. They couldn’t be checked against the records now to see how important they might be, but Hys might make another raid on the strength of the suspicion. This call wouldn’t take long, then he would be free to tackle Professor-Commander Krafft.

Carefully setting the transmitter on the frequency of the rebel army, he sent out a call to Hys. There was no answer. When he switched to receive all he heard was static.

There was always a chance the set was broken. He quickly twisted the transmitter to the frequency of his personal radio, then whistled in the microphone. The received signal was so loud that it hurt his ears. He tried to call Hys again, and was relieved to get a response this time.

“Brion Brandd here. Can you read me? I want to talk to Hys at once.”

It came as a shock that it was Professor-Commander Krafft who answered.

“I’m sorry, Brion, but it’s impossible to talk to Hys. We are monitoring his frequency and your call was relayed to me. Hys and his rebels lifted ship about half an hour ago, and are already on the way back to Nyjord. Are you ready to leave now? It will soon

become dangerous to make any landings. Even now I will have to ask for volunteers to get you out of there.”

Hys and the rebel army gone! Brion assimilated the thought. He had been thrown off balance when he realized he was talking to Krafft.

“If they’re gone—well, then there’s nothing I can do about it,” he said. “I was going to call you, so I can talk to you now. Listen and try to understand. You must cancel the bombing. I’ve found out about the magter, found what causes their mental aberration. If we can correct that, we can stop them from attacking Nyjord—”

“Can they be corrected by midnight tonight?” Krafft broke in. He was abrupt and sounded almost angry. Even saints get tired.

“No, of course not.” Brion frowned at the microphone, realizing the talk was going all wrong, but not knowing how to remedy it. “But it won’t take too long. I have evidence here that will convince you that what I say is the truth.”

“I believe you without seeing it, Brion.” The trace of anger was gone from Krafft’s voice now, and it was heavy with fatigue and defeat. “I’ll admit you are probably right. A little while ago I admitted to Hys too that he was probably right in his original estimation of the correct way to tackle the problem of Dis. We have made a lot of mistakes, and in making them we have run out of time. I’m afraid that is the only fact that is relevant now. The bombs fall at twelve, and even then they may drop too late. A ship is already on its way from Nyjord with my replacement. I exceeded my authority by running a day past the maximum the technicians gave me. I realize now I was gambling the life of my own world in the vain hope I could save Dis. They can’t be saved. They’re dead. I won’t hear any more about it.”

“You must listen—”

“I must destroy the planet below me, that is what I must do. That fact will not be changed by anything you say. All the offworlders—other than your party—are gone. I’m sending a ship down now to pick you up. As soon as that ship lifts I am going to drop the first bombs. Now—tell me where you are so they can come for you.”

“Don’t threaten me, Krafft!” Brion shook his fist at the radio in an excess of anger. “You’re a killer and a world destroyer—don’t try to make yourself out as anything else. I have the knowledge to avert this slaughter and you won’t listen to me. And I know where the cobalt bombs are—in the magter tower that Hys raided last night. Get those bombs and there is no need to drop any of your own!”

“I’m sorry, Brion. I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but at the same time I know the futility of it. I’m not going to accuse you of lying, but do you realize how thin your evidence sounds from this end? First, a dramatic discovery of the cause of the magters’ intransigency. Then, when that had no results, you suddenly remember that you know where the bombs are. The best-kept magter secret.”

“I don’t know for sure, but there is a very good chance it is so,” Brion said, trying to repair his defenses. “Telt made readings, he had other records of radioactivity in this same magter keep—proof that something is there. But Telt is dead now, the records destroyed. Don’t you see—” He broke off, realizing how vague and unprovable his case was. This was defeat.

The radio was silent, with just the hum of the carrier wave as Krafft waited for him to continue. When Brion did speak his voice was empty of all hope.

“Send your ship down,” he said tiredly. “We’re in a building that belonged to the Light Metals Trust, Ltd., a big warehouse of some kind. I don’t know the address here, but I’m sure you have someone there who can find it. We’ll be waiting for you. You win, Krafft.”

He turned off the radio.

Chapter 17

“Do you mean what you said, about giving up?” Lea asked. Brion realized that she had stopped talking to Ulv some time ago, and had been listening to his conversation with Krafft. He shrugged, trying to put his feeling into words.

“We’ve tried—and almost succeeded. But if they won’t listen, what can we do? What can one man possibly do against a fleet loaded with H-bombs?”

As if in answer to the question, Ulv’s voice drowned him out, the harsh Disan words slashing the silence of the room.

“Kill you, the enemy!” he said. “Kill you *umedvirk*!”

He shouted the last word and his hand flashed to his belt. In a single swift motion he lifted his blowgun and placed it to his lips. A tiny dart quivered in the already dead flesh of the creature in the magter’s skull. The action had all the symbolism of a broken lance, the declaration of war.

“Ulv understands it a lot better than you might think,” Lea said. “He knows things about symbiosis and mutualism that would get him a job as a lecturer in any university on Earth. He knows just what the brain-symbiote is and what it does. They even have a word for it, one that never appeared in our Disan language lessons. A life form that you can live with or cooperate with is called *medvirk*. One that works to destroy you is *umedvirk*. He also understands that life forms can change, and be *medvirk* or *umedvirk* at different times. He has just decided that the brain symbiote is *umedvirk* and he is out to kill it. So will the rest of the Disans as soon as he can show them the evidence and explain.”

“You’re sure of this?” Brion asked, interested in spite of himself.

“Positive. The Disans have an absolute attitude towards survival; you should realize that. Not the same as the magter, but not much different in the results. They will kill the brain-symbiotes, even if it means killing every magter who harbors one.”

“If that is the case we can’t leave now,” Brion said. With these words it suddenly became clear what he had to do. “The ship is coming down now from the fleet. Get in it and take the body of the magter. I won’t go.”

“Where will you be?” she asked, shocked.

“Fighting the magter. My presence on the planet means that Krafft won’t keep his threat to drop the bombs any earlier than the midnight deadline. That would be deliberately murdering me. I doubt if my presence past midnight will stop him, but it should keep the bombs away at least until then.”

“What will you accomplish besides committing suicide?” Lea pleaded. “You just told me how a single man can’t stop the bombs. What will happen to you at midnight?”

“I’ll be dead—but in spite of that I can’t run away. Not now. I must do everything possible right up until the last instant. Ulv and I will go to the magter tower, try to find out if the bombs are there. He will fight on our side now. He may even know more about the bombs, things that he didn’t want to tell me before. We can get help from his people. Some of them must know where the bombs are, being native to this planet.”

Lea started to say something, but he rushed on, drowning out her words.

“You have just as big a job. Show the magter to Krafft, explain the significance of the brain-parasite to him. Try to get him to talk to Hys about the last raid. Try to get him to hold off the attack. I’ll keep the radio with me and as soon as I know anything I’ll call in. This is all last resort, finger in the dike kind of stuff, but it is all we can do. Because if we do nothing, it means the end of Dis.”

Lea tried to argue with him, but he wouldn’t listen to her. He only kissed her, and with a lightness he did not feel tried to convince her that everything would be all right. In their hearts they both knew it wouldn’t be but they left it that way because it was the least painful solution.

A sudden rumbling shook the building and the windows darkened as a ship settled in the street outside. The Nyjord crew came in with guns pointed, alert for anything.

After a little convincing they took the cadaver, as well as Lea, when they lifted ship. Brion watched the spacer become a pinpoint in the sky and vanish. He tried to shake off the feeling that this was the last time he would see any of them.

“Let’s get out of here fast,” he told Ulv, picking up the radio, “before anyone comes around to see why the ship landed.”

“What will you do?” Ulv asked as they went down the street towards the desert.

“What can we do in the few hours we have left?” He pointed at the sun, nearing the horizon. Brion shifted the weight of the radio to his other hand before replying.

“Get to the magter tower we raided last night, that’s the best chance. The bombs might be there.... Unless you know where the bombs are?”

Ulv shook his head. “I do not know, but some of my people may. We will capture a magter, then kill him, so they can all see the *umedvirk*. Then they will tell us everything they know.”

“The tower first then, for bombs or a sample magter. What’s the fastest way we can get there?”

Ulv frowned in thought. “If you can drive one of the cars the offworlders use, I know where there are some locked in buildings in this city. None of my people know how they are made to move.”

“I can work them—let’s go.”

Chance was with them this time. The first sand car they found still had the keys in the lock. It was battery-powered, but contained a full charge. Much quieter than the heavy atomic cars, it sped smoothly out of the city and across the sand. Ahead of them the sun sank in a red wave of color. It was six o’clock. By the time they reached the tower it was seven, and Brion’s nerves felt as if they were writhing under his skin.

Even though it looked like suicide, attacking the tower brought blessed relief. It was movement and action, and for moments at a time he forgot the bombs hanging over his head.

The attack was nerve-rackingly anticlimactic. They used the main entrance, Ulv ranging soundlessly ahead. There was no one in sight. Once inside, they crept down towards the lower rooms where the radiation had been detected. Only gradually did they realize that the magter tower was completely empty.

“Everyone gone,” Ulv grunted, sniffing the air in every room that they passed. “Many magter were here earlier, but they are gone now.”

“Do they often desert their towers?” Brion asked.

“Never. I have never heard of it happening before. I can think of no reason why they should do a thing like this.”

“Well, I can,” Brion told him. “They would leave their home if they took something with them of greater value. The bombs. If the bombs were hidden here, they might move them after the attack.” Sudden fear hit him. “Or they might move them because it is time to take them—to the launcher! Let’s get out of here, the quickest way we can.”

“I smell air from outside,” Ulv said, “coming from down there. This cannot be, because the magter have no entrances this low in their towers.”

“We blasted one in earlier—that could be it. Can you find it?”

Moonlight shone ahead as they turned an angle of the corridor, and stars were visible through the gaping opening in the wall.

“It looks bigger than it was,” Brion said, “as if the magter had enlarged it.” He looked through and saw the tracks on the sand outside. “As if they had enlarged it to bring something bulky up from below—and carried it away in whatever made those tracks!”

Using the opening themselves, they ran back to the sand car. Brion ground it fiercely around and turned the headlights on the tracks. There were the marks of a sand car’s treads, half obscured by thin, unmarked wheel tracks. He turned off the lights and forced himself to move slowly and to do an accurate job. A quick glimpse at his watch showed him there were four hours left to go. The moonlight was bright enough to illuminate the tracks. Driving with one hand, he turned on the radio transmitter, already set for Krafft’s wave length.

When the operator acknowledged his signal Brion reported what they had discovered and his conclusions. “Get that message to Commander Krafft now. I can’t wait to talk to him—I’m following the tracks.” He killed the transmission and stamped on the accelerator. The sand car churned and bounced down the track.

“They are going to the mountains,” Ulv said some time later, as the tracks still pointed straight ahead. “There are caves there and many magter have been seen near them; that is what I have heard.”

The guess was correct. Before nine o’clock the ground humped into a range of foothills, and the darker masses of mountains could be seen behind them, rising up to obscure the stars.

“Stop the car here,” Ulv said, “The caves begin not too far ahead. There may be magter watching or listening, so we must go quietly.”

Brion followed the deep-cut grooves, carrying the radio. Ulv came and went on both sides, silently as a shadow, scouting for hidden watchers. As far as he could discover there were none.

By nine-thirty Brion realized they had deserted the sand car too soon. The tracks wound on and on, and seemed to have no end. They passed some caves which Ulv pointed out to him, but the tracks never stopped. Time was running out and the nightmare stumbling through the darkness continued.

“More caves ahead,” Ulv said, “Go quietly.”

They came cautiously to the crest of a hill, as they had done so many times already, and looked into the shallow valley beyond. Sand covered the valley floor, and the light of the setting moon shone over the tracks at a flat angle, marking them off sharply as lines of shadow. They ran straight across the sandy valley and disappeared into the dark mouth of a cave on the far side.

Sinking back behind the hilltop, Brion covered the pilot light with his hand and turned on the transmitter. Ulv stayed above him, staring at the opening of the cave.

“This is an important message,” Brion whispered into the mike. “Please record.” He repeated this for thirty seconds, glancing at his watch to make sure of the time, since the seconds of waiting stretched to minutes in his brain. Then, as clearly as possible without raising his voice above a whisper, he told of the discovery of the tracks and the cave.

“... The bombs may or may not be in here, but we are going in to find out. I’ll leave my personal transmitter here with the broadcast power turned on, so you can home on its signal. That will give you a directional beacon to find the cave. I’m taking the other radio in—it has more power. If we can’t get back to the entrance I’ll try a signal from inside. I doubt if you will hear it because of the rock, but I’ll try. End of transmission. Don’t try to answer me because I have the receiver turned off. There are no earphones on this set and the speaker would be too loud here.”

He switched off, held his thumb on the button for an instant, then flicked it back on.

“Good-by Lea,” he said, and killed the power for good.

They circled and reached the rocky wall of the cliff. Creeping silently in the shadows, they slipped up on the dark entrance of the cave. Nothing moved ahead and there was no sound from the entrance of the cave. Brion glanced at his watch and was instantly sorry.

Ten-thirty.

The last shelter concealing them was five metres from the cave. They started to rise, to rush the final distance, when Ulv suddenly waved Brion down. He pointed to his nose, then to the cave. He could smell the magter there.

A dark figure separated itself from the greater darkness of the cave mouth. Ulv acted instantly. He stood up and his hand went to his mouth; air hissed faintly through the tube in his hand. Without a sound the magter folded and fell to the ground. Before the body hit, Ulv crouched low and rushed in. There was the sudden scuffling of feet on the floor, then silence.

Brion walked in, gun ready and alert, not knowing what he would find. His toe pushed against a body on the ground and from the darkness Ulv whispered, “There were only two. We can go on now.”

Finding their way through the cave was a maddening torture. They had no light, nor would they dare use one if they had. There were no wheel marks to follow on the stone floor. Without Ulv’s sensitive nose they would have been completely lost. The cave branched and rejoined and they soon lost all sense of direction.

Walking was almost impossible. They had to grope with their hands before them like blind men. Stumbling and falling against the rock, their fingers were soon throbbing and raw from brushing against the rough walls. Ulv followed the scent of the magter

that hung in the air where they had passed. When it grew thin he knew they had left the frequently used tunnels and entered deserted ones. They could only retrace their steps and start again in a different direction.

More maddening than the walking was the way time was running out. Inexorably the glowing hands crept around the face of Brion's watch until they stood at fifteen minutes before twelve.

"There is a light ahead," Ulv whispered, and Brion almost gasped with relief. They moved slowly and silently until they stood, concealed by the darkness, looking out into a domed chamber brightly lit by glowing tubes.

"What is it?" Ulv asked, blinking in the painful wash of illumination after the long darkness.

Brion had to fight to control his voice, to stop from shouting.

"The cage with the metal webbing is a jump-space generator. The pointed, silver shapes next to it are bombs of some kind, probably the cobalt bombs. We've found it!"

His first impulse was to instantly send the radio call that would stop the waiting fleet of H-bombers. But an unconvincing message would be worse than no message at all. He had to describe exactly what he saw here so the Nyjorders would know he wasn't lying. What he told them had to fit exactly with the information they already had about the launcher and the bombs.

The launcher had been jury-rigged from a ship's jump-space generator; that was obvious. The generator and its controls were neatly cased and mounted. Cables ran from them to a roughly constructed cage of woven metal straps, hammered and bent into shape by hand. Three technicians were working on the equipment. Brion wondered what sort of blood-thirsty war-lovers the magter had found to handle the bombing for them. Then he saw the chains around their necks and the bloody wounds on their backs.

He still found it difficult to have any pity for them. They had obviously been willing to accept money to destroy another planet—or they wouldn't have been working here. They had probably rebelled only when they had discovered how suicidal the attack would be.

Thirteen minutes to midnight.

Cradling the radio against his chest, Brion rose to his feet. He had a better view of the bombs now. There were twelve of them, alike as eggs from the same deadly clutch. Pointed like the bow of a spacer, each one swept smoothly back for its two metres of length, to a sharply chopped-off end. They were obviously incomplete, the war heads of rockets. One had its base turned towards him, and he saw six projecting studs that could be used to attach it to the missing rocket. A circular inspection port was open in the flat base of the bomb.

This was enough. With this description, the Nyjorders would know he couldn't be lying about finding the bombs. Once they realized this, they couldn't destroy Dis without first trying to neutralize them.

Brion carefully counted fifty paces before he stopped. He was far enough from the cavern so he couldn't be heard, and an angle of the cave cut off all light from behind him. With carefully controlled movements he turned on the power, switched the set

to transmit, and checked the broadcast frequency. All correct. Then slowly and clearly, he described what he had seen in the cavern behind him. He kept his voice emotionless, recounting facts, leaving out anything that might be considered an opinion.

It was six minutes before midnight when he finished. He thumbed the switch to receive and waited.

There was only silence.

Slowly, the empty quality of the silence penetrated his numbed mind. There were no crackling atmospherics nor hiss of static, even when he turned the power full on. The mass of rock and earth of the mountain above was acting as a perfect grounding screen, absorbing his signal even at maximum output.

They hadn't heard him. The Nyjord fleet didn't know that the cobalt bombs had been discovered before their launching. The attack would go ahead as planned. Even now, the bomb-bay doors were opening; armed H-bombs hung above the planet, held in place only by their shackles. In a few minutes the signal would be given and the shackles would spring open, the bombs drop clear....

"Killers!" Brion shouted into the microphone. "You wouldn't listen to reason, you wouldn't listen to Hys, or me, or to any voice that suggested an alternative to complete destruction. You are going to destroy Dis, and *it's not necessary!* There were a lot of ways you could have stopped it. You didn't do any of them, and now it's too late. You'll destroy Dis, and in turn this will destroy Nyjord. Ihjel said that, and now I believe him. You're just another damned failure in a galaxy full of failures!"

He raised the radio above his head and sent it crashing into the rock floor. Then he was running back to Ulv, trying to run away from the realization that he too had tried and failed. The people on the surface of Dis had less than two minutes left to live.

"They didn't get my message," Brion said to Ulv. "The radio won't work this far underground."

"Then the bombs will fall?" Ulv asked, looking searchingly at Brion's face in the dim reflected light from the cavern.

"Unless something happens that we know nothing about, the bombs will fall."

They said nothing after that—they simply waited. The three technicians in the cavern were also aware of the time. They were calling to each other and trying to talk to the magter. The emotionless, parasite-ridden brains of the magter saw no reason to stop work, and they attempted to beat the men back to their tasks. In spite of the blows, they didn't go; they only gaped in horror as the clock hands moved remorselessly towards twelve. Even the magter dimly felt some of the significance of the occasion. They stopped too and waited.

The hour hand touched twelve on Brion's watch, then the minute hand. The second hand closed the gap and for a tenth of a second the three hands were one. Then the second hand moved on.

Brion's immediate sensation of relief was washed away by the chilling realization that he was deep underground. Sound and seismic waves were slow, and the flare of atomic explosions couldn't be seen here. If the bombs had been dropped at twelve they wouldn't know it at once.

A distant rumble filled the air. A moment later the ground heaved under them and the lights in the cavern flickered. Fine dust drifted down from the roof above.

Ulv turned to him, but Brion looked away. He could not face the accusation in the Disan's eyes.

Chapter 18

One of the technicians was running and screaming. The magter knocked him down and beat him into silence. Seeing this, the other two men returned to work with shaking hands. Even if all life on the surface of the planet was dead, this would have no effect on the magter. They would go ahead as planned, without emotion or imagination enough to alter their set course.

As the technicians worked, their attitude changed from shocked numbness to anger. Right and wrong were forgotten. They had been killed—the invisible death of radiation must already be penetrating into the caves—but they also had the chance for vengeance. Swiftly they brought their work to completion, with a speed and precision they had concealed before.

“What are those offworlders doing?” Ulv asked.

Brion stirred from his lethargy of defeat and looked across the cavern floor. The men had a wheeled handtruck and were rolling one of the atomic warheads onto it. They pushed it over to the latticework of the jump-field.

“They are going to bomb Nyjord now, just as Nyjord bombed Dis. That machine will hurl the bombs in a special way to the other planet.”

“Will you stop them?” Ulv asked. He had his deadly blowgun in his hand and his face was an expressionless mask.

Brion almost smiled at the irony of the situation. In spite of everything he had done to prevent it, Nyjord had dropped the bombs. And this act alone may have destroyed their own planet. Brion had it within his power now to stop the launching in the cavern. Should he? Should he save the lives of his killers? Or should he practice the ancient blood-oath that had echoed and destroyed down through the ages: *An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*. It would be so simple. He literally had to do nothing. The score would be even, and his and the Disans’ death avenged.

Did Ulv have his blowgun ready to kill Brion with, if he should try to stop the launchings? Or had he misread the Disan entirely?

“Will *you* stop them, Ulv?” he asked.

How large was mankind’s sense of obligation? The caveman first had this feeling for his mate, then for his family. It grew until men fought and died for the abstract ideas of cities and nations, then for whole planets. Would the time ever come when men might realize that the obligation should be to the largest and most encompassing reality of all—mankind? And beyond that to life of all kinds.

Brion saw this idea, not in words but as a reality. When he posed the question to himself in this way he found that it stated clearly its inherent answer. He pulled his gun out, and as he did he wondered what Ulv’s answer might be.

“Nyjord is *medvirk*,” Ulv said, raising his blowgun and sending a dart across the cavern. It struck one of the technicians, who gasped and fell to the floor.

Brion’s shots crashed into the control board, shorting and destroying it, removing the menace to Nyjord for all time.

Medvirk, Ulv had said. A life form that cooperates and aids other life forms. It may kill in self-defense, but it is essentially not a killer or destroyer. Ulv had a lifetime of knowledge about the interdependency of life. He grasped the essence of the idea and ignored all the verbal complications and confusions. He had killed the magter, who were his own people, because they were *umedvirk*—against life. And he had saved his enemies because they were *medvirk*.

With this realization came the painful knowledge that the planet and the people that had produced this understanding were dead.

In the cavern the magter saw the destruction of their plans, and the cave mouth from which the bullets had come. Silently they rushed to kill their enemy—a concerted wave of emotionless fury.

Brion and Ulv fought back. Even the knowledge that he was doomed no matter what happened could not resign Brion to death at the hands of the magter. To Ulv, the decision was much easier. He was simply killing *umedvirk*. A believer in life, he destroyed the anti-life.

They retreated into the darkness, still firing. The magter had lights and ion rifles, and were right behind them. Knowing the caverns better than the men they chased, the pursuers circled. Brion saw lights ahead and dragged Ulv to a stop.

“They know their way through these caves, and we don’t,” he said. “If we try to run they’ll just shoot us down. Let’s find a spot we can defend and settle into it.”

“Back here”—Ulv gave a tug in the right direction—“there is a cave with only one entrance, and that is very narrow.”

“Let’s go!”

Running as silently as they could in the darkness, they reached the deadend cavern without being seen. What noise they made was lost in other footsteps that sounded and echoed through the connecting caves. Once inside, they found cover behind a ridge and waited. The end was certain.

The magter ran swiftly into their cave, flashing his light into all the places of concealment. The beam passed over the two hidden men, and at the same instant Brion fired. The shot boomed loudly as the magter fell—a shot that would surely have been heard by the others.

Before anyone else came into the cave, Brion ran over and grabbed the still functioning light. Propping it on the rocks so it shone on the entrance, he hurried back to shelter beside Ulv. They waited for the attack.

It was not long in coming. Two magter rushed in, and died. More were outside, Brion knew, and he wondered how long it would be before they remembered the grenades and rolled one into their shelter.

An indistinct murmur sounded outside, and sharp explosions. In their hiding place, Brion and Ulv crouched low and wondered why the attack didn’t come. Then one of the magter came in the entrance, but Brion hesitated before shooting.

The man had *backed* in, firing behind him as he came.

Ulv had no compunctions about killing, only his darts couldn't penetrate the magter's thick clothing. As the magter turned, Ulv's breath pulsed once and death stung the back of the other man's hand. He collapsed into a crumpled heap.

"Don't shoot," a voice called from outside the cave, and a man stepped through the swirling dust and smoke to stand in the beam from the light.

Brion clutched wildly at Ulv's arm, dragging the blowgun from the Disan's mouth.

The man in the light wore a protective helmet, thick boots and a pouch-hung uniform.

He was a Nyjorder.

The realization was almost impossible to accept. Brion had heard the bombs fall. Yet the Nyjord soldier was here. The two facts couldn't be accepted together.

"Would you keep a hold on his arm, sir, just in case," the soldier said, glancing warily at Ulv's blowpipe. "I know what those darts can do." He pulled a microphone from one of his pockets and spoke into it.

More soldiers crowded into the cave, and Professor-Commander Krafft came in behind them. He looked strangely out of keeping in the dusty combat uniform. The gun was even more incongruous in his blue-veined hand. After giving the pistol to the nearest soldier with an air of relief, he stumbled quickly over to Brion and took his hand.

"It is a profound and sincere pleasure to meet you in person," he said. "And your friend Ulv as well."

"Would you kindly explain what is going on?" Brion said thickly. He was obsessed by the strange feeling that none of this could possibly be happening.

"We will always remember you as the man who saved us from ourselves," Krafft said, once again the professor instead of the commander.

"What Brion wants are facts, Grandpa, not speeches," Hys said. The bent form of the leader of the rebel Nyjord army pushed through the crowd of taller men until he stood next to Krafft. "Simply stated, Brion, your plan succeeded. Krafft relayed your message to me—and as soon as I heard it I turned back and met him on his ship. I'm sorry that Telt's dead—but he found what we were looking for. I couldn't ignore his report of radioactive traces. Your girl friend arrived with the hacked-up corpse at the same time I did, and we all took a long look at the green leech in its skull. Her explanation of what it is made significant sense. We were already carrying out landings when we had your call about something having been stored in the magter tower. After that it was just a matter of following tracks—and the transmitter you planted."

"But the explosions at midnight?" Brion broke in. "I heard them!"

"You were supposed to," Hys laughed. "Not only you, but the magter in this cave. We figured they would be armed and the cave strongly defended. So at midnight we dropped a few large chemical explosive bombs at the entrance. Enough to kill the guards without bringing the roof down. We also hoped that the magter deeper in would leave their posts or retreat from the imagined radiation. And they did. It worked like a charm. We came in quietly and took them by surprise. Made a clean sweep—killed the ones we couldn't capture."

“One of the renegade jump-space technicians was still alive,” Krafft said. “He told us about your stopping the bombs aimed at Nyjord, the two of you.”

None of the Nyjorders there could add anything to his words, not even the cynical Hys. But Brion could empathize their feelings, the warmth of their intense relief and happiness. It was a sensation he would never forget.

“There is no more war,” Brion translated for Ulv, knowing that the Disan had understood nothing of the explanation. As he said it, he realized that there was one glaring error in the story.

“You couldn’t have done it,” Brion said. “You landed on this planet *before* you had my message about the tower. That means you still expected the magter to be sending their bombs to Nyjord—and you made the landings in spite of this knowledge.”

“Of course,” Professor Krafft said, astonished at Brion’s lack of understanding. “What else could we do? The magter are sick!”

Hys laughed aloud at Brion’s baffled expression. “You have to understand Nyjord psychology,” he said. “When it was a matter of war and killing, my planet could never agree on an intelligent course. War is so alien to our philosophy that it couldn’t even be considered correctly. That’s the trouble with being a vegetable eater in a galaxy of carnivores. You’re easy prey for the first one that lands on your back. Any other planet would have jumped on the magter with both feet and shaken the bombs out of them. We fumbled it so long it almost got both worlds killed. Your mind-parasite drew us back from the brink.”

“I don’t understand,” Brion said.

“A simple matter of definition. Before you came we had no way to deal with the magter here on Dis. They really were alien to us. Nothing they did made sense—and nothing we did seemed to have the slightest effect on them. But you discovered that they were *sick*, and that’s something we know how to handle. We’re united again; my rebel army was instantly absorbed into the rest of the Nyjord forces by mutual agreement. Doctors and nurses are on the way here now. Plans were put under way to evacuate what part of the population we could until the bombs were found. The planet is united again, and working hard.”

“Because the magter are sick, infected by a destructive life form?” Brion asked.

“Exactly so,” Professor Krafft said. “We are civilized, after all. You can’t expect us to fight a war—and you surely can’t expect us to ignore the plight of sick neighbors?”

“No ... you surely can’t,” Brion said, sitting down heavily. He looked at Ulv, to whom the speech had been incomprehensible. Beyond him, Hys wore his most cynical expression as he considered the frailties of his people.

“Hys,” Brion called out, “you translate all that into Disan and explain to Ulv. I wouldn’t dare.”

Chapter 19

Dis was a floating golden ball, looking like a schoolroom globe in space. No clouds obscured its surface, and from this distance it seemed warm and attractive set against the cold darkness. Brion almost wished he were back there now, as he sat shivering inside the heavy coat. He wondered how long it would be before his confused body-temperature controls decided to turn off the summer adjustment. He hoped it wouldn't be as sudden or as drastic as turning it on had been.

Delicate as a dream, Lea's reflection swam in space next to the planet. She had come up quietly behind him in the spaceship's corridor, only her gentle breath and mirrored face telling him she was there. He turned quickly and took her hands in his.

"You're looking infinitely better," he said.

"Well, I should," she said, pushing back her hair in an unconscious gesture with her hand. "I've been doing nothing but lying in the ship's hospital, while you were having such a fine time this last week. Rushing around down there shooting all the magter."

"Just gassing them," he told her. "The Nyjorders can't bring themselves to kill any more, even if it does raise their own casualty rate. In fact, they are having difficulty restraining the Disans led by Ulv, who are happily killing any magter they see as being pure *umedvirk*."

"What will they do when they have all those frothing magter madmen?"

"They don't know yet," he said. "They won't really know until they see what an adult magter is like with his brain-parasite dead and gone. They're having better luck with the children. If they catch them early enough, the parasite can be destroyed before it has done too much damage."

Lea shuddered delicately and let herself lean against him. "I'm not that sturdy yet; let's sit down while we talk." There was a couch opposite the viewport where they could sit and still see Dis.

"I hate to think of a magter deprived of his symbiote," she said. "If his system can stand the shock, I imagine there will be nothing left except a brainless hulk. This is one series of experiments I don't care to witness. I rest secure in the knowledge that the Nyjorders will find the most humane solution."

"I'm sure they will," Brion said.

"Now what about us?" she said disconcertingly, leaning back in his arms. "I must say you have the highest body temperature of any one I have ever touched. It's positively exciting."

This jarred Brion even more. He didn't have her ability to put past horrors out of the mind by substituting present pleasures. "Well, just what about us?" he said with masterful inappropriateness.

She smiled as she leaned against him. "You weren't as vague as that, the night in the hospital room. I seem to remember a few other things you said. And did. You can't claim you're completely indifferent to me, Brion Brandd. So I'm only asking you what any outspoken Anvharian girl would. Where do we go from here? Get married?"

There was a definite pleasure in holding her slight body in his arms and feeling her hair against his cheek. They both sensed it, and this awareness made his words sound that much more ugly.

“Lea—darling! You know how important you are to me—but you certainly realize that we could never get married.”

Her body stiffened and she tore herself away from him.

“Why, you great, fat, egotistical slab of meat! What do you mean by that? I like you, Lea, we have plenty of fun and games together, but surely you realize that you aren’t the kind of girl one takes home to mother!”

“Lea, hold on,” he said. “You know better than to say a thing like that. What I said has nothing to do with how I feel towards you. But marriage means children, and you are biologist enough to know about Earth’s genes—”

“Intolerant yokel!” she cried, slapping his face. He didn’t move or attempt to stop her. “I expected better from you, with all your pretensions of understanding. But all you can think of are the horror stories about the worn-out genes of Earth. You’re the same as every other big, strapping bigot from the frontier planets. I know how you look down on our small size, our allergies and haemophilia and all the other weaknesses that have been bred back and preserved by the race. You hate—”

“But that’s not what I meant at all,” he interrupted, shocked, his voice drowning hers out. “Yours are the strong genes, the viable strains—*mine* are the deadly ones. A child of mine would kill itself and you in a natural birth, if it managed to live to term. You’re forgetting that you are the original homo sapiens. I’m a recent mutation.”

Lea was frozen by his words. They revealed a truth she had known, but would never permit herself to consider.

“Earth is home, the planet where mankind developed,” he said. “The last few thousand years you may have been breeding weaknesses back into the genetic pool. But that’s nothing compared to the hundred millions of years that it took to develop man. How many newborn babies live to be a year of age on Earth?”

“Why ... almost all of them. A fraction of one per cent die each year—I can’t recall exactly how many.”

“Earth is home,” he said again gently. “When men leave home they can adapt to different planets, but a price must be paid. A terrible price is in dead infants. The successful mutations live, the failures die. Natural selection is a brutally simple affair. When you look at me, you see a success. I have a sister—a success too. Yet my mother had six other children who died when they were still babies. And several others that never came to term. You know about these things, don’t you, Lea?”

“I know, I know ...” she said sobbing into her hands. He held her now and she didn’t pull away. “I know it all as a biologist—but I am so awfully tired of being a biologist, and top of my class and a mental match for any man. When I think about you, I do it as a woman, and can’t admit any of this. I need someone, Brion, and I needed you so much because I loved you.” She paused and wiped her eyes. “You’re going home, aren’t you? Back to Anvhar. When?”

“I can’t wait too long,” he said, unhappily. “Aside from my personal wants, I find myself remembering that I’m a part of Anvhar. When you think of the number of people who suffered and died—or adapted—so that I could be sitting here now ...

well, it's a little frightening. I suppose it doesn't make sense logically that I should feel indebted to them. But I do. Anything I do now, or in the next few years, won't be as important as getting back to Anvhar."

"And I won't be going back with you." It was a flat statement the way she said it, not a question.

"No, you won't be," he said. "There is nothing on Anvhar for you."

Lea was looking out of the port at Dis and her eyes were dry now. "Way back in my deeply buried unconscious I think I knew it would end this way," she said. "If you think your little lecture on the Origins of Man was a novelty, it wasn't. It just reminded me of a number of things my glands had convinced me to forget. In a way, I envy you your weightlifter wife-to-be, and your happy kiddies. But not very much. Very early in life I resigned myself to the fact that there was no one on Earth I would care to marry. I always had these teen-age dreams of a hero from space who would carry me off, and I guess I slipped you into the pattern without realizing it. I'm old enough now to face the fact that I like my work more than a banal marriage, and I'll probably end up a frigid and virtuous old maid, with more degrees and titles than you have shot-putting records."

As they looked through the port Dis began slowly to contract. Their ship drew away from it, heading towards Nyjord. They sat apart, without touching now. Leaving Dis meant leaving behind something they had shared. They had been strangers together there, on a strange world. For a brief time their lifelines had touched. That time was over now.

"Don't we look happy!" Hys said, shambling towards them.

"Fall dead and make me even happier then," Lea snapped bitterly.

Hys ignored the acid tone of her words and sat down on the couch next to them. Since leaving command of his rebel Nyjord army he seemed much mellowed. "Going to keep on working for the Cultural Relationships Foundation, Brion?" he asked. "You're the kind of man we need."

Brion's eyes widened as the meaning of the last words penetrated. "Are you in the C.R.F.?"

"Field agent for Nyjord," he said. "I hope you don't think those helpless office types like Faussel or Mervv really represented us there? They just took notes and acted as a front and cover for the organization. Nyjord is a fine planet, but a gentle guiding hand behind the scenes is needed, to help them find their place in the galaxy before they are pulverized."

"What's your dirty game, Hys?" Lea asked, scowling. "I've had enough hints to suspect for a long time that there was more to the C.R.F. than the sweetness-and-light part I have seen. Are you people egomaniacs, power hungry or what?"

"That's the first charge that would be leveled at us if our activities were publicly known," Hys told her. "That's why we do most of our work under cover. The best fact I can give you to counter the charge is *money*. Just where do you think we get the funds for an operation this size?" He smiled at their blank looks. "You'll see the records later so there won't be any doubt. The truth is that all our funds are donated by planets we have helped. Even a tiny percentage of a planetary income is large—add enough of them together and you have enough money to help other planets. And voluntary gratitude is a perfect test, if you stop to think about it. You can't talk people

into liking what you have done. They have to be convinced. There have always been people on C.R.F. worlds who knew about our work, and agreed with it enough to see that we are kept in funds.”

“Why are you telling me all this super-secret stuff,” Lea asked.

“Isn’t that obvious? We want you to keep on working for us. You can name whatever salary you like—as I’ve said, there is no shortage of ready cash.”

Hys glanced quickly at them both and delivered the clinching argument. “I hope Brion will go on working with us too. He is the kind of field agent we desperately need, and it is almost impossible to find.”

“Just show me where to sign,” Lea said, and there was life in her voice once again.

“I wouldn’t exactly call it blackmail,” Brion smiled, “but I suppose if you people can juggle planetary psychologies, you must find that individuals can be pushed around like chessmen. Though you should realize that very little pushing is required this time.”

“Will you sign on?” Hys asked.

“I must go back to Anvhar,” Brion said, “but there really is no pressing hurry.”

“Earth,” said Lea, “is overpopulated enough as it is.”

The Ethical Engineer

Chapter 1

Jason dinAlt looked unhappily at the two stretchers as they were carried by. “Are they at it again?” he asked.

Brucco nodded, the scowl permanently ingrained now on his hawklike face. “We have only one thing to be thankful for. That is—so far at least—they haven’t used any weapons on each other.”

Jason looked down unbelievably at the shredded clothing, crushed flesh and broken bones. “The absence of weapons doesn’t appear to make much difference when two Pyrrans start fighting. It seems impossible that this damage could be administered bare-handed.”

“Well it was. Even you should know that much about Pyrrus by now. We take our fighting very seriously. But they never think how much more work it makes for me. Now I have to patch these two idiots up and try to find room for them in the ward.” He stalked away, irritated and annoyed as always. Jason usually laughed at the doctor’s irascible state, but not today.

Today, and for some days past, he had found himself living with a persistent feeling of irritation, that had arrived at the same time as his discovery that it is far easier to fight a war than to administer a peace. The battle at the perimeter still continued, since the massed malevolence of the Pyrran life forms were not going to call a truce simply because the two warring groups of humans had done so. There was battle on the perimeter and a continual feeling of unrest inside the city. So far there had been very little traffic between the city Pyrrans and those living outside the walls, and what contact there had been usually led to the kind of violence he had just witnessed. The only minor note of hope in this concert of discord was the fact that no one had died—as yet—in any of these fearsome hand-to-hand conflicts. In spite of the apparent deadliness of the encounters all of the Pyrrans seemed to understand that, despite past hatreds, they were all really on the same side. A distant rumble from the clouded sky broke through his thoughts.

“There is a ship on the radar,” Meta said, coming out of the ground-control office and squinting up at the overcast. “I wonder if it is that ecology expedition that Brucco arranged—or the cargo ship from Ondion?”

“We’ll find out in a few minutes,” Jason said, happy to forget his troubles for the moment in frank admiration, since just looking at Meta was enough to put a golden edge on this gloom-filled day. Standing there, head back searching the sky, she managed to be beautiful even in the formless Pyrran coverall. Jason put his arms around her waist and exacted a great deal of pleasure from kissing the golden length of her up-stretched throat.

“Oh, Jason ... not now,” she said in exasperation. Pyrran minds, by necessity, run along one track at a time, and at the present moment she was thinking about the descending spaceship. With a quick motion, scarcely aware of her action, she pulled his hands from her and pushed him away, an easy enough thing for a Pyrran girl to do. But in doing so she half fractured one of his wrists, numbed the other, and knocked Jason to the ground.

“Darling ... I’m sorry,” she gasped, suddenly realizing what she had done, bending quickly to help him up.

“Get away, you lady weight-lifter,” he growled, pushing aside the proffered hand and struggling to his feet. “When are you going to realize that I’m only human, not made of chrome steel bars like the rest of your people....” He stifled the rest of his words in disgust, at himself, his temper, this deadly planet and the cantankerousness of its citizens that was scratching away at his nerves. He turned and stamped away, angry at himself for taking out his vile mood on Meta, but still too annoyed to make peace.

Meta watched him leave, trying to say something that would end this foolish quarrel, but unable to. The largest blank in the Pyrran personality was an almost complete lack of knowledge of human nature, and her struggle to fill in the gaps—gaps she was only just beginning to realize existed—was a difficult one. The stronger emotions of hate and fear were no strangers to her; but for the first time she was discovering how difficult and complex was this unusual feeling of love. She let Jason go because she was incapable of any other action. Of course she could stop him by force, but if she had learned anything in the past few weeks, it was the discovery that this was one area where he was very sensitive. There was no doubt that she was far stronger than he—physically—and he did not like to be reminded about it. She went back into the ground-control room, almost eager to deal with the impersonal faces of the dials and scopes, material and unchanging entities that posed no conflicting problems.

Jason stood at the edge of the field and watched the ship come in for a landing, his anger forgotten temporarily in the presence of this break in routine. Perhaps this was the shipful of scientific eggheads that Brucco was expecting; he hoped so. It would be a pleasant treat to have a conversation with someone about a topic more universal than the bore dimensions of guns. With practiced eye he watched the landing which was a little sloppy, either a new pilot or an old one who didn’t care much. It was a small ship so not many people would be aboard. Then the spacer turned for a moment, in a landing correction, and he had a quick glimpse of a serial number and tantalizingly familiar insignia on its stern—where had he seen that before?

The ship touched down and the flaring rockets died. There was only the click of cooling metal from the ship: no one emerged, nor did any of the Pyrrans seem interested enough in the newcomer to approach it. That must mean that no one had any business with it, and, of course, no curiosity either, for this along with imagination was in very short supply on the war-torn planet. Since no one else was making any moves, Jason went forward to investigate for himself.

A stingwing that had escaped the perimeter guards dived towards him and he blasted it automatically with his gun. The corpse thudded to the ground and the soil churned around it as the insectile scavengers fought for the flesh; only bare bones remained by the time he had taken two paces.

A muffled whine of motors told him that the lower hatch was opening, and Jason watched as a hairline crack appeared in the thick metal, then widened as the heavy door ground outwards. Through the opening he had a glimpse of a figure muffled in a heavy-duty spacesuit. That must be Meta’s work, she would have contacted the ship by radio while it was on its way down and explained the standing orders that no off-worlders were to be allowed out of their ships unless wearing the heaviest armor. Since the armed truce between the human inhabitants there had been a lessening of the relentless warfare the Pyrran life forms waged against the city, but only to a slight degree. Deadly beasts still abounded, and the air was thick with toxic diseases. A

stranger, unprotected, would be ill in five minutes, dead within ten—or much sooner if a horndevil or other beast got to him in the interval.

Jason felt a justified pride that he could walk this planet under his own power. The natives, adapted to the deadliness and heavy gravity since birth, were still his superiors, but he was the only off-worlder who could stand the dangers of Pyrrus. His gun whined out of his power holster into his waiting hand as he searched for some target to use his talents on. An armored piece of nastiness, with a lot of legs, was crawling into hiding under a rock and he blasted it neatly with a single shot. The gun snapped back into the holster and he turned to the open door of the spacer, his morale greatly improved.

“Welcome to Pyrrus,” he told the ungainly figure that clumped out of the ship. There was a hefty maser-projector clutched in the armored gloves and whoever was inside the suit, the face was invisible behind the thick and tinted faceplate, seemed exceedingly nervous, turning to look in all directions.

“Don’t worry,” Jason said, fighting to keep a tone of smug satisfaction out of his voice, “I’ll take care of things for you. I don’t know what kind of horror stories you may have heard about Pyrrus—but they’re all true. That’s a nice looking heat ray you have there, but I doubt if you could move fast enough to use it.”

The figure lowered the gun and fumbled for a switch on the front of the space armor, it clicked and a speaker diaphragm rustled.

“I’m looking for a man called Jason dinAlt. Can you tell me if he is on this planet or if he has left?”

It was impossible to tell the speaker’s tone from the rasping diaphragm, and no face was visible that might betray an emotion. This was the moment when Jason should have shown caution, and have remembered that there were thousands of policemen scattered across the galaxy who would heartily enjoy putting him under arrest. Yet he couldn’t imagine any of them going to the trouble of following him here. And certainly there could be very little danger from a spacesuited man with a rifle, not to the man who had learned to take Pyrrus on its own terms, and live.

“I’m Jason dinAlt,” he said. “What do you want me for?”

“I’ve come a long way to find you,” the speaker rasped. “Now”—the gloved hand pointed—“what is THAT?”

Jason’s reactions were instantaneous, conditioned to move without thought. He wheeled, crouched, the gun in his hand and finger quivering lightly on the trigger, pointed in the indicated direction. There was nothing unusual to be seen, just an empty field and the control building at the edge.

“Whatever are you talking about ...” Jason asked, then stopped as it became very obvious what the stranger had been talking about. The large, flanged mouth of the maser-projector ground into the small of his back. His own gun snapped halfway out of its holster, buzzed briefly, then slipped back as he realized his position.

“That’s much better,” the stranger said. “If you attempt to move, turn, lower your gun hand or do anything I don’t like I’ll pull this trigger and....”

“I know,” Jason sighed, careful to stand with every muscle frozen. “You will pull the trigger and burn a nice round hole through my backbone and intestines. But I would

just like to know why? Who is it that is so interested in my worthless old carcass that they were willing to pay interstellar freight charges to send you and that oversize toaster all the way here in order to threaten it?”

Jason was only talking to kill time, since he knew this situation would not stay static for long, not on Pyrrus. He was completely right because before he had finished the ground-control door burst open and Meta ran out, circling to the left. At the same moment Kerk appeared from behind the building, his Pyrran reflexes absorbing the situation in an instant and with no perceptible delay he ran in the opposite direction. Both Pyrrans had their guns ready and closed in with the merciless precision of trained predators.

“Tell them to stop,” the suit speaker grated at Jason. “I’ll shoot you if they try anything.”

“Hold it!” Jason shouted, and the running Pyrrans stopped instantly. “Don’t come any closer and whatever you do don’t shoot.” He half-turned his head and spoke in a quieter voice to the suited figure behind him. “Now you see where you stand. Lower the gun and get back into your ship, I guarantee you’ll stay alive if you do that at once.”

“Don’t try and buff me, dinAlt,” the maser barrel pushed harder against his back. “You are my prisoner and your friends can’t save you. Start walking backwards now—I’ll stay right behind you.”

“Look,” Jason said calmly, not permitting himself to get angry. “Those are *Pyrrans* out there. Either of them could kill you so quickly that you couldn’t possibly have time to pull that trigger. I’m saving your life—though I don’t know why I’m bothering—so be a good boy and get back into your ship and go home and we’ll give you a T for trying.”

“Could I have him, please Kerk?” Meta called out, the deadly assumption of her remark punctuating Jason’s logic. “After all, Jason means more to me than you. Shall I kill him yet, Jason?”

“Just shoot his gun hand off, Meta,” Kerk told her, in the same emotionless tone. “I want to know who this is, why he came here, before he dies.”

“Get back into your ship, you fool,” Jason hissed. “You’ve got only seconds to live.”

“Start walking backwards,” his captor said. “You are under arrest. I’ll count to three, then shoot. One ... two....”

Jason shuffled a cautious step to the rear and the Pyrran guns snapped up at the same instant, extended at arm’s length. Jason was so close to the man in the spacesuit that the guns could have been pointed at him, the eyes sighting carefully over the dark muzzles.

“Don’t shoot!” Jason shouted to his friends.

“Don’t worry,” Kerk called back. “We won’t hit you.”

“I know that—it’s this idiot here that I’m worrying about. You just can’t shoot him for trying to do his job. In fact I’m surprised to find out that there is one honest cop left on any of the places I’ve been.”

“Don’t talk so crazy,” Meta said with maddening sweetness. “We’ll kill him, Jason. We’ll take care of you.”

Anger hit him. "You will NOT take care of me because I can take care of myself. Either of you kill him and so help me I'll kill you." Jason shuffled backwards faster now until his legs hit the lower edge of the hatch. He clambered into it and burst out laughing at the dumfounded expressions of his friends' faces. The laugh died as something pricked the back of his neck. The pressure of the gun was gone and he swung around, surprised to see the floor rushing up towards him, but before it struck him blackness descended.

Consciousness returned, accompanied by a thudding headache that made Jason wince when he moved, and when he opened his eyes the pain of the light made him screw them shut again. Whatever the drug was that had knocked him out, it was fast working, and seemed to be oxidized just as quickly. The headache faded away to a dull throb and he could open his eyes without feeling that needles were being driven into them. He was seated in a standard spacechair that had been equipped with wrist and ankle locks, now well secured. A man sat in the chair next to him, intent on the spaceship's controls; the ship was in flight and well into space. The stranger was working the computer, cutting a tape to control their flight in jump-space.

Jason took the opportunity to study the man. He seemed to be a little old for a policeman, though on second thought it was really hard to tell his age. His hair was gray and cropped as short as a skull cap, but the wrinkles on his leathery skin seemed to have been caused more by exposure than advanced years. Tall and firmly erect, he appeared underweight at first glance, until Jason realized this effect was caused by the total absence of any excess flesh. It was as though he had been cooked by the sun and leached by the rain until only bone, tendon and muscle were left. When he turned his head the muscles stood out like cables under the skin of his neck and his hands at the controls were the browned talons of some bird. A hard finger pressed the switch that actuated the jump control, and he turned away from the board to face Jason.

"I see you are awake. It was a mild drug. I did not enjoy using it, but it was the safest way."

When he talked his jaw opened and shut with the seriousness of a bank vault. The deep-set and cold blue eyes stared fixedly from under dark brows. Jason stared back just as steadily and chuckled.

"I suppose you didn't enjoy using the maser-projector either, nor threatening to cook holes in me. For a cop you seem to be very tender hearted."

"I did it only to save your friends. I did not want them to get hurt."

"Get hurt!" Jason roared with laughter. "Space-cop, don't you have any idea what Pyrrans are like, or what kind of a setup you were walking into? Don't you realize that I saved your life—though I really don't know why. Call me a natural humanitarian. You may have a swollen head and a ready trigger-finger, but you were so far out of your class that you just weren't in the race. They could have blasted you into pieces, then shot the pieces into smaller pieces, while you were still thinking about pulling the trigger. You should just thank me for being your savior."

"So you are a liar as well as a thief," Jason's captor answered with no change of expression. "You attempt to play on my sympathies to gain your freedom. Why should I believe this story? I came to arrest you, threatening to kill you if you didn't submit, and your friends were there ready to defend you. Why should you attempt to

save my life? It does not make sense.” He turned back to the controls to make an adjustment.

It didn’t make sense, Jason agreed completely. Why had he saved this oaf who meant nothing to him? It was not an easy question to answer, though it had seemed so right at the time. If only Meta hadn’t said that they would take care of him; he knew they could and was tired of it. He could take care of himself: he felt the anger rising again at the remembered words. Was that the only reason he had let this cop capture him? To show the Pyrrans that he was able to control his own destiny? Was the human ego such a pitiable thing that it had to keep reassuring itself of its own independence or lie down on its back and curl up its toes?

Apparently it was. At least his was. The years had taught him a certain insight into his own personality and he realized that his greedy little subconscious had collected all the cues and signals from the encounter at the spaceport and goaded him into a line of action that looked uncomfortably like suicide. The arrival of the stranger, the threat to himself, the automatic assumption by the Pyrrans that they would take care of him. Apparently his ego and his subconscious felt that he had been taken care of too long. They had managed to get him into this spot from which he could only be extricated by his own talents, far away from Pyrrus and the pressures that had been weighing on him so long.

He took a deep breath and smiled. It wasn’t such a bad idea after all. Stupid in retrospect, but the stupidity could hopefully be kept in the past. Now he had to prove that there was something other than a death wish in his subconscious flight from Pyrrus, and he must find a way to reverse positions with this cop, whoever he was. Which meant that he had to find out a little more about the man before making any plans.

“I’m afraid you have the advantage of me, officer. How about telling me who you are and showing me a warrant or something under which you are performing this deed of interstellar justice.”

“I am Mikah Samon. I am returning you to Cassylia for trial and sentencing.”

“Ah, yes,” Jason sighed. “I’m not surprised to hear that they are still interested in finding me. But I should warn you that there is very little remaining of the three-billion, seventeen-million credits that I won from your casino.”

“Cassylia doesn’t want the money back,” Mikah said as he locked the controls and swung about in his chair. “They don’t want you back either. You are their planetary hero now. When you escaped with your ill-gotten gains they realized that they would never see the money again. So they put their propaganda mills to work and you are now known throughout all the adjoining star systems as ‘Jason 3-Billion’, the living proof of the honesty of their dishonest games, and a lure for all the weak in spirit. You tempt them into gambling for money instead of working honestly for it.”

“Pardon me for being thick today,” Jason said, shaking his head rapidly to loosen up the stuck synapses. “I’m having a little difficulty in following you. What kind of a policeman are you to arrest me for trial after the charges have been dropped?”

“I’m not a policeman,” Mikah said sternly, his long fingers woven tightly together before him, his eyes wide and penetrating. “I’m a believer in Truth—nothing more. The corrupt politicians who control Cassylia have placed you on a pedestal of honor. Honoring you, another—and if possible—a more corrupt man, and behind your

image they have waxed fat. But I am going to use the Truth to destroy that image, and when I destroy the image I shall destroy the evil that produced it.”

“That’s a tall order for one man,” Jason said calmly—much calmer than he really felt. “Do you have a cigarette?”

“There is, of course, no tobacco or spirits on this ship. And I am more than one man. I have followers. The Truth Party is already a power to be reckoned with. We have spent much time and energy in tracking you down, but it was worth it. We have followed your dishonest trail into the past, to Mahaut’s Planet, to the Nebula Casino on Galipto, through a series of sordid crimes that turns an honest man’s stomach. We have warrants for your arrest from each of these places, in some cases even the results of trials and your death sentence.”

“I suppose it doesn’t bother your sense of legality that those trials were all held in my absence,” Jason asked. “Or that I have only fleeced casinos and gamblers—who make their living by fleecing suckers?”

Mikah Samon wiped away this consideration with a wave of his hand. “You have been proven guilty of a number of crimes. No amount of wriggling on the hook can change that. You should be thankful that your revolting record will have a good use in the end. It will be the lever with which we shall topple the grafting government of Cassylia.”

“I’m beginning to be sorry that I stopped Kerk and Meta from shooting you,” Jason said, shaking his head in wonder. “I have a very strong suspicion that you are going to cause yourself—and a lot of other people—a good deal of trouble before this thing is over. Look at me for instance—” he rattled his wrists in their restraining bands. The servo motors whined a bit as the detector unit came to life and tightened the grasp of the cuffs, limiting his movement. “A little while ago I was enjoying my health and freedom and I threw it all away on the impulse to save your life. I’m going to have to learn to fight those impulses.”

“If that is supposed to be a plea for mercy, it is sickening,” Mikah said. “I have never taken favors nor do I owe anything to men of your type. Nor will I ever.”

“*Ever* like *never* is a long time,” Jason said very quietly. “I wish I had your serenity of mind about the sure order of things.”

“Your remark shows that there might be hope for you yet. You might be able to recognise the Truth before you die. I will help you, talk to you and explain.”

“Better the execution,” Jason choked.

Chapter 2

“Are you going to feed me by hand—or unlock my wrists while I eat?” Jason asked. Mikah stood over him with the tray, undecided. Jason gave a light verbal prod, very gently, because whatever else he was, Mikah was not stupid. “I would prefer you to feed me of course, you’d make an excellent body servant.”

“You are capable of eating by yourself,” Mikah responded instantly, sliding the tray into the slots of Jason’s chair. “But you will have to do it with only one hand. If you were freed you would only cause trouble.” He touched the control on the back of the chair and the right wrist lock snapped open. Jason stretched his cramped fingers and picked up the fork.

While he ate Jason’s eyes were busy. Not obviously, since a gambler’s attention is never obvious, but many things can be seen if you keep your eyes open and your attention apparently elsewhere. A sudden glimpse of someone’s cards, the slight change of expression that reveals a player’s strength. Item by item his seemingly random gaze touched the items in the cabin: control console, screens, computer, chart screen, jump control chart case, bookshelf. Everything was observed, remembered and considered. Some combination of them would fit into the plan.

So far all he had was the beginning and the end of an idea. Beginning: He was a prisoner in this ship, on his way back to Cassylia. End: He was not going to remain a prisoner—nor return to Cassylia. Now all that was missing was the vital middle. It looked impossible at the moment, but Jason never considered that it couldn’t be done. He operated on the principle that you made your own luck. You kept your eyes open as things evolved and at the right moment you acted. If you acted fast enough, that was good luck. If you worried over the possibilities until the moment had passed, that was bad luck.

He pushed the empty plate away and stirred sugar into his cup. Mikah had eaten sparingly and was now starting on his second cup of tea. His eyes were fixed, unfocused in thought as he drank. He started slightly when Jason called to him.

“Since you don’t stock cigarettes on this ship—how about letting me smoke my own? You’ll have to dig them out for me since I can’t reach the pocket while I’m chained to this chair.”

“I cannot help you,” Mikah said, unmoving. “Tobacco is an irritant, a drug and a carcinogen. If I gave you a cigarette, I would be giving you cancer.”

“Don’t be a hypocrite!” Jason snapped, inwardly pleased at the rewarding flush in the other’s neck. “They’ve taken the cancer-producing agents out of tobacco for centuries now. And even if they hadn’t—how does that affect this situation. You’re taking me to Cassylia to certain death. So why should you concern yourself with the state of my lungs in the future?”

“I hadn’t considered it that way. It is just that there are certain rules of life....”

“Are there?” Jason broke in, keeping the initiative and the advantage. “Not as many as you like to think. And you people who are always dreaming up the rules never carry your thinking far enough. You are against drugs. Which drugs? What about the tannic acid in that tea you’re drinking? Or the caffeine in it? It’s loaded with caffeine—a drug that is both a strong stimulant and a diuretic. That’s why you won’t

find tea in spacesuit canteens. That's a case of a drug forbidden for a good reason. Can you justify your cigarette ban the same way?"

Mikah started to talk, then thought for a moment. "Perhaps you are right. I'm tired, and it is not important." He warily took the cigarette case from Jason's pocket and dropped it onto the tray. Jason didn't attempt to interfere. Mikah poured himself a third cup of tea with a slightly apologetic air.

"You must excuse me, Jason, for attempting to make you conform to my own standards. When you are in pursuit of the big Truths, you sometimes let the little Truths slip. I'm not intolerant, but I do tend to expect everyone else to live up to certain criteria I have set for myself. Humility is something we should never forget and I thank you for reminding me of it. The search for Truth is hard."

"There is no Truth," Jason told him, the anger and insult gone now from his voice since he wanted to keep his captor involved in the conversation. Involved enough to forget about the free wrist for a while. He raised the cup to his lips and let the tea touch his lips without drinking any. The half-full cup supplied an unconsidered reason for his free hand.

"No Truth?" Mikah weighed the thought. "You can't possibly mean that. The galaxy is filled with Truth, it's the touchstone of Life itself. It's the thing that separates Mankind from the animals."

"There is no Truth, no Life, no Mankind. At least not the way you spell them—with capital letters. They don't exist."

Mikah's taut skin contracted into a furrow of concentration. "You'll have to explain yourself," he said. "You're not being clear."

"I'm afraid it's you who aren't being clear. You're making a reality where none exists. Truth—with a small *T* is a description, a relationship. A way to describe a statement. A semantic tool. But capital *T* Truth is an imaginary word, a noise with no meaning. It pretends to be a noun but it has no referent. It stands for nothing. It means nothing. When you say 'I believe in Truth' you are really saying 'I believe in nothing'."

"You're wrong, you're wrong," Mikah said, leaning forward, stabbing with his finger. "Truth is a philosophical abstraction, one of the tools that mankind's mind has used to raise it above the beasts—the proof that we are not beasts ourselves, but a higher order of creation. Beasts can be true—but they cannot know Truth. Beasts can see, but they cannot see Beauty."

"Arrgh!" Jason growled. "It's impossible to talk to you, much less enjoy any comprehensible exchange of ideas. We aren't even speaking the same language. Aside from who is right and who is wrong, for the moment, we should go back to basics and at least agree on the meaning of the terms that we are using. To begin with—can you define the difference between *ethics* and *ethos*?"

"Of course," Mikah snapped, a glint of pleasure in his eyes at the thought of a good rousing round of hair-splitting. "Ethics is the discipline dealing with what is good or bad, or right or wrong—or with moral duty and obligation. Ethos means the guiding beliefs, standards or ideals that characterize a group or community."

"Very good, I can see that you have been spending the long spaceship-nights with your nose buried in the books. Now make sure the difference between those two

terms is very clear, because it is the heart of the little communications problem we have here. Ethos is inextricably linked with a single society and cannot be separated from it, or it loses all meaning. Do you agree?”

“Well....”

“Come, come—you *have* to agree on the terms of your own definition. The ethos of a group is just a catch-all term for the ways in which the members of a group rub against each other. Right?”

Mikah reluctantly produced a nod of acquiescence.

“Now that we agree about that we can push on one step further. Ethics, again by your definition, must deal with any number of societies or groups. If there are any absolute laws of ethics, they must be so inclusive that they can be applied to *any* society. A law of ethics must be as universal of application as is the law of gravity.”

“I don’t follow you...?”

“I didn’t think you would when I got to this point. You people who prattle about your Universal Laws never really consider the exact meaning of the term. My knowledge of the history of science is very vague, but I’m willing to bet that the first Law of Gravity ever dreamed up stated that things fell at such and such a speed, and accelerated at such and such a rate. That’s not a law, but an observation that isn’t even complete until you add ‘on this planet.’ On a planet with a different mass there will be a different observation. The law of gravity is the formula

$$F = mN/d^2$$

and this can be used to compute the force of gravity between any two bodies anywhere. This is a way of expressing fundamental and unalterable principles that apply in all circumstances. If you are going to have any real ethical laws they will have to have this same universality. They will have to work on Cassylia or Pyrrus, or on any planet or in any society you can find. Which brings us back to you. What you so grandly call—with capital letters and a flourish of trumpets—‘Laws of Ethics’ aren’t laws at all, but are simple little chunks of tribal ethos, aboriginal observations made by a gang of desert shepherders to keep order in the house—or tent. These rules aren’t capable of any universal application, even you must see that. Just think of the different planets that you have been on and the number of weird and wonderful ways people have of reacting to each other—then try and visualize ten rules of conduct that would be applicable in all these societies. An impossible task. Yet I’ll bet that you have ten rules you want me to obey, and if one of them is wasted on an injunction against saying prayers to carved idols I can imagine just how universal the other nine are. You aren’t being ethical if you try to apply them wherever you go—you’re just finding a particularly fancy way to commit suicide!”

“You are being insulting!”

“I hope so. If I can’t reach you in any other way, perhaps insult will jar you out of your state of moral smugness. How dare you even consider having me tried for stealing money from the Cassylia casino when all I was doing was conforming to their own code of ethics! They run crooked gambling games, so the law under their local ethos must be that crooked gambling is the norm. So I cheated them, conforming to their norm. If they have also passed a law that says cheating at

gambling is illegal, the *law* is unethical, not the cheating. If you are bringing me back to be tried by that law you are unethical, and I am the helpless victim of an evil man.”

“Limb of Satan!” Mikah shouted, leaping to his feet and pacing back and forth before Jason, clasping and unclasping his hands with agitation. “You seek to confuse me with your semantics and so-called ethics that are simply opportunism and greed. There is a Higher Law that cannot be argued—”

“That is an impossible statement—and I can prove it.” Jason pointed at the books on the wall. “I can prove it with your own books, some of that light reading on the shelf there. Not the Aquinas—too thick. But the little volume with *Lull* on the spine. Is that Ramon Lull’s ‘The Booke of the Ordre of Chyualry’?”

Mikah’s eyes widened. “You know the book? You’re acquainted with Lull’s writing?”

“Of course,” Jason said, with an offhandedness he did not feel, since this was the only book in the collection he could remember reading, the odd title had stuck in his head. “Now let me see it and I shall prove to you what I mean.” There was no way to tell from the unchanged naturalness of his words that this was the moment he had been working carefully towards. He sipped the tea. None of his tenseness showing.

Mikah Samon got the book and handed it to him.

Jason flipped through the pages while he talked. “Yes ... yes, this is perfect. An almost ideal example of your kind of thinking. Do you like to read Lull?”

“Inspirational!” Mikah answered, his eyes shining. “There is beauty in every line and Truths that we have forgotten in the rush of modern life. A reconciliation and proof of the interrelationship between the Mystical and the Concrete. By manipulation of symbols he explains everything by absolute logic.”

“He proves nothing about nothing,” Jason said emphatically. “He plays word games. He takes a word, gives it an abstract and unreal value, then proves this value by relating it to other words with the same sort of nebulous antecedents. His facts aren’t facts—just meaningless sounds. This is the key point, where your universe and mine differ. You live in this world of meaningless facts that have no existence. My world contains facts that can be weighed, tested, proven related to other facts in a logical manner. My facts are unshakeable and unarguable. They exist.”

“Show me one of your unshakeable facts,” Mikah said, his voice calmer now than Jason’s.

“Over there,” Jason said. “The large green book over the console. It contains facts that even you will agree are true—I’ll eat every page if you don’t. Hand it to me.” He sounded angry, making overly bold statements and Mikah fell right into the trap. He handed the volume to Jason, using both hands since it was very thick, metal bound and heavy.

“Now listen closely and try and understand, even if it is difficult for you,” Jason said, opening the book. Mikah smiled wryly at this assumption of his ignorance. “This is a stellar ephemeris, just as packed with facts as an egg is with meat. In some ways it is a history of mankind. Now look at the jump screen there on the control console and you will see what I mean. Do you see the horizontal green line? Well, that’s our course.”

“Since this is my ship and I’m flying it I’m aware of that,” Mikah said. “Get on with your proof.”

“Bear with me,” Jason told him. “I’ll try and keep it simple. Now the red dot on the green line is our ship’s position. The number above the screen our next navigational point, the spot where a star’s gravitational field is strong enough to be detected in jump space. The number is the star’s code listing. DB89-046-229. I’ll look it up in the book”—he quickly flipped the pages—“and find its listing. No name. A row of code symbols though that tell a lot about it. This little symbol means that there is a planet or planets suitable for man to live on. Doesn’t say if any people are there though.”

“Where does this all lead to?” Mikah interrupted.

“Patience—you’ll see in a moment. Now look, at the screen. The green dot approaching on the course line is the PMP. Point of Maximum Proximity. When the red dot and green dot coincide....”

“Give me that book,” Mikah ordered, stepping forward. Aware suddenly that something was wrong. He was just an instant too late.

“Here’s your proof,” Jason said, and hurled the heavy book through the jump screen into the delicate circuits behind. Before it hit he had thrown the second book. There was a tinkling crash, a flare of light and the crackle of shorted circuits.

The floor gave a tremendous heave as the relays snapped open, dropping the ship through into normal space.

Mikah grunted in pain, clubbed to the floor by the suddenness of the transition. Locked into the chair, Jason fought the heaving of his stomach and the blackness before his eyes. As Mikah dragged himself to his feet, Jason took careful aim and sent the tray and dishes hurtling into the smoking ruin of the jump computer.

“There’s your fact,” he said in cheerful triumph. “Your incontrovertible, gold-plated, uranium-cored fact.

“We’re not going to Cassylia any more!”

Chapter 3

"You've killed us both," Mikah said with his face strained and white but his voice under control.

"Not quite," Jason told him cheerily. "But I have killed the jump control so we can't get to another star. However there's nothing wrong with our space drive, so we can make a landing on one of the planets—you saw for yourself that there is at least one suitable for habitation."

"Where I will fix the jump drive and continue the voyage to Cassylia. You will have gained nothing."

"Perhaps," Jason answered in his most noncommittal voice, since he did not have the slightest intention of continuing the trip, no matter what Mikah Samon thought.

His captor had reached the same conclusion. "Put your hand back on the chair arm," he ordered, and locked the cuff into place again. He stumbled as the drive started and the ship changed direction. "What was that?" he asked.

"Emergency control. The ship's computer knows that something drastic is wrong, so it has taken over. You can override it with the manuals, but don't bother yet. The ship can do a better job than either of us with its senses and stored data. It will find the planet we're looking for, plot a course and get us there with the most economy of time and fuel. When we get into the atmosphere you can take over and look for a spot to set down."

"I don't believe a word you say now," Mikah said grimly. "I'm going to take control and get a call out on the emergency band. Someone will hear it." As he started forward the ship lurched again and all the lights went out. In the darkness flames could be seen flickering inside the controls. There was a hiss of foam and they vanished. With a weak flicker the emergency lighting circuit came on.

"Shouldn't have thrown the Ramon Lull book," Jason said. "The ship can't stomach it any more than I could."

"You are irreverent and profane," Mikah said through his clenched teeth, as he went to the controls. "You attempt to kill us both. You have no respect for your own life or mine. You're a man who deserves the worst punishment the law allows."

"I'm a gambler," Jason laughed. "Not at all as bad as you say. I take chances—but I only take them when the odds are right. You were carrying me back to certain death. The worst my wrecking the controls can do is administer the same end. So I took a chance. There is a bigger risk factor for you of course, but I'm afraid I didn't take that into consideration. After all, this entire affair is your idea. You'll just have to take the consequences of your own actions and not scold me for them."

"You're perfectly right," Mikah said quietly. "I should have been more alert. Now will you tell me what to do to save *both* our lives. None of the controls work."

"None! Did you try the emergency override? The big red switch under the safety housing."

"I did. It is dead, too."

Jason slumped back into the seat. It was a moment before he could speak. “Read one of your books, Mikah,” he said at last. “Seek consolation in your philosophy. There’s nothing we can do. It’s all up to the computer now, and whatever is left of the circuits.”

“Can’t we help—repair anything?”

“Are you a ship technician? I’m not. We would probably do more harm than good.”

It took two ship-days of very erratic flight to reach the planet. A haze of clouds obscured the atmosphere. They approached from the night side and no details were visible. Or lights.

“If there were cities we should see their lights—shouldn’t we?” Mikah asked.

“Not necessarily. Could be storms. Could be enclosed cities. Could be only ocean in this hemisphere.”

“Or it could be that there are no people down there. Even if the ship should get us down safely—what will it matter? We will be trapped for the rest of our lives on this lost planet at the end of the universe.”

“Don’t be so cheerful,” Jason interrupted. “How about taking off these cuffs while we go down. It will probably be a rough landing and I’d like to have some kind of a chance.”

Mikah frowned at him. “Will you give me your word of honor that you won’t try to escape during the landing?”

“No. And if I gave it—would you believe it? If you let me go, you take your chances. Let neither of us think it will be any different.”

“I have my duty to do,” Mikah said. Jason remained locked in the chair.

They were in the atmosphere, the gentle sighing against the hull quickly climbed the scale to a shrill scream. The drive cut out and they were in free fall. Air friction heated the outer hull white-hot and the interior temperature quickly rose in spite of the cooling unit.

“What’s happening?” Mikah asked. “You seem to know more about this. Are we through—going to crash?”

“Maybe. Could be only one of two things. Either the whole works has folded up—in which case we are going to be scattered in very small pieces all over the landscape, or the computer is saving itself for one last effort. I hope that’s it. They build computers smart these days, all sort of problem-solving circuits. The hull and engines are in good shape—but the controls spotty and unreliable. In a case like this a good human pilot would let the ship drop as far and fast as it could before switching on the drive. Then turn it on full—thirteen gees or more, whatever he figured the passengers could take on the couches. The hull would take a beating, but who cares. The control circuits would be used the shortest amount of time in the simplest manner.”

“Do you think that’s what is happening?” Mikah asked, getting into his acceleration chair.

“That’s what I *hope* is happening. Going to unlock the cuffs before you go to bed? It could be a bad landing and we might want to go places in a hurry.”

Mikah considered, then took out his gun. "I'll unlock you, but I intend to shoot if you try anything. Once we are down you will be locked in again."

"Thanks for small blessings," Jason said, rubbing his wrists.

Deceleration jumped on them, kicked the air from their lungs in uncontrollable gasps, sank them deep into the yielding couches. Mikah's gun was pressed into his chest, too heavy to lift. It made no difference, Jason could not stand nor move. He hovered on the border of consciousness, his vision flickering behind a black and red haze.

Just as suddenly the pressure was gone.

They were still falling.

The drive groaned in the stern of the ship and relays chattered. But it didn't start again. The two men stared at each other, unmoving, for the unmeasurable unit of time that the ship fell.

As the ship dropped it turned and hit at an angle. The end came for Jason in an engulfing wave of thunder, shock and pain. Sudden impact pushed him against the restraining straps, burst them with the inertia of his body, hurled him across the control room. His last conscious thought was to protect his head. He was lifting his arm when he struck the wall.

There is a cold that is so chilling it is a pain not a temperature. Cold that slices into the flesh before it numbs and kills.

Jason came to with the sound of his own voice crying hoarsely. The cold was so great it filled the universe. Cold water he realized as he coughed it from his mouth and nose. Something was around him and it took an effort to recognize it as Mikah's arm; he was holding Jason's face above the surface while he swam. A receding blackness in the water could only have been the ship, giving off bubbles and groans as it died. The cold water didn't hurt now and Jason was just relaxing when he felt something solid under his feet.

"Stand up and walk, curse you," Mikah gasped hoarsely. "I can't ... carry you ... can't carry myself...."

They floundered out of the water, side by side, four-legged crawling beasts that could not stand erect. Everything had an unreality to it and Jason found it hard to think. He should not stop, that he was sure of, but what else could he do? There was a flickering in the darkness, a wavering light coming towards them. Jason could say nothing, but he heard Mikah cry out for help.

Nearer came the light, some kind of a flare or torch, held high. Mikah pulled to his feet as the flame approached.

It was a nightmare. It wasn't a man but a thing that held the flare. A thing of angles, sharp corners, fang-faced and horrible. It had a clubbed extremity it used to strike down Mikah. The tall man fell wordlessly and the creature turned towards Jason. He had no strength to fight with, though he struggled to climb to his feet. His fingers scratched at the frosted sand, but he could not rise, and exhausted with this last effort he fell forward face down. Unconsciousness pulled at his brain but he would not submit. The flickering torchlight came closer and the scuffle of heavy feet in the sand; he could not have this horror behind him. With the last of his strength he

levered himself over and lay on his back, staring up at the thing that stood over him, with the darkness of exhaustion filming his eyes.

Chapter 4

It did not kill him at once, but stood staring down at him, and as the slow seconds ticked by and Jason was still alive he forced himself to consider this menace that appeared from the blackness.

“K’e vi stas el...?” the creature said, and for the first time Jason realized it was human. The meaning of the question picked at the edge of his exhausted brain, he felt he could almost understand it, though he had never heard the language before. He tried to answer but there was only a hoarse gargle from his throat.

“Ven k’n torcoy—r’pidu!”

More lights sprang from the darkness inland and with them the sound of running feet. As they came closer Jason had a clearer look at the man above him and could understand why he had mistaken him for some inhuman creature. His limbs were completely wrapped in lengths of stained leather, his chest and body protected by thick and overlapping leather plates covered with blood-red designs. Over his head was fitted the cochlea shaped shell of some animal, spiraling to a point in front: two small openings had been drilled in it for eye holes. Great, finger-long teeth had been set in the lower edge of the shell to heighten the already fearsome appearance. The only thing at all human about the creature was the matted and filthy beard that trickled out of the shell below the teeth. There were too many other details for Jason to absorb so suddenly; something bulky slung behind one shoulder, dark objects at the waist, a heavy club reached and prodded Jason in the ribs, but he was too close to unconsciousness to resist.

A guttural command halted the torch-bearers a full five meters from the spot where Jason lay. He wondered vaguely why the armored man had not let them approach closer since the light from their torches barely reached this far: everything on this planet seemed inexplicable. For a few moments Jason must have lost consciousness because when he looked again the torch was stuck in the sand at his side and the armored man had one of Jason’s boots off and was pulling at the other. Jason could only writhe feebly but not prevent the theft, for some reason he could not force his body to follow his will. His sense of time seemed to have altered as well and though every second dragged heavily by events occurred with startling rapidity.

The boots were gone now and the man fumbled at Jason’s clothes, stopping every few seconds to glance up at the row of torch-bearers. The magnetic seals were alien to him, the sharp teeth sewn into the leather over his knuckles dug into Jason’s flesh as he struggled to open the seals or to tear the resistant metalcloth. He was growling with impatience when he accidentally touched the release button on the medikit and it dropped into his hand. The shining gadget seemed to please him, but when one of the sharp needles slipped through his thick hand-coverings and stabbed him he howled with rage, throwing the machine down, and grinding it into a splintered ruin in the sand. The loss of this irreplaceable device goaded Jason into motion, he sat up and was trying to reach the medikit when unconsciousness surged over him.

Sometime before dawn the pain in his head drove him reluctantly back to awareness. There were some foul-smelling hides draped over him that retained a little of his body heat. He pulled away the stifling fold that covered his face and stared up at the

stars, cold points of light that glittered in the frigid night. The air was a stimulant and he sucked deep gasps of it that burned his throat but seemed to clear his thoughts. For the first time he realized that his disorientation had been caused by that crack on the head he had received when the ship crashed; his exploring fingers found a swollen rawness on his skull. He must have a brain concussion, that would explain his earlier inability to move or think straight. The cold air was numbing his face and he willingly pulled the hairy skin back over his head.

He wondered what had happened to Mikah Samon after the local thug in the horror outfit had bashed him with the club. This was a messy and unexpected end for the man after he had managed to survive the crash of the ship. Jason had no special affection for the under-nourished zealot, but he did owe him a life. Mikah had saved him after the crash, only to be murdered himself by this local assassin. Jason made a mental note to kill the man just as soon as he was physically up to it, at the same time he was a little astonished at his reflexive acceptance of the need for this blood-thirsty atonement of a life for a life. Apparently his long stay on Pyrrus had trodden down his normal dislike for killing except in self-defense and from what he had seen so far of this world the Pyrran training would certainly be most useful. The sky showed gray through a tear in the hide and he pushed it back to look at the dawn.

Mikah Samon lay next to him his head projecting from a covering fur. He hair was matted and caked with dark blood, but he was still breathing.

“Harder to kill than I thought,” Jason grunted as he levered himself painfully up onto one elbow and took a good look at this world where his spaceship sabotage had landed them.

It was a grim desert, lumped with huddled bodies like the aftermath of a battle at world’s-end. A few of them were stumbling to their feet, holding their skins around them, the only signs of life in that immense waste of gritty sand. On one side a ridge of dunes cut off sight of the sea, but he could hear the dull boom of waves on the shore. White frost rimed the ground and the chill wind made his eyes blink and water. On the top of the dunes a remembered figure suddenly appeared, the armored man, doing something with what appeared to be lengths of rope; there was metallic tinkling, suddenly cut off. Mikah Samon groaned and stirred.

“How do you feel,” Jason asked. “Those are two of the finest blood-shot eyeballs I have ever seen.”

“Where am I?”

“Now that is a bright and original question—I didn’t pick you for the type who watched historical spaceopera on the TV. I have no idea where we are—but I can give you a brief synopsis of how we arrived here, if you are up to it.”

“I remember we swam ashore, then something evil came from the darkness, like a demon from hell. We fought....”

“And he bashed in your head, one quick blow and that was about all the fight there was. I had a better look at your demon, though I was in no better condition to fight him than you were. He’s a man dressed in a weird outfit out of an addict’s nightmare and appears to be the boss of this crew of rugged campers. Other than that I have little idea of what is going on—except that he stole my boots and I’m going to get them back if I have to kill him for them.”

“Do not lust after material things,” Mikah intoned seriously. “And do not talk of killing a man for material gain. You are evil, Jason, and.... My boots are gone—and my clothes, too!”

Mikah had thrown back his covering skins and made this startling discovery. “Belial!” he roared. “Asmodeus, Abaddon, Apollyon and Baal-zebub!”

“Very nice,” Jason said admiringly, “you really have been studying up on your demonology. Were you just listing them—or calling on them for aid?”

“Silence, blasphemer! I have been robbed!” He rose to his feet and the wind whistling around his almost-bare body quickly gave his skin a light touch of blue. “I am going to find the evil creature that did this and force him to return what is mine.”

Mikah turned to leave but Jason reached out and grabbed his ankle with a wrestling grip, twisted it and brought the man thudding to the ground. The fall dazed him and Jason pulled the skins back over the raw-boned form.

“We’re even,” Jason said. “You saved my life last night, just now I saved yours. You’re bare-handed and wounded—while the old man of the mountain up there is a walking armory, and anyone with the personality to wear that kind of an outfit will kill you as easily as he picks his teeth. So take it easy and try to avoid trouble. There’s a way out of this mess—there’s a way out of *every* mess if you look for it—and I’m going to find it. In fact I’m going to take a walk right now and start my research. Agreed?”

A groan was his only answer since Mikah was unconscious again, fresh blood seeping from his injured scalp. Jason stood and wrapped his hides about his body as some protection from the wind, tying the loose ends together. Then he kicked through the sand until he found a smooth rock that would fit inside his fist with just the end protruding, and thus armed made his way out through the stirring forms of the sleepers.

Mikah was conscious again when Jason returned, and the sun was well above the horizon. The people were all awake now, a shuffling, scratching herd of about thirty men, women and children. They were identical in their filth and crude skin wrappings, milling about with a random motion or sitting blankly on the ground. They showed no interest at all in the two strangers. Jason handed a tarred leather cup to Mikah and squatted next to him.

“Drink that. It’s water, the only thing that anyone here had to drink. I didn’t find any food.” He still had the stone in his hand and while he talked he rubbed it on the sand: the end was moist and red and some long hairs were stuck in it.

“I took a good look around this camp, and there’s very little more than you can see from here. Just this crowd of broken down types, a few bundles rolled in hide, and some of them are carrying skin water bottles. They have a simple me-stronger pecking order so I pecked a bit and we can drink. Food comes next.”

“Who are they? What are we doing?” Mikah asked, mumbling a little, obviously still suffering the after-effects of the blow. Jason looked at the contused skull, and decided not to touch it. The wound had bled freely and clotted. Washing it off with the highly dubious water would accomplish little and might add infection to their other troubles.

“I’m only sure of one thing,” Jason said. “They’re slaves. I don’t know why they are here, what they are doing or where they are going, but their status is painfully clear—ours, too. Old Nasty up there on the hill is the boss. The rest of us are slaves.”

“Slaves!” Mikah snorted, the word penetrating through the pain in his head. “It is abominable. The slaves must be freed.”

“No lectures please, and try to be realistic—even if it hurts. There are only two slaves that need freeing here, you and I. These people seem nicely adjusted to the *status quo* and I see no reason to change it. I’m not starting any abolitionist campaigns until I can see my way clearly out of this mess, and I probably won’t start any then either. This planet has been going on a long time without me, and will probably keep rolling along once I’m gone.”

“Coward! You must fight for the Truth and the Truth will make you free.”

“I can hear those capital letters again,” Jason groaned. “The only thing right now that is going to make me free is me. Which may be bad poetry, but is still the truth. The situation here is rough but not unbeatable—so listen and learn. The boss, his name is Ch’aka in case you care, seems to have gone off on a hunt of some kind. He’s not far away and will be back soon, so I’ll try and give you the entire setup quickly.

“I thought I recognized the language, and I was right. It’s a corrupt form of Esperanto, the language all the Terido worlds speak. This altered language plus the fact that these people live about one step above the stone-age culture is pretty sure evidence that they are cut off from any contact with the rest of the galaxy, though I hope not. There may be a trading base somewhere on the planet, and if there is we’ll find it later. We have enough other things to worry about right now, but at least we can speak the language. These people have contracted and lost a lot of sounds and even introduced a glottal stop, something that *no* language needs, but with a little effort the meaning can still be made out.”

“I do not speak Esperanto.”

“Then learn it. It’s easy enough even in this jumbled form. And shut up and listen. These locals are born and bred slaves and it is all they know. There is a little squabbling in the ranks with the bigger ones pushing the work on the weak ones when Ch’aka isn’t looking, but I have that situation well in hand. Ch’aka is our big problem, and we have to find out a lot more things before we can tackle him. He is boss, fighter, father, provider and destiny for this mob, and he seems to know his job. So try to be a good slave for a while....”

“Slave! I?” Mikah arched his back and tried to rise. Jason pushed him back to the ground—harder than was necessary.

“Yes, you—and me, too. That is the only way we are going to survive in this arrangement. Do what everyone else does, obey orders, and you stand a good chance of staying alive until we can find a way out of this tangle.”

Mikah’s answer was drowned out in a roar from the dunes as Ch’aka returned. The slaves climbed quickly to their feet, grabbing up their bundles, and began to form a single widespaced line. Jason helped Mikah to stand and wrap strips of skin around his feet then supported most of his weight as they stumbled to a place in the open formation. Once they were all in position Ch’aka kicked the nearest one and they began walking slowly forward looking carefully at the ground as they went. Jason had

no idea of the significance of the action, but as long as he and Mikah weren't bothered it didn't matter: he had enough work cut out for him just to keep the wounded man on his feet. Somehow Mikah managed to dredge up enough strength to keep going.

One of the slaves pointed down and shouted and the line stopped. He was too far away for Jason to make out the cause of the excitement, but the man bent over and scratched a hole with a short length of pointed wood. In a few seconds he dug up something round and not quite the size of his hand. He raised it over his head and brought the thing to Ch'aka at a shambling run. The slavemaster took it and bit off a chunk, and when the man who had found it turned away he gave him a lusty kick. The line moved forward again.

Two more of the mysterious objects were found, both of which Ch'aka ate as well. Only when his immediate hunger was satisfied did he make any attempt to be the good provider. When the next one was found he called over a slave and threw the object into a crudely woven basket he was carrying on his back. After this the basket-toting slave walked directly in front of Ch'aka who was carefully watchful that every one of the things that was dug up went into the basket. Jason wondered what they were—and they were edible, too, an angry rumbling in his stomach reminded him.

The slave next in line to Jason shouted and pointed to the sand. Jason let Mikah sink to a sitting position when they stopped and watched with interest as the slave attacked the ground with his piece of wood, scratching around a tiny sprig of green that projected from the desert sand. His burrowings uncovered a wrinkled gray object from which the green leaves were growing, a root or tuber of some kind. It appeared as edible as a piece of stone to Jason, but obviously not to the slave who drooled heavily and actually had the temerity to sniff the root. Ch'aka howled with anger at this and when the slave had dropped the root into the basket with the others he received a kick so strong that he had to limp back painfully to his position in the line.

Soon after this Ch'aka called a halt and the tattered slaves huddled around while he poked through the basket. He called them over one at a time and gave them one or more of the roots according to some merit system of his own. The basket was almost empty when he poked his club at Jason.

"K'e nam h'vas vi?" he asked.

"Mia namo estas Jason, mia amiko estas Mikah."

Jason answered in correct Esperanto that Ch'aka seemed to understand well enough, because he grunted and dug through the contents of the basket. His masked face stared at them and Jason could feel the impact of the unseen watching eyes. The club pointed again.

"Where you come from? That you ship that burn, sink?"

"That was our ship. We come from far away."

"From other side of ocean?" This was apparently the largest distance the slaver could imagine.

"From the other side of the ocean, correct." Jason was in no mood to deliver a lecture on astronomy. *"When do we eat?"*

“You a rich man in your country, got a ship, got shoes. Now I got your shoes. You a slave here. My slave. You both my slaves.”

“I’m your slave, I’m your slave,” Jason said resignedly. “But even slaves have to eat. Where’s the food?”

Ch’aka grubbed around in the basket until he found a tiny and withered root which he broke in half and threw onto the sand in front of Jason.

“Work hard you get more.”

Jason picked up the pieces and brushed away as much of the dirt as he could. He handed one to Mikah and took a tentative bite out of the other one: it was gritty with sand and tasted like slightly rancid wax. It took a distinct effort to eat the repulsive thing but he did. Without a doubt it was food, no matter how unwholesome, and would do until something better came along.

“What did you talk about?” Mikah asked, grinding his own portion between his teeth.

“Just swapping lies. He thinks we’re his slaves and I agreed. But it’s just temporary—” Jason added as anger colored Mikah’s face and he started to climb to his feet. Jason pulled him back down. “This is a strange planet, you’re injured, we have no food or water, and no idea at all how to survive in this place. The only thing we can do to stay alive is to go along with what Old Ugly there says. If he wants to call us slaves, fine—we’re slaves.”

“Better to die free than to live in chains!”

“Will you stop the nonsense. Better to live in chains and learn how to get rid of them. That way you end up alive-free rather than dead-free, a much more attractive state. Now shut up and eat. We can’t do anything until you are out of the walking wounded class.”

For the rest of the day the line of walkers plodded across the sand and in addition to helping Mikah, Jason found two of the *krenoj*, the edible roots. They stopped before dusk and dropped gratefully to the sand. When the food was divided they received a slightly larger portion, as evidence perhaps of Jason’s attention to the work. Both men were exhausted and fell asleep as soon as it was dark.

During the following morning they had their first break from the walking routine. Their foodsearching always paralleled the unseen sea, and one slave walked the crest of the dunes that hid the water from sight. He must have seen something of interest because he leaped down from the mound and waved both arms wildly. Ch’aka ran heavily to the dunes and talked with the scout, then booted the man from his presence.

Jason watched with growing interest as he unwrapped the bulky package slung from his back and disclosed an efficient looking crossbow, cocking it by winding on a built-in crank. This complicated and deadly piece of machinery seemed very much out of place with the primitive slave-holding society, and Jason wished that he could get a better look at the device. Ch’aka fumbled a quarrel from another pouch and fitted it to the bow. The slaves sat silently on the sand while their master stalked along the base of the dunes, then wormed his way over them and out of sight, creeping silently on his stomach. A few minutes later there was a scream of pain from behind the dunes and all the slaves jumped to their feet and raced to see. Jason left Mikah where

he lay and was in the first rank of observers that broke over the hillocks and onto the shore.

They stopped at the usual distance and shouted compliments about the quality of the shot and what a mighty hunter Ch'aka was. Jason had to admit there was a certain truth in the claims. A large, furred amphibian lay at the water's edge, the fletched end of the crossbow bolt projecting from its thick neck and a thin stream of blood running down to mix with the surging waves.

"Meat! Meat today!"

"Ch'aka kills the *rosmaro*! Ch'aka is wonderful!"

"Hail, Ch'aka, great provider," Jason shouted to get into the swing of things. "When do we eat?"

The master ignored his slaves, sitting heavily on the dune until he regained his breath after the stalk. Then after cocking the crossbow again he stalked over to the beast and with his knife cut out the quarrel, notching it against the bowstring still dripping with blood.

"Get wood for fire," he commanded. "You, Opisweni, you use the knife."

Shuffling backwards Ch'aka sat down on a hillock and pointed the crossbow at the slave who approached the kill. Ch'aka had left his knife in the animal and Opisweni pulled it free and began to methodically flay and butcher the beast. All the time he worked he carefully kept his back turned to Ch'aka and the aimed bow.

"A trusting soul, our slave-driver," Jason mumbled to himself as he joined the others in searching the shore for driftwood. Ch'aka had all the weapons as well as a constant fear of assassination. If Opisweni tried to use the knife for anything other than the intended piece of work, he would get the crossbow quarrel in the back of his head. Very efficient.

Enough driftwood was found to make a sizable fire, and when Jason returned with his contribution the *rosmaro* had been hacked into large chunks. Ch'aka kicked his slaves away from the heap of wood and produced a small device from another of his sacks. Interested, Jason pushed as close as he dared, into the front rank of the watching circle. Though he had never seen one of them before, the operation of the firemaker was obvious to him. A spring-loaded arm drove a fragment of stone against a piece of steel, sparks flew out and were caught in a cup of tinder, where Ch'aka blew on them until they burst into flame.

Where had the firelighter and the crossbow come from? They were evidence of a higher level of culture than that possessed by these slave-holding nomads. This was the first bit of evidence that Jason had seen that there might be more to the cultural life of this planet than they had seen since their landing. Later, while they were gorging themselves on the seared meat, he drew Mikah aside and pointed this out.

"There's hope yet. These illiterate thugs never manufactured that crossbow or firelighter. We must find out where they came from and see about getting there ourselves. I had a quick look at the quarrel when Ch'aka pulled it out, and I'll swear that it was turned from steel."

"This has significance?" Mikah asked, puzzled.

"It means an industrial society, and possible interstellar contact."

“Then we must ask Ch’aka where he obtained them and leave at once. There will be authorities, we will contact them, explain the situation, obtain transportation to Cassylia. I will not place you under arrest again until that time.”

“How considerate of you,” Jason said, lifting one eyebrow. Mikah was absolutely impossible, and Jason probed at his moral armor to see if there were any weak spots. “Won’t you feel guilty about bringing me back to get killed? After all we are companions in trouble—and I did save your life.”

“I will grieve, Jason. I can see that though you are evil you are not completely evil, and given the right training could be fitted for a useful place in society. But my personal grief must not be allowed to alter events: you forget that you committed a crime and must pay the penalty.”

Ch’aka belched cavernously inside his shell-helmet and howled at his slaves.

“Enough eating, you pigs. You get fat. Wrap the meat and carry it, we have light yet to look for *krenoj*. Move!”

Once more the line was formed and began its slow pace across the desert. More of the edible roots were found, and once they stopped briefly to fill the water bags at a spring that bubbled up out of the sand. The sun dropped towards the horizon and what little warmth it possessed was absorbed by a bank of clouds. Jason looked around and shivered—then noticed the line of dots moving on the horizon. He nudged Mikah who still leaned heavily on him.

“Looks like company coming. I wonder where they fit into the program?”

Pain had blurred Mikah’s attention and he took no notice and, surprisingly enough, neither did any of the other slaves nor Ch’aka. The dots expanded and became another row of marchers, apparently absorbed in the same task as Jason’s group. They plodded forward, making a slow examination of the sand, followed behind by the solitary figure of their master. The two lines slowly approached each other, paralleling the shore.

Near the dunes was a crude mound of stones and the line of walking slaves stopped as soon as they reached it, dropping with satisfied grunts onto the sand. The cairn was obviously a border marker and Ch’aka walked to it and rested his foot on one of the stones, watching while the other line of slaves approached. They, too, stopped at the cairn and settled to the ground: both groups stared with dull-eyed lack of interest and only the slave-masters showed any animation. The other master stopped a good ten paces before he reached Ch’aka and waved an evil looking stone hammer over his head.

“Hate you, Ch’aka!” he roared.

“Hate you, Fasimba!” boomed back the answer.

The exchange was as formal as a *pas de deux* and just about as warlike. Both men shook their weapons and shouted a few insults, then settled down to a quiet conversation. Fasimba was garbed in the same type of hideous and fear-inspiring outfit as Ch’aka, differing only in unimportant details. Instead of a conch, his head was encased in the skull of one of the amphibious *rosmaroj*, brightened up with some extra tusks and horns. The differences between the two men were all minor, and mostly a matter of decoration or variation of weapon design. They were obviously slave masters and equals.

“Killed a *rosmaro* today, second time in ten days,” Ch’aka said.

“You got a good piece coast. Plenty *rosmaroj*. Where the two slaves you owe me?”

“I owe you two slaves?”

“You owe me two slaves, don’t play like stupid. I got the iron arrows for you from the D’zertanoj, one slave you paid with died. You still owe other one.”

“I got two slaves for you. I got two slaves more I pulled out of the ocean.”

“You got a good piece coast.”

Ch’aka walked down his line of slaves until he came to the over-bold one he had half-crippled with a kick the day before. Pulling him to his feet he booted him towards the other mob.

“Here’s a good one,” he said, delivering the goods with a last parting kick.

“Look skinny. Not too good.”

“No, all muscles. Works hard. Doesn’t eat much.”

“You’re a liar!”

“Hate you, Fasimba!”

“Hate you, Ch’aka! Where’s the other one?”

“Got a good one. Stranger from the ocean. He can tell you funny stories, work hard.”

Jason turned in time to avoid the full force of the kick, but it was still strong enough to knock him sprawling. Before he could get up Ch’aka had clutched Mikah Samon by the arm and dragged him across the invisible line to the other group of slaves. Fasimba stalked over to examine him, prodding him with a spiked toe.

“Don’t look good. Big hole on the head.”

“He works hard,” Ch’aka said. “Hole almost healed. He very strong.”

“You give me new one if he dies?” Fasimba asked doubtfully.

“I’ll give you. Hate you, Fasimba!”

“Hate you, Ch’aka.”

The slave herds were prodded to their feet and moved back the way they had come, and Jason shouted after Ch’aka.

“Wait! Don’t sell my friend. We work better together, you can get rid of someone else....”

The slaves gaped at this sudden outburst and Ch’aka wheeled raising his club.

“You shut up. You’re a slave. You tell me once more to do what and I kill you.”

Jason shut up since it was very obvious that this was the only thing he could do. He had a few qualms about Mikah’s possible fate: if he survived the wound he was certainly not the type to bow to the inevitabilities of slave-holding life. Yet Jason had done his best to save him and that was that. Now Jason would think about Jason for a while.

They made a brief march before dark, apparently just until the other slaves were out of sight, then stopped for the night. Jason settled himself into the lee of a mound that broke the force of the wind a bit and unwrapped a piece of scorched meat he had salvaged from the earlier feast. It was tough and oily but far superior to the barely edible *krenoj* that made up the greater part of the native diet. He chewed noisily on the bone and watched while one of the other slaves sidled over towards him.

“Give me some your meat?” the slave asked in a whining voice, and only when she talked did Jason realize that this was a girl; all the slaves were alike in their matted hair and skin wrappings. He ripped off a chunk of meat.

“Here. Sit down and eat it. What’s your name?” In exchange for his generosity he intended to get some information from his captive audience.

“Ijale.” She tore at the meat, held tightly in one fist, while the index finger of her free hand scratched for enemies in her tangled hair.

“Where do you come from? Did you always live here—like this?” How do you ask a slave if she has always been a slave?

“Not here. I come from Bul’wajo first, then Fasimba, now I belong to Ch’aka.”

“What or who is Bul’wajo? Someone like our boss Ch’aka?” She nodded, gnawing at the meat. “And the D’zertanoj that Fasimba gets his arrows from—who are they?”

“You don’t know much,” she said, finishing the meat and licking the grease from her fingers.

“I know enough to have meat when you don’t have any—so don’t abuse my hospitality. Who are the D’zertanoj?”

“Everyone knows who they are.” She shrugged with incomprehension and looked for a soft spot in the sand to sit down. “They live in the desert. They go around in *caroj*. They stink. They have many nice things. One of them gave me my best thing. If I show it to you, you won’t take it?”

“No, I won’t touch it. But I would like to see anything they have made. Here, here’s some more meat. Now let me see your best thing.”

Ijale rooted in her skins for a hidden pocket and dragged out something that she concealed in her clenched fist. She held it out proudly and opened it and there was enough light left for Jason to make out the rough form of a red glass bead.

“Isn’t this so very nice?” she asked.

“Very nice,” Jason agreed, and for an instant felt a touch of real sorrow when he looked at the pathetic bauble. This girl’s ancestors had come to this planet in spaceships with a knowledge of the most advanced sciences. Cut off, their children had degenerated into this, barely conscious slaves, who could prize a worthless piece of glass above all things.

“I like you. I’ll show you my best thing again.”

“I like you, too. Good night.”

Chapter 5

Ijale stayed near Jason the next day, and took the next station in line when the endless *krenoj* hunt began. Whenever it was possible he questioned her and before noon had extracted all of her meager knowledge of affairs beyond the barren coastal plain where they lived. The ocean was a mystery that produced edible animals, fish and an occasional human corpse. Ships could be seen from time to time offshore but nothing was known about them. On the other flank the territory was bounded by desert even more inhospitable than the one in which they scratched out their existence, a waste of lifeless sand, habitable only by the D'zertanoj and their mysterious *caroj*. These last could be animals—or mechanical transportation of some kind, either was possible from Ijale's vague description. Ocean, coast and desert, these made up all of her world and she could conceive of nothing that might exist beyond.

Jason knew there was more, the crossbow was proof enough of that, and he had every intention of finding out where it came from. In order to do that he was going to have to change his slave status when the proper time came. He was developing a certain facility in dodging Ch'aka's heavy boot, the work was never hard and there was ample food. Being a slave left him with no responsibilities other than obeying orders and he had ample opportunity to discover what he could about this planet, so that when he finally did leave he would be as well prepared as was possible.

Later in the day another column of marching slaves was sighted in the distance, on a course paralleling their own, and Jason expected a repeat performance of the previous day's meeting. He was agreeably surprised that it was not. The sight of the others threw Ch'aka into an immediate rage that sent his slaves rushing for safety in all directions. By leaping into the air, howling with anger and beating his club against his thick leather armor he managed to work himself into quite a state before starting off on a slogging run. Jason, followed close behind him, greatly interested by this new turn of affairs. Ahead of them the other slaves scattered and from their midst burst another armed and armored figure. They churned towards each other at top speed and Jason hoped for a shattering crash when they met. However they slowed before they hit and began circling each other, spitting curses.

"Hate you, M'shika!"

"Hate you, Ch'aka!"

The words were the same, but shouted with fierce meaning, with no touch of formality this time.

"Kill you, M'shika! You coming again on my part of the ground with your carrion-meat slaves!"

"You lie, Ch'aka—this ground mine from way back."

"I kill you way back!"

Ch'aka leaped in as he screamed the words and swung a roundhouse blow with his club that would have broken the other man in two if it had connected. But M'shika was expecting this and fell back, swinging a counter-blow with his own club that Ch'aka easily avoided. There followed a quick exchange of club-work that did little more than fan the air, until suddenly both men were locked together and the fight

began in earnest. They rolled together on the ground grunting savagely, tearing at each other. The heavy clubs were of no use this close and were dropped in favor of knives and knees: Jason could understand now why Ch'aka had the long tusks strapped to his kneecaps. It was a no-holds-barred fight and each man was trying as hard as possible to kill his opponent. The leather armor made this difficult and the struggle continued, littering the sand with broken off animal teeth, discarded weapons and other debris. It looked like it would be called a draw when both men separated for a breather, but they dived right back in again.

It was Ch'aka who broke the stalemate when he plunged his dagger into the ground and on the next roll caught the handle in his mouth. Holding his opponent's arms in both his hands he plunged his head down and managed to find a weak spot in the other's armor: M'shika howled and pulled free and when he climbed to his feet blood was running down his arm and dripping from his fingertips. Ch'aka jumped after him but the wounded man grabbed up his club in time to ward off the charge. Stumbling backward he managed to pick up most of his discarded weapons with his wounded arm and beat a hasty retreat. Ch'aka ran after him a short way, shouting praise of his own strength and abilities and of his opponent's cowardice. Jason saw a short, sharp horn from some sea animal lying in the churned up sand and quickly picked it up before Ch'aka turned back.

Once his enemy had been chased out of sight Ch'aka carefully searched the battleground and scavenged anything of military value. Though there was still some hours of daylight left he signaled a halt and distributed the evening ration of *krenoj*. Jason sat and chewed his portion reflectively while Ijale leaned against his side, her shoulder moving rhythmically as she scratched some hidden mite. Lice were inescapable, they hid in the crevices of the badly cured hides and emerged with clicking jaws whenever the warmth of human flesh came near. Jason had his quota of the pests and found his scratching keeping time with hers. This syncopation of scratch triggered the anger that had been building within him, slow and unnoticed.

"I'm serving notice," he said, jumping to his feet. "I'm through with this slave business. Which way is the nearest spot in the desert where I can find the D'zertanoj?"

"Over there, a two-day walk. How are you going to kill Ch'aka?"

"I'm not going to kill Ch'aka, I'm just leaving. I've enjoyed his hospitality and his boot long enough and feel like striking out for myself."

"You can't do that," she gasped. "You will be killed."

"Ch'aka can't very well kill me if I'm not here."

"Everybody will kill you. That is the law. Runaway slaves are always killed."

Jason sat down again and cracked another chunk from his *krenoj* and ruminated over it. "You've talked me into staying a while. But I have no particular desire now to kill Ch'aka, even though he did steal my boots. And I don't see how killing him will help me any."

"You are stupid. After you kill Ch'aka you'll be the new Ch'aka. Then you can do what you want."

Of course. Now that he had been told, the social setup appeared obvious. Because he had seen slaves and slave-holders, Jason had held the mistaken notion that they were different classes of society, when in reality there was only one class, what might be called the dog-eat-dog class. He should have been aware of this when he had seen how careful Ch'aka was to never allow anyone within striking distance of him, and how he vanished each night to some hidden spot. This was free enterprise with a vengeance, carried to its absolute extreme with every man out for himself, every other man's hand turned against him, and your station in life determined by the strength of your arm and the speed of your reflexes. Anyone who stayed alone placed himself outside this society and was therefore an enemy of it and sure to be killed on sight. All of which added up to the fact that he had to kill Ch'aka if he wanted to get ahead. He still had no desire to do it, but he had to.

That night he watched Ch'aka when he slipped away from the others and Jason made a careful note of the direction that he took. Of course the slave master would circle about before he concealed himself, but with a little luck Jason would find him. And kill him. He had no special love of midnight assassination, and until landing on this planet had always believed that killing a sleeping man was a cowardly way to terminate another's existence. But special conditions demand special solutions, and he was no match for the heavily armored man in open combat, therefore the assassin's knife. Or rather sharpened horn. He managed to doze fitfully until some time after midnight, then slipped silently from under his skin coverings. Silently he skirted the sleepers and crept into the darkness between the dunes.

Finding Ch'aka in the wilderness of the desert night was not easy, yet Jason persisted. He made careful sweeps in wider and wider arcs, working his way out from the sleeping slaves. There were gullies and shadowed ravines and all of them had to be searched with utmost care. The slave master was sleeping in one of them and would be alert for any sound. The fact that he had also made special precautions to guard against assassination was only apparent to Jason after he heard the bell ring. It was a tiny sound, barely detectable, but he froze instantly. There was a thin strand pressing against his arm, and when he drew back carefully the bell sounded again. He cursed silently for his stupidity, only remembering now about the bells he had heard from Ch'aka's sleeping site. The slaver must surround himself every night with a network of string that would sound alarm bells if anyone attempted to approach in the dark. Slowly and soundlessly Jason drew back deeper into the gully.

With a thud of rushing feet Ch'aka appeared, swinging his club around his head, coming directly towards Jason. Jason rolled desperately sideways and the club crashed into the ground, then he was up and running at top speed down the gully. Rocks twisted under his feet and he knew that if he tripped he was dead, yet he had no choice other than flight. The heavily armored Ch'aka could not keep up with him and Jason managed to stay on his feet until the other was left behind. Ch'aka shouted with rage and hurled curses after him, but he could not catch him. Jason, panting for breath, vanished into the darkness and made a slow circle back to the sleeping camp. The noise would have roused them and he stayed away for an estimated hour, shivering in the icy predawn, before he slipped back to his waiting skins. The sky was beginning to gray and he lay awake wondering if he had been recognized: he didn't think he had.

As the red sun climbed over the horizon Ch'aka appeared on top of the dunes, shaking with rage.

"Who did it?" he screamed. "Who came in night." He stalked among them, glaring right and left, and no one stirred except to draw away from his stamping feet. "Who did it?" he shouted again as he came near the spot where Jason lay.

Five slaves pointed silently at Jason.

Cursing their betrayal Jason sprang up and ran from the whistling club. He had the sharpened horn in his hand but knew better than to try and stand up to Ch'aka in open combat; there had to be another way. He looked back quickly to see his enemy still following and narrowly missed tripping over the outstretched leg of a slave. They were all against him! They were all against each other and no man was safe from any other man's hand. He ran free of the slaves and scrambled to the top of a shifting dune, pulling himself up the steep slope by clutching at the coarse grass on the summit. He turned at the top and kicked sand into Ch'aka's face, trying to blind him, but had to run when the slaver swung down his crossbow and notched a steel quarrel. Ch'aka chased him again, panting heavily.

Jason was tiring now and he knew this was the best time to launch a counterattack. The slaves were out of sight and it would be a battle only between the two of them. Scrambling up a slope of broken rock he reversed himself suddenly and leaped back down. Ch'aka was taken by surprise and had his club only half-raised when Jason was upon him, and he swung wildly. Jason ducked under the blow and used Ch'aka's momentum to help throw him as he grabbed the club arm and pulled. Face down the armored man crashed against the stones and Jason was straddling his back even as he fell, clutching for his chin. He lacerated his fingers on a jagged tooth necklace then grasped the man's thick beard and pulled back. For a single long instant, before he could writhe free and roll over, Ch'aka's head was stretched back, and in that instant Jason plunged the sharp horn deep into the soft flesh of the throat. Hot blood burst over his hand and Ch'aka shuddered horribly under him and died.

Jason climbed wearily to his feet, suddenly exhausted. He was alone with his victim. The cold wind swept about them carrying the rustling grains of sand, chilling the sweat on his body. Sighing once he wiped his bloody hands on the sand and began to strip the corpse. Thick straps held the shell helmet over the dead man's head and when he unknotted them and pulled it away he saw that Ch'aka was well past middle age. There was some gray in his beard, but his scraggly hair was completely gray, his face and balding head pallid white from being concealed under the helmet. It took a long time to get the wrappings and armor off and retie them over himself, but it was finally done. Under the skin and claw wrappings on Ch'aka's feet were Jason's boots, filthy but undamaged, and Jason drew them on happily. When at last, after scouring it out with sand, he had strapped on the helmet, Ch'aka was reborn. The corpse on the sand was just another dead slave. Jason scraped a shallow grave, interred and covered it. Then, slung about with weapons, bags and crossbow, the club in his hand, he stalked back to the waiting slaves. As soon as he appeared they scrambled to their feet and formed a line. Jason saw Ijale looking at him worriedly, trying to discover who had won the battle.

"Score one for the visiting team," he called out, and she gave him a small, frightened smile and turned away. "About face all and head back the way we came. There is a

new day dawning for you slaves. I know you don't believe this yet, but there are some big changes in store."

He whistled while he strolled after the line and chewed happily on the first *krenoj* that was found.

Chapter 6

That evening they built a fire on the beach and Jason sat with his back to the safety of the sea. He took his helmet off, the thing was giving him a headache, and called Ijale over to him.

“I hear Ch’aka. I obey.”

She ran hurriedly over to him and flopped onto the sand.

“I want to talk to you,” Jason said. “And my name is Jason, not Ch’aka.”

“Yes, Ch’aka,” she said, darting a quick glance at his exposed face, then turning away. He grumbled and pushed the basket of *krenoj* over to her.

“I can see where it is not going to be an easy thing changing this social setup. Tell me, do you or any of the others ever have any desire to be free?”

“What is free?”

“Well ... I suppose that answers my question. Free is what you are when you are not a slave, or a slave owner, free to go where you want and do what you want.”

“I wouldn’t like that.” She shivered. “Who would take care of me? How could I find any *krenoj*? It takes many people together to find *krenoj*, one alone would starve.”

“If you are free, you can combine with other free people and look for *krenoj* together.”

“That is stupid. Whoever found would eat and not share unless a master made him. I like to eat.”

Jason rasped his sprouting beard. “We all like to eat, but that doesn’t mean we have to be slaves. But I can see that unless there are some radical changes in this environment I am not going to have much luck in freeing anyone, and I had better take all the precautions of a Ch’aka to see that I can stay alive.”

He picked up his club and stalked off into the darkness, silently circling the camp until he found a good-sized knoll with smooth sides. Working by touch he pulled the little pegs from their bag and planted them in rows, carefully laying the leather strings in their forked tops. The ends of the strings were fastened to delicately balanced steel bells that tinkled at the slightest touch. Thus protected he lay down in the center of his warning spiderweb and spent a restless night, half awake, waiting tensely for the bells to ring.

In the morning the march continued and they came to the barrier cairn, and when the slaves stopped Jason urged them past it. They did this happily, looking forward to witnessing a good fight for possession of the violated territory. Their hopes were justified when later in the day the other row of slaves was seen far off to the right, and a figure detached itself and ran towards them.

“Hate you, Ch’aka!” Fasimba shouted as he ran up, only this time he meant what he said. “Coming on my ground, I kill you!”

“Not yet,” Jason called out. “And hate you, Fasimba, sorry I forgot the formalities. I don’t want any of your land and the old treaty or whatever it is still holds. I just want to talk to you.”

Fasimba stopped, but kept his stone hammer ready, very suspicious. “You got new voice, Ch’aka.”

“I got new Ch’aka, old Ch’aka now pushing up the daisies. I want to trade back a slave from you and then we’ll go.”

“Ch’aka fight hard. You must be good fighter Ch’aka.” He shook his hammer angrily. “Not as good as me, Ch’aka!”

“You’re the tops, Fasimba, nine slaves out of ten want you for a master. Look, can’t we get to the point, then I’ll get my mob out of here.” He looked at the row of approaching slaves, trying to pick out Mikah. “I want back the slave who had the hole in his head. I’ll give you two slaves in trade, your choice. What do you say to that?”

“Good trade, Ch’aka. You pick one of mine, take the best, I’ll take two of yours. But hole-in-head gone. Too much trouble. Talk all the time. I got sore foot from kicking him. Got rid of him.”

“Did you kill him?”

“Don’t waste slave. Traded him to the D’zertanoj. Got arrows. You want arrows?”

“Not this time, Fasimba, but thanks for the information.” He rooted around in a pouch and pulled out a *krenoj*. “Here, have something to eat.”

“Where you get poisoned *krenoj*?” Fasimba asked with interest. “I could use a poisoned *krenoj*.”

“This isn’t poisoned, it’s perfectly edible, or at least as edible as these things ever are.”

Fasimba laughed. “You pretty funny, Ch’aka. I give you one arrow for poisoned *krenoj*.”

“You’re on,” Jason said throwing the *krenoj* to the ground between them. “But I tell you it is perfectly good.”

“That’s what I tell man I give it to. I got good use for a poisoned *krenoj*.” He threw an arrow into the sand away from them and grabbed up the vegetable as he left.

When Jason picked up the arrow it bent, and he saw that it was rusted almost completely in two and that the break had been craftily covered by clay. “That’s all right,” he called after the retreating slaver, “just wait until your friend eats the *krenoj*.”

The march continued, first back to the boundary cairn with the suspicious Fasimba dogging their steps. Only after Jason and his band had passed the border did the others return to their normal foraging. Then began the long walk to the borders of the inland desert. Since they had to search for *krenoj* as they went it took them the better part of three days to reach their destination. Jason merely started the line in the correct direction, but as soon as he was out of sight of the sea he had only a rough idea of the correct course, however he did not confide his ignorance to the slaves and they marched steadily on, along what was obviously a well-known route to them. Along the way they collected and consumed a good number of *krenoj*, found two

wells from which they refilled the skin bags, and pointed out a huddled animal sitting by a hole that Jason, to their un-voiced disgust, managed to miss completely with a bolt from the crossbow.

On the morning of the third day Jason saw a line of demarcation on the flattened horizon and before the midday meal they came to a sea of billowing, bluish-gray sand. The ending of what he had been accustomed to thinking of as the desert was startling. Beneath their feet were yellow sand and gravel, while occasional shrubs managed a sickly existence as did some grass and the life-giving *krenoj*. Animals as well as men lived here and, ruthless though survival was, they were at least alive. In the wastes ahead no life was possible or visible, though there seemed to be no doubt that the D'zertanoj lived there. This must mean that though it looked unlimited—as Ijale believed it to be—there were probably arable lands on the other side. Mountains as well, if they weren't just clouds, since a line of gray peaks could just be made out on the distant horizon.

"Where do we find the D'zertanoj?" he asked the nearest slave who merely scowled and looked away. Jason was having a problem with discipline. The slaves would not do a thing he asked unless he kicked them. Their conditioning had been so thorough that an order unaccompanied by a kick just wasn't an order and his continued reluctance to impose the physical coercion with the spoken command was just being taken as a sign of weakness. Already some of the burlier slaves were licking their lips and sizing him up. His efforts to improve the life of the slaves were being blocked completely by the slaves themselves. With a mumbled curse at the continued obduracy of the human race Jason sank the toe of his boot into the man.

"Find them there by big rock," was the immediate response.

There was a dark spot at the desert's edge in the indicated direction and when they approached Jason saw that it was an outcropping of rock that had been built up with a wall of bricks or boulders to a uniform height. A good number of men could be concealed behind that wall and he was not going to risk his precious slaves or even more precious skin anywhere near it. At his shout the line halted and settled to the sand while he stalked a few meters in front, settling his club in his hand and suspiciously examined the structure.

That there were unseen watchers was proven when a man appeared from around the corner and walked slowly towards Jason. He was dressed in loose-fitting robes and carried a basket on one arm, and when he had reached a point roughly halfway between Jason and the rock he had just quitted he halted and sat crosslegged in the sand, the basket at his side. Jason looked carefully in all directions and decided the position was safe enough. There were no places of concealment where armed men might have hidden and he had no fear of the single man. Club ready he walked out and stopped a full three paces from the other.

"Welcome, Ch'aka," the man said. "I was afraid we wouldn't be seeing you again after that little ... difficulty we had."

He remained seated while he talked, stroking the few strands of his scraggly beard. His head was shaven smooth and as sunburned and leathery brown as the rest of his face, the most prominent feature of which was the magnificent prow of a nose that terminated in flaring nostrils and was used as sturdy support for a pair of handmade sunglasses. They appeared to be carved completely of bone and fit tightly to the face, their flat, solid fronts were cut with thin transverse slashes. This eye protection, the

things could only have been for weak eyes, and the network of wrinkles indicated the man was quite old and would present no danger to Jason.

"I want something," Jason said, in straightforward, Ch'akaish manner.

"A new voice and a new Ch'aka—I bid you welcome. The old one was a dog and I hope he died in great pain when you killed him. Now sit friend Ch'aka and drink with me." He carefully opened the basket and removed a stone crock and two crockery mugs.

"Where you get poison drink?" Jason asked, remembering his local manners. This *D'zertano* was a smart one and had been able to tell instantly from Jason's voice that there had been a change in slaves. "And what your name?"

"Edipon," the ancient said as, uninsulted, he put the drinking apparatus back into the basket. "What is it that you want—within reason that is? We always need slaves and we are always willing to trade."

"I want slave you got. I trade you two for one."

The seated man smiled coldly from behind the shelter of his nose. "It is not necessary to talk as ungrammatically as the coastal barbarians, since I can tell by your accent that you are a man of education. What slave is it that you want?"

"The one that you just received from Fasimba. He belongs to me." Jason abandoned his linguistic ruse and put himself even more on guard, taking a quick look around at the empty sands. This dried up old bird was a lot brighter than he looked and he would have to stay on guard.

"Is that all you want?" Edipon asked.

"All I can think of at this moment. You produce this slave and perhaps we can talk more business."

"I have an even better idea than that."

Edipon's laugh had very dirty overtones and Jason sprang back when the oldster put two fingers into his mouth and whistled shrilly between them. There was the rustle of shifting sand and Jason wheeled to see men apparently climbing out of the empty desert, pushing back wooden covers over which the sand had been smoothed. There were six of them, with shields and clubs, and Jason cursed his stupidity at meeting Edipon on a spot of the other's choosing. He swung his club behind him but the oldster was already scampering for the safety of the rock. Jason howled in anger and ran at the nearest man who was still only halfway out of his hiding place. The man took Jason's blow on his upraised shield and was toppled back into the pit by the force of it. Jason ran on but another was ahead of him, swinging his own war club in readiness. There was no way around so Jason ran into him at full speed with all of his pendant teeth and horns gnashing and clattering. The man fell back under the attack and Jason split his shield with his club, and would have done further damage except that the other men arrived at that moment and he had to face them.

It was a brief and wicked battle, with Jason giving just a little more than he received. Two of the attackers were down and a third holding his cracked head when the weight of numbers carried Jason to the ground. He called to his slaves for aid, then cursed them when they only remained seated, while his arms were pinioned with rope and his weapons stripped from his body. One of the victors waved to the slaves

who now stood and docilely marched into the desert. Jason was dragged, snarling with rage, in the same direction.

There was a wide opening in the desert-facing side of the wall and once through it Jason's anger instantly vanished. Here was one of the *caroj* that Ijale had told him about: there could be no doubt of it. He could now understand how, to her uneducated eye, there could exist an uncertainty as to whether the thing was an animal or not. The vehicle was a good ten meters long, shaped roughly like a boat, and bore on the front a large and obviously false animal head covered with fur and resplendent with rows of carved teeth and glistening crystal eyes. There were hide coverings and not-too realistic legs hanging about the thing, surely not enough camouflage to fool a sophisticated six-year old.

This sort of disguise might be good enough to take in the ignorant savages, but the same civilized child would recognize this as a vehicle as soon as he saw the six large wheels below. They were cut with deep treads and made from some resilient looking substance. No motive power was visible, but Jason almost hooted with joy at the prominent stink of burnt fuel. This crude looking contrivance had some artificial source of power, which might be the product of a local industrial revolution or have been purchased from off-world traders. Either possibility offered the chance of eventual escape from this nameless planet.

The slaves, some of them cringing with terror of the unknown, were kicked up the gangplank and into the *caroj*. Four of the huskies who had subdued and bound Jason carried him up and dumped him onto the deck where he lay quietly and examined what could be seen of the desert-vehicle's mechanism. A post projected from the front of the deck and one of the men fitted what could only have been a tiller handle over the squared top of it. If this monolithic apparatus steered with the front pair of wheels it must be driven with the rear, so Jason flopped around on the deck until he could look towards the stern. A cabin, the width of the deck, was situated here, windowless and with a single inset door fitted with a grand selection of locks and bolts. Any doubt that this was the engine room was displaced by the black metal smokestack that rose up through the cabin roof.

"We are leaving," Edipon screeched and waved his thin arms in the air. "Bring in the entranceway. Narsisi stand forward to indicate the way to the *caroj*. Now—all pray as I go into the shrine to induce the sacred powers to move us towards Putl'ko." He started towards the cabin, then stopped to point to one of the club bearers. "Erebo you lazy sod, did you remember to fill the watercup of the gods this time, because they grow thirsty?"

"I filled it, I filled it," Erebo muttered, chewing on a looted *krenoj*.

Preparations made, Edipon went into the recessed doorway and pulled a concealing curtain over it. There was much clanking and rattling as the locks and bolts were opened and he let himself inside. Within a few minutes a black cloud of greasy smoke rolled out of the smokestack and was whipped away by the wind. Almost an hour passed before the sacred powers were ready to move, and they announced their willingness to proceed by screaming and blowing their white breath up in the air. Four of the slaves screamed counterpoint and fainted, while the rest looked as if they would be happier off dead. Jason had had some experience with primitive machines

before so the safety valve on the boiler came as no great surprise. He was also prepared when the vehicle shuddered and began to move slowly out into the desert. From the amount of smoke and the quantity of steam escaping from under the stern he didn't think the engine was very efficient, but primitive as it was it moved the *caroj* and its load of passengers across the sand at a creeping yet steady pace.

There were more screams from the slaves, and a few tried to leap over the side but were clubbed down. The robe-wrapped D'zertanoj were firmly working their way through the ranks of the captives, pouring ladlefuls of dark liquid down their throats. The first ones to receive it were already slumped unconscious or dead, though the chances were better that they were unconscious since there was no reason for their captors to kill them after going to such lengths to get them in the first place. Jason believed this, but the terrified slaves did not have the solace of his philosophy so struggled on, thinking that they were fighting for their lives. When Jason's turn came he did not submit meekly, in spite of his beliefs, and managed to bite some fingers and kick one man in the stomach before they sat on him, held his nose and poured a measure of the burning liquid down his throat. It hurt and he was dizzy, and he tried to will himself to throw up, but this was the last thing that he remembered.

Chapter 7

“Drink some more of this,” the voice said, and cold water splashed on Jason’s face and some of it trickled down his throat making him cough. Something hard was pressing into his back and his wrists hurt. Memory seeped back slowly, the fight, the capture and the potion that had been forced upon him. When he opened his eyes he saw a flickering yellow lamp overhead, hung from a chain. He blinked at it and tried to gather enough energy to sit up. A familiar face swam in front of the light and Jason squinted his eyes at it and groaned.

“Is that you Mikah—or are you just part of a nightmare?”

“There is no escape from justice, Jason. It is I, and I have some grave questions to put to you.”

Jason groaned again. “You’re real all right. Even in a nightmare I wouldn’t dare dream up any lines like that. But before the questions, how about telling me a thing or two about the local setup, you should know something since you have been a slave of the D’zertanoj longer than I have.” Jason realized that the pain in his wrists came from heavy iron shackles. A chain passed through them and was stapled to a thick wooden bar on which his head had been resting. “Why the chains—and what is the local hospitality like?”

Mikah resisted the invitation to impart any vital information and returned irresistibly to his own topic.

“When I saw you last you were a slave of Ch’aka, and tonight you were brought in with the other slaves of Ch’aka and chained to the bar while you were unconscious. There was an empty place next to mine and I told them I would tend you if they placed you there, and they did. Now there is something I must know. Before they stripped you I saw that you were wearing the armor and helmet of Ch’aka. Where is the man—what happened to him?”

“Me Ch’aka,” Jason rasped, and burst out coughing from the dryness in his throat. He took a long drink of water from the bowl. “You sound very vindictive, Mikah you old fraud. Where is all the turn-the-other-cheek stuff now? Don’t tell me you could possibly hate the man just because he hit you on the head, fractured your skull and sold you down the river as a slave reject? In case you have been brooding over this injustice you can now be cheered because the evil Ch’aka is no more. He is buried in the trackless wastes and after all the applicants were sifted out I got the job.”

“You killed him?”

“In a word—yes. And don’t think that it was easy since he had all the advantages and I possessed only my native ingenuity, which luckily proved to be enough. It was touch and go for a while because when I tried to assassinate him in his sleep—”

“You *what*?” Mikah Samon hissed.

“Got to him at night. You don’t think anyone in his right mind would tackle a monster like that face-to-face do you? Though it ended up that way, since he had some neat gadgets for keeping track of people in the dark. Briefly, we fought, I won, I became Ch’aka, though my reign was neither long nor noble. I followed you as far as the desert where I was neatly trapped by a shrewd old bird name of Edipon who

demoted me back to the ranks and took away all my slaves as well. Now that's my story. So tell me yours, where we are, what goes on here?"

"Assassin! Slave holder!" Mikah reared back, as far as he could under the restraint of the chain, and pointed the finger of judgment at Jason. "Two more charges must be added to your role of infamy. I sicken myself, Jason, that I could ever have felt sympathy for you and tried to help you. I will still help you, but only to stay alive so that you may be taken back to Cassylia for trial and execution."

"I like that example of fair and impartial justice—trial *and* execution." Jason coughed again and drained the bowl of water. "Didn't you ever hear of presumed innocence until proven guilty? It only happens to be the mainstay of all jurisprudence. And how could you possibly justify trying me on Cassylia for actions that occurred on this planet—that aren't crimes here? That's like taking a cannibal away from his tribe and executing him for anthropophagy."

"What would be wrong with that? The eating of human flesh is a crime so loathsome I shudder to think of it. Of course a man who does that must be executed."

"If he slips in the back door and eats one of your relatives, you certainly have grounds for action. But not if he joins the rest of his jolly tribe for a good roast of enemy. Don't you see the obvious point here—that human conduct can only be judged in relation to its environment? Conduct is relative. The cannibal in his society is just as moral as the churchgoer in yours."

"Blasphemer! A crime is a crime! There are moral laws that stand above all human society."

"Oh no there are not, that's just the point where your medieval morality breaks down. All laws and ideas are historical and relative, not absolute. They are relevant to their particular time and place and taken out of context they lose their importance. Within the context of this grubby society I acted in a most straightforward and honest manner. I attempted to assassinate my master—which is the only way an ambitious boy can get ahead in this hard world, and which was undoubtedly the way Ch'aka himself got the job in the first place. Assassination didn't work but combat did, and the results were the same. Once in power I took good care of my slaves, though of course they didn't appreciate it since they didn't want good care, they only wanted my job, that being the law of the land. The only thing I really did wrong was to not live up to my obligations as a slave holder and keep them marching up and down the beaches forever. Instead I came looking for you and was trapped and broken back to slavery where I belong for pulling such a stupid trick."

The door crashed open and harsh sunlight streamed into the windowless building. "On your feet slaves!" a D'zertano shouted in through the opening.

A chorus of shufflings and groans broke out as the men stirred to life. Jason could see now that he was one of twenty slaves shackled to the long bar, apparently the entire trunk of a good-sized tree. The man chained at the far end seemed to be a leader of sorts because he cursed and goaded the others to life. When they were all standing he snapped his commands in a hectoring tone of voice.

"Come on, come on, first come best food. And don't forget your bowls, put them away so they can't drop out, remember nothing to eat or drink all day unless you have a bowl. And let's work together today, everyone pull his weight, that's the only way to do it. That goes for all you men, specially you new men. Give them a day's work here and they give you a day's food...."

“Oh shut up!” someone shouted.

“... And you can’t complain about that,” the strawboss whined on, unperturbed. “Now altogether ... *one* ... bend down and get your hands around the bar, get a good grip and ... *two* ... lift it clear of the ground, that’s the way. And ... *three* ... stand up and out the door we go.”

They shuffled out into the sunlight and the cold wind of dawn bit through his Pyrran coverall and the remnants of Ch’aka’s leather trappings that Jason had been allowed to keep. His captors had torn off the claw-studded feet but not bothered the wrappings underneath, so they hadn’t found his boots. This was the only bright spot on an otherwise unlimited vista of blackest gloom. Jason tried to be thankful for small blessings, but only shivered some more. As soon as possible this situation had to be changed since he had already served his term as slave on this backwoods planet and was cut out for better things.

On order the slaves lined up against the walls of the yard. Presenting their bowls like scruffy penitents they accepted dippers of lukewarm soup from another slave who pushed along a wheeled tub of the stuff: he was chained to the tub. Jason’s appetite vanished when he tasted the sludge. It was *krenoj* soup, and the desert tubers tasted even worse—he hadn’t thought it was possible—when served up in a broth. But survival was more important than fastidiousness, so he gulped the evil stuff down.

Breakfast over they marched out the gate into another compound and fascinated interest displaced all of Jason’s concerns. In the center of the yard was a large capstan into which the first group of slaves were already fitting the end of their bar. Jason’s group, and the two others, shuffled into position and seated their bars, making a four spoked wheel out of the capstan. An overseer shouted and the slaves groaned and threw their weight against the bars until they shuddered and began to turn, then trudging slowly they kept the wheel moving. Once this slogging labor was under way Jason turned his attention to the crude mechanism that they were powering.

A vertical shaft from the capstan turned a creaking wooden wheel that set a series of leather belts into motion. Some of them vanished through openings into a large stone building, while the strongest strap of all turned the rocker arm of what could only be a counterbalanced pump. This all seemed like a highly inefficient way to go about pumping water since there certainly must be natural springs and lakes somewhere around. The pungent smell that filled the yard was hauntingly familiar, and Jason had just reached the conclusion that water couldn’t be the object of their labors when a throaty gurgling came from the standpipe of the pump and a thick black stream bubbled out.

“Petroleum—of course!” Jason enthused out loud, then bent his attentions to pushing when the overseer gave him an ugly look and cracked his whip menacingly.

This was the secret of the D’zertanoj, and the source of their power. Mountains were visible nearby, and hills, towering above the surrounding walls. The captured slaves had been drugged so they would not even know in which direction they had been brought to this hidden site, or how long the trip was. Here in this guarded valley they labored to pump the crude oil that their masters used to power their big desert wagons. Or did they use crude oil for this? The petroleum was gurgling out in a solid stream now, and running down an open trough that vanished through the wall into

the same building as the turning belts. And what barbaric devilishness went on in there? A thick chimney crowned the building and produced clouds of black smoke, while from the various openings in the wall came a tremendous stench that threatened to lift the top off his head.

At the same moment that he realized what was going on in the building a guarded door was opened and Edipon came out, blowing his sizable nose in a scrap of rag. The creaking wheel turned and when its rotation brought Jason around again he called out to him.

“Hey, Edipon, come over here. I want to talk to you. I’m the former Ch’aka, in case you don’t recognize me out of uniform.”

Edipon gave him one look, then turned away dabbing at his nose. It was obvious that slaves held no interest for him, no matter what their position had been before their fall. The slave-driver ran over with a roar, raising his whip, while the slow rotation of the wheel carried Jason away. He shouted back over his shoulder.

“Listen to me—I know a lot and can help you.” Only a turned back for an answer and the whip was already whistling down. It was time for the hard sell. “You had better hear me—because I know that *what comes out first is best*. Yeow!” This last was involuntary as the whip landed.

Jason’s words were without meaning to the slaves as well as the overseer who was raising his whip for another blow, but their impact on Edipon was as dramatic as if he had stepped on a hot coal. He shuddered to a halt and wheeled about, and even at this distance Jason could see that a sickly gray tone had replaced his normal browned color of his skin.

“*Stop the wheel!*” he shouted.

This unexpected command drew the startled attention of everyone. The gape-mouthed overseer lowered his whip while the slaves stumbled and halted and the wheel groaned to a stop. In the sudden silence Edipon’s steps echoed loudly as he ran to Jason, halting a hand’s breadth away, his lips drawn back from his teeth with tension as if he were prepared to bite.

“What was that you said?” He hurled the words at Jason while his fingers half-plucked a knife from his belt.

Jason smiled, looking and acting calmer than he felt. His barb had gone home, but unless he proceeded carefully so would Edipon’s knife—into his stomach. This was obviously a very sensitive topic.

“You heard what I said—and I don’t think you want me to repeat it in front of all these strangers. I know what happens here because I come from a place far away where we do this kind of thing all the time. I can help you. I can show you how to get more of the best, and how to make your *caroj* work better. Just try me. Only unchain me from this bar first and let’s get to some place private where we can have a nice chat.”

Edipon’s thoughts were obvious. He chewed his lip and looked hotly at Jason, fingering the edge of his knife. Jason only returned a smile of pure innocence and tapped his fingers happily on the bar, just marking time while he waited to be released. Yet in spite of the cold there was a rivulet of sweat trickling down his spine.

He was gambling everything on Edipon's intelligence, that the man's curiosity would overcome the immediate desire to silence the slave who knew so much about things so secret, hoping that he would remember that slaves could always be killed, and that it wouldn't hurt to ask a few questions first. Curiosity won and the knife dropped back into the sheath while Jason let his breath out in a relieved sigh. It had been entirely too close, even for a professional gambler; his own life on the board was a little higher stakes than he enjoyed playing for.

"Release him from the bar and bring him to me," Edipon ordered, then strode agitatedly away. The other slaves watched wide-eyed as the blacksmith was rushed out, and with much confusion and shouted orders Jason's chain was cut from the bar where it joined the heavy staple.

"What are you doing?" Mikah asked, and one of the guards backhanded him to the ground. Jason just smiled and touched his finger to his lips as his chain was released and they led him away. He was free from bondage and he would stay that way if he could convince Edipon that he would be better off in some capacity other than dumb labor.

The room they led him to contained the first touches of decoration or self-indulgence that he had seen on this planet. The furniture was carefully constructed, with an occasional bit of carving to brighten it, and there was a woven cover on the bed. Edipon stood by a table, tapping his fingers nervously on the dark polished surface. "Lock him up," he ordered the guards, and Jason was secured to a sturdy ringbolt that projected from the wall. As soon as the guards were gone he stood before Jason and drew his knife. "Tell me what you know or I will kill you at once."

"My past is an open book to you, Edipon. I come from a land where we know all the secrets of nature—"

"What is the name of this land? Are you a spy from Appisala?"

"I couldn't very well be one since I have never heard of the place." Jason pulled at his lower lip, wondering just how intelligent Edipon was, and just how frank he could be with him. This was no time to get tangled up in lies about planetary geography: it might be best to try him on a small dose of the truth. "If I told you I came from another planet, another world in the sky up among the stars, would you believe me?"

"Perhaps. There are many old legends that our forefathers came from a world beyond the sky, but I have always dismissed this as religious drivel, fit only for women."

"In this case the girls happen to be right. Your planet was settled by men whose ships crossed the emptiness of space as your *caroj* pass over the desert. Your people have forgotten about that and lost the science and knowledge you once had, but in other worlds the knowledge is still held."

"Madness!"

"Not at all, it is science, though many times confused as being the same thing. I'll prove my point. You know that I could never have been inside your mysterious building out there, and I imagine you can be sure no one has told me its secrets. Yet I'll bet you that I can describe fairly accurately what is in there—not from seeing the machinery, but from knowing what must be done to oil in order to get the products you need. Do you want to hear?"

“Proceed,” Edipon said, sitting on a corner of the table and balancing the knife loosely in his palm.

“I don’t know what you call it, the device, but in the trade it is a pot still used for fractional distillation. Your crude oil runs into a tank of some kind, and you pipe it from there to a retort, some big vessel that you can seal airtight. Once it is closed you light a fire under the thing and try to get all the oil to an even temperature. A gas rises from the oil and you take it off through a pipe and run it through a condenser, probably more pipe with water running over it. Then you put a bucket under the open end of the pipe and out of it drips the juice that you burn in your *caroj* to make them move.”

Edipon’s eyes opened wider and wider while Jason talked until they stuck out of his head like boiled eggs. “Demon!” he screeched and tottered towards Jason with the knife extended. “You couldn’t have seen, not through stone walls, yet only my family have seen, no others—I’ll swear to that!”

“Keep cool, Edipon, I told you that we have been doing this stuff for years in my country.” He balanced on one foot, ready for a kick at the knife in case the old man’s nerves did not settle down. “I’m not out to steal your secrets, in fact they are pretty small potatoes where I come from since every farmer has a still for cooking up his own mash and saving on taxes. I’ll bet I can even put in some improvements for you, sight unseen. How do you monitor the temperature on your cooking brew? Do you have thermometers?”

“What are thermometers?” Edipon asked, forgetting the knife for the moment, drawn on by the joys of a technical discussion.

“That’s what I thought. I can see where your bootleg joyjuice is going to take a big jump in quality, if you have anyone here who can do some simple glassblowing. Though it might be easier to rig up a coiled bi-metallic strip. You’re trying to boil off your various fractions, and unless you keep an even and controlled temperature you are going to have a mixed brew. The thing you want for your engines are the most volatile fractions, the liquids that boil off first like gasoline and benzene. After that you raise the temperature and collect kerosene for your lamps and so forth right on down the line until you have a nice mass of tar left to pave your roads with. How does that sound to you?”

Edipon had forced himself into calmness, though a jumping muscle in his cheek betrayed his inner tension. “What you have described is the truth, though you were wrong on some small things. But I am not interested in your thermometer nor in improving our water-of-power, it has been good enough for my family for generations and it is good enough for me....”

“I bet you think that line is original?”

“... There is something that you might be able to do that would bring you rich rewards. We can be generous when needs be. You have seen our *caroj* and ridden on one, and seen me go into the shrine to intercede with the sacred powers to make us move. Can you tell me what power moves the *caroj*?”

“I hope this is the final exam, Edipon, because you are stretching my powers of extrapolation. Stripping away all the *shrines* and *sacred powers* I would say that you go into the engine room to do a piece of work with very little praying involved. There

could be a number of ways of moving those barns, but let's think of the simplest. This is top of the head now, so no penalties if I miss any of the fine points.

"Internal combustion is out, I doubt if you have the technology to handle it, plus the fact there was a lot to do about the water tank and it took you almost an hour to get under way. That sounds like you were getting up a head of steam—the safety valve! I forgot about that. So it is steam. You go in, lock the door of course, then open a couple of valves until the fuel drips into the firebox, then you light it. Maybe you have a pressure gauge, or maybe you just wait until the safety valve pops to tell you if you have a head of steam. Which can be dangerous since a sticking valve could blow the whole works right over the mountain.

"Once you have the steam you crack a valve to let it into the cylinders and get the thing moving. After that you just enjoy the trip, of course making sure the water is feeding to your boiler all right, that your pressure stays up, your fire is hot enough, all your bearings are lubricated and the rest...."

Jason looked on astounded as Edipon did a little jig around the room, holding his robe up above his bony knees. Bouncing with excitement he jabbed his knife into the table top and rushed over to Jason and grabbed him by the shoulders, shaking him until his chain rattled.

"Do you know what you have done?" he asked. "Do you know what you have said?"

"I know well enough. Does this mean that I have passed the exam? Was I right?"

"I don't know if you are right or not. I have never seen the inside of one of the Appsalan devil-boxes." He danced around the room again. "You know more about their ... what do you call it, *engine* ... than I do. I have only spent my life tending them and cursing the people of Appsala who keep the secret from us. But you will reveal it to us! We will build our own engines and if they want water-of-power they will have to pay dearly for it."

"Would you mind being a little bit clearer," Jason pleaded. "I have never heard anything so confused in my entire life."

"I will show you, man from a far world, and you will reveal the Appsalan secrets to us. I see the dawn of a new day for Putl'ko arriving." He opened the door and shouted for the guards, and for his son, Narsisi, who arrived as they were unlocking Jason who recognized him as the same droop-eyed and sleepy looking D'zertano who had been helping Edipon to drive their ungainly vehicle.

"Seize this chain my son and keep your club ready to kill this slave if he makes any attempt to escape. Otherwise do not harm him, for he is very valuable. Come."

He tugged on the chain, but Jason only dug his heels in and did not move. They looked at him, astonished.

"Just a few things before we go. The man who is to bring the new day to Putl'ko is not a slave, let us get that straight before this operation goes any further. We'll work out something with chains or guards so I can't escape, but the slavery thing is out."

"But—you are not one of us, therefore you must be a slave."

"I've just added a third category to your social order. Employee. Though reluctant, I am still an employee, skilled labor, and I intend to be treated that way. Figure it out for yourself. Kill a slave and what do you lose? Very little if there is another slave in

the pens that can push in the same place. But kill me and what do you get? Brains on your club—and they do you no good at all there.”

“Say, Dad, does he mean I can’t kill him?” Narsisi looked puzzled as well as sleepy.

“No, he doesn’t mean that. He means if we kill him there is no one else that can do the work he is to do for us. I can understand him and I do not like it. There are only slaves and slavers, anything else is against the natural order. But he has us trapped between *satano* and the sand-storm so we must allow him some freedoms. Bring the slave now ... I mean the employee ... and we will see if he can do the things he has promised. If he does not, *I* will have the pleasure of killing him because I do not like his revolutionary ideas.”

They marched single file to a locked and guarded building with immense doors, which were pulled open to reveal the massive forms of seven *caroj*.

“Look at them,” Edipon hissed and tugged at his nose. “The finest and most beautiful of constructions, striking fear into our enemies’ hearts, carrying us fleetly across the sands, bearing on their backs immense loads and only three of the things are able to move.”

“Engine trouble?” Jason asked lightly.

Edipon grumbled, cursed and fumed under his breath and led the way to an inner courtyard where stood four immense black boxes painted with death-heads, splintered bones, fountains of blood and cabalistic symbols all of a sinister appearance.

“Those swine in Appsala take our water-of-power and give nothing in return. Oh yes, they let us use their engines, but after running for a few months the cursed things stop and will not go again, then we must bring them back to the city to exchange for a new one, and pay again and again.”

“A nice racket,” Jason said, looking at the sealed covering on the engines. “Why don’t you just crack into them and fix them yourself, they can’t be very complex.”

“That is death!” Edipon gasped, and both D’zertanoj recoiled from the boxes at the thought. “We have tried that, in my father’s father’s day, since we are not superstitious like the slaves and know that these are man-made not god-made. However the tricky serpents of Appsala hide their secrets with immense cunning. If any attempt is made to break the covering horrible death leaks out and fills the air. Men who breathe the air die, and even those who are solely touched by it develop immense blisters and die in pain. The man of Appsala laughed when this happened to our people and after that raised the price even higher.”

Jason circled one of the boxes, examining it with interest, trailing Narsisi behind him at the end of the chain. The thing was higher than his head and almost twice as long. A heavy shaft emerged through openings on opposite sides, probably the power takeoff for the wheels. Through an opening in the side he could see inset handles and two small colored disks, and above this were three funnel-shaped openings shaped and painted like mouths. By standing on tiptoe Jason looked on top but there was only a flanged, sooty opening that must be for attachment of a smokestack. There was only one more opening, a smallish one in the rear, and no other controls on the garish container.

"I'm beginning to get the picture, but you will have to tell me how you work the controls."

"Death before that," Narsisi shouted. "Only my family—"

"Will you shut up!" Jason shouted right back. "Remember? You're not allowed to browbeat the help anymore. There are no secrets here. Not only that, but I probably know more about this thing than you do just by looking at it. Oil, water and fuel go in these three openings, you poke a light in somewhere, probably in that smoky hole under the controls, open one of those valves for fuel supply, another one is to make the engine go slower and faster, and the third is for your water feed. The disks are indicators of some kind." Narsisi paled and stepped back. "So keep the trap shut while I talk to your dad."

"It is as you say," Edipon pointed. "The mouths must always be filled and woebetide if they shall go empty for the powers will halt or worse. Fire goes in here as you guessed, and when the green finger comes forward this lever may be turned for motion. The next is for great speed or going slow. The very last is under the sign of the red finger, which when it points indicates need, and the handle must be turned and held until the finger retires. White breath comes from the opening in back. That is all there is."

"About what I expected," Jason muttered and examined the container wall, rapping it with his knuckles until it boomed. "They give you the minimum of controls to run the thing, so you won't learn anything about the basic principles involved. Without the theory you would never know what the handles control, or that the green indicator comes out when you have operating pressure or the red one when the water level is low in the boiler. Very neat. And the whole thing sealed up in a can and booby-trapped in case you have any ideas of going into business for yourself."

"The cover sounds like it is double walled, and from your description I would say that it has one of the vesicant war gases, like mustard gas, sealed inside there in liquid form. Anyone who tries to cut their way in will quickly forget their ambitions after a dose of that. Yet there must be a way to get inside the case and service the engine, they aren't just going to throw them away after a few months' use. And considering the level of technology displayed by this monstrosity I should be able to find the tricks and get around any other built-in traps. I think I'll take the job."

"Very well, begin."

"Wait a minute, boss, you still have a few things to learn about hired labor. There are always certain working conditions and agreements involved, all of which I'll be happy to list for you."

Chapter 8

“What I do not understand is why you must have the other slave?” Narsisi whined. “To have the woman of course is natural, as well as to have quarters of your own, my father has given his permission. But he also said that I and my brothers are to help you, that the secrets of the engine are to be revealed to no one else.”

“Then trot right over to him and get permission for the slave Mikah to join me in the work. You can explain that he comes from the same land that I do, and that your secrets are mere children’s toys to him. And if dad wants any other reasons tell him that I need skilled aid, someone who knows how to handle tools and who can be trusted to follow directions exactly as given. You and your brothers have entirely too many ideas of your own about how things should be done, and a tendency to leave details up to the gods and have a good bash with the hammer if things don’t work the way they should.”

Narsisi retired, seething and mumbling to himself while Jason huddled over the oil stove planning the next step. It had taken most of the day to lay down logs for rollers and to push the sealed engine out into the sandy valley, far from the well site; open space was needed for any experiments where a mistake could release a cloud of war gas. Even Edipon had finally seen the sense of this, though all of his tendencies were to conduct the experiments with great secretiveness behind locked doors. He had granted permission only after skin walls had been erected to form an enclosure that could be guarded; it was only incidental that they acted as a much-appreciated windbreak.

And after much argument the dangling chains and shackles had been removed from Jason’s arms and light-weight leg-irons substituted. He had to shuffle when he walked but his arms were completely free, a great improvement over the chains, even though one of the brothers kept watch with a cocked crossbow as long as Jason wasn’t fastened down. Now he had to get some tools and some idea of the technical knowledge of these people before he could proceed, which would necessarily entail one more battle over their precious secrets.

“Come on,” he called to his guard, “let’s find Edipon and give his ulcers another twinge.”

After his first enthusiasm the leader of the D’zertanoj was getting very little pleasure out of his new project.

“You have quarters of your own,” he grumbled, “and the slave woman to cook for you, and I have just given permission for the other slave to help you. Now more requests—do you want to drain all the blood from my body?”

“Let’s not dramatize too much. I simply want some tools to get on with my work, and a peek at your machine shop or wherever it is you do your mechanical work. I have to have some idea of the way you people solve mechanical problems before I can go to work on that box of tricks out there in the desert.”

“Entrance is forbidden—”

“Regulations are snapping like straws today, so we might as well go on and finish off a few more. Will you lead the way?”

The guards were reluctant to open the refinery building gates to Jason, and there was much rattling of keys and worried looks. A brace of elderly D'zertanoj, stinking of oil fumes, emerged from the interior and joined in a shouted argument with Edipon whose will finally prevailed. Chained again, and guarded like a murderer, Jason was begrudgingly led into the dark interior, the contents of which was depressingly anticlimactic.

"Really from rubeville," Jason sneered and kicked at the boxful of hand-forged and clumsy tools. The work was of the crudest, the product of a sort of neolithic machine age. The distilling retort had been laboriously formed from sheet copper and clumsily riveted together. It leaked mightily as did the soldered seams on the hand-formed pipe. Most of the tools were blacksmith's tongs and hammers for heating and beating out shapes on the anvil. The only things that gladdened Jason's heart were the massive drill press and lathe that worked off the slave-power drive belts. In the tool holder of the lathe was clamped a chip of some hard mineral that did a good enough job of cutting the forged iron and low-carbon steel. Even more cheering was the screw-thread advance on the cutting head that was used to produce the massive nuts and bolts that secured the *caroj* wheels to their shafts. It could have been worse. Jason sorted out the smallest and handiest tools and put them aside for his own use in the morning. The light was almost gone and there would be no more work this day.

They left, in armed procession, as they came, and a brace of brothers showed him to the kennellike room that was to be his private quarters. The heavy bolt thudded shut in the door behind him and he winced at the thick fumes of half-burnt kerosene through which the light of the single-wick lamp barely penetrated. Ijale crouched over the small oil stove cooking something in a pottery bowl. She looked up and smiled hesitatingly at Jason, then turned back to the stove. Jason walked over, sniffed and shuddered.

"What a feast! *Krenoj* soup, and I suppose followed by fresh *krenoj* and *krenoj* salad. Tomorrow I see about getting a little variety into the diet."

"Ch'aka is great," she whispered without looking up. "Ch'aka is powerful...."

"Jason is the name, I lost the Ch'aka job when they took the uniform away."

"... Jason is powerful to work charms on the D'zertanoj and makes them do what he will. His slave thanks you."

He lifted her chin and the dumb obedience in her eyes made him wince. "Can't we forget about the slavery bit? We are in this thing together and we'll get out of it together."

"We will escape, I knew it. You will kill all the D'zertanoj and release your slaves and lead us home again where we can march and find *krenoj* far from this terrible place."

"Some girls are sure easy to please. That is roughly what I had in mind, except when we get out of here we are going in the other direction, as far away from your *krenoj* crowd as I can get."

Ijale listened attentively, stirring the soup with one hand and scratching inside her leather wrappings with the other. Jason found himself scratching as well, and realized from sore spots on his hide that he had been doing an awful lot of this since he had been dragged out of the ocean of this inhospitable planet.

“Enough is enough!” he exploded and went over and hammered on the door. “This place is a far cry from civilization as I know it, but that is no reason why we can’t be as comfortable as possible.” Chains and bolts rattled outside the door and Narsisi pushed his gloom-ridden face in.

“Why do you cry out? What is wrong?”

“I need some water, lots of it.”

“But you have water,” Narsisi said, puzzled, and pointed to a stone crock in the corner. “There is water there enough for days.”

“By your standards, Nars old boy, not mine. I want at least ten times as much as that and I want it now. And some soap, if there is such stuff in this barbaric place.”

There was a good deal of argument involved, but Jason finally got his way with the water by explaining it was needed for religious rites to make sure that he would not fail in the work tomorrow. It came in a varied collection of containers along with a shallow bowl full of powerful soft soap.

“We’re in business,” he chortled. “Take your clothes off, I have a surprise for you.”

“Yes, Jason,” Ijale said, smiling happily.

“You’re going to get a bath. Do you know what a bath is?”

“No,” she said, and shuddered. “It sounds evil.”

“Over here and off with the clothes,” he ordered, poking at a hole in the floor. “This should serve as a drain, at least the water went away when I poured some into it.”

The water was warm from the stove, yet Ijale still crouched against the wall and shuddered when he poured it over her. She screamed when he rubbed the slippery soap into her hair, and he continued with his hand over her mouth so that she wouldn’t bring in the guards. He rubbed the soap into his own head, too, and it tingled delightfully as it soaked through to his scalp. Some of it was in his ears, muffling them, so the first intimation he had that the door was opened was the sound of Mikah’s hoarse shout. He was standing in the doorway, finger pointed and shaking with wrath. Narsisi was standing behind him, peering over his shoulder with fascination at this weird religious rite.

“Degradation!” Mikah thundered. “You force this poor creature to bend to your will, humiliate her, strip her clothes from her and gaze upon her though you are not united in lawful wedlock.” He shielded his eyes from sight with a raised arm. “You are evil, Jason, a demon of evil and must be brought to justice—”

“*Out!*” Jason roared, and spun Mikah about and started him through the door with one of his practiced Ch’aka kicks. “The only evil here is in your mind, you snooping scut. I’m giving the girl the first scrubbing of her life and you should be giving me a medal for bringing sanitation to the natives instead of howling like that.” He pushed them both out the door and shouted at Narsisi. “I wanted this slave, but not *now!* Lock him up until morning then bring him back.” He slammed the door and made a mental note to get hold of a bolt to be placed on this side as well.

There were more *krenoj* for breakfast but Jason was feeling too good physically to mind. He was scrubbed raw and clean and the itching was gone even from his sprouting beard. The metalcloth of his Pyrran coverall had dried almost as soon as it

had been washed so he was wearing clean clothes as well. Ijale was still recovering from the traumatic effects of her bath, but she looked positively attractive with her skin cleaned and her hair washed and combed a bit. He would have to find some of the local cloth for her since it would be a shame to ruin the good work by letting her get back into the badly cured skins she was used to wearing. It was with a sensation of positive good feeling that he bellowed for the door to be opened and stamped through the cool morning to his place of labor. Mikah was already there, looking scruffy and angry as he rattled his chains; Jason gave him the friendliest of smiles that only rubbed salt into the other's moral wounds.

"Leg-irons for him, too," Jason ordered, "And do it fast. We have a big job to do today." He turned back to the sealed engine, rubbing his hands together with anticipation.

The concealing hood was made of thin metal that could not hide many secrets. He carefully scratched away some of the paint and discovered a crimped and soldered joint where the sides met, but no other revealing marks. After an hour spent tapping all over with his ear pressed to the metal he was sure that the hood was just what he had thought it was when he first examined the thing—a double-walled metal container filled with liquid. Puncture it and you were dead. It was there merely to hide the secrets of the engine, and served no other function. Yet it had to be passed to service the steam engine—or did it? The construction was roughly cubical, and the hood covered only five sides. What about the sixth, the base?

"Now you're thinking, Jason," he chortled to himself, and knelt down to examine it. A wide flange, apparently of cast iron, projected all around, and was penetrated by four large bolt holes. The protective casing seemed to be soldered to the base, but there must be stronger concealed attachments because it would not move even after he carefully scratched away some of the solder at the base. Therefore the answer simply had to be on the sixth side.

"Over here, Mikah," he called, and the man detached himself reluctantly from the warmth of the stove and shuffled up. "Come close and look at this medieval motive-power while we talk, as if we are discussing business. Are you going to co-operate with me?"

"I do not want to, Jason. I am afraid that you will soil me with your touch, as you have others."

"Well you're not so clean now—"

"I do not mean physically."

"Well I do. You could certainly do with a bath and a deep shampoo. I'm not worried about the state of your soul, you can battle that out on your own time. But if you work with me I'll find a way to get us out of this place and to the city that made this engine, because if there is a way off this planet we'll find it only in the city."

"I know that, yet I still hesitate—"

"Small sacrifices now for the greater good later. Isn't the entire purpose of this trip to get me back to justice? You're not going to accomplish that by rotting out the rest of your life as a slave."

"You are the devil's advocate the way you twist my conscience—yet what you say is true. I will help you here so that we can escape."

“Fine. Now get to work. Take Narsisi and have him round up at least three good-sized poles, the kind we were chained to in the pumping gang. Bring them back here along with a couple of shovels.”

Slaves carried the poles only as far as the outside of the skin walls, since Edipon would not admit them inside, and it was up to Jason and Mikah to drag them laboriously to the site. The D’zertanoj, who never did physical labor, thought it was very funny when Jason suggested that they help. Once in position by the engine, Jason dug channels beneath it and forced the bars under. When this was done he took turns with Mikah in digging out the sand beneath until the engine stood over a pit supported only by the bars. Jason let himself down and examined the bottom of the machine. It was smooth and featureless.

Once more he scratched away the paint with careful precision, until it was cleared around the edges. Here the solid metal gave way to solder and he picked at this until he discovered that a piece of sheet metal had been soldered at the edges and fastened to the bedplate. “Very tricky, these Appsalanoj,” he chortled and attacked the solder with a knife blade. When one end was loose he slowly pulled the sheet of metal away, making positive that there was nothing attached to it, nor that it had been booby-trapped in any way. It came off easily enough and clanged down into the pit. The revealed surface was smooth metal, featureless and hard.

“Enough for one day,” Jason said, climbing out of the pit and brushing off his hands. It was almost dark. “We’ve accomplished enough for now and I want to think a bit before I go ahead. So far luck has been on our side, but I don’t think it should be this easy. I hope you brought your suitcase with you, Mikah, because you’re moving in with me.”

“Never! A sink of sin, depravity—”

Jason looked him coldly in the eye and with each word he spoke he stabbed him in the chest with his finger to drive home the point. “You are moving in with me because that is essential to our plans. And if you stop referring to my moral weaknesses I’ll stop talking about yours. Now come on.”

Living with Mikah Samon was trying, but barely possible. He made Ijale and Jason go to the far wall and turn their backs and promise not to look while he bathed behind a screen of skins. Jason did this but exacted a small revenge by telling Ijale jokes so that they tittered together and Mikah would be sure they were laughing at him. The screen of skins remained after the bath, and was reinforced, and Mikah retired behind it to sleep. Their food still consisted only of *krenoj* and Jason shuddered while he admitted that he was actually growing used to them.

The following morning, under the frightened gaze of his guards, Jason tackled the underside of the baseplate. He had been thinking about it a good part of the night and he put his theories to the test at once. By pressing hard on a knife he could make a good groove in the metal. It was not as soft as the solder, but seemed to be some simple alloy containing a good percentage of lead. What could it be concealing? Probing carefully with the point of the knife he covered the bottom in a regular pattern. The depth of the metal was uniformly deep except in two spots where he found irregularities, they were on the midline of the rectangular base, and equidistant from the ends and sides. Picking and scraping he uncovered two familiar looking shapes each as big as his head.

“Mikah. Get down in this hole and look at these things. Tell me what you think they are.”

Mikah scratched his beard. “They’re still covered with this metal, I can’t be sure—”

“I’m not asking you to be sure of anything—just tell me what they make you think of.”

“Why ... big nuts of course. Threaded on the ends of bolts. But they are so big—”

“They would have to be if they hold the entire metal case on. I think we are getting very close now to the mystery of how to open the engine—and this is the time to be careful. I still can’t believe it is as easy as this to crack the secret. I’m going to whittle a wooden template of the nut, then have a wrench made. While I’m gone you stay down here and pick all the metal off the bolt and out of the screw threads. I can put off doing it while we think this thing through, but sooner or later I’m going to have to take a stab at turning one of those nuts. And I find it very hard to forget about that mustard gas.”

Making the wrench put a small strain on the local technology and all of the old men who enjoyed the title of Masters of the Still went into consultation over it. One of them was a fair blacksmith and after a ritual sacrifice and a round of prayers he shoved a bar of iron into the charcoal and Jason pumped the bellows until it glowed white hot. With much hammering and cursing it was laboriously formed into a sturdy open-end wrench with an offset head to get at the countersunk nuts. Jason made sure that the opening was slightly undersized, then took the untempered wrench to the work site and filed the jaws to an exact fit. After being reheated and quenched in oil he had the tool that he hoped would do the job.

Edipon must have been keeping track of the work progress because he was waiting near the engine when Jason returned with the completed wrench.

“I have been under,” he announced, “and have seen the nuts that the devilish Appsalanoj have concealed within solid metal. Who would have suspected! It still seems to me impossible that one metal could be hidden within another, how could that be done?”

“Easy enough. The base of the assembled engine was put into a form and the molten covering metal poured into it. It must have a much lower melting point than the steel of the engine so there would be no damage. They just have a better knowledge of metal technology in the city and counted on your ignorance.”

“Ignorance! You insult—”

“I take it back. I just meant they thought they could get away with the trick, and since they didn’t they are the stupid ones. Does that satisfy you?”

“What do you do next?”

“I take off the nuts and when I do there is a good chance that the poison-hood will be released and can simply be lifted off.”

“It is too dangerous for you to do, the fiends may still have other traps ready when the nut is turned. I will send a strong slave to turn them while we watch from a distance, his death will not matter.”

“I’m touched by your concern for my health, but as much as I would like to take advantage of the offer, I cannot. I’ve been over the same ground and reached the

reluctant conclusion that this is one job of work that I have to do myself. Taking off those nuts looks entirely too easy, and that's what makes me suspicious. I'm going to do it and look out for any more trickery at the same time—and that is something that only I can do. Now I suggest you withdraw with the troops to a safer spot.”

There was no hesitation about leaving, footsteps rustled quickly on the sand and Jason was alone. The leather walls flapped slackly in the wind and there was no other sound. Jason spat on his palms, controlled a slight shiver and slid into the pit. The wrench fitted neatly over the nut, he wrapped both hands around it and, bracing his leg against the pit wall, began to pull.

And stopped. Three turns of thread on the bolt projected below the nut, scraped clean of metal by the industrious Mikah. Something about them looked very wrong but he didn't know quite what.

“Mikah,” he shouted, and had to call loudly two more times before his assistant poked his head tentatively around the screen. “Nip over to the petroleum works and get me one of their bolts threaded with a nut, any size, it doesn't matter.”

Jason warmed his hands by the stove until Mikah returned with the oily bolt, then waved him out to rejoin the others. Back in the pit he held it up next to the protruding section of Appsalan bolt and chortled with joy. The threads on the angle bolt were canted at a slightly different angle: where one ran up, the other ran down. The Appsalan threads had been cut in reverse, with a lefthand thread.

Throughout the galaxy there existed as many technical and cultural differences as there were planets, yet one of the few things they all had in common, inherited from their terrestrial ancestors, was a uniformity of thread. Jason had never thought about it before, but when he mentally ran through his experiences on different planets he realized that they were all the same. Screws went into wood, bolts went into threaded holes and nuts all went onto bolts when you turned them with a clockwise motion. Counterclockwise removed them. In his hand was the crude D'zertano nut and bolt, and when he tried it it moved in the same manner. But the engine bolt did not work that way—it had to be turned clockwise to *remove* it.

Dropping the nut and bolt he placed the wrench on the massive engine bolt and slowly applied pressure in what felt like the completely wrong direction, as if he were tightening not loosening. It gave slowly, first a quarter then a half turn. And bit by bit the projection threads vanished until they were level with the surface of the nut. It turned easily now and within a minute it fell into the pit—he threw the wrench after it and scrambled out. Standing at the edge he carefully sniffed the air, ready to run at the slightest smell of gas. There was nothing.

The second nut came off as easily as the first and with no ill effects. Jason pushed a sharp chisel between the upper case and the baseplate where he had removed the solder, and when he leaned on it the case shifted slightly, held down only by its own weight.

From the entrance to the enclosure he shouted to the group huddled in the distance. “Come on back—this job is almost finished.”

They all took turns at sliding into the pit and looking at the projecting bolts and made appreciative sounds when Jason leaned on the chisel and showed how the case was free.

“There is still the little matter of taking it off,” he told them, “and I’m sure that grabbing and heaving is the wrong way. That was my first idea too, but the people who assembled that thing had some bad trouble in store for anyone who tightened those nuts instead of loosening them. Until we find out what that is we are going to tread very lightly. Do you have any big blocks of ice around here, Edipon? It is winter now, isn’t it?”

“Ice? Winter?” Edipon mumbled, caught off guard by the change of direction, rubbing abstractedly at the reddened tip of his prominent nose. “Of course it is winter. Ice, there must be ice at the higher lakes in the mountain, they are always frozen at this time of the year. But what do you want ice for?”

“You get it and I’ll show you. Have it cut in nice flat blocks that I can stack. I’m not going to lift the hood—I’m going to drop the engine out from underneath it!”

By the time the slaves had brought the ice down from the distant lakes Jason had rigged a strong wooden frame flat on the ground around the engine and pushed sharpened metal wedges under the hood, then had secured the wedges to the frame. Now, if the engine was lowered into the pit, the hood would stay above supported by the wedges. The ice would take care of this. Jason built a foundation of ice under the engine then slipped out the supporting bars. Now as the ice slowly melted the engine would be gently lowered into the pit.

The weather remained cold and the ice refused to melt until Jason had the pit ringed with smoking oil stoves. Water began to run down into the pit and Mikah went to work bailing it out, while the gap between the hood and the baseplate widened. The melting continued for the rest of the day and almost all of the night. Red-eyed and exhausted Jason and Mikah supervised the soggy sinking and when the D’zertanoj returned at dawn the engine rested safely in a pool of mud on the bottom of the pit: the hood was off.

“They’re tricky devils over there in Appisala, but Jason dinAlt wasn’t born yesterday,” he exulted. “Do you see that crock sitting there on top of the engine,” he pointed to a sealed container of thick glass the size of a small barrel, filled with an oily greenish liquid; it was clamped down tightly with padded supports. “That’s the booby trap. The nuts I took off were on the threaded ends of two bars that held the hood on, but instead of being fastened directly to the hood they were connected by a crossbar that rested on top of that jug. If either nut was tightened instead of being loosened, the bar would have bent and broken the glass. I’ll give you exactly one guess as to what would have happened then.”

“The poison liquid!”

“None other. And the double-walled hood is filled with it, too. I suggest that as soon as we have dug a deep hole in the desert the hood and container be buried and forgotten about. I doubt if the engine has many other surprises in store, but I’ll be careful as I work on it.”

“You can fix it? You know what is wrong with it?” Edipon was vibrating with joy.

“Not yet, I have barely looked at the thing. In fact one look was enough to convince that the job will be as easy as stealing *krenoj* from a blind man. The engine is as inefficient and clumsy in construction as your petroleum still. If you people put one tenth of the energy into research and improving your product as you do into hiding it from the competition, you would all be flying jets.”

“I forgive your insult because you have done us a service. You will now fix this engine and the other engines. A new day is breaking for us!”

“Right now it is a new night that is breaking for me,” Jason yawned. “I have two days sleep to make up. See if you can talk your sons into wiping the water off that engine before it rusts away, and when I get back I’ll see what I can do about getting it into running condition.”

Chapter 9

Edipon's good mood remained and Jason took advantage of it by extracting as many concessions as possible. By hinting that there might be more traps in the engine permission was easily gained to do all the work on the original site instead of inside the sealed and guarded buildings. A covered shed gave them protection from the weather and a test stand was constructed to hold the engines when Jason worked on them. This was of a unique design and built to Jason's exacting specification, and since no one, including Mikah, had ever heard of or seen a test stand before Jason had his way.

The first engine proved to have a burnt-out bearing and Jason rebuilt it by melting down the original bearing metal and casting it in position. When he unbolted the head of the massive single cylinder he shuddered at the clearance around the piston; he could fit his fingers into the opening between the piston and the cylinder wall; by introducing cylinder rings he doubled the compression and power output. When Edipon saw the turn of speed the rebuilt engine gave his *caroj* he hugged Jason to his bosom and promised him the highest reward. This turned out to be a small piece of meat every day to relieve the monotony of the *krenoj* meals, and a doubled guard to make sure that his valuable property did not escape.

Jason had his own plans and kept busy manufacturing a number of pieces of equipment that had nothing at all to do with his engine-overhauling business. While these were being assembled he went about lining up a little aid.

"What would you do if I gave you a club?" he asked a burly slave whom he was helping to haul a log towards his workshop. Narsisi and one of his brothers lazed along out of earshot, bored by the routine of the guard duty.

"What I do with club?" the slave grunted, forehead furrowing and mouth gaping open with the effort of thought.

"That's what I asked. And keep pulling while you think, I don't want the guards to notice anything."

"If I have club, I kill!" the slave announced excitedly, fingers grasping eagerly for coveted weapon.

"Would you kill me?"

"I have club, I kill you, you not so big."

"But if I gave you the club wouldn't I be your friend? Then wouldn't you want to kill someone else?"

The novelty of this alien thought stopped the slave dead and he scratched his head perplexedly until Narsisi lashed him back to work. Jason sighed and found another slave to try his sales program on.

It took a while, but the idea was eventually percolating through the ranks of the slaves. All they had to look forward to from the D'zertanoj was backbreaking labor and an early death. Jason offered them something else, weapons, a chance to kill their masters, and even more killing later when they marched on Appssala. It was difficult for them to grasp the idea that they must work together to accomplish this and not kill Jason and each other as soon as they received weapons.

It was a chancy plan at best, and would probably break down long before any visit could be made to the city. But the revolt should be enough to free them from bondage, even if the slaves fled afterwards. There were less than fifty D'zertanoj at this well station, all men, with their women and children at some other settlement further back in the hills. It would not be too hard to kill them or chase them off and long before they could bring reinforcements Jason and his runaway slaves would be gone. There was just one factor missing from his plans and a new draft of slaves solved even that problem for him.

"Happy days," he laughed, pushing open the door to his quarters and rubbing his hands together with glee. The guard shoved Mikah in after him and locked the door. Jason secured it with his own interior bolt then waved the two others over to the corner farthest from the door and tiny window opening.

"New slaves today," he told them, "and one of them is from Appসা, a mercenary or a soldier of some kind that they captured on a skirmish. He knows that they will never let him live long enough to leave here, so he was grateful for any suggestions I had."

"This is man's talk I do not understand," Ijale said, turning away and starting towards the cooking fire.

"You'll understand this," Jason said, taking her by the shoulder. "The soldier knows where Appসা is and can lead us there. The time has come to think about leaving this place."

He had all of her attention now, and Mikah's as well, "How is this?" she gasped.

"I have been making my plans, I have enough files and lockpicks now to crack into every room in this place, a few weapons, the key to the armory and every able bodied slave on my side."

"What do you plan to do?" Mikah asked.

"Stage a servile revolt in the best style. The slaves fight the D'zertanoj and we get away, perhaps with an army helping us, but at least we get away."

"You are talking *revolution!*" Mikah bellowed and Jason jumped him and knocked him to the floor. Ijale held his legs down while Jason squatted on his chest and covered his mouth.

"What is the matter with you? Want to spend the rest of your life rebuilding stolen engines? They are guarding us too well for there to be much chance of our breaking out on our own, so we need allies. We have them ready made, all the slaves."

"Brevilushun...." Mikah mumbled through the restraining fingers.

"Of course it's a revolution. It is also the only possible chance of survival that these poor devils will ever have. Now they are human cattle, beaten and killed on whim. You can't be feeling sorry for the D'zertanoj—every one of them is a murderer ten times over. You've seen them beat people to death. Do you feel that they are too nice to suffer a revolution?"

Mikah relaxed and Jason removed his hand slightly, ready to clamp down if the other's voice rose above a whisper.

"Of course they are not nice, beasts in human garb is more truthful. I feel no mercy for them and they should be wiped out and blotted from the face of the earth as was

Sodom and Gomorrah. But it cannot be done by revolution, revolution is evil, inherently evil.”

Jason stifled a groan. “Try telling that to two-thirds of the governments that now exist, since that’s about how many were founded by revolution. Nice, liberal democratic governments—that were started by a bunch of lads with guns and the immense desire to run things in a manner more beneficial to themselves. How else do you get rid of the powers on your neck if there is no way to legally vote them away? If you can’t vote them—shoot them.”

“Bloody revolution, it cannot be!”

“All right, no revolution,” Jason said, getting up and wiping his hands disgustedly. “We’ll change the name. How about calling it a prison break? No, you wouldn’t like that either. I have it—liberation! We are going to strike the chains off these poor people and restore them to the lands from which they were stolen. The tiny fact that the slave holders regard them as property and won’t think much of the idea, therefore might get hurt in the process, shouldn’t bother you. So—will you join me in this Liberation Movement?”

“It is still revolution.”

“It is whatever I decide to call it!” Jason raged. “You come along with me on the plans or you will be left behind when we go. You have my word on that.” He stomped over and helped himself to some soup and waited for his anger to simmer down.

“I cannot do it ... I cannot do it,” Mikah brooded, staring into his rapidly cooling soup as into an oracular crystal ball, seeking guidance there. Jason turned his back in disgust.

“Don’t end up like him,” he warned Ijale, pointing his spoon back over his shoulder. “Not that there is much chance that you ever will coming as you do from a society with its feet firmly planted on the ground, or on the grave to be more accurate. Your people see only concrete facts, and only the most obvious ones, and as simple an abstraction as ‘trust’ seems beyond you. While this long-faced clown can only think in abstractions of abstractions, and the more unreal they are the better. I bet he even worries about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.”

“I do not worry about it,” Mikah broke in, overhearing the remark. “But I do think about it once in a while, it is a problem that cannot be lightly dismissed.”

“You see?”

Ijale nodded. “If he is wrong, and I am wrong—then you must be the only one who is right.” She nodded in satisfaction at the thought.

“Very nice of you to say so,” Jason smiled. “And true, too. I lay no claims to infallibility but I am sure that I can see the difference between abstractions and facts a lot better than either of you, and I am certainly more adroit at handling them. The Jason dinAlt fan club meeting is now adjourned.” He reached his hand over his shoulder and patted himself on the back.

“Monster of arrogance,” Mikah bellowed.

“Oh, shut up.”

“Pride goeth before a fall! You are a maledicent and idolatrous antipietist....”

“Very good.”

“... And I grieve that I could have considered aiding you for even a second, or of standing by while you sin, and fear for the weakness of my own soul that I have not been able to resist temptation as I should. It grieves me, but I must do my duty.” He banged loudly on the door. “Guard! Guard!”

Jason dropped his bowl and started to scramble to his feet, but slipped in the spilled soup and fell. As he stood again the locks rattled on the door and it opened. If he could reach Mikah before the idiot opened his mouth he would close it forever, or at least knock him out before it was too late.

It was too late. Narsisi poked his head in and blinked sleepily; Mikah struck his most dramatic pose and pointed to Jason. “Seize and arrest that man, I denounce him for attempted revolution, for planning red murder!”

Jason skidded to a halt and back-tracked, diving into a bag of his personal belongings that lay against the wall. He scrabbled in it, then kicked the contents about and finally came up with a metal-forming hammer that had a weighty solid lead head.

“More traitor you,” Jason shouted at Mikah as he ran at Narsisi who had been dumbly watching the performance and mulling over Mikah’s words. Slow as he appeared, there was nothing wrong with his reflexes and his shield snapped up and took Jason’s blow while his club spun over neatly and rapped Jason on the back of the hand: the numbed fingers opened and the hammer dropped to the floor.

“I think you two better come with me, my father will know what to do,” he said, pushing Jason and Mikah ahead of him out the door. He locked it and called for one of his brothers to stand guard, then poked his captives down the hall. They shuffled along in their leg-irons, Mikah nobly as a martyr and Jason seething and grinding his teeth.

Edipon was not at all stupid when it came to slave rebellions, and sized up the situation even faster than Narsisi could relate it.

“I have been expecting this, so it comes as no surprise.” His eyes held a mean little glitter when he leveled them at Jason. “I knew the time would come when you would try to overthrow me, which was why I permitted this other to assist you and to learn your skills. As I expected he has betrayed you to gain your position, which I award him now.”

“Betray? I did this for no personal gain,” Mikah protested.

“Only the purest of motives,” Jason laughed coldly. “Don’t believe a word this pious crook tells you, Edipon. I’m not planning any revolutions, he just said that to get my job.”

“You caluminate me, Jason! I never lie—you are planning revolt. You told me—”

“Silence both of you, or I’ll have you beaten to death. This is my judgment. The slave Mikah has betrayed the slave Jason, and whether the slave Jason is planning rebellion or not is completely unimportant. His assistant would have not denounced him unless he was sure that he could do the work as well, which is the only fact that has any importance to me. Your ideas about a worker-class have troubled me Jason. I will be glad to kill them and you at the same time. Chain him with the slaves. Mikah, I award you Jason’s quarter and woman, and as long as you do the work well I will not kill you. Do it a long time and you will live a long time.

“Only the purest of motives, is that what you said, Mikah?” Jason shouted back as he was kicked from the room.

The descent from the pinnacle of power was fast and smooth. Within half an hour new shackles were on Jason’s wrists and he was chained to the wall in a dark room filled with other slaves. His leg-irons had been left on as an additional reminder of his new status. He rattled the chains and examined them in the dim light of a distant lamp as soon as the door was closed.

“How comes the revolution?” the slave chained next to him leaned over and asked in a hoarse whisper.

“Very funny, ha-ha,” Jason grumbled, then moved closer for a better look at the man who had a fine case of strabismus, his eyes pointing in independent directions. “You look familiar ... are you the new slave I talked to today?”

“That’s me, Snarbi, fine soldier, pikeman, checked out on club and dagger, seven kills and two possibles on my record, you can check it yourself at the guild hall.”

“I remember it all Snarbi, including the fact that you know your way back to Appala.”

“I’ve been around.”

“Then the revolution is still on, in fact it is starting right now but I want to keep it small. Instead of freeing all these slaves what do you say to the idea that we two escape by ourselves?”

“Best idea I heard since torture was invented, we don’t need all these stupid people. They just get in the way. Keep the operation small and fast, that’s what I always say.”

“I always say that, too,” Jason agreed, digging into his boot with his fingertip. He had managed to shove his best file and a lockpick into hiding there while Mikah was betraying him back in their room. The attack on Narsisi with the hammer had just been a cover up.

Jason had made the file himself after many attempts at manufacturing and hardening steel, and the experiments had been successful. He picked out the clay that covered the cut he had made in his leg-cuffs and tackled the soft iron with vigor; within three minutes they were lying on the floor.

“You a magician?” Snarbi whispered, shuddering back.

“Mechanic. On this planet they’re the same thing.” He looked around but the exhausted slaves were all asleep and had heard nothing. Wrapping a piece of leather around it to muffle the sound he began to file a link in the chain that secured the shackles on his wrists. “Snarbi,” he asked, “are we on the same chain?”

“Yeah, the chain goes through these iron cuff things and holds the whole row of slaves together, the other end goes out through a hole in the wall.”

“Couldn’t be better. I’m filing one of these links, and when it goes we’re both free. See if you can’t slip the chain through the holes in your shackles and lay it down without letting the next slave know what is happening. We’ll wear these iron cuffs for now, there is no time to play around with them and they shouldn’t bother us too much. Do the guards come through here at all during the night to check on the slaves?”

“Not since I’ve been here, just wake us up in the morning by pulling on the chain.”

“Then let’s hope that’s what happens again tonight, because we are going to need plenty of time—*there!*” The file had cut through the link. “See if you can get enough of a grip on the other end of this link while I hold this end, we’ll try and bend it open a bit.” They strained silently until the opening gaped wide and the next link fitted through the cut.

They slipped the chain and laid it silently on the ground, then drifted noiselessly to the door.

“Is there a guard outside?” Jason asked.

“Not that I know. I don’t think they have enough men here to guard all the slaves.”

The door would not budge when they pushed against it, and there was just light enough to make out the large keyhole of a massive inset lock. Jason probed lightly with the pick and curled his lip in contempt.

“These idiots have left the key in the lock.” He pulled off the stiffest of his leather wrappings and after flattening it out pushed it under the badly fitting bottom edge of the door, leaving just a bit to hold onto. Then he poked lightly at the key through the keyhole and heard it thud to the ground outside. When he pulled the leather back in the key was lying in the center of it. The door unlocked silently and a moment later they were outside, staring tensely into the darkness.

“Let’s go! Run, get away from here,” Snarbi said and Jason grabbed him by the throat and pulled him back.

“Isn’t there one drop of constructive intelligence on this planet? How are you going to get to Apsala without food or water, and if you find some—how can you carry enough? You want to stay alive follow my instructions. I’m going to lock this door first so that no one stumbles onto our escape by accident. Then we are going to get some transport and leave here in style. Agreed?”

The answer was only a choked rattle until Jason opened his fingers a bit and let some air into the man’s lungs. A labored groan must have meant assent because Snarbi tottered after him when he made his way through the dark alleys between the buildings.

Getting clear of the walled refinery town presented no problem since the few sentries were only looking for trouble from the outside. It was equally easy to approach Jason’s leather-walled worksite from the rear and slip through it at the spot where Jason had cut the leather and sewn up the opening with thin twine.

“Sit here and touch nothing or you will be cursed for life,” he commanded the shivering Snarbi, then slipped towards the front entrance with a small sledge hammer clutched in his fist. He was pleased to see one of Edipon’s other sons on guard duty, leaning against a pole and dozing. Jason gently lifted his leather helm with his free hand and tapped once with the hammer: the guard slept even more soundly.

“Now we can get to work,” Jason said when he had returned inside, and clicked a firelighter to the wick of a lantern.

“What are you doing? They’ll see us, kill us—escaped slaves.”

“Stick with me Snarbi and you’ll be wearing shoes. Lights here can’t be seen by the sentries, I made sure of that when I sited the place. And we have a piece of work to do before we leave—we have to build a *caroj*.”

They did not have to build it from scratch, but there was enough truth in the statement to justify it. His most recently rebuilt and most powerful engine was still bolted to the test stand, a fact that justified all the night's risks. Three *caroj* wheels lay among the other debris of the camp and two of them were to be bolted to the engine while it was still on the stand. The ends of the driving axle cleared the edges of the stand, Jason threaded the securing wheel bolts into place and utilized Snarbi to tighten them.

At the other end of the stand was a strong, swiveling post that had been a support for his test instruments, and seemed strangely large for this small task. It was. When the instruments were stripped away a single bar remained projecting backwards like a tiller handle. When a third wheel was fitted with a stub axle and slid into place in the forked lower end of the post the test stand looked remarkably like a three-wheeled, steerable, steam engine powered platform that was mounted on legs. This is exactly what it was, what Jason had designed it to be from the first, and the supporting legs came away with the same ease that the other parts had been attached. Escape had always taken first priority in his plans.

Snarbi dragged over the crockery jars of oil, water and fuel while Jason filled the tanks. He started the fire under the boiler and loaded aboard tools and the small supply of *krenoj* he had managed to set aside from their rations. All of this took time, but not time enough. It would soon be dawn and they would have to leave before then, and he could no longer avoid making up his mind. He could not leave Ijale here, and if he went to get her he could not refuse to take Mikah as well. The man had saved his life, no matter what murderous idiocies he had managed to pull since that time. Jason believed that you owed something to a man who prolonged your existence, but he also wondered just how much he still owed. In Mikah's case he felt the balance of the debt to be mighty small, if not overdrawn. Perhaps this one last time.

"Keep an eye on the engine and I'll be back as soon as I can," he said, jumping to the ground and loading on equipment.

"You want me to do *what*? Stay here with this devil machine? I cannot! It will burn and consume me—"

"Act your age, Snarbi, your physical age if not your mental one. This rolling junk pile was made by men and repaired and improved by me, no demons involved. It burns oil to make heat that makes steam that goes to this tube to push that rod to make those wheels go around so we can move, and that is as much of the theory of the steam engine as you are going to get from me. Maybe you can understand this better—only I can get you safely away from here. Therefore, you will stay and do as I say or I will beat your brains in. Clear?"

Snarbi nodded dumbly.

"Fine. All you have to do is sit here and look at this little green disk, see it? If it should pop out before I come back turn *this* handle in *this* direction. Clear enough? That way the safety valve won't blow and wake the whole country and we'll still have a head of steam."

Jason went out past the still-silent sentry and headed back towards the refinery station. Instead of a club or a dagger he was armed with a well tempered broadsword that he had managed to manufacture under the noses of the guards. They had examined everything he brought from the worksite, since he had been working in the

evenings in his room, but ignored everything he manufactured as being beyond their comprehension. This primordial mental attitude had been of immense value for in addition to the sword he carried a sack of molotails, a simple weapon of assault whose origins were lost in pre-history. Small crocks were filled with the most combustible of the refinery's fractions and wrapped around outside with cloth that he had soaked in the same liquid. The stench made him dizzy and he hoped that they would repay his efforts when the time came, since they were completely untried. In use one lit the outer covering and threw them. The crockery burst on impact and the fuse ignited the contents. Theoretically.

Getting back in proved to be as easy as getting out, and Jason felt an unmistakable twinge of regret. His subconscious had obviously been hoping that there would be a disturbance and he would have to retreat to save himself, his subconscious obviously being very short on interest in saving the slave girl and his nemesis, particularly at the risk of his own skin. His subconscious was disappointed. He was in the building where his quarters lay, trying to peek around the corner to see if a guard was at the door. There was, and he seemed to be dozing, but something jerked him awake. He had heard nothing but he sniffed the air and wrinkled his nose; the powerful smell of water-of-power from Jason's molotails had roused him and he spotted Jason before he could pull back.

"Who is there?" he shouted and advanced at a lumbering run.

There was no quiet way out of this one so Jason leaped out with an echoing shout and lunged. The blade went right under the man's guard—he must never have seen a sword before—and the tip caught him full in the throat. He expired with a bubbling wail that stirred voices deeper in the building. Jason sprang over the corpse and tore at the multifold bolts and locks that sealed the door. Footsteps were running in the distance when he finally threw the door open and ran in.

"Get out and quick we're escaping!" he shouted at them and pushed the dazed Ijale towards the door and exacted a great deal of pleasure from landing a tremendous kick that literally lifted Mikah through the opening, where he collided with Edipon who had just run up waving a club. Jason leaped over the tumbled forms, rapped Edipon behind the ear with the hilt of his sword and dragged Mikah to his feet.

"Get out to the engine works," he ordered his still uncomprehending companions. "I have a *caroj* there that we can get away in." He cursed them and they finally broke into clumsy motion. There were shouts from behind him and an armed mob of D'zertanoj ran into view. Jason pulled down the hall light, burning his hand on the hot base at the same time, and applied its open flame to one of his molotails. The wick caught with a roar of flame and he threw it at approaching soldiers before it could burn his hand. It flew towards them, hit the wall and broke, inflammable fuel spurted in every direction and the flame went out.

Jason cursed and grappled for another molotail, because if they didn't work he was dead. The D'zertanoj had hesitated a moment rather than walk through the puddle of spilled water-of-power and in that instant he hurled the second fire bomb. This one burst nicely too, and lived up to its maker's expectations when it ignited the first molotail as well and the passageway filled with a curtain of fire. Holding his hand around the lamp flame so it wouldn't go out, Jason ran after the others.

So far the alarm had not spread outside of the building and Jason bolted the door from the outside. By the time this was broken open and the confusion sorted out they would be clear of the buildings. There was no need for the lamp now and would only

give him away. He blew it out and from the desert came a continuous and ear-piercing scream.

“He’s done it,” Jason groaned. “That’s the safety valve on the steam engine!”

He bumped into Ijale and Mikah who were milling about confusedly in the dark, kicked Mikah again out of sheer malice and hatred of all mankind, and led them towards the worksite at a dead run.

They escaped unharmed mainly because of the confusion on all sides of them. The D’zertanoj seemed to never have experienced a night attack before, which they apparently thought this was, and did an incredible amount of rushing about and shouting. Matters were not helped by the burning building nor the unconscious form of Edipon that was carried from the blaze. All the D’zertanoj had been roused by the scream of the safety valve, that was still bleeding irreplaceable steam into the night air, and there was much milling about.

In the confusion the fleeing slaves were not noticed, and Jason led them around the guard post on the walls and directly towards the worksite. They were spotted as they crossed the empty ground and after some hesitation the guard ran in pursuit. Jason was leading the enemy directly to his precious steam-wagon, but he had no choice. The thing was certainly making its presence known in any case, and unless he reached it at once the head of steam would be gone and they would be trapped. He leaped the still recumbent guard at the entrance and ran towards his machine. Snarbi was cowering behind one wheel but there was no time to give him any attention. As Jason jumped onto the platform the safety valve closed and the sudden stillness was frightening. The steam was gone.

With frantic grabs he spun valves and shot one glance at the indicator: there wasn’t enough steam left to roll the meters. Water gurgled and the boiler hissed and clacked at him while screams of anger came from the D’zertanoj as they ran into the enclosure and saw the bootleg *caroj*. Jason thrust the end of a molotail into the firebox; it caught fire and he turned and hurled it at them. The angry cries turned into screams of fear as the tongues of flame licked up at the pursuers and they retreated in disorder. Jason ran after them and hastened their departure with another molotail. They seemed to be retreating as far as the refinery walls, but he could not be sure in the darkness if some of them weren’t creeping around to the sides.

He hurried back to the *caroj*, tapped on the still-unmoving pressure indicator and opened the fuel feed wide. As an afterthought he wired down the safety valve since his reinforced boiler should hold more pressure than the valve had been originally adjusted for. Once this was finished he chewed at his oily fingernails since there was nothing else that could be done until the pressure built up again. The D’zertanoj would rally, someone would take charge, and they would attack the worksite. If they had enough steam before this happened, they would escape. If not—

“Mikah, and you, too, you cowering slob Snarbi you, get behind this thing and push,” Jason said.

“What has happened,” Mikah asked. “Have you started this revolution? If so I will give no aid....”

“We’re escaping, if that’s all right with you. Just I, Ijale and a guide to show us the way. You don’t have to come—”

“I will join you. There is nothing criminal in escaping from these barbarians.”

“Very nice of you to say so. Now push. I want this steamobile in the center, far from all the walls, and pointing towards the desert. Down the valley I guess, is that right, Snarbi?”

“Down the valley, sure, that’s the way.” His voice was still rasping from the earlier throttling, Jason was pleased to notice.

“Stop it here and everyone aboard. Grab onto those bars I’ve bolted along the sides so you won’t get bounced off, if we ever start moving that is.”

Jason took a quick look through his workshop to make sure everything they might need was already loaded, then reluctantly climbed aboard himself. He blew out the lantern and they sat there in the darkness, their faces lit from below by the flickering glow from the firebox, while the tension mounted. There was no way to measure time since each second took an eternity to drag by.

The walls of the worksite cut off any view of the outside and within a few moments imagination had peopled the night with silent hordes creeping towards them, huddling about the thin barrier of leather, ready to swoop down and crush them in an instant.

“Let’s run for it,” Snarbi gurgled and tried to jump from the platform. “We’re trapped here, we’ll never get away....”

Jason tripped him and knocked him flat, then pounded his head against the floor planks a few times until he quieted.

“I can sympathize with that poor man,” Mikah said severely. “You are a brute, Jason, to punish him for his natural feelings. Cease your sadistic attack and join me in a prayer.”

“If this poor man you are so sorry for had simply done his duty and watched the boiler, we would all be safely away from here by now. And if you have enough breath for a prayer, put it to better use by blowing into the firebox. It’s not going to be wishes or prayers that gets us out of here, just a head of steam.”

A howled battlecry was echoed by massed voices and a squad of D’zertanoj burst in through the entrance, and at the same instant the rear of the leather wall went down and more armed men swarmed over it. The immobile *caroj* was trapped between the two groups of attackers who laughed happily as they charged. Jason cursed and lit four molotails at the same time and hurled them two and two in opposite directions. Before they hit he had jumped to the steam valve and wound it open; with a hissing clank the *caroj* shuddered and got underway.

For the moment the attackers were held back by the walls of flame and screamed even louder as the machine moved away at right angles from between their two groups. The air whistled with crossbow bolts, but most were badly aimed and only a few thudded into the baggage. With each revolution of the wheels their speed picked up and when they hit the walls the hides parted with a creaking snap. Strips of leather whipped at them, then they were through.

The shouts and the fires grew dimmer behind them as they streaked down the valley at a suicidal pace, hissing, rattling and crashing over the bumps. Jason clung to the tiller and shouted for Mikah to come relieve him, since if he let go of the thing they would turn and crash in an instant, and as long as he held it he couldn't cut down the steam. Some of this finally penetrated to Mikah because he crawled forward grasping desperately to every hand-hold until he crouched beside Jason.

"Grab this tiller and hold it straight and steer around anything big enough to see."

As soon as the steering was taken over Jason worked his way back to the engine and throttled down; they slowed to a clanking walk then stopped completely. Ijale moaned and Jason felt as if every inch of his body had been beaten with hammers. There was no sign of pursuit since it would be at least an hour before they could raise steam in the *caroj* and no one on foot could have possibly matched their headlong pace. The lantern he had used earlier had vanished during the wild ride so Jason dug out another one of his own construction.

"On your feet, Snarbi," he ordered. "I've cracked us all out of slavery so now it is time for you to do some of the guiding that you were telling me about. Walk ahead with this light and pick out a nice smooth track going in the right direction. I never did have a chance to build headlights for this machine so you will have to do instead."

Snarbi climbed down unsteadily and walked out in front. Jason opened the valve a bit and they clattered forward on his trail as Mikah turned the tiller to follow. Ijale crawled over and settled herself against Jason's side, shivering with cold and fright. He patted her shoulder.

"Relax," he said, "from now on this is just a pleasure trip."

Chapter 10

They were six days out of Putl'ko and their supplies were almost exhausted. The country, once they were away from the mountains, became more fertile, an undulating pampas of grass with enough streams and herds of beasts to assure that they did not starve. It was fuel that mattered, and that afternoon Jason had opened their last jar. They stopped a few hours before dark since their fresh meat was gone, and Snarbi took the crossbow and went out to shoot something for the pot. Since he was the only one who could handle the clumsy weapon with any kind of skill in spite of his ocular deficiencies, and who knew about the local game, this task had been assigned to him. With longer contact his fear of the *caroj* had lessened, and his self-esteem rose at his recognized ability as a hunter. He strolled arrogantly out into the knee-high grass, crossbow over his shoulder, whistling tunelessly through his teeth. Jason stared after him and once again felt a growing unease.

"I don't trust that wall-eyed mercenary, I don't trust him for one second," he muttered.

"Were you talking to me?" Mikah asked.

"I wasn't but I might as well now. Have you noticed anything interesting about the country we have been passing through, anything different?"

"Nothing. It is a wilderness, untouched by the hand of man."

"Then you must be blind, because I have been seeing things the last two days, and I know just as little about woodcraft as you do. Ijale," he called, and she looked up from the boiler over which she was heating a thin stew of their last *krenoj*. "Leave that stuff, it tastes just as bad whatever is done to it, and if Snarbi has any luck we'll be having roast in any case. Tell me, have you seen anything strange or different about the land we passed through today."

"Nothing strange, just signs of people. Twice we passed places where the grass was flat and branches broken as if a *caroj* passed two or three days ago, maybe more. And once there was a place where someone had built a cooking fire, but that was very old."

"Nothing to be seen, Mikah?" Jason asked with raised eyebrows. "See what a lifetime of *krenoj* hunting can do for the sense of observation and terrain."

"I am no savage. You cannot expect me to look out for that sort of thing."

"I don't. I have learned to expect very little from you beside trouble. Only now I am going to need your help. This is Snarbi's last night of freedom whether he knows it or not, and I don't want him standing guard tonight, so you and I will split the shift."

Mikah was astonished. "I do not understand. What do you mean this is his last night of freedom?"

"It should be obvious by now—even to you—after seeing how the social ethic works on this planet. What did you think we were going to do when we came to Appসা—follow Snarbi like sheep to the slaughter? I have no idea what he is planning. I just know he must be planning something. When I ask him about the city he only answers in generalities. Of course he is a hired mercenary who wouldn't know too much of the details, but he must know a lot more than he is telling us. He says we are still four

days away from the city. My guess is that we are no more than one or two. In the morning I intend to grab him and tie him up, then swing over to those hills there and find a place to hole up. I'll fix some chains for Snarbi so he can't get away, then I'll do a scout of the city...."

"You are going to chain this poor man, make a slave of him for no reason!"

"I'm not going to make a slave of him, just chain him to make sure he doesn't lead us into some trap that will benefit him. This souped-up *caroj* is valuable enough to tempt any of the locals, and if he can sell me as an engine-mechanic slave his fortune is made."

"I will not hear this!" Mikah stormed. "You condemn the man on no evidence at all, just because of your nasty minded suspicions. Judge not lest ye be judged yourself! And you play the hypocrite as well, because I well remember your telling me that a man is innocent until proven guilty."

"Well this man is guilty, if you want to put it that way, guilty of being a member of this broken down society, which means that he will always act in certain ways at certain times. Haven't you learned anything about these people yet? Ijale!" She looked up from contented munching on a *krenoj*, obviously not listening to the argument. "Tell me, what is your opinion? We are coming soon to a place where Snarbi has friends, or people who will help him. What do you think he will do?"

"Say hello to the people he knows? Maybe they will give him a *krenoj*." She smiled in satisfaction at her answer and took another bite.

"That's not quite what I had in mind," Jason said patiently. "What if we three are with him when we come to the people, and the people see us and the *caroj*...."

She sat up, alarmed. "We can't go with him! If he has people there they will fight us, make us slaves, take the *caroj*. You must kill Snarbi at once."

"Bloodthirsty heathen...." Mikah began in his best denunciatory voice, but quit when he saw Jason pick up a heavy hammer.

"Do you understand yet?" Jason asked. "By tying up Snarbi I'm only conforming to a local code of ethic, like saluting in the army or not eating with your fingers in polite society. In fact I'm being a little slipshod, since by local custom I should kill him before he can make us trouble."

"It cannot be, I cannot believe it. You cannot judge and condemn a man upon such flimsy evidence."

"I'm not condemning him," Jason said with growing irritation, "Just making sure that he can't cause me any trouble. You don't have to agree with me to help me, just don't get in my way. And split the guard with me tonight. Whatever I do in the morning will be on my shoulders and no concern of yours."

"He is returning," Ijale hissed, and a moment later Snarbi came up through the high grass.

"Got a *cervo*," he announced proudly, and dropped the animal down before them. "Cut him up, makes good chops and roast. We eat tonight."

He was completely innocent and without guile and the only thing guilty about him was his shifty gaze which could be blamed completely on his crossed eyes. Jason

wondered for a second if his assessment of the danger was correct, then remembered where he was and lost his doubts. Snarbi would be committing no crime if he tried to kill or enslave them, just doing what any ordinary, decent slave-holding barbarian would do in his place. Jason searched through his tool box for some rivets that could be used to fasten the leg irons on the man.

They had a filling dinner and the others turned in at dusk and were quickly asleep. Jason, tired from the labors of the trip and heavy with food, forced himself to remain awake, trying to keep alert for trouble both from within and from without. When he became too sleepy he paced around the camp until the cold drove him back to the shelter of the still-warm boiler. Above him the stars wheeled slowly and when a prominent one reached the zenith he estimated it was midnight, or a bit after. He shook Mikah awake.

“You’re on now. Keep your eyes and ears open for anything stirring and don’t forget a careful watch there,” he jerked his thumb at Snarbi’s silent form. “Wake me up at once if there’s anything suspicious.”

Sleep dropped like a heavy curtain and Jason barely stirred until the first light of dawn touched the sky. Only the brighter stars were visible on the eastern horizon and he could see a ground fog rising from the grass around them. Near him were the huddled forms of the two sleepers and the farthest one shifted in his sleep and he realized it was Mikah.

Sleep fell away instantly and he bounded out of his skin covers and grabbed the other man by the shoulders. “What are you doing asleep?” he raged. “You were supposed to be on guard.”

Mikah opened his eyes and blinked. “I was on guard, but towards morning Snarbi awoke and offered to take his turn. I could not refuse him....”

“You couldn’t WHAT? After what I said—”

“That was why. I could not judge an innocent man guilty and be a party to your unfair action. Therefore, I left him on guard.”

“You did, did you?” Jason grated with rage and pulled an unfelt handful of hair from his newgrown beard. “Then where is he? Do you see anyone on guard?”

Mikah looked in a careful circle and saw only the two of them and the wakening Ijale. “He seems to have gone. He has proven his untrustworthiness and in the future we will not allow him to stand guard.”

Jason raged, drew his foot back for a kick in the local reflex then realized he had no time for such indulgences and dived for the steamobile. The firelighter worked at the first shot, for a rare change, and he lit the boiler. It roared merrily but when he tapped the indicator he saw the fuel was almost gone. There would be enough left in the last jug to take them to safety before whatever trouble Snarbi was planning arrived. But the jug was gone.

“That tears it,” Jason said resignedly after a hectic search of the *caroj* and the surrounding plain. The water-of-power had vanished with Snarbi who, afraid as he was of the steam engine, apparently knew enough from observing Jason fueling the thing that it could not move without the vital liquid. An empty feeling of resignation had replaced Jason’s first rage: he should have known better than to trust Mikah

with anything, particularly when it involved an ethical point. He stared at the man, now calmly eating a bit of cold roast and marveled at the unruffled calm. “This doesn’t bother you, the fact that you have condemned us all to slavery again?”

“I did what was right, I had no other choice. We must live as moral creatures or sink to the level of the animals.”

“But when you live with people who behave like animals—how do you survive?”

“You live as they do—as you do, Jason,” he said with majestic judgment, “twisting and turning with fear and unable to avoid your fate no matter how you squirm. Or you live as I have done, as a man of conviction, knowing what is right and not letting your head be turned by the petty needs of the day. And if one lives this way one can die happy.”

“Then die happy!” Jason snarled and reached for his sword, but settled back again glumly before he picked it up. “To think that I ever thought I could teach you anything about the reality of existence here when you have never experienced reality before nor ever will until the day you die. You carry your own attitudes, which are your reality, around with you all the time, and they are more solid to you than this ground we are sitting upon.”

“For once we are in agreement, Jason. I have tried to open your eyes to the true light, but you turn away and will not see. You ignore the Eternal Law for the exigencies of the moment and are, therefore, damned.”

The pressure indicator on the boiler hissed and popped out, but the fuel level was at the absolute bottom.

“Grab some food for breakfast, Ijale,” Jason said, “and get away from this machine. The fuel is gone and it’s finished.”

“I shall make a bundle to carry, we will escape on foot.”

“No, that’s out of the question. Snarbi knows this country and he knew we would find out that he was missing at dawn. Whatever kind of trouble he is bringing is already on the way and we wouldn’t be able to escape on foot. So we might as well save our energy. But they aren’t getting my handmade, super-charged steamobile!” he added with sudden vehemence, grabbing up the crossbow. “Back both of you, far back. They’ll make a slave of me for my talents, but no free samples go with it. If they want one of these hot-rod steam wagons, they are going to have to pay for it!”

Jason lay down flat at the maximum range of the crossbow and his third quarrel hit the boiler. It went up with a most satisfactory bang and small pieces of metal and wood rained down all around. In the distance he heard shouting and the barking of dogs.

When he stood he could see a distant line of men advancing through the tall grass and when they were closer large dogs were also visible, tugging at their leashes. Though they must have come far in a few hours they approached at a steady trot, experienced runners, in thin leather garments each carrying a short, laminated bow and a full quiver of arrows. They swooped up in a semicircle, their great hounds slaving to be loosed, and stopped when the three strangers were within bow range. They notched their arrows and waited with alert patience, staying well clear of the

smoking ruins of the *caroj*, until Snarbi finally staggered up half supported by two other runners.

“You now belong to ... the Hertug Persson ... and are his slaves.... What happened to the *caroj*?” He screamed this last when he spotted the smoking wreck and would have collapsed except for the sustaining arms. Evidently the new slaves decreased in value with the loss of the machine. He stumbled over to it and, when none of the soldiers would help him, gathered up what he could find of Jason’s artifacts and tools. When he had bundled them up, and the foot cavalry had seen that he suffered no injury from the contact, they reluctantly agreed to carry them. One of the soldiers, identical in dress with the others, seemed to be in charge, and when he signaled a return they closed in on the three prisoners and nudged them to their feet with drawn bows.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Jason said, gnawing on a bone, “but I’m going to finish my breakfast first. I see an endless vista of *krenoj* stretching out before me and intend to enjoy this last meal before entering servitude.”

The lead soldiers looked confused and turned to their officer for orders. “Who is this?” he asked Snarbi, pointing at the still seated Jason. “Is there any reason why I should not kill him.”

“You can’t!” Snarbi choked, and turned a dirty shade of white. “He is the one who built the devil-wagon and knows all of its secrets. Hertug Persson will torture him to build another.”

Jason wiped his fingers on the grass and reluctantly stood. “All right gentlemen, let’s go. And on the way perhaps someone can tell me just who Hertug Persson is and what is going to happen next.”

“I’ll tell you,” Snarbi bragged as they started the march. “He is Hertug of the Perssonoj. I have fought for the Perssonoj and they knew me and I saw the Hertug himself and he believed me. The Perssonoj are very powerful in Appala and have many powerful secrets, but not as powerful as the Trozelligoj who have the secret of the *caroj* and the *jetilo*. I knew I could ask any price of the Perssonoj if I brought them the secret of the *caroj*. And I will.” He thrust his face close to Jason’s with a fierce grimace. “You will tell them the secret. I will help them torture you until you tell.”

Jason put out his toe as they walked and Snarbi tripped over it and when the traitor fell he walked the length of his body. None of the soldiers paid any attention to this exchange and when they had passed Snarbi staggered to his feet and tottered after them shouting curses. Jason did not hear them, he had troubles enough as it was.

Chapter 11

Seen from the surrounding hills, Appsala looked like a burning city that was being slowly washed into the sea. Only when they had come closer was it clear that the smoke was from the multifold chimneys, both large and small, that studded the buildings, and that the city began at the shore and covered a number of islands in what must be a shallow lagoon. Large sea-going ships were tied up at the seaward side of the city and closer to the mainland smaller craft were being poled through the canals. Jason searched anxiously for a spaceport or any signs of interstellar culture but saw nothing. Then the hills intervened as the trail cut off to one side and approached the sea some distance from the city.

A fair-sized sailing vessel was tied up at the end of a stone wharf, obviously awaiting them, and the captives were tied hand and foot and tossed into the hold. Jason managed to wriggle around until he could get his eye to a crack between two badly fitting planks and recited a running travelogue of the cruise, apparently for the edification of his companions, but really for his own benefit since the sound of his own voice always cheered and encouraged him.

“Our voyage is nearing its close and before us opens up the romantic and ancient city of Appsala, famed for its loathsome customs, murderous natives and archaic sanitation facilities, of which this watery channel this ship is now entering seems to be the major cloaca. There are islands on both sides, the smaller ones covered with hovels so decrepit that in comparison the holes in the ground of the humblest animals appear to be palaces, while the larger islands appear to be forts, each one walled and barbicaned and presenting a warlike face to the world. There couldn’t be that many forts in a town this size so I am led to believe that each one is undoubtedly the guarded stronghold of one of the tribes, groups or clans that our friend Judas told us about. Look on these monuments to ultimate selfishness and beware: this is the end product of the system that begins with slave-holders like the former Ch’aka with their tribes of *krenoj* crackers, and builds up through familiar hierarchies like the D’zertanoj and reaches its zenith of depravity behind those strong walls. It is still absolute power that rules absolutely, each man out for all that he can get and the only way to climb being over the bodies of others, and all physical discoveries and inventions being treated as private and personal secrets to be hidden and used only for personal gain. Never have I seen human greed and selfishness carried to such extremes and I admire Homo sapiens’ capacity to follow through on an idea, no matter how it hurts.”

The ship lost way as it backed its sails and Jason fell from his precarious perch into the stinking bilge. “The descent of man,” he muttered and inched his way out.

Piles grated along the sides and with much shouting and cursed orders the ship came to a halt. The hatch above was slid back and the three captives were rushed to the deck. The ship was tied up to a dock in a pool of water surrounded by buildings and high walls. Behind them a large sea gate was just swinging shut, through which the ship had entered from the canal. They could see no more because they were pushed into a doorway and through halls and past guards until they ended up in a large central room. It was unfurnished except for the dais at the far end on which stood a large and rusty iron throne. The man on the throne, undoubtedly the Hertug Persson, sported a magnificent white beard and shoulder length hair, his nose was

round and red, his eyes blue and watery. He nibbled at a *krenoj* impaled delicately on a two-tined iron fork.

“Tell me,” the Hertug shouted suddenly, “why you should not be killed at once?”

“We are your slaves, Hertug, we are your slaves,” everyone in the room shouted in unison, waving their hands in the air at the same time. Jason missed the first chorus, but came in on the second. Only Mikah did not join in the chant-and-wave, speaking instead in a solitary voice after the pledge of allegiance was completed.

“I am no man’s slave.”

The commander of the soldiers swung his thick bow in a short arc that terminated on the top of Mikah’s head: he dropped stunned to the floor.

“You have a new slave, oh Hertug,” the commander said.

“Which is the one who knows the secrets of the *caroj*?” the Hertug asked and Snarbi pointed at Jason.

“Him there, oh mightiness. He can make *caroj* and he can make the monster that burns and moves them, I know because I watched him do it. He also made balls of fire that burned the D’zertanoj and many other things. I brought him to be your slave so that he could make *caroj* for the Perssonoj. Here are the pieces of the *caroj* we traveled in, after it was consumed by its own fire.” Snarbi shook the tools and burnt fragments out onto the floor and the Hertug curled his lip at them.

“What proof is this?” he asked, and turned to Jason. “These things mean nothing. How can you prove to me, slave, that you can do the things he says?”

Jason entertained briefly the idea to deny all knowledge of the matter, which would be a neat revenge against Snarbi who would certainly meet a sticky end for causing all this trouble for nothing, but he discarded the thought as fast as it came. Partly for humanitarian reasons, Snarbi could not help being what he was, but mostly because he had no particular desire to be put to the question. He knew nothing about the local torture methods, and he wanted to keep it that way.

“Proof is easy, Hertug of all the Perssonoj, because I know everything about everything. I can build machines that walk, that talk, that run, fly, swim, bark like a dog and roll on their backs.”

“You will build a *caroj* for me?”

“It could be arranged, if you have the right kind of tools I could use. But I must first know what is the specialty of your clan, if you know what I mean. Like the Trozelligoj make *caroj* and the D’zertanoj pump oil. What do your people do?”

“You cannot know as much as you say if you do not know of the glories of the Perssonoj!”

“I come from a distant land and as you know news travels slowly around these parts.”

“Not around the Perssonoj,” the Hertug said scornfully and thumped his chest. “We can talk across the width of the country and always know where our enemies are. We can send magic on wires to kill, or magic to make light in a glass ball or magic that will pluck the sword from an enemy’s hand and drive terror into his heart.”

“It sounds like your gang has the monopoly on electricity, which is good to hear. If you have some heavy forging equipment....”

“Stop!” the Hertug ordered. “Leave! Out—everyone except the *sciuloj*. Not the new slave, he stays here,” he shouted when the soldiers grabbed Jason.

The room emptied and the handful of men who remained were all a little long in the tooth and each wore a brazen, sun-burst type decoration on his chest. They were undoubtedly adept in the secret electrical arts and they fingered their weapons and grumbled with unconcealed anger at Jason’s forbidden knowledge. The Hertug signaled him to continue.

“You used a sacred word. Who told it to you? Speak quickly or you will be killed.”

“Didn’t I tell you I knew everything? I can build a *caroj* and given a little time I can improve on your electrical works, if your technology is on the same level as the rest of this planet.”

“Do you know what lies behind the forbidden portal?” the Hertug asked, pointing to a barred, locked and guarded door at the other end of the room. “There is no way you can have seen what is there, but if you can tell me what lies beyond it I will know you are the wizard that you claim you are.”

“I have a very strange feeling that I have been over this ground once before,” Jason sighed. “All right, here goes. You people here make electricity, maybe chemically, though I doubt if you would get enough power that way, so you must have a generator of some sort. That will be a big magnet, a piece of special iron that can pick up other iron, and you spin it around fast next to some coils of wire and out comes electricity. You pipe this through copper wire to whatever devices you have, and they can’t be very many. You say you talk across the country. I’ll bet you don’t talk at all but send little clicks, dots and dashes.... I’m right aren’t I?” The foot shuffling and rising buzz from the adepts was a sure sign that he was hitting close. “I have an idea for you, I think I’ll invent the telephone. Instead of the old clikkety-clack how would you like to *really* talk across the country? Speak into a gadget here and have your voice come out at the far end of the wire?”

The Hertug’s piggy little eyes blinked greedily. “It is said that in the old days this could be done, but we have tried and have failed. Can you do this thing?”

“I can—if we can come to an agreement first. But before I make any promises I have to see your equipment.”

This brought the usual groans of complaint about secrecy, but in the end avarice won over taboo and the door to the holy of holies was opened for Jason while two of the *sciuloj*, with bared and ready daggers, stood at his sides. At almost the same instant Jason looked in through the door he heard the sound.

Now the reaction of the human body, while remarkably fast, need certain finite measures of time and have been measured over and over again with a great deal of accuracy. The commands of the brain, speedy as they may be, must be carried by sluggish nerves and put into operation by inert lumps of muscle. Therefore to say that Jason’s reactions were instantaneous is to tell a lie, or at least exaggerate. Only to his watchers did his actions appear to take place that fast; they were older, and less alert, and had not had the advantage of Pyrran survival training. So to their point of view the sacred portal was opened and Jason vanished in a flurry of activity. Two

lightning blows sent his guardians spinning, and before they had fallen to the floor their supposed captive was through the door and it was slammed in their faces. Before the first dumfounded Persson could jump forward the bolt grated home inside and the door was sealed.

Things were a little more complex than that to Jason. When the door opened he had had a good view of the inside of the room, of a slave cranking the handle on a crude collection of junk that could only have been a generator. Thick wires looped across the room from the thing to a man who stood before some blades of copper pushing at them with a wooden stick, while above his head fat sparks leaped the gap between two brassy spheres. As if to complete this illustration for a bronze-age edition of "First Steps in Electricity" another cable twisted up from the spark gap and vanished out a small window. The entire thing might have been labeled "How to Generate A Radio Signal in the Crudest Manner." As Jason reached this conclusion in the smallest fraction of a second, and at almost the very same instant, he heard the sound.

What he heard could have been distant thunder, an earthquake, a volcano or some giant explosion. It rumbled and rolled, muffled by distance, yet still clear. It resembled none of these things to Jason, but made him think only of a high altitude rocket or jet, cleaving through the atmosphere.

It must have been the juxtaposition of these two things, occurring as they did at the same time, the view of a radio transmitter, no matter how crude, and the thought that there might be a civilized craft or some kind up there containing men who would come to his aid if he could only contact them. The idea was an insane one, but even as he realized that fact he was through the door and bolting it behind him. Perhaps he did it because he had been pushed around entirely too much and felt like pushing someone else for a change. In any case it was done, insane or not, and he might as well carry through.

The generator slave looked up, startled, but when Jason glanced at him he lowered his eyes and kept cranking. The man who had been working the transmitter spun about, startled by the slam of the door and the muffled pounding and shouts that followed instantly from the other side. He groped for his dagger when he saw the stranger, but before it was clear of the scabbard Jason was on him and after a few quick Pyrran infighting blows the man lost all interest in what was happening and slid to the floor. Jason straddled his body, picked the stick up, nodded to the slave who began cranking faster, and began to tap out a message.

S-O-S ... S-O-S ... he sent first, then as fragments of code came back to him he spelled out J-A-S-O-N D-A-L-T H-R-E.... N-E-E-D A-I-D.... R-I-C-H.... R-E-W-A-R-D ... F-O-R ... H-E-L-P....

He varied this a bit, repeated his name often, and tried other themes appealing for off-world aid. It was a slim chance that he had heard a rocket, and even slimmer chance that they would pick his message out of the static if they happened to be listening. He had no evidence that any off-worlders were in contact with this planet, merely hope. He tapped on and the slave ground away industriously. His arm was growing tired by the time the old guard in the other room found something heavy enough to swing and broke the door down. Jason stopped tapping and turned to face the apoplectic Hertug, rubbing his tired wrist.

"Your equipment works fine, though it could use a lot of improvements."

“Kill him.... Kill!” the Hertug sputtered.

“Kill me and there goes your *caroj*, as well as your telephone system and your only chance to wrap up all the industrial secrets in one big bundle,” Jason said, looking around for something heavy to swing.

A gigantic explosion slammed into the room; a crack appeared in one wall and dust floated down from the ceiling. There was a sound of snapping small arms fire in the distance.

“It worked!” Jason shouted with unrestrained glee and hurled a heavy roll of wire at the startled men in the doorway and followed instantly after it in a headlong dive. There was a flurry of action, most of the damage being done by his boots, then he was through and running out of the throne room with the men bellowing in pursuit.

A small war seemed to be raging ahead, the sharp explosions of gunfire being mixed with the heavier thud of bombs and grenades. Walls were down, doors blasted open while confused soldiers rushed in panic through the clouds of dust. One of them tried to stop Jason who kept on going, carrying the man’s club with him. Sunlight shone ahead and he dived through a riven wall and landed, rolling in the open ground next to the dock. A spaceship’s lifeboat stood there, still glowing hot from the speed of descent, and next to it stood Meta keeping up a continuous fire with her gun, happily juggling micro-grenades with her free hand.

“What were you waiting for,” she snapped. “I have been in orbit over this planet for a month now, waiting for some word from you. There are dozens of radio transmitters on this continent and I have been monitoring them all.” She fired a long burst at an upper story where some bowmen had been foolish enough to appear, then ran to Jason, eyes wet with tears. “Oh, darling, I was so worried.”

She held him—with her grenade-throwing arm—and kissed him fiercely. She kept her eyes open while she was doing this but only had to fire once.

“Jason!” a voice called and Ijale appeared, half-supporting the still dazed Mikah.

“Who is this?” Meta snapped, the chill back in her voice.

“Why—just someone I know,” Jason answered, smiling insincerely. “You should recognize the man, he’s the one who arrested me.”

“Here is a gun, you will want to kill him yourself.”

Jason took the gun, but used it to clear a nearby roof-top, the powerful kick of the Pyrran automatic was like a caress on the heel of his hand.

“I don’t think I want to kill him. He saved my life once, though he has tried to lose it for me a dozen times since. Let’s get upstairs to the ship and I’ll tell you about it. There are more healthy spots than this to have a conversation.”

Chapter 12

Washed, shaved, scrubbed, cleaned, filled with good food and slightly awash with alcoholic drink, Jason collapsed into the acceleration couch and firmly swore that life was worth living after all.

“You can’t appreciate the simple things of life until you have gone without them for a while. Or the better things either.” He reached out and took Meta’s hand. She pulled it away and fed more digits into the computer.

“How did you find me?” he asked, trying to discover a subject that she might warm to.

“That should be obvious. We saw the markings on the ship that took you away and charted a directional trace before it went into jump-space. We identified the markings and I went to Cassylia, but the ship had never arrived there. I back-tracked the straight-line course and found three possible planets near enough to have registered in the ship during jump-space flight. Two are highly organized with modern spaceports and would have known if the ship had landed. It hadn’t. Therefore you must have forced the ship down on the planet we just left. And once you were there you would find one of the radios to send a message. Which is what you did. It is obvious. Who is she?” The final words were in a distinctly chillier tone of voice, and there could be only one she, Ijale, who crouched across the room, obviously unhappy and wide-eyed with fear at this voyage in a spaceship, not understanding the language the others spoke.

“I’ve told you before—just a friend. She was with us, and helped us, too. I couldn’t let her go back to the life in the desert, it’s more brutal than you can possibly imagine. There is an entire planetful of slaves back there, and of course I can’t save them all. But I can do this much, take out the one person there who would rather see me live than die.”

“What do you intend to do with her?” The sub-zero temperature of Meta’s voice left no doubt as to what she wanted to do with her. Jason had already given this a good deal of thought, and if Ijale was going to live much longer she had to be separated as soon as possible from the deadly threat of female Pyrran jealousy.

“We stop at the next civilized planet and let her off. I have enough money to leave a deposit in a bank that will last her for years. Make arrangements for it to be paid out only a bit at a time, so no matter how she is cheated she will still have enough. I’m not going to worry about her, if she was able to survive in the *krenoj* legion she can get along well anywhere on a settled world.”

He could hear the complaints on when he broke the news to Ijale, but it was for her own survival.

“I shall care for and lead her in the paths of righteousness,” a remembered voice spoke from the doorway. Mikah stood there, clutching to the jamb, a turban of bandages on his head.

“That’s a wonderful idea,” Jason agreed enthusiastically. He turned to Ijale and spoke in her own language. “Did you hear that? Mikah is going to take you home with him and look after you. I’ll arrange for some money to be paid to you for all your needs, he’ll explain to you what money is. I want you to listen to him carefully, note

exactly what he says, then do the exact opposite. You must promise me you will do that and never break your word. In that way you may make some mistakes and will be wrong sometimes, but all the rest of the time things will go very smoothly.”

“I cannot leave you! Take me with you—I’ll be your slave always!” she wailed.

“What did she say?” Meta snapped, catching some of the meaning.

“You are evil, Jason,” Mikah declaimed, getting the needle back into the familiar groove. “She will obey you, I know that, so no matter how I labor she will always do as you say.”

“I sincerely hope so,” Jason said fervently. “One has to be born into your particular brand of illogic to get any pleasure from it. The rest of us are happier bending a bit under the impact of existence, and exacting a mite more pleasure from the physical life around us.”

“Evil I say, and you shall not go unpunished.” His hand appeared from behind the door jamb and it held a pistol that he had found below. “I am taking command of this ship. You will secure the two women so that they can cause no trouble, then we will proceed to Cassylia for your trial.”

Meta had her back turned to Mikah and was sitting in the control chair a good five meters from him with her hands filled with navigational notes. She slowly raised her head and looked at Jason and a smile broke across her face.

“You said once you didn’t want him killed.”

“I still don’t want him killed, but I also have no intention of going to Cassylia.” He echoed her smile and turned away.

He sighed happily and there was a sudden rush of feet behind his back. No shots were fired but a hoarse scream, a thud and a sharp cracking noise told him that Mikah had lost his last argument.

The Repairman

Being an interstellar trouble shooter wouldn't be so bad ... if I could shoot the trouble!

The Old Man had that look of intense glee on his face that meant someone was in for a very rough time. Since we were alone, it took no great feat of intelligence to figure it would be me. I talked first, bold attack being the best defense and so forth.

"I quit. Don't bother telling me what dirty job you have cooked up, because I have already quit and you do not want to reveal company secrets to me."

The grin was even wider now and he actually chortled as he thumbed a button on his console. A thick legal document slid out of the delivery slot onto his desk.

"This is your contract," he said. "It tells how and when you will work. A steel-and-vanadium-bound contract that you couldn't crack with a molecular disruptor."

I leaned out quickly, grabbed it and threw it into the air with a single motion. Before it could fall, I had my Solar out and, with a wide-angle shot, burned the contract to ashes.

The Old Man pressed the button again and another contract slid out on his desk. If possible, the smile was still wider now.

"I should have said a *duplicate* of your contract—like this one here." He made a quick note on his secretary plate. "I have deducted 13 credits from your salary for the cost of the duplicate—as well as a 100-credit fine for firing a Solar inside a building."

I slumped, defeated, waiting for the blow to land. The Old Man fondled my contract.

"According to this document, you can't quit. Ever. Therefore I have a little job I know you'll enjoy. Repair job. The Centauri beacon has shut down. It's a Mark III beacon...."

"*What* kind of beacon?" I asked him. I have repaired hyperspace beacons from one arm of the Galaxy to the other and was sure I had worked on every type or model made. But I had never heard of this kind.

"Mark III," the Old Man repeated, practically chortling. "I never heard of it either until Records dug up the specs. They found them buried in the back of their oldest warehouse. This was the earliest type of beacon ever built—by Earth, no less. Considering its location on one of the Proxima Centauri planets, it might very well be the first beacon."

I looked at the blueprints he handed me and felt my eyes glaze with horror. "It's a monstrosity! It looks more like a distillery than a beacon—must be at least a few hundred meters high. I'm a repairman, not an archeologist. This pile of junk is over 2000 years old. Just forget about it and build a new one."

The Old Man leaned over his desk, breathing into my face. "It would take a year to install a new beacon—besides being too expensive—and this relic is on one of the main routes. We have ships making fifteen-light-year detours now."

He leaned back, wiped his hands on his handkerchief and gave me Lecture Forty-four on Company Duty and My Troubles.

“This department is officially called Maintenance and Repair, when it really should be called trouble-shooting. Hyperspace beacons are made to last forever—or damn close to it. When one of them breaks down, it is *never* an accident, and repairing the thing is never a matter of just plugging in a new part.”

He was telling *me*—the guy who did the job while he sat back on his fat paycheck in an air-conditioned office.

He rambled on. “How I wish that were all it took! I would have a fleet of parts ships and junior mechanics to install them. But its not like that at all. I have a fleet of expensive ships that are equipped to do almost anything—manned by a bunch of irresponsibles like *you*.”

I nodded moodily at his pointing finger.

“How I wish I could fire you all! Combination space-jockeys, mechanics, engineers, soldiers, con-men and anything else it takes to do the repairs. I have to browbeat, bribe, blackmail and bulldoze you thugs into doing a simple job. If you think you’re fed up, just think how I feel. But the ships must go through! The beacons must operate!”

I recognized this deathless line as the curtain speech and crawled to my feet. He threw the Mark III file at me and went back to scratching in his papers. Just as I reached the door, he looked up and impaled me on his finger again.

“And don’t get any fancy ideas about jumping your contract. We can attach that bank account of yours on Algol II long before you could draw the money out.”

I smiled, a little weakly, I’m afraid, as if I had never meant to keep that account a secret. His spies were getting more efficient every day. Walking down the hall, I tried to figure a way to transfer the money without his catching on—and knew at the same time he was figuring a way to outfigure me.

It was all very depressing, so I stopped for a drink, then went on to the spaceport.

By the time the ship was serviced, I had a course charted. The nearest beacon to the broken-down Proxima Centauri Beacon was on one of the planets of Beta Circinus and I headed there first, a short trip of only about nine days in hyperspace.

To understand the importance of the beacons, you have to understand hyperspace. Not that many people do, but it is easy enough to understand that in this *non*-space the regular rules don’t apply. Speed and measurements are a matter of relationship, not constant facts like the fixed universe.

The first ships to enter hyperspace had no place to go—and no way to even tell if they had moved. The beacons solved that problem and opened the entire universe. They are built on planets and generate tremendous amounts of power. This power is turned into radiation that is punched through into hyperspace. Every beacon has a code signal as part of its radiation and represents a measurable point in hyperspace. Triangulation and quadrature of the beacons works for navigation—only it follows its own rules. The rules are complex and variable, but they are still rules that a navigator can follow.

For a hyperspace jump, you need at least four beacons for an accurate fix. For long jumps, navigators use as many as seven or eight. So every beacon is important and every one has to keep operating. That is where I and the other trouble-shooters came in.

We travel in well-stocked ships that carry a little bit of everything; only one man to a ship because that is all it takes to operate the overly efficient repair machinery. Due to the very nature of our job, we spend most of our time just rocketing through normal space. After all, when a beacon breaks down, how do you find it?

Not through hyperspace. All you can do is approach as close as you can by using other beacons, then finish the trip in normal space. This can take months, and often does.

This job didn't turn out to be quite that bad. I zeroed on the Beta Circinus beacon and ran a complicated eight-point problem through the navigator, using every beacon I could get an accurate fix on. The computer gave me a course with an estimated point-of-arrival as well as a built-in safety factor I never could eliminate from the machine.

I would much rather take a chance of breaking through near some star than spend time just barreling through normal space, but apparently Tech knows this, too. They had a safety factor built into the computer so you couldn't end up inside a star no matter how hard you tried. I'm sure there was no humaneness in this decision. They just didn't want to lose the ship.

It was a twenty-hour jump, ship's time, and I came through in the middle of nowhere. The robot analyzer chuckled to itself and scanned all the stars, comparing them to the spectra of Proxima Centauri. It finally rang a bell and blinked a light. I peeped through the eyepiece.

A fast reading with the photocell gave me the apparent magnitude and a comparison with its absolute magnitude showed its distance. Not as bad as I had thought—a six-week run, give or take a few days. After feeding a course tape into the robot pilot, I strapped into the acceleration tank and went to sleep.

The time went fast. I rebuilt my camera for about the twentieth time and just about finished a correspondence course in nucleonics. Most repairmen take these courses. Besides their always coming in handy, the company grades your pay by the number of specialties you can handle. All this, with some oil painting and free-fall workouts in the gym, passed the time. I was asleep when the alarm went off that announced planetary distance.

Planet two, where the beacon was situated according to the old charts, was a mushy-looking, wet kind of globe. I tried to make sense out of the ancient directions and finally located the right area. Staying outside the atmosphere, I sent a flying eye down to look things over. In this business, you learn early when and where to risk your own skin. The eye would be good enough for the preliminary survey.

The old boys had enough brains to choose a traceable site for the beacon, equidistant on a line between two of the most prominent mountain peaks. I located the peaks easily enough and started the eye out from the first peak and kept it on a course directly toward the second. There was a nose and tail radar in the eye and I fed their

signals into a scope as an amplitude curve. When the two peaks coincided, I spun the eye controls and dived the thing down.

I cut out the radar and cut in the nose orthicon and sat back to watch the beacon appear on the screen.

The image blinked, focused—and a great damn pyramid swam into view. I cursed and wheeled the eye in circles, scanning the surrounding country. It was flat, marshy bottom land without a bump. The only thing in a ten-mile circle was this pyramid—and that definitely wasn't my beacon.

Or wasn't it?

I dived the eye lower. The pyramid was a crude-looking thing of undressed stone, without carvings or decorations. There was a shimmer of light from the top and I took a closer look at it. On the peak of the pyramid was a hollow basin filled with water. When I saw that, something clicked in my mind.

Locking the eye in a circular course, I dug through the Mark III plans—and there it was. The beacon had a precipitating field and a basin on top of it for water; this was used to cool the reactor that powered the monstrosity. If the water was still there, the beacon was still there—inside the pyramid. The natives, who, of course, weren't even mentioned by the idiots who constructed the thing, had built a nice heavy, thick stone pyramid around the beacon.

I took another look at the screen and realized that I had locked the eye into a circular orbit about twenty feet above the pyramid. The summit of the stone pile was now covered with lizards of some type, apparently the local life-form. They had what looked like throwing sticks and arbalasts and were trying to shoot down the eye, a cloud of arrows and rocks flying in every direction.

I pulled the eye straight up and away and threw in the control circuit that would return it automatically to the ship.

Then I went to the galley for a long, strong drink. My beacon was not only locked inside a mountain of handmade stone, but I had managed to irritate the things who had built the pyramid. A great beginning for a job and one clearly designed to drive a stronger man than me to the bottle.

Normally, a repairman stays away from native cultures. They are poison. Anthropologists may not mind being dissected for their science, but a repairman wants to make no sacrifices of any kind for his job. For this reason, most beacons are built on uninhabited planets. If a beacon *has* to go on a planet with a culture, it is usually built in some inaccessible place.

Why this beacon had been built within reach of the local claws, I had yet to find out. But that would come in time. The first thing to do was make contact. To make contact, you have to know the local language.

And, for *that*, I had long before worked out a system that was fool-proof.

I had a pryeye of my own construction. It looked like a piece of rock about a foot long. Once on the ground, it would never be noticed, though it was a little disconcerting to see it float by. I located a lizard town about a thousand kilometers from the pyramid and dropped the eye. It swished down and landed at night in the

bank of the local mud wallow. This was a favorite spot that drew a good crowd during the day. In the morning, when the first wallowers arrived, I flipped on the recorder.

After about five of the local days, I had a sea of native conversation in the memory bank of the machine translator and had tagged a few expressions. This is fairly easy to do when you have a machine memory to work with. One of the lizards gargled at another one and the second one turned around. I tagged this expression with the phrase, “Hey, George!” and waited my chance to use it. Later the same day, I caught one of them alone and shouted “Hey, George!” at him. It gurgled out through the speaker in the local tongue and he turned around.

When you get enough reference phrases like this in the memory bank, the MT brain takes over and starts filling in the missing pieces. As soon as the MT could give a running translation of any conversation it heard, I figured it was time to make a contact.

I found him easily enough. He was the Centaurian version of a goat-boy—he herded a particularly loathsome form of local life in the swamps outside the town. I had one of the working eyes dig a cave in an outcropping of rock and wait for him.

When he passed next day, I whispered into the mike: “Welcome, O Goat-boy Grandson! This is your grandfather’s spirit speaking from paradise.” This fitted in with what I could make out of the local religion.

Goat-boy stopped as if he’d been shot. Before he could move, I pushed a switch and a handful of the local currency, wampum-type shells, rolled out of the cave and landed at his feet.

“Here is some money from paradise, because you have been a good boy.” Not really from paradise—I had lifted it from the treasury the night before. “Come back tomorrow and we will talk some more,” I called after the fleeing figure. I was pleased to notice that he took the cash before taking off.

After that, Grandpa in paradise had many heart-to-heart talks with Grandson, who found the heavenly loot more than he could resist. Grandpa had been out of touch with things since his death and Goat-boy happily filled him in.

I learned all I needed to know of the history, past and recent, and it wasn’t nice.

In addition to the pyramid being around the beacon, there was a nice little religious war going on around the pyramid.

It all began with the land bridge. Apparently the local lizards had been living in the swamps when the beacon was built, but the builders didn’t think much of them. They were a low type and confined to a distant continent. The idea that the race would develop and might reach *this* continent never occurred to the beacon mechanics. Which is, of course, what happened.

A little geological turnover, a swampy land bridge formed in the right spot, and the lizards began to wander up beacon valley. And found religion. A shiny metal temple out of which poured a constant stream of magic water—the reactor-cooling water pumped down from the atmosphere condenser on the roof. The radioactivity in the water didn’t hurt the natives. It caused mutations that bred true.

A city was built around the temple and, through the centuries, the pyramid was put up around the beacon. A special branch of the priesthood served the temple. All went

well until one of the priests violated the temple and destroyed the holy waters. There had been revolt, strife, murder and destruction since then. But still the holy waters would not flow. Now armed mobs fought around the temple each day and a new band of priests guarded the sacred fount.

And I had to walk into the middle of that mess and repair the thing.

It would have been easy enough if we were allowed a little mayhem. I could have had a lizard fry, fixed the beacon and taken off. Only “native life-forms” were quite well protected. There were spy cells on my ship, all of which I hadn’t found, that would cheerfully rat on me when I got back.

Diplomacy was called for. I sighed and dragged out the plastiflesh equipment.

Working from 3D snaps of Grandson, I modeled a passable reptile head over my own features. It was a little short in the jaw, me not having one of their toothy mandibles, but that was all right. I didn’t have to look *exactly* like them, just something close, to soothe the native mind. It’s logical. If I were an ignorant aborigine of Earth and I ran into a Spican, who looks like a two-foot gob of dried shellac, I would immediately leave the scene. However, if the Spican was wearing a suit of plastiflesh that looked remotely humanoid, I would at least stay and talk to him. This was what I was aiming to do with the Centaurians.

When the head was done, I peeled it off and attached it to an attractive suit of green plastic, complete with tail. I was really glad they had tails. The lizards didn’t wear clothes and I wanted to take along a lot of electronic equipment. I built the tail over a metal frame that anchored around my waist. Then I filled the frame with all the equipment I would need and began to wire the suit.

When it was done, I tried it on in front of a full-length mirror. It was horrible but effective. The tail dragged me down in the rear and gave me a duck-waddle, but that only helped the resemblance.

That night I took the ship down into the hills nearest the pyramid, an out-of-the-way dry spot where the amphibious natives would never go. A little before dawn, the eye hooked onto my shoulders and we sailed straight up. We hovered above the temple at about 2,000 meters, until it was light, then dropped straight down.

It must have been a grand sight. The eye was camouflaged to look like a flying lizard, sort of a cardboard pterodactyl, and the slowly flapping wings obviously had nothing to do with our flight. But it was impressive enough for the natives. The first one that spotted me screamed and dropped over on his back. The others came running. They milled and mobbed and piled on top of one another, and by that time I had landed in the plaza fronting the temple. The priesthood arrived.

I folded my arms in a regal stance. “Greetings, O noble servers of the Great God,” I said. Of course I didn’t say it out loud, just whispered loud enough for the throat mike to catch. This was radioed back to the MT and the translation shot back to a speaker in my jaws.

The natives chomped and rattled and the translation rolled out almost instantly. I had the volume turned up and the whole square echoed.

Some of the more credulous natives prostrated themselves and others fled screaming. One doubtful type raised a spear, but no one else tried that after the

pterodactyl-eye picked him up and dropped him in the swamp. The priests were a hard-headed lot and weren't buying any lizards in a poke; they just stood and muttered. I had to take the offensive again.

"Begone, O faithful steed," I said to the eye, and pressed the control in my palm at the same time.

It took off straight up a bit faster than I wanted; little pieces of wind-torn plastic rained down. While the crowd was ogling this ascent, I walked through the temple doors.

"I would talk with you, O noble priests," I said.

Before they could think up a good answer, I was inside.

The temple was a small one built against the base of the pyramid. I hoped I wasn't breaking too many taboos by going in. I wasn't stopped, so it looked all right. The temple was a single room with a murky-looking pool at one end. Sloshing in the pool was an ancient reptile who clearly was one of the leaders. I waddled toward him and he gave me a cold and fishy eye, then growled something.

The MT whispered into my ear, "Just what in the name of the thirteenth sin are you and what are you doing here?"

I drew up my scaly figure in a noble gesture and pointed toward the ceiling. "I come from your ancestors to help you. I am here to restore the Holy Waters."

This raised a buzz of conversation behind me, but got no rise out of the chief. He sank slowly into the water until only his eyes were showing. I could almost hear the wheels turning behind that moss-covered forehead. Then he lunged up and pointed a dripping finger at me.

"You are a liar! You are no ancestor of ours! We will—"

"Stop!" I thundered before he got so far in that he couldn't back out. "I said your ancestors sent me as emissary—I am not one of your ancestors. Do not try to harm me or the wrath of those who have Passed On will turn against you."

When I said this, I turned to jab a claw at the other priests, using the motion to cover my flicking a coin grenade toward them. It blew a nice hole in the floor with a great show of noise and smoke.

The First Lizard knew I was talking sense then and immediately called a meeting of the shamans. It, of course, took place in the public bathtub and I had to join them there. We jawed and gurgled for about an hour and settled all the major points.

I found out that they were new priests; the previous ones had all been boiled for letting the Holy Waters cease. They found out I was there only to help them restore the flow of the waters. They bought this, tentatively, and we all heaved out of the tub and trickled muddy paths across the floor. There was a bolted and guarded door that led into the pyramid proper. While it was being opened, the First Lizard turned to me.

"Undoubtedly you know of the rule," he said. "Because the old priests did pry and peer, it was ruled henceforth that only the blind could enter the Holy of Holies." I'd swear he was smiling, if thirty teeth peeking out of what looked like a crack in an old suitcase can be called smiling.

He was also signaling to him an underpriest who carried a brazier of charcoal complete with red-hot irons. All I could do was stand and watch as he stirred up the coals, pulled out the ruddiest iron and turned toward me. He was just drawing a bead on my right eyeball when my brain got back in gear.

“Of course,” I said, “blinding is only right. But in my case you will have to blind me before I *leave* the Holy of Holies, not now. I need my eyes to see and mend the Fount of Holy Waters. Once the waters flow again, I will laugh as I hurl myself on the burning iron.”

He took a good thirty seconds to think it over and had to agree with me. The local torturer sniffled a bit and threw a little more charcoal on the fire. The gate crashed open and I stalked through; then it banged to behind me and I was alone in the dark.

But not for long—there was a shuffling nearby and I took a chance and turned on my flash. Three priests were groping toward me, their eye-sockets red pits of burned flesh. They knew what I wanted and led the way without a word.

A crumbling and cracked stone stairway brought us up to a solid metal doorway labeled in archaic script *MARK III BEACON—AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY*. The trusting builders counted on the sign to do the whole job, for there wasn’t a trace of a lock on the door. One lizard merely turned the handle and we were inside the beacon.

I unzipped the front of my camouflage suit and pulled out the blueprints. With the faithful priests stumbling after me, I located the control room and turned on the lights. There was a residue of charge in the emergency batteries, just enough to give a dim light. The meters and indicators looked to be in good shape; if anything, unexpectedly bright from constant polishing.

I checked the readings carefully and found just what I had suspected. One of the eager lizards had managed to open a circuit box and had polished the switches inside. While doing this, he had thrown one of the switches and that had caused the trouble.

Rather, that had *started* the trouble. It wasn’t going to be ended by just reversing the water-valve switch. This valve was supposed to be used only for repairs, after the pile was damped. When the water was cut off with the pile in operation, it had started to overheat and the automatic safeties had dumped the charge down the pit.

I could start the water again easily enough, but there was no fuel left in the reactor.

I wasn’t going to play with the fuel problem at all. It would be far easier to install a new power plant. I had one in the ship that was about a tenth the size of the ancient bucket of bolts and produced at least four times the power. Before I sent for it, I checked over the rest of the beacon. In 2000 years, there should be *some* sign of wear.

The old boys had built well, I’ll give them credit for that. Ninety per cent of the machinery had no moving parts and had suffered no wear whatever. Other parts they had beefed up, figuring they would wear, but slowly. The water-feed pipe from the roof, for example. The pipe walls were at least three meters thick—and the pipe

opening itself no bigger than my head. There were some things I could do, though, and I made a list of parts.

The parts, the new power plant and a few other odds and ends were chuted into a neat pile on the ship. I checked all the parts by screen before they were loaded in a metal crate. In the darkest hour before dawn, the heavy-duty eye dropped the crate outside the temple and darted away without being seen.

I watched the priests through the pryeye while they tried to open it. When they had given up, I boomed orders at them through a speaker in the crate. They spent most of the day sweating the heavy box up through the narrow temple stairs and I enjoyed a good sleep. It was resting inside the beacon door when I woke up.

The repairs didn't take long, though there was plenty of groaning from the blind lizards when they heard me ripping the wall open to get at the power leads. I even hooked a gadget to the water pipe so their Holy Waters would have the usual refreshing radioactivity when they started flowing again. The moment this was all finished, I did the job they were waiting for.

I threw the switch that started the water flowing again.

There were a few minutes while the water began to gurgle down through the dry pipe. Then a roar came from outside the pyramid that must have shaken its stone walls. Shaking my hands once over my head, I went down for the eye-burning ceremony.

The blind lizards were waiting for me by the door and looked even unhappier than usual. When I tried the door, I found out why—it was bolted and barred from the other side.

"It has been decided," a lizard said, "that you shall remain here forever and tend the Holy Waters. We will stay with you and serve your every need."

A delightful prospect, eternity spent in a locked beacon with three blind lizards. In spite of their hospitality, I couldn't accept.

"What—you dare interfere with the messenger of your ancestors!" I had the speaker on full volume and the vibration almost shook my head off.

The lizards cringed and I set my Solar for a narrow beam and ran it around the door jamb. There was a great crunching and banging from the junk piled against it, and then the door swung free. I threw it open. Before they could protest, I had pushed the priests out through it.

The rest of their clan showed up at the foot of the stairs and made a great ruckus while I finished welding the door shut. Running through the crowd, I faced up to the First Lizard in his tub. He sank slowly beneath the surface.

"What lack of courtesy!" I shouted. He made little bubbles in the water. "The ancestors are annoyed and have decided to forbid entrance to the Inner Temple forever; though, out of kindness, they will let the waters flow. Now I must return—on with the ceremony!"

The torture-master was too frightened to move, so I grabbed out his hot iron. A touch on the side of my face dropped a steel plate over my eyes, under the plastiskin. Then I jammed the iron hard into my phony eye-sockets and the plastic gave off an authentic odor.

A cry went up from the crowd as I dropped the iron and staggered in blind circles. I must admit it went off pretty well.

Before they could get any more bright ideas, I threw the switch and my plastic pterodactyl sailed in through the door. I couldn't see it, of course, but I knew it had arrived when the grapples in the claws latched onto the steel plates on my shoulders.

I had got turned around after the eye-burning and my flying beast hooked onto me backward. I had meant to sail out bravely, blind eyes facing into the sunset; instead, I faced the crowd as I soared away, so I made the most of a bad situation and threw them a snappy military salute. Then I was out in the fresh air and away.

When I lifted the plate and poked holes in the seared plastic, I could see the pyramid growing smaller behind me, water gushing out of the base and a happy crowd of reptiles sporting in its radioactive rush. I counted off on my talons to see if I had forgotten anything.

One: The beacon was repaired.

Two: The door was sealed, so there should be no more sabotage, accidental or deliberate.

Three: The priests should be satisfied. The water was running again, my eyes had been duly burned out, and they were back in business. Which added up to—

Four: The fact that they would probably let another repairman in, under the same conditions, if the beacon conked out again. At least I had done nothing, like butchering a few of them, that would make them antagonistic toward future ancestral messengers.

I stripped off my tattered lizard suit back in the ship, very glad that it would be some other repairman who'd get the job.

Arm of the Law

It was a big, coffin-shaped plywood box that looked like it weighed a ton. This brawny type just dumped it through the door of the police station and started away. I looked up from the blotter and shouted at the trucker's vanishing back.

"What the hell is that?"

"How should I know?" he said as he swung up into the cab. "I just deliver, I don't X-ray 'em. It came on the morning rocket from earth is all I know." He gunned the truck more than he had to and threw up a billowing cloud of red dust.

"Jokers," I growled to myself. "Mars is full of jokers."

When I went over to look at the box I could feel the dust grate between my teeth. Chief Craig must have heard the racket because he came out of his office and helped me stand and look at the box.

"Think it's a bomb?" he asked in a bored voice.

"Why would anyone bother—particularly with a thing this size? And all the way from earth."

He nodded agreement and walked around to look at the other end. There was no sender's address anywhere on the outside. Finally we had to dig out the crowbar and I went to work on the top. After some prying it pulled free and fell off.

That was when we had our first look at Ned. We all would have been a lot happier if it had been our last look as well. If we had just put the lid back on and shipped the thing back to earth! I know now what they mean about Pandora's Box.

But we just stood there and stared like a couple of rubes. Ned lay motionless and stared back at us.

"A robot!" the Chief said.

"Very observant; it's easy to see you went to the police academy."

"Ha ha! Now find out what he's doing here."

I hadn't gone to the academy, but this was no handicap to my finding the letter. It was sticking up out of a thick book in a pocket in the box. The Chief took the letter and read it with little enthusiasm.

"Well, well! United Robotics have the brainstorm that ... *robots, correctly used will tend to prove invaluable in police work* ... they want us to co-operate in a field test ... *robot enclosed is the latest experimental model; valued at 120,000 credits.*"

We both looked back at the robot, sharing the wish that the credits had been in the box instead of it. The Chief frowned and moved his lips through the rest of the letter. I wondered how we got the robot out of its plywood coffin.

Experimental model or not, this was a nice-looking hunk of machinery. A uniform navy-blue all over, though the outlet cases, hooks and such were a metallic gold. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to get that effect. This was as close as a robot could look to a cop in uniform, without being a joke. All that seemed to be missing was the badge and gun.

Then I noticed the tiny glow of light in the robot's eye lenses. It had never occurred to me before that the thing might be turned on. There was nothing to lose by finding out.

"Get out of that box," I said.

The robot came up smooth and fast as a rocket, landing two feet in front of me and whipping out a snappy salute.

"Police Experimental Robot, serial number XPO-456-934B, reporting for duty, sir."

His voice quivered with alertness and I could almost hear the humming of those taut cable muscles. He may have had a stainless steel hide and a bunch of wires for a brain—but he spelled rookie cop to me just the same. The fact that he was man-height with two arms, two legs and that painted-on uniform helped. All I had to do was squint my eyes a bit and there stood Ned the Rookie Cop. Fresh out of school and raring to go. I shook my head to get rid of the illusion. This was just six feet of machine that boffins and brain-boys had turned out for their own amusement.

"Relax, Ned," I said. He was still holding the salute. "At ease. You'll get a hernia of your exhaust pipe if you stay so tense. Anyways, I'm just the sergeant here. That's the Chief of Police over there."

Ned did an about face and slid over to the Chief with that same greased-lightning motion. The Chief just looked at him like something that sprang out from under the hood of a car, while Ned went through the same report routine.

"I wonder if it does anything else beside salute and report," the Chief said while he walked around the robot, looking it over like a dog with a hydrant.

"The functions, operations and responsible courses of action open to the Police Experimental Robots are outlined on pages 184 to 213 of the manual." Ned's voice was muffled for a second while he half-dived back into his case and came up with the volume mentioned. "A detailed breakdown of these will also be found on pages 1035 to 1267 inclusive."

The Chief, who has trouble reading an entire comic page at one sitting, turned the 6-inch-thick book over in his hands like it would maybe bite him. When he had a rough idea of how much it weighed and a good feel of the binding he threw it on my desk.

"Take care of this," he said to me as he headed towards his office. "And the robot, too. Do something with it." The Chief's span of attention never was great and it had been strained to the limit this time.

I flipped through the book, wondering. One thing I never have had much to do with is robots, so I know just as much about them as any Joe in the street. Probably less. The book was filled with pages of fine print, fancy mathematics, wiring diagrams and charts in nine colors and that kind of thing. It needed close attention. Which attention I was not prepared to give at the time. The book slid shut and I eyed the newest employee of the city of Nineport.

"There is a broom behind the door. Do you know how to use it?"

"Yes, sir."

"In that case you will sweep out this room, raising as small a cloud of dust as possible at the same time."

He did a very neat job of it.

I watched 120,000 credits worth of machinery making a tidy pile of butts and sand and wondered why it had been sent to Nineport. Probably because there wasn't another police force in the solar system that was smaller or more unimportant than ours. The engineers must have figured this would be a good spot for a field test. Even if the thing blew up, nobody would really mind. There would probably be someone along some day to get a report on it. Well, they had picked the right spot all right. Nineport was just a little bit beyond nowhere.

Which, of course, was why I was there. I was the only real cop on the force. They needed at least one to give an illusion of the wheels going around. The Chief, Alonzo Craig, had just enough sense to take graft without dropping the money. There were two patrolmen. One old and drunk most of the time. The other so young the only scar he had was the mark of the attram. I had ten years on a metropolitan force, earthside. Why I left is nobody's damn business. I have long since paid for any mistakes I made there by ending up in Nineport.

Nineport is not a city, it's just a place where people stop. The only permanent citizens are the ones who cater to those on the way through. Hotel keepers, restaurant owners, gamblers, barkeepers, and the rest.

There is a spaceport, but only some freighters come there. To pick up the metal from some of the mines that are still working. Some of the settlers still came in for supplies. You might say that Nineport was a town that just missed the boat. In a hundred years I doubt if there will be enough left sticking of the sand to even tell where it used to be. I won't be there either, so I couldn't care less.

I went back to the blotter. Five drunks in the tank, an average night's haul. While I wrote them up Fats dragged in the sixth one.

"Locked himself in the ladies' john at the spaceport and resisting arrest," he reported.

"D and D. Throw him in with the rest."

Fats steered his limp victim across the floor, matching him step for dragging step. I always marveled at the way Fats took care of drunks, since he usually had more under his belt than they had. I have never seen him falling down drunk or completely sober. About all he was good for was keeping a blurred eye on the lockup and running in drunks. He did well at that. No matter what they crawled under or on top of, he found them. No doubt due to the same shared natural instincts.

Fats clanged the door behind number six and weaved his way back in. "What's that?" he asked, peering at the robot along the purple beauty of his nose.

"That is a robot. I have forgotten the number his mother gave him at the factory so we will call him Ned. He works here now."

"Good for him! He can clean up the tank after we throw the bums out."

"That's *my* job," Billy said coming in through the front door. He clutched his nightstick and scowled out from under the brim of his uniform cap. It is not that Billy is stupid, just that most of his strength has gone into his back instead of his mind.

"That's Ned's job now because you have a promotion. You are going to help me with some of my work."

Billy came in very handy at times and I was anxious that the force shouldn't lose him. My explanation cheered him because he sat down by Fats and watched Ned do the floor.

That's the way things went for about a week. We watched Ned sweep and polish until the station began to take on a positively antiseptic look. The Chief, who always has an eye out for that type of thing, found out that Ned could file the odd ton of reports and paperwork that cluttered his office. All this kept the robot busy, and we got so used to him we were hardly aware he was around. I knew he had moved the packing case into the storeroom and fixed himself up a cozy sort of robot dormitory-coffin. Other than that I didn't know or care.

The operation manual was buried in my desk and I never looked at it. If I had, I might have had some idea of the big changes that were in store. None of us knew the littlest bit about what a robot can or cannot do. Ned was working nicely as a combination janitor-file clerk and should have stayed that way. He would have too if the Chief hadn't been so lazy. That's what started it all.

It was around nine at night and the Chief was just going home when the call came in. He took it, listened for a moment, then hung up.

"Greenback's liquor store. He got held up again. Says to come at once."

"That's a change. Usually we don't hear about it until a month later. What's he paying protection money for if China Joe ain't protecting? What's the rush now?"

The Chief chewed his loose lip for a while, finally and painfully reached a decision.

"You better go around and see what the trouble is."

"Sure," I said reaching for my cap. "But no one else is around, you'll have to watch the desk until I get back."

"That's no good," he moaned. "I'm dying from hunger and sitting here isn't going to help me any."

"I will go take the report," Ned said, stepping forward and snapping his usual well-greased salute.

At first the Chief wasn't buying. You would think the water cooler came to life and offered to take over his job.

"How could *you* take a report?" he growled, putting the wise-guy water cooler in its place. But he had phrased his little insult as a question so he had only himself to blame. In exactly three minutes Ned gave the Chief a summary of the routine necessary for a police officer to make a report on an armed robbery or other reported theft. From the glazed look in Chief's protruding eyes I could tell Ned had quickly passed the boundaries of the Chief's meager knowledge.

"Enough!" the harried man finally gasped. "If you know so much why don't you make a report?"

Which to me sounded like another version of "*if you're so damned smart why ain't you rich?*" which we used to snarl at the brainy kids in grammar school. Ned took such things literally though, and turned towards the door.

"Do you mean you wish me to make a report on this robbery?"

"Yes," the Chief said just to get rid of him, and we watched his blue shape vanish through the door.

"He must be brighter than he looks," I said. "He never stopped to ask where Greenback's store is."

The Chief nodded and the phone rang again. His hand was still resting on it so he picked it up by reflex. He listened for a second and you would have thought someone was pumping blood out of his heel from the way his face turned white.

“The holdup’s still on,” he finally gasped. “Greenback’s delivery boy is on the line—calling back to see where we are. Says he’s under a table in the back room ...”

I never heard the rest of it because I was out the door and into the car. There were a hundred things that could happen if Ned got there before me. Guns could go off, people hurt, lots of things. And the police would be to blame for it all—sending a tin robot to do a cop’s job. Maybe the Chief had ordered Ned there, but clearly as if the words were painted on the windshield of the car, I knew I would be dragged into it. It never gets very warm on Mars, but I was sweating.

Nineport has fourteen traffic regulations and I broke all of them before I had gone a block. Fast as I was, Ned was faster. As I turned the corner I saw him open the door of Greenback’s store and walk in. I screamed brakes in behind him and arrived just in time to have a gallery seat. A shooting gallery at that.

There were two holdup punks, one behind the counter making like a clerk and the other lounging off to the side. Their guns were out of sight, but blue-coated Ned busting through the door like that was too much for their keyed up nerves. Up came both guns like they were on strings and Ned stopped dead. I grabbed for my own gun and waited for pieces of busted robot to come flying through the window.

Ned’s reflexes were great. Which I suppose is what you should expect of a robot.

“DROP YOUR GUNS, YOU ARE UNDER ARREST.”

He must have had on full power or something, his voice blasted so loud my ears hurt. The result was just what you might expect. Both torpedoes let go at once and the air was filled with flying slugs. The show windows went out with a crash and I went down on my stomach. From the amount of noise I knew they both had recoilless .50’s. You can’t stop one of those slugs. They go right through you and anything else that happens to be in the way.

Except they didn’t seem to be bothering Ned. The only notice he seemed to take was to cover his eyes. A little shield with a thin slit popped down over his eye lenses. Then he moved in on the first thug.

I knew he was fast, but not that fast. A couple of slugs jarred him as he came across the room, but before the punk could change his aim Ned had the gun in his hand. That was the end of that. He put on one of the sweetest hammer locks I have ever seen and neatly grabbed the gun when it dropped from the limp fingers. With the same motion that slipped the gun into a pouch he whipped out a pair of handcuffs and snapped them on the punk’s wrists.

Holdupnik number two was heading for the door by then, and I was waiting to give him a warm reception. There was never any need. He hadn’t gone halfway before Ned slid in front of him. There was a thud when they hit that didn’t even shake Ned, but gave the other a glazed look. He never even knew it when Ned slipped the cuffs on him and dropped him down next to his partner.

I went in, took their guns from Ned, and made the arrest official. That was all Greenback saw when he crawled out from behind the counter and it was all I wanted him to see. The place was a foot deep in broken glass and smelled like the inside of a Jack Daniels bottle. Greenback began to howl like a wolf over his lost stock. He didn’t

seem to know any more about the phone call than I did, so I grabbed ahold of a pimply looking kid who staggered out of the storeroom. He was the one who had made the calls.

It turned out to be a matter of sheer stupidity. He had worked for Greenback only a few days and didn't have enough brains to realize that all holdups should be reported to the protection boys instead of the police. I told Greenback to wise up his boy, as look at the trouble that got caused. Then pushed the two ex-holdup men out to the car. Ned climbed in back with them and they clung together like two waifs in a storm. The robot's only response was to pull a first aid kit from his hip and fix up a ricochet hole in one of the thugs that no one had noticed in the excitement.

The Chief was still sitting there with that bloodless look when we marched in. I didn't believe it could be done, but he went two shades whiter.

"You made the pinch," he whispered. Before I could straighten him out a second and more awful idea hit him. He grabbed a handful of shirt on the first torpedo and poked his face down. "You with China Joe," he snarled.

The punk made the error of trying to be cute so the Chief let him have one on the head with the open hand that set his eyes rolling like marbles. When the question got asked again he found the right answer.

"I never heard from no China Joe. We just hit town today and—"

"Freelance, by God," the Chief sighed and collapsed into his chair. "Lock 'em up and quickly tell me what in hell happened."

I slammed the gate on them and pointed a none too steady finger at Ned.

"There's the hero," I said. "Took them on single-handed, rassled them for a fall and made the capture. He is a one-robot tornado, a power for good in this otherwise evil community. And he's bulletproof too." I ran a finger over Ned's broad chest. The paint was chipped by the slugs, but the metal was hardly scratched.

"This is going to cause me trouble, big trouble," the Chief wailed.

I knew he meant with the protection boys. They did not like punks getting arrested and guns going off without their okay. But Ned thought the Chief had other worries and rushed in to put them right. "There will be no trouble. At no time did I violate any of the Robotic Restriction Laws, they are part of my control circuits and therefore fully automatic. The men who drew their guns violated both robotic and human law when they threatened violence. I did not injure the men—merely restrained them."

It was all over the Chief's head, but I liked to think *I* could follow it. And I *had* been wondering how a robot—a machine—could be involved in something like law application and violence. Ned had the answer to that one too.

"Robots have been assuming these functions for years. Don't recording radar meters pass judgment on human violation of automobile regulations? A robot alcohol detector is better qualified to assess the sobriety of a prisoner than the arresting officer. At one time robots were even allowed to make their own decisions about killing. Before the Robotic Restriction Laws automatic gun-pointers were in general use. Their final development was a self-contained battery of large anti-aircraft guns. Automatic scan radar detected all aircraft in the vicinity. Those that could not return

the correct identifying signal had their courses tracked and computed, automatic fuse-cutters and loaders readied the computer-aimed guns—which were fired by the robot mechanism.”

There was little I could argue about with Ned. Except maybe his college-professor vocabulary. So I switched the attack.

“But a robot can’t take the place of a cop, it’s a complex human job.”

“Of course it is, but taking a human policeman’s place is not the function of a police robot. Primarily I combine the functions of numerous pieces of police equipment, integrating their operations and making them instantly available. In addition I can aid in the *mechanical* processes of law enforcement. If you arrest a man you handcuff him. But if you order me to do it, I have made no moral decision. I am just a machine for attaching handcuffs at that point ...”

My raised hand cut off the flow of robotic argument. Ned was hipped to his ears with facts and figures and I had a good idea who would come off second best in any continued discussion. No laws had been broken when Ned made the pinch, that was for sure. But there are other laws than those that appear on the books.

“China Joe is not going to like this, not at all,” the Chief said, speaking my own thoughts.

The law of Tooth and Claw. That’s one that wasn’t in the law books. And that was what ran Nineport. The place was just big enough to have a good population of gambling joints, bawdy houses and drunk-rollers. They were all run by China Joe. As was the police department. We were all in his pocket and you might say he was the one who paid our wages. This is not the kind of thing, though, that you explain to a robot.

“Yeah, China Joe.”

I thought it was an echo at first, then realized that someone had eased in the door behind me. Something called Alex. Six feet of bone, muscle and trouble. China Joe’s right hand man. He imitated a smile at the Chief who sank a bit lower in his chair.

“China Joe wants you should tell him why you got smart cops going around and putting the arm on people and letting them shoot up good liquor. He’s mostly angry about the hooch. He says that he had enough guff and after this you should—”

“I am putting you under Robot Arrest, pursuant to article 46, paragraph 19 of the revised statutes ...”

Ned had done it before we realized he had even moved. Right in front of our eyes he was arresting Alex and signing our death warrants.

Alex was not slow. As he turned to see who had grabbed him, he had already dragged out this cannon. He got one shot in, square against Ned’s chest, before the robot plucked the gun away and slipped on the cuffs. While we all gaped like dead fish, Ned recited the charge in what I swear was a satisfied tone.

“The prisoner is Peter Rakjomsj, alias Alex the Axe, wanted in Canal City for armed robbery and attempted murder. Also wanted by local police of Detroit, New York and Manchester on charges of ...”

“*Get it off me!*” Alex howled. We might have too, and everything might have still been straightened out if Benny Bug hadn’t heard the shot. He popped his head in the front door just long enough to roll his eyes over our little scene.

“Alex ... they’re puttin’ the arm on Alex!”

Then he was gone and when I hit the door he was nowhere in sight. China Joe’s boys always went around in pairs. And in ten minutes he would know all about it.

“Book him,” I told Ned. “It wouldn’t make any difference if we let him go now. The world has already come to an end.”

Fats came in then, mumbling to himself. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder when he saw me.

“What’s up? I see little Benny Bug come out of here like the place was on fire and almost get killed driving away?”

Then Fats saw Alex with the bracelets on and turned sober in one second. He just took a moment to gape, then his mind was made up. Without a trace of a stagger he walked over to the Chief and threw his badge on the desk in front of him.

“I am an old man and I drink too much to be a cop. Therefore I am resigning from the force. Because if that is whom I think it is over there with the cuffs on, I will not live to be a day older as long as I am around here.”

“Rat.” The Chief growled in pain through his clenched teeth. “Deserting the sinking ship. Rat.”

“Squeak,” Fats said and left.

The Chief was beyond caring at this point. He didn’t blink an eye when I took Fats’ badge off the desk. I don’t know why I did it, perhaps I thought it was only fair. Ned had started all the trouble and I was just angry enough to want him on the spot when it was finished. There were two rings on his chest plate, and I was not surprised when the badge pin fitted them neatly.

“There, now you are a real cop.” Sarcasm dripped from the words. I should have realized that robots are immune to sarcasm. Ned took my statement at face value.

“This is a very great honor, not only for me but for all robots. I will do my best to fulfill all the obligations of the office.” Jack Armstrong in tin underwear. I could hear the little motors in his guts humming with joy as he booked Alex.

If everything else hadn’t been so bad I would have enjoyed that. Ned had more police equipment built into him than Nineport had ever owned. There was an ink pad that snapped out of one hip, and he efficiently rolled Alex’s fingertips across it and stamped them on a card. Then he held the prisoner at arm’s length while something clicked in his abdomen. Once more sideways and two instant photographs dropped out of a slot. The mug shots were stuck on the card, arrest details and such inserted. There was more like this, but I forced myself away. There were more important things to think about.

Like staying alive.

“Any ideas, Chief?”

A groan was my only answer so I let it go at that. Billy, the balance of the police force, came in then. I gave him a quick rundown. Either through stupidity or guts he elected to stay, and I was proud of the boy. Ned locked away the latest prisoner and began sweeping up.

That was the way we were when China Joe walked in.

Even though we were expecting it, it was still a shock. He had a bunch of his toughest hoods with him and they crowded through the door like an overweight baseball team. China Joe was in front, hands buried in the sleeves of his long mandarin gown. No expression at all on his ascetic features. He didn't waste time talking to us, just gave the word to his own boys.

"Clean this place up. The new police Chief will be here in a while and I don't want him to see any bums hanging around."

It made me angry. Even with the graft I like to feel I'm still a cop. Not on a cheap punk's payroll. I was also curious about China Joe. Had been ever since I tried to get a line on him and never found a thing. I still wanted to know.

"Ned, take a good look at that Chinese guy in the rayon bathrobe and let me know who he is."

My, but those electronic circuits work fast. Ned shot the answer back like a straight man who had been rehearsing his lines for weeks.

"He is a pseudo-oriental, utilizing a natural sallowness of the skin heightened with dye. He is not Chinese. There has also been an operation on his eyes, scars of which are still visible. This has been undoubtedly done in an attempt to conceal his real identity, but Bertillon measurements of his ears and other features make identity positive. He is on the Very Wanted list of Interpol and his real name is ..."

China Joe was angry, and with a reason.

"That's the *thing* ... that big-mouthed tin radio set over there. We heard about it and we're taking care of it!"

The mob jumped aside then or hit the deck and I saw there was a guy kneeling in the door with a rocket launcher. Shaped anti-tank charges, no doubt. That was my last thought as the thing let go with a "whoosh."

Maybe you can hit a tank with one of those. But not a robot. At least not a police robot. Ned was sliding across the floor on his face when the back wall blew up. There was no second shot. Ned closed his hand on the tube of the bazooka and it was so much old drainpipe.

Billy decided then that anyone who fired a rocket in a police station was breaking the law, so he moved in with his club. I was right behind him since I did not want to miss any of the fun. Ned was at the bottom somewhere, but I didn't doubt he could take care of himself.

There were a couple of muffled shots and someone screamed. No one fired after that because we were too tangled up. A punk named Brooklyn Eddie hit me on the side of the head with his gunbutt and I broke his nose all over his face with my fist.

There is a kind of a fog over everything after that. But I do remember it was very busy for a while.

When the fog lifted a bit I realized I was the only one still standing. Or leaning rather. It was a good thing the wall was there.

Ned came in through the street door carrying a very bashed-looking Brooklyn Eddie. I hoped I had done all that. Eddie's wrists were fastened together with cuffs. Ned laid him gently next to the heap of thugs—who I suddenly realized all wore the same kind

of handcuffs. I wondered vaguely if Ned made them as he needed them or had a supply tucked away in a hollow leg or something.

There was a chair a few feet away and sitting down helped.

Blood was all over everything and if a couple of the hoods hadn't groaned I would have thought they were corpses. One was, I noticed suddenly. A bullet had caught him in the chest, most of the blood was probably his.

Ned burrowed in the bodies for a moment and dragged Billy out. He was unconscious. A big smile on his face and the splintered remains of his nightstick still stuck in his fist. It takes very little to make some people happy. A bullet had gone through his leg and he never moved while Ned ripped the pants leg off and put on a bandage.

"The spurious China Joe and one other man escaped in a car," Ned reported.

"Don't let it worry you," I managed to croak. "Your batting average still leads the league."

It was then I realized the Chief was still sitting in his chair, where he had been when the brouhaha started. Still slumped down with that glazed look. Only after I started to talk to him did I realize that Alonzo Craig, Chief of Police of Nineport, was now dead.

A single shot. Small caliber gun, maybe a .22. Right through the heart and what blood there had been was soaked up by his clothes. I had a good idea where the gun would be that fired that shot. A small gun, the kind that would fit in a wide Chinese sleeve.

I wasn't tired or groggy any more. Just angry. Maybe he hadn't been the brightest or most honest guy in the world. But he deserved a better end than that. Knocked off by a two-bit racket boss who thought he was being crossed.

Right about then I realized I had a big decision to make. With Billy out of the fight and Fats gone I was the Nineport police force. All I had to do to be clear of this mess was to walk out the door and keep going. I would be safe enough.

Ned buzzed by, picked up two of the thugs, and hauled them off to the cells.

Maybe it was the sight of his blue back or maybe I was tired of running. Either way my mind was made up before I realized it. I carefully took off the Chief's gold badge and put it on in place of my old one.

"The new Chief of Police of Nineport," I said to no one in particular.

"Yes, sir," Ned said as he passed. He put one of the prisoners down long enough to salute, then went on with his work. I returned the salute.

The hospital meat wagon hauled away the dead and wounded. I took an evil pleasure in ignoring the questioning stares of the attendants. After the doc fixed the side of my head, everyone cleared out. Ned mopped up the floor. I ate ten aspirin and waited for the hammering to stop so I could think what to do next.

When I pulled my thoughts together the answer was obvious. Too obvious. I made as long a job as I could of reloading my gun.

"Refill your handcuff box, Ned. We are going out."

Like a good cop he asked no questions. I locked the outside door when we left and gave him the key.

“Here. There’s a good chance you will be the only one left to use this before the day is over.”

I stretched the drive over to China Joe’s place just as much as I could. Trying to figure if there was another way of doing it. There wasn’t. Murder had been done and Joe was the boy I was going to pin it on. So I had to get him.

The best I could do was stop around the corner and give Ned a briefing.

“This combination bar and dice-room is the sole property of the one whom we will still call China Joe until there is time for you to give me a rundown on him. Right now I got enough distractions. What we have to do is go in there, find Joe and bring him to justice. Simple?”

“Simple,” Ned answered in his sharp Joe-college voice. “But wouldn’t it be simpler to make the arrest now, when he is leaving in that car, instead of waiting until he returns?”

The car in mention was doing sixty as it came out of the alley ahead of us. I only had a glimpse of Joe in the back seat as it tore by us.

“Stop them!” I shouted, mostly for my own benefit since I was driving. I tried to shift gears and start the engine at the same time, and succeeded in doing exactly nothing.

So Ned stopped them. It had been phrased as an order. He leaned his head out of the window and I saw at once why most of his equipment was located in his torso. Probably his brain as well. There sure wasn’t much room left in his head when that cannon was tucked away in there.

A .75 recoilless. A plate swiveled back right where his nose should have been if he had one, and the big muzzle pointed out. It’s a neat idea when you think about it. Right between the eyes for good aiming, up high, always ready.

The BOOM BOOM almost took my head off. Of course Ned was a perfect shot—so would I be with a computer for a brain. He had holed one rear tire with each slug and the car flap-flapped to a stop a little ways down the road. I climbed out slowly while Ned sprinted there in seconds flat. They didn’t even try to run this time. What little nerve they had left must have been shattered by the smoking muzzle of that .75 poking out from between Ned’s eyes. Robots are neat about things like that so he must have left it sticking out deliberate. Probably had a course in psychology back in robot school.

Three of them in the car, all waving their hands in the air like the last reel of a western. And the rear floor covered with interesting little suitcases.

Everyone came along quietly.

China Joe only snarled while Ned told me that his name really was Stantin and the Elmira hot seat was kept warm all the time in hopes he would be back. I promised Joe-Stantin I would be happy to arrange it that same day. Thereby not worrying about any slip-ups with the local authorities. The rest of the mob would stand trial in Canal City.

It was a very busy day.

Things have quieted down a good deal since then. Billy is out of the hospital and wearing my old sergeant's stripes. Even Fats is back, though he is sober once in a while now and has trouble looking me in the eye. We don't have much to do because in addition to being a quiet town this is now an honest one.

Ned is on foot patrol nights and in charge of the lab and files days. Maybe the Policeman's Benevolent wouldn't like that, but Ned doesn't seem to mind. He touched up all the bullet scratches and keeps his badge polished. I know a robot can't be happy or sad—but Ned *seems* to be happy.

Sometimes I would swear I can hear him humming to himself. But, of course, that is only the motors and things going around.

When you start thinking about it, I suppose we set some kind of precedent here. What with putting on a robot as a full-fledged police officer. No one ever came around from the factory yet, so I have never found out if we're the first or not.

And I'll tell you something else. I'm not going to stay in this broken-down town forever. I have some letters out now, looking for a new job.

So some people are going to be *very* surprised when they see who their new Chief of Police is after *I* leave.

Navy Day

GENERAL WINGROVE looked at the rows of faces without seeing them. His vision went beyond the Congress of the United States, past the balmy June day to another day that was coming. A day when the Army would have its destined place of authority.

He drew a deep breath and delivered what was perhaps the shortest speech ever heard in the hallowed halls of Congress:

“The General Staff of the U.S. Army requests Congress to abolish the archaic branch of the armed forces known as the U.S. Navy.”

The aging Senator from Georgia checked his hearing aid to see if it was in operating order, while the press box emptied itself in one concerted rush and a clatter of running feet that died off in the direction of the telephone room. A buzz of excited comment ran through the giant chamber. One by one the heads turned to face the Naval section where rows of blue figures stirred and buzzed like smoked-out bees. The knot of men around a paunchy figure heavy with gold braid broke up and Admiral Fitzjames climbed slowly to his feet.

Lesser men have quailed before that piercing stare, but General Wingrove was never the lesser man. The admiral tossed his head with disgust, every line of his body denoting outraged dignity. He turned to his audience, a small pulse beating in his forehead.

“I cannot comprehend the general’s attitude, nor can I understand why he has attacked the Navy in this unwarranted fashion. The Navy has existed and will always exist as the first barrier of American defense. I ask you, gentlemen, to ignore this request as you would ignore the statements of any person ... er, slightly demented. I should like to offer a recommendation that the general’s sanity be investigated, and an inquiry be made as to the mental health of anyone else connected with this preposterous proposal!”

The general smiled calmly. “I understand, Admiral, and really don’t blame you for being slightly annoyed. But, please let us not bring this issue of national importance down to a shallow personal level. The Army has facts to back up this request—facts that shall be demonstrated tomorrow morning.”

Turning his back on the raging admiral, General Wingrove included all the assembled solons in one sweeping gesture.

“Reserve your judgment until that time, gentlemen, make no hasty judgments until you have seen the force of argument with which we back up our request. It is the end of an era. In the morning the Navy joins its fellow fossils, the dodo and the brontosaurus.”

The admiral’s blood pressure mounted to a new record and the gentle thud of his unconscious body striking the floor was the only sound to break the shocked silence of the giant hall.

THE EARLY morning sun warmed the white marble of the Jefferson Memorial and glinted from the soldiers' helmets and the roofs of the packed cars that crowded forward in a slow-moving stream. All the gentlemen of Congress were there, the passage of their cars cleared by the screaming sirens of motorcycle policemen. Around and under the wheels of the official cars pressed a solid wave of government workers and common citizens of the capital city. The trucks of the radio and television services pressed close, microphones and cameras extended.

The stage was set for a great day. Neat rows of olive drab vehicles curved along the water's edge. Jeeps and half-tracks shouldered close by weapons carriers and six-bys, all of them shrinking to insignificance beside the looming Patton tanks. A speakers' platform was set up in the center of the line, near the audience.

At precisely 10 a.m., General Wingrove stepped forward and scowled at the crowd until they settled into an uncomfortable silence. His speech was short and consisted of nothing more than amplifications of his opening statement that actions speak louder than words. He pointed to the first truck in line, a 2½-ton filled with an infantry squad sitting stiffly at attention.

The driver caught the signal and kicked the engine into life; with a grind of gears it moved forward toward the river's edge. There was an indrawn gasp from the crowd as the front wheels ground over the marble parapet—then the truck was plunging down toward the muddy waters of the Potomac.

The wheels touched the water and the surface seemed to sink while taking on a strange glassy character. The truck roared into high gear and rode forward on the surface of the water surrounded by a saucer-shaped depression. It parked two hundred yards off shore and the soldiers, goaded by the sergeant's bark, leapt out and lined up with a showy *present arms*.

The general returned the salute and waved to the remaining vehicles. They moved forward in a series of maneuvers that indicated a great number of rehearsal hours on some hidden pond. The tanks rumbled slowly over the water while the jeeps cut back and forth through their lines in intricate patterns. The trucks backed and turned like puffing ballerinas.

The audience was rooted in a hushed silence, their eyeballs bulging. They continued to watch the amazing display as General Wingrove spoke again:

"You see before you a typical example of Army ingenuity, developed in Army laboratories. These motor units are supported on the surface of the water by an intensifying of the surface tension in their immediate area. Their weight is evenly distributed over the surface, causing the shallow depressions you see around them.

"This remarkable feat has been accomplished by the use of the *Dornifier*. A remarkable invention that is named after that brilliant scientist, Colonel Robert A. Dorn, Commander of the Brooke Point Experimental Laboratory. It was there that one of the civilian employees discovered the Dorn effect—under the Colonel's constant guidance, of course.

"Utilizing this invention the Army now becomes master of the sea as well as the land. Army convoys of trucks and tanks can blanket the world. The surface of the water is our highway, our motor park, our battleground—the airfield and runway for our planes."

Mechanics were pushing a Shooting Star onto the water. They stepped clear as flame gushed from the tail pipe; with the familiar whooshing rumble it sped down the Potomac and hurled itself into the air.

“When this cheap and simple method of crossing oceans is adopted, it will of course mean the end of that fantastic medieval anachronism, the Navy. No need for billion-dollar aircraft carriers, battleships, drydocks and all the other cumbersome junk that keeps those boats and things afloat. Give the taxpayer back his hard-earned dollar!”

Teeth grated in the Naval section as carriers and battleships were called “boats” and the rest of America’s sea might lumped under the casual heading of “things.” Lips were curled at the transparent appeal to the taxpayer’s pocketbook. But with leaden hearts they knew that all this justified wrath and contempt would avail them nothing. This was Army Day with a vengeance, and the doom of the Navy seemed inescapable.

The Army had made elaborate plans for what they called “Operation Sinkers.” Even as the general spoke the publicity mills ground into high gear. From coast to coast the citizens absorbed the news with their morning nourishment.

“... Agnes, you hear what the radio said! The Army’s gonna give a trip around the world in a B-36 as first prize in this limerick contest. All you have to do is fill in the last line, and mail one copy to the Pentagon and the other to the Navy ...”

The Naval mail room had standing orders to burn all the limericks when they came in, but some of the newer men seemed to think the entire thing was a big joke.

Commander Bullman found one in the mess hall:

*The Army will always be there,
On the land, on the sea, in the air.
So why should the Navy
Take all of the gravy ...*

to which a seagoing scribe had added:

And not give us ensigns our share?

The newspapers were filled daily with photographs of mighty B-36’s landing on Lake Erie, and grinning soldiers making mock beachhead attacks on Coney Island. Each man wore a buzzing black box at his waist and walked on the bosom of the now quiet Atlantic like a biblical prophet.

Radio and television also carried the thousands of news releases that poured in an unending flow from the Pentagon Building. Cards, letters, telegrams and packages descended on Washington in an overwhelming torrent. The Navy Department was the unhappy recipient of deprecatory letters and a vast quantity of little cardboard battleships.

The people spoke and their representatives listened closely. This was an election year. There didn’t seem to be much doubt as to the decision, particularly when the reduction in the budget was considered.

It took Congress only two months to make up its collective mind. The people were all pro-Army. The novelty of the idea had fired their imaginations.

They were about to take the final vote in the lower house. If the amendment passed it would go to the states for ratification, and their votes were certain to follow that of Congress. The Navy had fought a last-ditch battle to no avail. The balloting was going

to be pretty much of a sure thing—the wet water Navy would soon become ancient history.

For some reason the admirals didn't look as unhappy as they should.

THE NAVAL Department had requested one last opportunity to address the Congress. Congress had patronizingly granted permission, for even the doomed man is allowed one last speech. Admiral Fitzjames, who had recovered from his choleric attack, was the appointed speaker.

"Gentlemen of the Congress of the United States. We in the Navy have a fighting tradition. We 'damn the torpedoes' and sail straight ahead into the enemy's fire if that is necessary. We have been stabbed in the back—we have suffered a second Pearl Harbor sneak attack! The Army relinquished its rights to fair treatment with this attack. Therefore we are *counter-attacking*!" Worn out by his attacking and mixed metaphors, the Admiral mopped his brow.

"Our laboratories have been working night and day on the perfection of a device we hoped we would never be forced to use. It is now in operation, having passed the final trials a few days ago.

"The significance of this device *cannot* be underestimated. We are so positive of its importance that—we are *demanding* that the *Army* be abolished!"

He waved his hand toward the window and bellowed one word.

"LOOK!"

Everyone looked. They blinked and looked again. They rubbed their eyes and kept looking.

Sailing majestically up the middle of Constitution Avenue was the battleship Missouri.

The Admiral's voice rang through the room like a trumpet of victory.

"The Mark-1 Debinder, as you see, temporarily lessens the binding energies that hold molecules of solid matter together. Solids become liquids, and a ship equipped with this device can sail anywhere in the world—on sea *or* land. Take your vote, gentlemen; the world awaits your decision."

Toy Shop

Because there were few adults in the crowd, and Colonel “Biff” Hawton stood over six feet tall, he could see every detail of the demonstration. The children—and most of the parents—gaped in wide-eyed wonder. Biff Hawton was too sophisticated to be awed. He stayed on because he wanted to find out what the trick was that made the gadget work.

“It’s all explained right here in your instruction book,” the demonstrator said, holding up a garishly printed booklet opened to a four-color diagram. “You all know how magnets pick up things and I bet you even know that the earth itself is one great big magnet—that’s why compasses always point north. Well ... the Atomic Wonder Space Wave Tapper hangs onto those space waves. Invisibly all about us, and even going right through us, are the magnetic waves of the earth. The Atomic Wonder rides these waves just the way a ship rides the waves in the ocean. Now watch....”

Every eye was on him as he put the gaudy model rocketship on top of the table and stepped back. It was made of stamped metal and seemed as incapable of flying as a can of ham—which it very much resembled. Neither wings, propellers, nor jets broke through the painted surface. It rested on three rubber wheels and coming out through the bottom was a double strand of thin insulated wire. This white wire ran across the top of the black table and terminated in a control box in the demonstrator’s hand. An indicator light, a switch and a knob appeared to be the only controls.

“I turn on the Power Switch, sending a surge of current to the Wave Receptors,” he said. The switch clicked and the light blinked on and off with a steady pulse. Then the man began to slowly turn the knob. “A careful touch on the Wave Generator is necessary as we are dealing with the powers of the whole world here....”

A concerted *ahhhh* swept through the crowd as the Space Wave Tapper shivered a bit, then rose slowly into the air. The demonstrator stepped back and the toy rose higher and higher, bobbing gently on the invisible waves of magnetic force that supported it. Ever so slowly the power was reduced and it settled back to the table.

“Only \$17.95,” the young man said, putting a large price sign on the table. “For the complete set of the Atomic Wonder, the Space Tapper control box, battery and instruction book ...”

At the appearance of the price card the crowd broke up noisily and the children rushed away towards the operating model trains. The demonstrator’s words were lost in their noisy passage, and after a moment he sank into a gloomy silence. He put the control box down, yawned and sat on the edge of the table. Colonel Hawton was the only one left after the crowd had moved on.

“Could you tell me how this thing works?” the colonel asked, coming forward. The demonstrator brightened up and picked up one of the toys.

“Well, if you will look here, sir....” He opened the hinged top. “You will see the Space Wave coils at each end of the ship.” With a pencil he pointed out the odd shaped plastic forms about an inch in diameter that had been wound—apparently at random—with a few turns of copper wire. Except for these coils the interior of the

model was empty. The coils were wired together and other wires ran out through the hole in the bottom of the control box. Biff Hawton turned a very quizzical eye on the gadget and upon the demonstrator who completely ignored this sign of disbelief.

"Inside the control box is the battery," the young man said, snapping it open and pointing to an ordinary flashlight battery. "The current goes through the Power Switch and Power Light to the Wave Generator ..."

"What you mean to say," Biff broke in, "is that the juice from this fifteen cent battery goes through this cheap rheostat to those meaningless coils in the model and absolutely nothing happens. Now tell me what really flies the thing. If I'm going to drop eighteen bucks for six-bits worth of tin, I want to know what I'm getting."

The demonstrator flushed. "I'm sorry, sir," he stammered. "I wasn't trying to hide anything. Like any magic trick this one can't be really demonstrated until it has been purchased." He leaned forward and whispered confidentially. "I'll tell you what I'll do though. This thing is way overpriced and hasn't been moving at all. The manager said I could let them go at three dollars if I could find any takers. If you want to buy it for that price...."

"Sold, my boy!" the colonel said, slamming three bills down on the table. "I'll give that much for it no matter *how* it works. The boys in the shop will get a kick out of it," he tapped the winged rocket on his chest. "Now *really*—what holds it up?"

The demonstrator looked around carefully, then pointed. "Strings!" he said. "Or rather a black thread. It runs from the top of the model, through a tiny loop in the ceiling, and back down to my hand—tied to this ring on my finger. When I back up—the model rises. It's as simple as that."

"All good illusions are simple," the colonel grunted, tracing the black thread with his eye. "As long as there is plenty of flimflam to distract the viewer."

"If you don't have a black table, a black cloth will do," the young man said. "And the arch of a doorway is a good site, just see that the room in back is dark."

"Wrap it up, my boy, I wasn't born yesterday. I'm an old hand at this kind of thing."

Biff Hawton sprang it at the next Thursday-night poker party. The gang were all missile men and they cheered and jeered as he hammed up the introduction.

"Let me copy the diagram, Biff, I could use some of those magnetic waves in the new bird!"

"Those flashlight batteries are cheaper than lox, this is the thing of the future!"

Only Teddy Kaner caught wise as the flight began. He was an amateur magician and spotted the gimmick at once. He kept silent with professional courtesy, and smiled ironically as the rest of the bunch grew silent one by one. The colonel was a good showman and he had set the scene well. He almost had them believing in the Space Wave Tapper before he was through. When the model had landed and he had switched it off he couldn't stop them from crowding around the table.

"A thread!" one of the engineers shouted, almost with relief, and they all laughed along with him.

"Too bad," the head project physicist said, "I was hoping that a little Space Wave Tapping could help us out. Let me try a flight with it."

“Teddy Kaner first,” Biff announced. “He spotted it while you were all watching the flashing lights, only he didn’t say anything.”

Kaner slipped the ring with the black thread over his finger and started to step back.

“You have to turn the switch on first,” Biff said.

“I know,” Kaner smiled. “But that’s part of illusion—the spiel and the misdirection. I’m going to try this cold first, so I can get it moving up and down smoothly, then go through it with the whole works.”

He moved his hand back smoothly, in a professional manner that drew no attention to it. The model lifted from the table—then crashed back down.

“The thread broke,” Kaner said.

“You jerked it, instead of pulling smoothly,” Biff said and knotted the broken thread. “Here let me show you how to do it.”

The thread broke again when Biff tried it, which got a good laugh that made his collar a little warm. Someone mentioned the poker game.

This was the only time that poker was mentioned or even remembered that night. Because very soon after this they found that the thread would lift the model only when the switch was on and two and a half volts flowing through the joke coils. With the current turned off the model was too heavy to lift. The thread broke every time.

“I still think it’s a screwy idea,” the young man said. “One week getting fallen arches, demonstrating those toy ships for every brat within a thousand miles. Then selling the things for three bucks when they must have cost at least a hundred dollars apiece to make.”

“But you *did* sell the ten of them to people who would be interested?” the older man asked.

“I think so, I caught a few Air Force officers and a colonel in missiles one day. Then there was one official I remembered from the Bureau of Standards. Luckily he didn’t recognize me. Then those two professors you spotted from the university.”

“Then the problem is out of our hands and into theirs. All we have to do now is sit back and wait for results.”

“*What* results?! These people weren’t interested when we were hammering on their doors with the proof. We’ve patented the coils and can prove to anyone that there is a reduction in weight around them when they are operating....”

“But a small reduction. And we don’t know what is causing it. No one can be interested in a thing like that—a fractional weight decrease in a clumsy model, certainly not enough to lift the weight of the generator. No one wrapped up in massive fuel consumption, tons of lift and such is going to have time to worry about a crackpot who thinks he has found a minor slip in Newton’s laws.”

“You think they will now?” the young man asked, cracking his knuckles impatiently.

“I *know* they will. The tensile strength of that thread is correctly adjusted to the weight of the model. The thread will break if you try to lift the model with it. Yet you can lift the model—after a small increment of its weight has been removed by the coils. This is going to bug these men. Nobody is going to ask them to solve the

problem or concern themselves with it. But it will nag at them because they know this effect can't possibly exist. They'll see at once that the magnetic-wave theory is nonsense. Or perhaps true? We don't know. But they will all be thinking about it and worrying about it. Someone is going to experiment in his basement—just as a hobby of course—to find the cause of the error. And he or someone else is going to find out what makes those coils work, or maybe a way to improve them!”

“And we have the patents....”

“Correct. They will be doing the research that will take them out of the massive-lift-propulsion business and into the field of pure space flight.”

“And in doing so they will be making us rich—whenever the time comes to manufacture,” the young man said cynically.

“We'll all be rich, son,” the older man said, patting him on the shoulder. “Believe me, you're not going to recognize this old world ten years from now.”

The Velvet Glove

Jon Venex fitted the key into the hotel room door. He had asked for a large room, the largest in the hotel, and paid the desk clerk extra for it. All he could do now was pray that he hadn't been cheated. He didn't dare complain or try to get his money back. He heaved a sigh of relief as the door swung open, it was bigger than he had expected—fully three feet wide by five feet long. There was more than enough room to work in. He would have his leg off in a jiffy and by morning his limp would be gone.

There was the usual adjustable hook on the back wall. He slipped it through the recessed ring in the back of his neck and kicked himself up until his feet hung free of the floor. His legs relaxed with a rattle as he cut off all power from his waist down.

The overworked leg motor would have to cool down before he could work on it, plenty of time to skim through the newspaper. With the chronic worry of the unemployed, he snapped it open at the want-ads and ran his eye down the *Help Wanted—Robot* column. There was nothing for him under the Specialist heading, even the Unskilled Labor listings were bare and unpromising. New York was a bad town for robots this year.

The want-ads were just as depressing as usual but he could always get a lift from the comic section. He even had a favorite strip, a fact that he scarcely dared mention to himself. "Rattly Robot," a dull-witted mechanical clod who was continually falling over himself and getting into trouble. It was a repellent caricature, but could still be very funny. Jon was just starting to read it when the ceiling light went out.

It was ten P.M., curfew hour for robots. Lights out and lock yourself in until six in the morning, eight hours of boredom and darkness for all except the few night workers. But there were ways of getting around the letter of a law that didn't concern itself with a definition of visible light. Sliding aside some of the shielding around his atomic generator, Jon turned up the gain. As it began to run a little hot the heat waves streamed out—visible to him as infra-red rays. He finished reading the paper in the warm, clear light of his abdomen.

The thermocouple in the tip of his second finger left hand, he tested the temperature of his leg. It was soon cool enough to work on. The waterproof gasket stripped off easily, exposing the power leads, nerve wires and the weakened knee joint. The wires disconnected, Jon unscrewed the knee above the joint and carefully placed it on the shelf in front of him. With loving care he took the replacement part from his hip pouch. It was the product of toil, purchased with his savings from three months employment on the Jersey pig farm.

Jon was standing on one leg testing the new knee joint when the ceiling fluorescent flickered and came back on. Five-thirty already, he had just finished in time. A shot of oil on the new bearing completed the job; he stowed away the tools in the pouch and unlocked the door.

The unused elevator shaft acted as waste chute, he slipped his newspaper through a slot in the door as he went by. Keeping close to the wall, he picked his way carefully down the grease-stained stairs. He slowed his pace at the 17th floor as two other

mechs turned in ahead of him. They were obviously butchers or meat-cutters; where the right hand should have been on each of them there stuck out a wicked, foot-long knife. As they approached the foot of the stairs they stopped to slip the knives into the plastic sheaths that were bolted to their chestplates. Jon followed them down the ramp into the lobby.

The room was filled to capacity with robots of all sizes, forms and colors. Jon Venex's greater height enabled him to see over their heads to the glass doors that opened onto the street. It had rained the night before and the rising sun drove red glints from the puddles on the sidewalk. Three robots, painted snow white to show they were night workers, pushed the doors open and came in. No one went out as the curfew hadn't ended yet. They milled around slowly talking in low voices.

The only human being in the entire lobby was the night clerk dozing behind the counter. The clock over his head said five minutes to six. Shifting his glance from the clock, Jon became aware of a squat black robot waving to attract his attention. The powerful arms and compact build identified him as a member of the Diger family, one of the most numerous groups. He pushed through the crowd and clapped Jon on the back with a resounding clang.

"Jon Venex! I knew it was you as soon as I saw you sticking up out of this crowd like a green tree trunk. I haven't seen you since the old days on Venus!"

Jon didn't need to check the number stamped on the short one's scratched chestplate. Alec Diger had been his only close friend during those thirteen boring years at Orange Sea Camp. A good chess player and a whiz at Two-handed Handball, they had spent all their off time together. They shook hands, with the extra squeeze that means friendliness.

"Alec, you beat-up little grease pot, what brings you to New York?"

"The burning desire to see something besides rain and jungle, if you must know. After you bought out, things got just too damn dull. I began working two shifts a day in that foul diamond mine, and then three a day for the last month to get enough credits to buy my contract and passage back to earth. I was underground so long that the photocell on my right eye burned out when the sunlight hit it."

He leaned forward with a hoarse confidential whisper, "If you want to know the truth, I had a sixty-carat diamond stuck behind the eye lens. I sold it here on earth for two hundred credits, gave me six months of easy living. It's all gone now, so I'm on my way to the employment exchange." His voice boomed loud again, "And how about *you*?"

Jon Venex chuckled at his friend's frank approach to life. "It's just been the old routine with me, a run of odd jobs until I got side-swiped by a bus—it fractured my knee bearing. The only job I could get with a bad leg was feeding slops to pigs. Earned enough to fix the knee—and here *I* am."

Alec jerked his thumb at a rust-colored, three-foot-tall robot that had come up quietly beside him. "If you think you've got trouble take a look at Dik here, that's no coat of paint on him. Dik Dryer, meet Jon Venex an old buddy of mine."

Jon bent over to shake the little mech's hand. His eye shutters dilated as he realized what he had thought was a coat of paint was a thin layer of rust that coated Dik's metal body. Alec scratched a shiny path in the rust with his fingertip. His voice was suddenly serious.

“Dik was designed for operation in the Martian desert. It’s as dry as a fossil bone there so his skinflint company cut corners on the stainless steel.

“When they went bankrupt he was sold to a firm here in the city. After a while the rust started to eat in and slow him down, they gave Dik his contract and threw him out.”

The small robot spoke for the first time, his voice grated and scratched. “Nobody will hire me like this, but I can’t get repaired until I get a job.” His arms squeaked and grated as he moved them. “I’m going by the Robot Free Clinic again today, they said they might be able to do something.”

Alec Diger rumbled in his deep chest. “Don’t put too much faith in those people. They’re great at giving out tenth-credit oil capsules or a little free wire—but don’t depend on them for anything important.”

It was six now, the robots were pushing through the doors into the silent streets. They joined the crowd moving out, Jon slowing his stride so his shorter friends could keep pace. Dik Dryer moved with a jerking, irregular motion, his voice as uneven as the motion of his body.

“Jon—Venex, I don’t recognize your family name. Something to do—with Venus—perhaps.”

“Venus is right, Venus Experimental—there are only twenty-two of us in the family. We have waterproof, pressure-resistant bodies for working down on the ocean bottom. The basic idea was all right, we did our part, only there wasn’t enough money in the channel-dredging contract to keep us all working. I bought out my original contract at half price and became a free robot.”

Dik vibrated his rusted diaphragm. “Being free isn’t all it should be. I some—times wish the Robot Equality Act hadn’t been passed. I would just l-love to be owned by a nice rich company with a machine shop and a—mountain of replacement parts.”

“You don’t really mean that, Dik,” Alec Diger clamped a heavy black arm across his shoulders. “Things aren’t perfect now, we know that, but it’s certainly a lot better than the old days, we were just hunks of machinery then. Used twenty-four hours a day until we were worn out and then thrown in the junk pile. No thanks, I’ll take my chances with things as they are.”

Jon and Alec turned into the employment exchange, saying good-by to Dik who went on slowly down the street. They pushed up the crowded ramp and joined the line in front of the registration desk. The bulletin board next to the desk held a scattering of white slips announcing job openings. A clerk was pinning up new additions.

Venex scanned them with his eyes, stopping at one circled in red.

ROBOTS NEEDED IN THESE CATEGORIES. APPLY AT ONCE TO CHAINJET, LTD., 1219 BROADWAY.

Fasten
Flyer
Atommel
Filmer
Venex

Jon rapped excitedly on Alec Diger's neck. "Look there, a job in my own specialty—I can get my old pay rate! See you back at the hotel tonight—and good luck in your job hunting."

Alec waved good-bye. "Let's hope the job's as good as you think, I never trust those things until I have my credits in my hand."

Jon walked quickly from the employment exchange, his long legs eating up the blocks. *Good old Alec, he didn't believe in anything he couldn't touch. Perhaps he was right, but why try to be unhappy. The world wasn't too bad this morning—his leg worked fine, prospects of a good job—he hadn't felt this cheerful since the day he was activated.*

Turning the corner at a brisk pace he collided with a man coming from the opposite direction. Jon had stopped on the instant, but there wasn't time to jump aside. The obese individual jarred against him and fell to the ground. From the height of elation to the depths of despair in an instant—he had injured a *human being*!

He bent to help the man to his feet, but the other would have none of that. He evaded the friendly hand and screeched in a high-pitched voice.

"Officer, officer, police ... HELP! I've been attacked—a mad robot ... HELP!"

A crowd was gathering—staying at a respectful distance—but making an angry muttering noise. Jon stood motionless, his head reeling at the enormity of what he had done. A policeman pushed his way through the crowd.

"Seize him, officer, shoot him down ... he struck me ... almost killed me ..." The man shook with rage, his words thickening to a senseless babble.

The policeman had his .75 recoilless revolver out and pressed against Jon's side.

"This *man* has charged you with a serious crime, *grease-can*. I'm taking you into the station house—to talk about it." He looked around nervously, waving his gun to open a path through the tightly packed crowd. They moved back grudgingly, with murmurs of disapproval.

Jon's thoughts swirled in tight circles. How did a catastrophe like this happen, where was it going to end? He didn't dare tell the truth, that would mean he was calling the man a liar. There had been six robots power-lined in the city since the first of the year. If he dared speak in his own defense there would be a jumper to the street lighting circuit and a seventh burnt out hulk in the police morgue.

A feeling of resignation swept through him, there was no way out. If the man pressed charges it would mean a term of penal servitude, though it looked now as if he would never live to reach the court. The papers had been whipping up a lot of anti-robe feeling, you could feel it behind the angry voices, see it in the narrowed eyes and clenched fists. The crowd was slowly changing into a mob, a mindless mob as yet, but capable of turning on him at any moment.

"What's goin' on here...?" It was a booming voice, with a quality that dragged at the attention of the crowd.

A giant cross-continent freighter was parked at the curb. The driver swung down from the cab and pushed his way through the people. The policeman shifted his gun as the man strode up to him.

"That's my robot you got there, Jack, don't put any holes in him!" He turned on the man who had been shouting accusations. "Fatty here, is the world's biggest liar. The

robot was standing here waiting for me to park the truck. Fatty must be as blind as he is stupid, I saw the whole thing. He knocks himself down walking into the robe, then starts hollering for the cops.”

The other man could take no more. His face crimson with anger he rushed toward the trucker, his fists swinging in ungainly circles. They never landed, the truck driver put a meaty hand on the other’s face and seated him on the sidewalk for the second time.

The onlookers roared with laughter, the power-lining and the robot were forgotten. The fight was between two men now, the original cause had slipped from their minds. Even the policeman allowed himself a small smile as he holstered his gun and stepped forward to separate the men.

The trucker turned towards Jon with a scowl.

“Come on you aboard the truck—you’ve caused me enough trouble for one day. What a junkcan!”

The crowd chuckled as he pushed Jon ahead of him into the truck and slammed the door behind them. Jamming the starter with his thumb he gunned the thunderous diesels into life and pulled out into the traffic.

Jon moved his jaw, but there were no words to come out. Why had this total stranger helped him, what could he say to show his appreciation? He knew that all humans weren’t robe-haters, why it was even rumored that some humans treated robots as *equals* instead of machines. The driver must be one of these mythical individuals, there was no other way to explain his actions.

Driving carefully with one hand the man reached up behind the dash and drew out a thin, plastikoid booklet. He handed it to Jon who quickly scanned the title, *Robot Slaves in a World Economy* by Philpott Asimov II.

“If you’re caught reading that thing they’ll execute you on the spot. Better stick it between the insulation on your generator, you can always burn it if you’re picked up.

“Read it when you’re alone, it’s got a lot of things in it that you know nothing about. Robots aren’t really inferior to humans, in fact they’re superior in most things. There is even a little history in there to show that robots aren’t the first ones to be treated as second class citizens. You may find it a little hard to believe, but human beings once treated each other just the way they treat robots now. That’s one of the reasons I’m active in this movement—sort of like the fellow who was burned helping others stay away from the fire.”

He smiled a warm, friendly smile in Jon’s direction, the whiteness of his teeth standing out against the rich ebony brown of his features.

“I’m heading towards US-1, can I drop you anywheres on the way?”

“The Chainjet Building please—I’m applying for a job.”

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Before he opened the door the driver shook hands with Jon.

“Sorry about calling you *junkcan*, but the crowd expected it.” He didn’t look back as he drove away.

Jon had to wait a half hour for his turn, but the receptionist finally signalled him towards the door of the interviewer’s room. He stepped in quickly and turned to face

the man seated at the transplastic desk, an upset little man with permanent worry wrinkles stamped in his forehead. The little man shoved the papers on the desk around angrily, occasionally making crabbed little notes on the margins. He flashed a birdlike glance up at Jon.

“Yes, yes, be quick. What is it you want?”

“You posted a help wanted notice, I—”

The man cut him off with a wave of his hand. “All right let me see your ID tag ... quickly, there are others waiting.”

Jon thumbed the tag out of his waist slot and handed it across the desk. The interviewer read the code number, then began running his finger down a long list of similar figures. He stopped suddenly and looked sideways at Jon from under his lowered lids.

“You have made a mistake, we have no opening for you.”

Jon began to explain to the man that the notice had requested his specialty, but he was waved to silence. As the interviewer handed back the tag he slipped a card out from under the desk blotter and held it in front of Jon’s eyes. He held it there for only an instant, knowing that the written message was recorded instantly by the robot’s photographic vision and eidetic memory. The card dropped into the ash tray and flared into embers at the touch of the man’s pencil-heater.

Jon stuffed the ID tag back into the slot and read over the message on the card as he walked down the stairs to the street. There were six lines of typewritten copy with no signature.

To Venex Robot: You are urgently needed on a top secret company project. There are suspected informers in the main office, so you are being hired in this unusual manner. Go at once to 787 Washington Street and ask for Mr. Coleman.

Jon felt an immense sensation of relief. For a moment there, he was sure the job had been a false lead. He saw nothing unusual in the method of hiring. The big corporations were immensely jealous of their research discoveries and went to great lengths to keep them secret—at the same time resorting to any means to ferret out their business rivals’ secrets. There might still be a chance to get this job.

The burly bulk of a lifter was moving back and forth in the gloom of the ancient warehouse stacking crates in ceiling-high rows. Jon called to him, the robot swung up his forklift and rolled over on noiseless tires. When Jon questioned him he indicated a stairwell against the rear wall.

“Mr. Coleman’s office is down in back, the door is marked.” The lifter put his fingertips against Jon’s ear pick-ups and lowered his voice to the merest shadow of a whisper. It would have been inaudible to human ears, but Jon could hear him easily, the sounds being carried through the metal of the other’s body.

“He’s the meanest man you ever met—he hates robots so be *ever* so polite. If you can use ‘sir’ five times in one sentence you’re perfectly safe.”

Jon swept the shutter over one eye tube in a conspiratorial wink, the large mech did the same as he rolled away. Jon turned and went down the dusty stairwell and knocked gently on Mr. Coleman’s door.

Coleman was a plump little individual in a conservative purple-and-yellow business suit. He kept glancing from Jon to the Robot General Catalog checking the Venex specifications listed there. Seemingly satisfied he slammed the book shut.

“Gimme your tag and back against that wall to get measured.”

Jon laid his ID tag on the desk and stepped towards the wall. “Yes, sir, here it is, sir.” Two “sir” on that one, not bad for the first sentence. He wondered idly if he could put five of them in one sentence without the man knowing he was being made a fool of.

He became aware of the danger an instant too late. The current surged through the powerful electromagnet behind the plaster flattening his metal body helplessly against the wall. Coleman was almost dancing with glee.

“We got him, Druce, he’s mashed flatter than a stinking tin-can on a rock, can’t move a motor. Bring that junk in here and let’s get him ready.”

Druce had a mechanic’s coveralls on over his street suit and a tool box slung under one arm. He carried a little black metal can at arm’s length, trying to get as far from it as possible. Coleman shouted at him with annoyance.

“That bomb can’t go off until it’s armed, stop acting like a child. Put it on that grease-can’s leg and *quick!*”

Grumbling under his breath, Druce spot-welded the metal flanges of the bomb onto Jon’s leg a few inches above his knee. Coleman tugged at it to be certain it was secure, then twisted a knob in the side and pulled out a glistening length of pin. There was a cold little click from inside the mechanism as it armed itself.

Jon could do nothing except watch, even his vocal diaphragm was locked by the magnetic field. He had more than a suspicion however that he was involved in something other than a “secret business deal.” He cursed his own stupidity for walking blindly into the situation.

The magnetic field cut off and he instantly raced his extensor motors to leap forward. Coleman took a plastic box out of his pocket and held his thumb over a switch inset into its top.

“Don’t make any quick moves, junk-yard, this little transmitter is keyed to a receiver in that bomb on your leg. One touch of my thumb, up you go in a cloud of smoke and come down in a shower of nuts and bolts.” He signalled to Druce who opened a closet door. “And in case you want to be heroic, just think of him.”

Coleman jerked his thumb at the sodden shape on the floor; a filthily attired man of indistinguishable age whose only interesting feature was the black bomb strapped tightly across his chest. He peered unseeingly from red-rimmed eyes and raised the almost empty whiskey bottle to his mouth. Coleman kicked the door shut.

“He’s just some Bowery bum we dragged in, Venex, but that doesn’t make any difference to you, does it? He’s human—and a robot can’t kill *anybody!* That rummy has a bomb on him tuned to the same frequency as yours, if you don’t play ball with us he gets a two-foot hole blown in his chest.”

Coleman was right, Jon didn’t dare make any false moves. All of his early mental training as well as Circuit 92 sealed inside his brain case would prevent him from harming a human being. He felt trapped, caught by these people for some unknown purpose.

Coleman had pushed back a tarpaulin to disclose a ragged hole in the concrete floor, the opening extended into the earth below. He waved Jon over.

“The tunnel is in good shape for about thirty feet, then you’ll find a fall. Clean all the rock and dirt out until you break through into the storm sewer, then come back. And you better be alone. If you tip the cops both you and the old stew go out together—now move.”

The shaft had been dug recently and shored with packing crates from the warehouse overhead. It ended abruptly in a wall of fresh sand and stone. Jon began shoveling it into the little wheelbarrow they had given him.

He had emptied four barrow loads and was filling the fifth when he uncovered the hand, a robot’s hand made of green metal. He turned his headlight power up and examined the hand closely, there could be no doubt about it. These gaskets on the joints, the rivet pattern at the base of the thumb meant only one thing, it was the dismembered hand of a Venex robot.

Quickly, yet gently, he shoveled away the rubble behind the hand and unearthed the rest of the robot. The torso was crushed and the power circuits shorted, battery acid was dripping from an ugly rent in the side. With infinite care Jon snapped the few remaining wires that joined the neck to the body and laid the green head on the barrow. It stared at him like a skull, the shutters completely dilated, but no glow of life from the tubes behind them.

He was scraping the mud from the number on the battered chestplate when Druce lowered himself into the tunnel and flashed the brilliant beam of a hand-spot down its length.

“Stop playing with that junk and get digging—or you’ll end up the same as him. This tunnel has gotta be through by tonight.”

Jon put the dismembered parts on the barrow with the sand and rock and pushed the whole load back up the tunnel, his thoughts running in unhappy circles. A dead robot was a terrible thing, and one of his family too. But there was something wrong about this robot, something that was quite inexplicable, the number on the plate had been “17,” yet he remembered only too well the day that a water-short motor had killed Venex 17 in the Orange Sea.

It took Jon four hours to drive the tunnel as far as the ancient granite wall of the storm sewer. Druce gave him a short pinch bar and he levered out enough of the big blocks to make a hole large enough to let him through into the sewer.

When he climbed back into the office he tried to look casual as he dropped the pinch bar to the floor by his feet and seated himself on the pile of rubble in the corner. He moved around to make a comfortable seat for himself and his fingers grabbed the severed neck of Venex 17.

Coleman swiveled around in his chair and squinted at the wall clock. He checked the time against his tie-pin watch, with a grunt of satisfaction he turned back and stabbed a finger at Jon.

“Listen, you green junk-pile, at 1900 hours you’re going to do a job, and there aren’t going to be any slip ups. You go down that sewer and into the Hudson River. The outlet is under water, so you won’t be seen from the docks. Climb down to the bottom and walk 200 yards north, that should put you just under a ship. Keep your eyes

open, *but don't show any lights!* About halfway down the keel of the ship you'll find a chain hanging.

"Climb the chain, pull loose the box that's fastened to the hull at the top and bring it back here. No mistakes—or you know what happens."

Jon nodded his head. His busy fingers had been separating the wires in the amputated neck. When they had been straightened and put into a row he memorized their order with one flashing glance.

He ran over the color code in his mind and compared it with the memorized leads. The twelfth wire was the main cranial power lead, number six was the return wire.

With his precise touch he separated these two from the pack and glanced idly around the room. Druce was dozing on a chair in the opposite corner. Coleman was talking on the phone, his voice occasionally rising in a petulant whine. This wasn't interfering with his attention to Jon—and the radio switch still held tightly in left hand.

Jon's body blocked Coleman's vision, as long as Druce stayed asleep he would be able to work on the head unobserved. He activated a relay in his forearm and there was a click as the waterproof cover on an exterior socket swung open. This was a power outlet from his battery that was used to operate motorized tools and lights underwater.

If Venex 17's head had been severed for less than three weeks he could reactivate it. Every robot had a small storage battery inside his skull, if the power to the brain was cut off the battery would provide the minimum standby current to keep the brain alive. The robe would be unconscious until full power was restored.

Jon plugged the wires into his arm-outlet and slowly raised the current to operating level. There was a tense moment of waiting, then 17's eye shutters suddenly closed. When they opened again the eye tubes were glowing warmly. They swept the room with one glance then focused on Jon.

The right shutter clicked shut while the other began opening and closing in rapid fashion. It was International code—being sent as fast as the solenoid could be operated. Jon concentrated on the message.

Telephone—call emergency operator—tell her "signal 14" help will—

The shutter stopped in the middle of a code group, the light of reason dying from the eyes.

For one instant Jon's heart leaped in panic, until he realized that 17 had deliberately cut the power. Druce's harsh voice rasped in his ear.

"What you doing with that? None of your funny robot tricks. I know your kind, plotting all kinds of things in them tin domes." His voice trailed off into a stream of incomprehensible profanity. With sudden spite he lashed his foot out and sent 17's head crashing against the wall.

The dented, green head rolled to a stop at Jon's feet, the face staring up at him in mute agony. It was only Circuit 92 that prevented him from injuring a *human*. As his motors revved up to send him hurtling forward the control relays clicked open. He sank against the debris, paralyzed for the instant. As soon as the rush of anger was gone he would regain control of his body.

They stood as if frozen in a tableau. The robot slumped backward, the man leaning forward, his face twisted with unreasoning hatred. The head lay between them like a symbol of death.

Coleman's voice cut through the air of tenseness like a knife.

"*Druce*, stop playing with the grease-can and get down to the main door to let Little Willy and his junk-brokers in. You can have it all to yourself afterward."

The angry man turned reluctantly, but pushed out of the door at Coleman's annoyed growl. Jon sat down against the wall, his mind sorting out the few facts with lightning precision. There was no room in his thoughts for Druce, the man had become just one more factor in a complex problem.

Call the emergency operator—that meant this was no local matter, responsible authorities must be involved. Only the government could be behind a thing as major as this. Signal 14—that inferred a complex set of arrangements, forces that could swing into action at a moment's notice. There was no indication where this might lead, but the only thing to do was to get out of here and make that phone call. And quick. Druce was bringing in more people, junk-brokers, whatever they were. Any action that he took would have to be done before they returned.

Even as Jon followed this train of logic his fingers were busy. Palming a wrench, he was swiftly loosening the main retaining nut on his hip joint. It dropped free in his hand, only the pivot pin remained now to hold his leg on. He climbed slowly to his feet and moved towards Coleman's desk.

"Mr. Coleman, sir, it's time to go down to the ship now, should I leave now, sir?"

Jon spoke the words slowly as he walked forward, apparently going to the door, but angling at the same time towards the plump man's desk.

"You got thirty minutes yet, go sit—*say*...!"

The words were cut off. Fast as a human reflex is, it is the barest crawl compared to the lightning action of electronic reflex. At the instant Coleman was first aware of Jon's motion, the robot had finished his leap and lay sprawled across the desk, his leg off at the hip and clutched in his hand.

"YOU'LL KILL YOURSELF IF YOU TOUCH THE BUTTON!"

The words were part of the calculated plan. Jon bellowed them in the startled man's ear as he stuffed the dismembered leg down the front of the man's baggy slacks. It had the desired effect, Coleman's finger stabbed at the button but stopped before it made contact. He stared down with bulging eyes at the little black box of death peeping out of his waistband.

Jon hadn't waited for the reaction. He pushed backward from the desk and stopped to grab the stolen pinch bar off the floor. A mighty one-legged leap brought him to the locked closet; he stabbed the bar into the space between the door and frame and heaved.

Coleman was just starting to struggle the bomb out of his pants when the action was over. The closet open, Jon seized the heavy strap holding the second bomb on the rummy's chest and snapped it like a thread. He threw the bomb into Coleman's corner, giving the man one more thing to worry about. It had cost him a leg, but Jon had escaped the bomb threat without injuring a human. Now he had to get to a phone and make that call.

Coleman stopped tugging at the bomb and plunged his hand into the desk drawer for a gun. The returning men would block the door soon, the only other exit from the room was a frosted-glass window that opened onto the mammoth bay of the warehouse.

Jon Venex plunged through the window in a welter of flying glass. The heavy thud of a recoilless .75 came from the room behind him and a foot-long section of metal window frame leaped outward. Another slug screamed by the robot's head as he scrambled toward the rear door of the warehouse.

He was a bare thirty feet away from the back entrance when the giant door hissed shut on silent rollers. All the doors would have closed at the same time, the thud of running feet indicated that they would be guarded as well. Jon hopped a section of packing cases and crouched out of sight.

He looked up over his head, there stretched a webbing of steel supports, crossing and recrossing until they joined the flat expanse of the roof. To human eyes the shadows there deepened into obscurity, but the infra-red from a network of steam pipes gave Jon all the illumination he needed.

The men would be quartering the floor of the warehouse soon, his only chance to escape recapture or death would be over their heads. Besides this, he was hampered by the loss of his leg. In the rafters he could use his arms for faster and easier travel.

Jon was just pulling himself up to one of the topmost cross beams when a hoarse shout from below was followed by a stream of bullets. They tore through the thin roof, one slug clanged off the steel beam under his body. Waiting until three of the newcomers had started up a nearby ladder, Jon began to quietly work his way towards the back of the building.

Safe for the moment, he took stock of his position. The men were spread out through the building, it could only be a matter of time before they found him. The doors were all locked and—he had made a complete circuit of the building to be sure—there were no windows that he could force—the windows were bolted as well. If he could call the emergency operator the unknown friends of Venex 17 might come to his aid. This, however, was out of the question. The only phone in the building was on Coleman's desk. He had traced the leads to make sure.

His eyes went automatically to the cables above his head. Plastic gaskets were set in the wall of the building, through them came the power and phone lines. The phone line! That was all he needed to make a call.

With smooth, fast motions he reached up and scratched a section of wire bare. He laughed to himself as he slipped the little microphone out of his left ear. Now he was half deaf as well as half lame—he was literally giving himself to this cause. He would have to remember the pun to tell Alec Diger later, if there was a later. Alec had a profound weakness for puns.

Jon attached jumpers to the mike and connected them to the bare wire. A touch of the ammeter showed that no one was on the line. He waited a few moments to be sure he had a dial tone then sent the eleven carefully spaced pulses that would connect him with the local operator. He placed the mike close to his mouth.

"Hello, operator. Hello, operator. I cannot hear you so do not answer. Call the emergency operator—signal 14, I repeat—signal 14."

Jon kept repeating the message until the searching men began to approach his position. He left the mike connected—the men wouldn't notice it in the dark but the open line would give the unknown powers his exact location. Using his fingertips he did a careful traverse on an I-beam to an alcove in the farthest corner of the room. Escape was impossible, all he could do was stall for time.

"Mr. Coleman, I'm sorry I ran away." With the volume on full his voice rolled like thunder from the echoing walls.

He could see the men below twisting their heads vainly to find the source.

"If you let me come back and don't kill me I will do your work. I was afraid of the bomb, but now I am afraid of the guns." It sounded a little infantile, but he was pretty sure none of those present had any sound knowledge of robotic intelligence.

"Please let me come back ... sir!" He had almost forgotten the last word, so he added another "Please, sir!" to make up.

Coleman needed that package under the boat very badly, he would promise anything to get it. Jon had no doubts as to his eventual fate, all he could hope to do was kill time in the hopes that the phone message would bring aid.

"Come on down, Junky, I won't be mad at you—if you follow directions." Jon could hear the hidden anger in his voice, the unspoken hatred for a robe who dared lay hands on him.

The descent wasn't difficult, but Jon did it slowly with much apparent discomfort. He hopped into the center of the floor—leaning on the cases as if for support. Coleman and Druce were both there as well as a group of hard-eyed newcomers. They raised their guns at his approach but Coleman stopped them with a gesture.

"This is *my* robe, boys, I'll see to it that he's happy."

He raised his gun and shot Jon's remaining leg off. Twisted around by the blast, Jon fell helplessly to the floor. He looked up into the smoking mouth of the .75.

"Very smart for a tin-can, but not smart enough. We'll get the junk on the boat some other way, some way that won't mean having you around under foot." Death looked out of his narrowed eyes.

Less than two minutes had passed since Jon's call. The watchers must have been keeping 24 hour stations waiting for Venex 17's phone message.

The main door went down with the sudden scream of torn steel. A whippet tank crunched over the wreck and covered the group with its multiple pom-poms. They were an instant too late, Coleman pulled the trigger.

Jon saw the tensing trigger finger and pushed hard against the floor. His head rolled clear but the bullet tore through his shoulder. Coleman didn't have a chance for a second shot, there was a fizzling hiss from the tank and the riot ports released a flood of tear gas. The stricken men never saw the gas-masked police that poured in from the street.

Jon lay on the floor of the police station while a tech made temporary repairs on his leg and shoulder. Across the room Venex 17 was moving his new body with evident pleasure.

“Now this really feels like *something*! I was sure my time was up when that land slip caught me. But maybe I ought to start from the beginning.” He stamped across the room and shook Jon’s inoperable hand.

“The name is Wil Counter-4951L3, not that *that* means much any more. I’ve worn so many different bodies that I forget what I originally looked like. I went right from factory-school to a police training school—and I have been on the job ever since—Force of Detectives, Sergeant Jr. grade, Investigation Department. I spend most of my time selling candy bars or newspapers, or serving drinks in crumb joints. Gather information, make reports and keep tab on guys for other departments.

“This last job—and I’m sorry I had to use a Venex identity, I don’t think I brought any dishonor to your family—I was on loan to the Customs department. Seems a ring was bringing uncut junk—heroin—into the country. F.B.I. tabbed all the operators here, but no one knew how the stuff got in. When Coleman, he’s the local big-shot, called the agencies for an underwater robot, I was packed into a new body and sent running.

“I alerted the squad as soon as I started the tunnel, but the damned thing caved in on me before I found out what ship was doing the carrying. From there on you know what happened.

“Not knowing I was out of the game the squad sat tight and waited. The hop merchants saw a half million in snow sailing back to the old country so they had you dragged in as a replacement. You made the phone call and the cavalry rushed in at the last moment to save two robots from a rusty grave.”

Jon, who had been trying vainly to get in a word, saw his chance as Wil Counter turned to admire the reflection of his new figure in a window.

“You shouldn’t be telling me those things—about your police investigations and department operations. Isn’t this information supposed to be secret? Specially from robots!”

“Of course it is!” was Wil’s airy answer. “Captain Edgecombe—he’s the head of my department—is an expert on all kinds of blackmail. I’m supposed to tell you so much confidential police business that you’ll have to either join the department or be shot as a possible informer.” His laughter wasn’t shared by the bewildered Jon.

“Truthfully, Jon, we need you and can use you. Robes that can think fast and act fast aren’t easy to find. After hearing about the tricks you pulled in that warehouse, the Captain swore to decapitate me permanently if I couldn’t get you to join up. Do you need a job? Long hours, short pay—but guaranteed to never get boring.”

Wil’s voice was suddenly serious. “You saved my life, Jon—those snowbirds would have left me in that sandpile until all hell froze over. I’d like you for a mate, I think we could get along well together.” The gay note came back into his voice, “And besides that, I may be able to save your life some day—I hate owing debts.”

The tech was finished, he snapped his tool box shut and left. Jon’s shoulder motor was repaired now, he sat up. When they shook hands this time it was a firm clasp. The kind you know will last awhile.

Jon stayed in an empty cell that night. It was gigantic compared to the hotel and barrack rooms he was used to. He wished that he had his missing legs so he could take a little walk up and down the cell. He would have to wait until the morning. They were going to fix him up then before he started the new job.

He had recorded his testimony earlier and the impossible events of the past day kept whirling around in his head. He would think about it some other time, right now all he wanted to do was let his overworked circuits cool down, if he only had something to read, to focus his attention on. Then, with a start, he remembered the booklet. Everything had moved so fast that the earlier incident with the truck driver had slipped his mind completely.

He carefully worked it out from behind the generator shielding and opened the first page of *Robot Slaves in a World Economy*. A card slipped from between the pages and he read the short message on it.

PLEASE DESTROY THIS CARD AFTER READING

If you think there is truth in this book and would like to hear more, come to Room B, 107 George St. any Tuesday at 5 P.M.

The card flared briefly and was gone. But he knew that it wasn't only a perfect memory that would make him remember that message.

The K-Factor

WE'RE losing a planet, Neel. I'm afraid that I can't ... understand it."

The bald and wrinkled head wobbled a bit on the thin neck, and his eyes were moist. Abravanel was a very old man. Looking at him, Neel realized for the first time just how old and close to death he was. It was a profoundly shocking thought.

"Pardon me, sir," Neel broke in, "but is it possible? To lose a planet, I mean. If the readings are done correctly, and the k-factor equations worked to the tenth decimal place, then it's really just a matter of adjustment, making the indicated corrections. After all, Societics is an exact science—"

"Exact? *Exact!* Of course it's not! Have I taught you so little that you dare say that to me?" Anger animated the old man, driving the shadow of death back a step or two.

Neel hesitated, feeling his hands quiver ever so slightly, groping for the right words. Societics was his faith, and his teacher, Abravanel, its only prophet. This man before him, carefully preserved by the age-retarding drugs, was unique in the galaxy. A living anachronism, a refugee from the history books. Abravanel had singlehandedly worked out the equations, spelled out his science of Societics. Then he had trained seven generations of students in its fundamentals. Hearing the article of his faith defamed by its creator produced a negative feedback loop in Neel so strong his hands vibrated in tune with it. It took a jarring effort to crack out of the cycle.

"The laws that control Societics, as postulated by ... you, are as exact as any others in the unified-field theory universe."

"No they're not. And, if any man I taught believes that nonsense, I'm retiring tomorrow and dropping dead the day after. My science—and it is really not logical to call it a science—is based on observation, experimentation, control groups and corrected observations. And though we have made observations in the millions, we are dealing in units in the billions, and the interactions of these units are multiples of that. And let us never forget that our units are people who, when they operate as individuals, do so in a completely different manner. So you cannot truthfully call my theories exact. They fit the facts well enough and produce results in practice, that has been empirically proven. So far. Some day, I am sure, we will run across a culture that doesn't fit my rules. At that time the rules will have to be revised. We may have that situation now on Himmel. There's trouble cooking there."

"They have always had a high activity count, sir," Neel put in hopefully.

"High yes, but *always* negative. Until now. Now it is slightly positive and nothing we can do seems to change it. That's why I've called you in. I want you to run a new basic survey, ignoring the old one still in operation, to re-examine the check points on our graphs. The trouble may lie there."

Neel thought before he answered, picking his words carefully. "Wouldn't that be a little ... unethical, sir? After all Hengly, who is operator there now, is a friend of mine. Going behind his back, you know."

"I know nothing of the sort." Abravanel snorted. "We are not playing for poker chips, or seeing who can get a paper published first. Have you forgotten what Societics is?"

Neel answered by rote. "The applied study of the interaction of individuals in a culture, the interaction of the group generated by these individuals, the equations derived therefrom, and the application of these equations to control one or more factors of this same culture."

"And what is the one factor that we have tried to control in order to make all the other factors possible of existence?"

"War." Neel said, in a very small voice.

"Very good then, there is no doubt what it is we are talking about. You are going to land quietly on Himmel, do a survey as quickly as possible and transmit the data back here. There is no cause to think of it as sneaking behind Hengly's back, but as doing something to help him set the matter right. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," Neel said firmly this time, straightening his back and letting his right hand rest reassuringly on the computer slung from his belt.

"Excellent. Then it is now time to meet your assistant." Abravanel touched a button on his desk.

It was an unexpected development and Neel waited with interest as the door opened. But he turned away abruptly, his eyes slitted and his face white with anger. Abravanel introduced them.

"Neel Sidorak, this is—"

"Costa. I know him. He was in my class for six months." There wasn't the slightest touch of friendliness in Neel's voice now. Abravanel either ignored it or didn't hear it. He went on as if the two cold, distant young men were the best of friends.

"Classmates. Very good—then there is no need to make introductions. Though it might be best to make clear your separate areas of control. This is your project Neel, and Adao Costa will be your assistant, following your orders and doing whatever he can to help. You know he isn't a graduate Societist, but he has done a lot of field work for us and can help you greatly in that. And, of course, he will be acting as an observer for the UN, and making his own reports in this connection."

Neel's anger was hot and apparent. "So he's a UN observer now. I wonder if he still holds his old job at the same time. I think it only fair, sir, that you know. He works for Interpol."

Abravanel's ancient and weary eyes looked at both men, and he sighed. "Wait outside Costa," he said, "Neel will be with you in a minute."

Costa left without a word and Abravanel waved Neel back to his chair. "Listen to me now," he said, "and stop playing tunes on that infernal buzzer." Neel snapped his hand away from the belt computer, as if it had suddenly grown hot. A hesitant finger reached out to clear the figures he had nervously been setting up, then thought better of it. Abravanel sucked life into his ancient pipe and squinted at the younger man.

"Listen," he said. "You have led a very sheltered life here at the university, and that is probably my fault. No, don't look angry, I don't mean about girls. In that matter undergraduates have been the same for centuries. I'm talking about people in groups, individuals, politics, and all the complicated mess that makes up human life. This has been your area of study and the program is carefully planned so you can study it secondhand. The important thing is to develop the abstract viewpoint, since any

attempt to prejudge results can only mean disaster. And it has been proved many times that a man with a certain interest will make many unwitting errors to shape an observation or experiment in favor of his interest. No, we could have none of that here.

“We are following the proper study of mankind and we must do that by keeping personally on the outside, to preserve our perspective. When you understand that, you understand many small things about the university. Why we give only resident student scholarships at a young age, and why the out-of-the-way location here in the Dolomites. You will also see the reason why the campus bookstore stocks all of the books published, but never has an adequate supply of newspapers. The agreed policy has been to see that you all mature with the long view. Then—hopefully—you will be immune to short-term political interests after you leave.

“This policy has worked well in turning out men with the correct attitude towards their work. It has also turned out a fair number of self-centered, egocentric horrors.”

Neel flushed. “Do you mean that I—”

“No, I don’t mean you. If I did, I would say so. Your worst fault—if you can call it a fault, since it is the very thing we have been trying to bring about—is that you have a very provincial attitude towards the universe. Now is the time to re-examine some of those ideas. Firstly, what do you think the attitude of the UN is towards Societics?”

There was no easy answer, Neel could see traps ready for anything he said. His words were hesitant. “I can’t say I’ve really ever thought about it. I imagine the UN would be in favor of it, since we make their job of world government that much easier—”

“No such thing,” Abravanel said, tempering the sharpness of his words with a smile.

“To put it in the simplest language, they hate our guts. They wish I had never formulated Societics, and at the same time they are very glad I did. They are in the position of the man who caught the tiger by the tail. The man enjoys watching the tiger eat all of his enemies, but as each one is consumed his worry grows greater. What will happen when the last one is gone? Will the tiger then turn and eat him?

“Well—we are the UN’s tiger. Societics came along just at the time it was sorely needed. Earth had settled a number of planets, and governed them. First as outposts, then as colonies. The most advanced planets very quickly outgrew the colony stage and flexed their independent muscles. The UN had no particular desire to rule an empire, but at the same time they had to insure Earth’s safety. I imagine they were considering all sorts of schemes—including outright military control—when they came to me.

“Even in its early, crude form, Societics provided a stopgap that would give them some breathing time. They saw to it that my work was well endowed and aided me—unofficially of course—in setting up the first control experiments on different planets. We had results, some very good, and the others not so bad that the local police couldn’t get things back under control after a while. I was, of course, happy to perfect my theories in practice. After a hundred years I had all the rough spots evened down and we were in business. The UN has never come up with a workable alternative plan, so they have settled down to the uncomfortable business of holding the tiger’s tail. They worry and spend vast sums of money keeping an eye on our work.”

“But *why*?” Neel broke in.

“Why?” Abravanel gave a quick smile. “Thank you for fine character rating. I imagine it is inconceivable to you that I might want to be Emperor of the Universe. I could be, you know. The same forces that hold the lids on the planets could just as easily blow them off.”

Neel was speechless at the awful enormity of the thought. Abravanel rose from behind his desk with an effort, and shambled over to lay a thin and feather-light arm on the younger man’s shoulders. “Those are the facts of life my boy. And since we cannot escape them, we must live with them. Costa is just a man doing his duty. So try and put up with him. For my sake if not for your own.”

“Of course,” Neel agreed quickly. “The whole thing takes a bit of getting used to, but I think I can manage. We’ll do as good a job on Himmel as it is possible to do. Don’t worry about me, sir.”

Costa was waiting in the next room, puffing quietly on a long cigarette. They left together, walking down the hall in silence. Neel glanced sideways at the wiry, dark-skinned Brazilian and wondered what he could say to smooth things out. He still had his reservations about Costa, but he’d keep them to himself now. Abravanel had ordered peace between them, and what the old man said was the law.

It was Costa who spoke first. “Can you brief me on Himmel—what we’ll find there, and be expected to do?”

“Run the basic survey first, of course,” Neel told him. “Chances are that that will be enough to straighten things out. Since the completion last year of the refining equations of Debir’s Postulate, all sigma-110 and alpha-142 graph points are suspect—”

“Just stop there please, and run the flag back down the pole.” Costa interrupted. “I had a six-months survey of Societics seven years ago, to give me a general idea of the field. I’ve worked with survey teams since then, but I have only the vaguest idea of the application of the information we got. Could you cover the ground again—only a bit slower?”

Neel controlled his anger successfully and started again, in his best classroom manner.

“Well, I’m sure you realize that a good survey is half the problem. It must be impartial and exact. If it is accurately done, application of the k-factor equations is almost mechanical.”

“You’ve lost me again. Everyone always talks about the k-factor, but no one has ever explained just what it is.”

Neel was warming to his topic now. “It’s a term borrowed from nucleonics, and best understood in that context. Look, you know how an atomic pile works—essentially just like an atomic bomb. The difference is just a matter of degree and control. In both of them you have neutrons tearing around, some of them hitting nuclei and starting new neutrons going. These in turn hit and start others. This goes on faster and faster and *bam*, a few milliseconds later you have an atomic bomb. This is what happens if you don’t attempt to control the reaction.

“However, if you have something like heavy water or graphite that will slow down neutrons and an absorber like cadmium, you can alter the speed of the reaction. Too

much damping material will absorb too many neutrons and the reaction will stop. Not enough and the reaction will build up to an explosion. Neither of these extremes is wanted in an atomic pile. What is needed is a happy balance where you are soaking up just as many neutrons as are being generated all the time. This will give you a constant temperature inside the reactor. The net neutron reproduction constant is then 1. This balance of neutron generation and absorption is the k-factor of the reactor. Ideally 1.0000000.

“That’s the ideal, though, the impossible to attain in a dynamic system like a reactor. All you need is a few more neutrons around, giving you a k-factor of 1.00000001 and you are headed for trouble. Each extra neutron produces two and your production rate soars geometrically towards bang. On the other hand, a k-factor of 0.999999999 is just as bad. Your reaction is spiraling down in the other direction. To control a pile you watch your k-factor and make constant adjustments.”

“All this I follow,” Costa said, “but where’s the connection with Societics?”

“We’ll get to that—just as soon as you realize and admit that a minute difference of degree can produce a marked difference of kind. You might say that a single, impossibly tiny, neutron is the difference between an atom bomb and a slowly cooling pile of inert uranium isotopes. Does that make sense?”

“I’m staggering, but still with you.”

“Good. Then try to go along with the analogy that a human society is like an atomic pile. At one extreme you will have a dying, decadent culture—the remains of a highly mechanized society—living off its capital, using up resources it can’t replace because of a lost technology. When the last machine breaks and the final food synthesizer collapses the people will die. This is the cooled down atomic pile. At the other extreme is complete and violent anarchy. Every man thinking only of himself, killing and destroying anything that gets in his way—the atomic explosion. Midway between the two is a vital, active, producing society.

“This is a generalization—and you must look at it that way. In reality society is infinitely complex, and the ramifications and possibilities are endless. It can do a lot more things than fizzle or go boom. Pressure of population, war or persecution patterns can cause waves of immigration. Plant and animal species can be wiped out by momentary needs or fashions. Remember the fate of the passenger pigeon and the American bison.

“All the pressures, cross-relationships, hungers, needs, hatreds, desires of people are reflected in their interrelationships. One man standing by himself tells us nothing. But as soon as he says something, passes on information in an altered form, or merely expresses an attitude—he becomes a reference point. He can be marked, measured and entered on a graph. His actions can be grouped with others and the action of the group measured. Man—and his society—then becomes a systems problem that can be fed into a computer. We’ve cut the Gordian knot of the three-L’s and are on our way towards a solution.”

“Stop!” Costa said, raising his hand. “I was with you as far as the 3L’s. What are they? A private code?”

“Not a code—abbreviation. Linear Logic Language, the pitfall of all the old researchers. All of them, historians, sociologists, political analysts, anthropologists,

were licked before they started. They had to know all about A and B before they could find C. Facts to them were always hooked up in a series. Whereas in truth they had to be analyzed as a complex circuit complete with elements like positive and negative feedback, and crossover switching. With the whole thing being stirred up constantly by continual homeostasis correction. It's little wonder they did do badly."

"You can't really say that," Adao Costa protested. "I'll admit that Societics has carried the art tremendously far ahead. But there were many basics that had already been discovered."

"If you are postulating a linear progression from the old social sciences—forget it," Neel said. "There is the same relationship here that alchemy holds to physics. The old boys with their frog guts and awful offal knew a bit about things like distilling and smelting. But there was no real order to their knowledge, and it was all an unconsidered by-product of their single goal, the whole nonsense of transmutation."

They passed a lounge, and Adao waved Neel in after him, dropping into a chair. He rummaged through his pockets for a cigarette, organizing his thoughts. "I'm still with you," he said. "But how do we work this back to the k-factor?"

"Simple," Neel told him. "Once you've gotten rid of the 3L's and their false conclusions. Remember that politics in the old days was all We are angels and They are devils. This was literally believed. In the history of mankind there has yet to be a war that wasn't backed by the official clergy on each side. And each declared that God was on their side. Which leaves You Know Who as prime supporter of the enemy. This theory is no more valid than the one that a single man can lead a country into war, followed by the inference that a well-timed assassination can save the peace."

"That doesn't sound too unreasonable," Costa said.

"Of course not. All of the old ideas sound good. They have a simple-minded simplicity that anyone can understand. That doesn't make them true. Kill a war-minded dictator and nothing changes. The violence-orientated society, the factors that produced it, the military party that represents it—none of these are changed. The k-factor remains the same."

"There's that word again. Do I get a definition yet?"

Neel smiled. "Of course. The k-factor is one of the many factors that interrelate in a society. Abstractly it is no more important than the other odd thousand we work with. But in practice it is the only one we try to alter."

"The k-factor is the war factor," Adao Costa said. All the humor was gone now.

"That's a good enough name for it," Neel said, grinding out his half-smoked cigarette. "If a society has a positive k-factor, even a slight one that stays positive, then you are going to have a war. Our planetary operators have two jobs. First to gather and interpret data. Secondly to keep the k-factor negative."

They were both on their feet now, moved by the same emotion.

"And Himmel has a positive one that stays positive," Costa said. Neel Sidorak nodded agreement. "Then let's get into the ship and get going," he said.

It was a fast trip and a faster landing. The UN cruiser cut its engines and dropped like a rock in free fall. Night rain washed the ports and the computer cut in the maximum permissible blast for the minimum time that would reduce their speed to

zero at zero altitude. Deceleration sat on their chests and squeezed their bones to rubber. Something crunched heavily under their stern at the exact instant the drive cut out. Costa was unbelted and out the door while Neel was still feeling his insides shiver back into shape.

The unloading had an organized rhythm that rejected Neel. He finally realized he could help best by standing back out of the way while the crewmen grav-lifted the heavy cases out through the cargo port, into the blackness of the rain-lashed woods. Adao Costa supervised this and seemed to know what he was doing. A signal rating wearing earphones stood to one side of the lock chanting numbers that sounded like detector fixes. There was apparently enough time to unload everything—but none to spare. Things got close towards the end.

Neel was suddenly hustled out into the rain and the last two crates were literally thrown out after him. He plowed through the mud to the edge of the clearing and had just enough time to cover his face before the take-off blast burst out like a new sun.

“Sit down and relax,” Costa told him. “Everything is in the green so far. The ship wasn’t spotted on the way down. Now all we have to do is wait for transportation.”

In theory at least, Adao Costa was Neel’s assistant. In practice he took complete charge of moving their equipment and getting it under cover in the capital city of Kitez. Men and trucks appeared to help them, and vanished as soon as their work was done. Within twenty hours they were installed in a large loft, all of the machines uncrated and plugged in. Neel took a no-sleep and began tuning checks on all the circuits, glad of something to do. Costa locked the heavy door behind their last silent helper, then dropped gratefully onto one of the bedding rolls.

“How did the gadgets hold up?” he asked.

“I’m finding out now. They’re built to take punishment—but being dropped twelve feet into mud soup, then getting baked by rockets isn’t in the original specs.”

“They crate things well these days,” Costa said unworriedly, sucking on a bottle of the famous Himmelian beer. “When do you go to work?”

“We’re working right now,” Neel told him, pulling a folder of papers out of the file. “Before we left I drew up a list of current magazines and newspapers I would need. You can start on these. I’ll have a sampling program planned by the time you get back.”

Costa groaned hollowly and reached for the papers.

Once the survey was in operation it went ahead of its own momentum. Both men grabbed what food and sleep they could. The computers gulped down Neel’s figures and spat out tape-reels of answers that demanded even more facts. Costa and his unseen helpers were kept busy supplying the material.

Only one thing broke the ordered labors of the week. Neel blinked twice at Costa before his equation-fogged brain assimilated an immediate and personal factor.

“You’ve a bandage on your head,” he said. “A *blood-stained* bandage!”

“A little trouble in the streets. Mobs. And that’s an incredible feat of observation,” Costa marveled. “I had the feeling that if I came in here stark naked, you wouldn’t notice it.”

"I ... I get involved," Neel said. Dropping the papers on a table and kneading the tired furrow between his eyes. "Get wrapped up in the computation. Sorry. I tend to forget about people."

"Don't feel sorry to me," Costa said. "You're right. Doing the job. I'm supposed to help you, not pose for the *before* picture in Home Hospital ads. Anyway—how are we doing? Is there going to be a war? Certainly seems like one brewing outside. I've seen two people lynched who were only suspected of being Earthies."

"Looks don't mean a thing," Neel said, opening two beers. "Remember the analogy of the pile. It boils liquid metal and cooks out energy from the infrared right through to hard radiation. Yet it keeps on generating power at a nice, steady rate. But your A-bomb at zero minus one second looks as harmless as a fallen log. It's the k-factor that counts, not surface appearance. This planet may look like a dictator's dream of glory, but as long as we're reading in the negative things are fine."

"And how are things? How's our little k-factor?"

"Coming out soon," Neel said, pointing at the humming computer. "Can't tell about it yet. You never can until the computation is complete. There's a temptation to try and guess from the first figures, but they're meaningless. Like trying to predict the winner of a horse race by looking at the starters lined up at the gate."

"Lots of people think they can."

"Let them. There are few enough pleasures in this life without taking away all delusions."

Behind them the computer thumped and was suddenly still.

"This is it," Neel said, and pulled out the tape. He ran it quickly through his fingers, mumbling under his breath. Just once he stopped and set some figures into his hand computer. The result flashed in the window and he stared at it, unmoving.

"Good? Bad? What is it?"

Neel raised his head and his eyes were ten years older.

"Positive. Bad. Much worse than it was when we left Earth."

"How much time do we have?"

"Don't know for certain," Neel shrugged. "I can set it up and get an approximation. But there is no definite point on the scale where war *has* to break out. Just a going and going until, somewhere along the line—"

"I know. Gone." Costa said, reaching for his gun. He slid it into his side pocket. "Now it's time to stop looking and start doing. What do I do?"

"Going to kill War Marshal Lommeord?" Neel asked distastefully. "I thought we had settled that you can't stop a war by assassinating the top man."

"We also settled that *something* can be done to change the k-factor. The gun is for my own protection. While you're radioing results back to Earth and they're feeling bad about it, I'm going to be doing something. Now *you* tell me what that something is."

This was a different man from the relaxed and quietly efficient Adao Costa of the past week. All of his muscles were hard with the restrained energy of an animal crouching to leap. The gun, ready in his pocket, had a suddenly new significance. Neel looked away, reaching around for words. This was all very alien to him and suddenly a little

frightening. It was one thing to work out a k-problem in class, and discuss the theory of correction.

It was something entirely different to direct the operation.

“Well?” Costa’s voice knifed through his thoughts.

“You can ... well ... it’s possible to change one of the peak population curves. Isolate individuals and groups, then effect status and location changes—”

“You mean get a lot of guys to take jobs in other towns through the commercial agents?”

Neel nodded.

“Too slow.” Costa withered the idea with his voice. “Fine in the long run, but of absolutely no value in an emergency.” He began to pace back and forth. Too quickly. It was more of a bubbling-over than a relaxation. “Can’t you isolate some recent key events that can be reversed?”

“It’s possible.” Neel thought about it, quickly. “It wouldn’t be a final answer, just a delaying action.”

“That’s good enough. Tell me what to do.”

Neel flipped through his books of notes, checking off the Beta-13’s. These were the reinforcers, the individuals and groups who were k-factor amplifiers. It was a long list which he cut down quickly by crossing off the low increment additions and multiple groups. Even while the list was incomplete, Neel began to notice a pattern. It was an unlikely one, but it was there. He isolated the motivator and did a frequency check. Then sat back and whistled softly.

“We have a powerhouse here,” he said, flipping the paper across the table. “Take this organization out of the equations and you might even knock us negative.”

“Society for the Protection of the Native Born,” Costa read. “Doesn’t sound like very important. Who or what are they?”

“Proof positive of the law of averages. It’s possible to be dealt a royal flush in a hand of cards, but it isn’t very common. It’s just as possible for a bunch of simpletons to set up an organization for one purpose, and have it turn out to be a supercharged, high-frequency k-factor amplifier. That’s what’s happened with this infernal S.P.N.B. A seedy little social club, dedicated to jingoists with low I.Q.’s. With the war scare they have managed to get hold of a few credits. They have probably been telling the same inflated stories for years about the discrimination against natives of this fair planet, but no one has really cared. Now they have a chance to get their news releases and faked pix out in quantity. Just at a time when the public is ripe for their brand of nonsense. Putting this bunch out of business will be a good day’s work.”

“Won’t there be repercussions?” Costa asked. “If they are this important and throw so much weight around—won’t it look suspicious if they are suddenly shut up. Like an obvious move by the enemy?”

“Not at all. That might be true if, for instance, you blew up the headquarters of the War Party. It would certainly be taken as an aggressive move. But no one really knows or cares about this Society of the Half-baked Native Born. There might be reaction and interest if attention was drawn to them. But if some accident or act of nature were to put them out of business, that would be the end of it.”

Costa was snapping his lighter on and off as he listened to Neel, staring at the flame. He closed it and held it up. "I believe in accidents. I believe that even in our fireproof age, fires still occur. Buildings still burn down. And if a burnt building just happened to be occupied by the S.P.N.B.—just one tenant of many—and their offices and records were destroyed; that would be of very little interest to anyone except the fire brigade."

"You're a born criminal," Neel told him. "I'm glad we're on the same side. That's your department and I leave it to you. I'll just listen for the news flashes. Meanwhile I have one little errand to take care of."

The words stopped Costa, who was almost out the door. He turned stiffly to look at Neel putting papers into an envelope. Yet Costa spoke naturally, letting none of his feelings through into his voice.

"Where are you going?"

"To see Hengly, the planetary operator here. Abravanel told me to stay away from him, to run an entirely new basic survey. Well we've done that now, and pinpointed some of the trouble areas as well. I can stop feeling guilty about poaching another man's territory and let him know what's going on."

"No. Stay away from Hengly," Costa said. "The last thing in the world we want to do, is to be seen near him. There's a chance that he ... well ... might be compromised."

"What do you mean!" Neel snapped. "Hengly's a friend of mine, a graduate—"

"He might also be surrounded ten deep by the secret police. Did you stop to think about *that*?"

Neel hadn't thought about it, and his anger vanished when he did. Costa drove the point home.

"Societics has been a well kept secret for over two centuries. It may still be a secret—or bits of it might have leaked out. And even if the Himmeliens know nothing about Societics, they have certainly heard of espionage. They know the UN has agents on their world, they might think Hengly is one of them. This is all speculation, of course, but we do have one fact—this Society of Native Boobs we turned up. *We* had no trouble finding them. If Hengly had reliable field men, he should know about them, too. The only reason he hasn't is because he isn't getting the information. Which means he's compromised."

Reaching back for a chair, Neel fell heavily into it. "You're right ... of course! I never realized."

"Good," Costa said. "We'll do something to help Hengly tomorrow, but this operation comes first. Sit tight. Get some rest. And don't open the door for anyone except me."

It had been a long job—and a tiring one—but it was almost over. Neel allowed himself the luxury of a long yawn, then shuffled over to the case of rations they had brought. He stripped the seal from something optimistically labeled CHICKEN DINNER—it tasted just like the algae it had been made from—and boiled some coffee while it was heating.

And all the time he was doing these prosaic tasks his mind was turning an indigestible fact over and over. It wasn't a conscious process, but it was nevertheless going on. The automatic mechanism of his brain ran it back and forth like a half

heard tune, searching for its name. Neel was tired, or he would have reacted sooner. The idea finally penetrated. One fact he had taken for granted was an obvious impossibility.

The coffee splashed to the floor as he jumped to his feet.

“It’s wrong ... it *has* to be wrong!” he said aloud, grabbing up the papers.

Computations and graphs dropped and were trampled into the spilled coffee. When he finally found the one he wanted his hands were shaking as he flipped through it. The synopsis of Hengly’s reports for the past five years. The gradual rise and fall of the k-factor from month to month. There were no sharp breaks in the curve or gaps in the supporting equations.

Societics isn’t an exact science. But it’s exact enough to know when it is working with incomplete or false information. If Hengly had been kept in the dark about the S.P.N.B., he would also have been misinformed about other factors. This kind of alteration of survey would *have* to show in the equations.

It didn’t.

Time was running out and Neel had to act. But what to do? He must warn Adao Costa. And the records here had to be protected. Or better yet destroyed. There was a power in these machines and charts that couldn’t be allowed to fall into nationalist hands. But what could be done about it?

In all the welter of equipment and containers, there was one solid, heavy box that he had never opened. It belonged to Costa, and the UN man had never unlocked it in his presence. Neel looked at the heavy clasps on it and felt defeat. But when he pulled at the lid, wondering what to do next, it fell open. It hadn’t been sealed. Costa wasn’t the kind of man who did things by accident. He had looked forward to the time when Neel might need what was in this box, and had it ready.

Inside was just what Neel expected. Grenades, guns, some smoothly polished devices that held an aura of violence. Looking at them, Neel had an overwhelming sensation of defeat. His life was dedicated to peace and the furthering of peace. He hated the violence that seemed inborn in man, and detested all the hypocritical rationalizations, such as the ends justifying the means. All of his training and personal inclinations were against it.

And he reached down and removed the blunt, black gun.

There was one other thing he recognized in the compact arsenal—a time bomb. There had been lectures on this mechanism in school, since the fact was clearly recognized that a time might come when equipment had to be destroyed rather than fall into the wrong hands. He had never seen one since, but he had learned the lesson well. Neel pushed the open chest nearer to his instruments and set the bomb dial for fifteen minutes. He slipped the gun into his pocket, started the fuse, and carefully locked the door when he left.

The bridges were burned. Now he had to find Adao Costa.

This entire operation was outside of his experience and knowledge. He could think of no plan that could possibly make things easier or safer. All he could do was head for the offices of the Society for the Protection of the Native Born and hope he could catch Adao before he ran into any trouble.

Two blocks away from the address he heard the sirens. Trying to act as natural as the other pedestrians, he turned to look as the armored cars and trucks hurtled by. Packed with armed police, their sirens and revolving lights cleared a path through the dark streets. Neel kept walking, following the cars now.

The street he wanted to go into was cordoned off.

Showing more than a normal interest would have been a giveaway. He let himself be hurried past, with no more than a glance down the block, with the other pedestrians. Cars and men were clustered around a doorway that Neel felt sure was number 265, his destination. Something was very wrong.

Had Costa walked into a trap—or tripped an alarm? It didn't really matter which, either way the balloon had gone up. Neel walked on slowly, painfully aware of his own inadequacy in dealing with the situation. It was a time for action—but what action? He hadn't the slightest idea where Costa was or how he could be of help to him.

Halfway down the block there was a dark mouth of an alleyway—unguarded. Without stopping to think, Neel turned into it. It would bring him closer to the building. Perhaps Costa was still trapped in there. He could get in, help him.

The back of 265 was quiet, with no hint of the activity on the other side of the building. Neel had counted carefully and was sure he had the right one. It was completely dark in the unlit alley, but he found a recessed door by touch. The chances were it was locked, but he moved into the alcove and leaned his weight against it, pulling at the handle, just in case. Nothing moved.

An inch behind his back the alley filled with light, washed with it, eye burning and strong. His eyes snapped shut, but he forced them open again, blinking against the pain. There were searchlights at each end of the alley, sealing it off. He couldn't get out.

In the instant before the fear hit him he saw the blood spots on the ground. There were three of them, large and glistening redly wet. They extended in a straight line away from him, pointing towards the gaping entrance of a cellar.

When the lights went out, Neel dived headlong towards the cracked and filthy pavement. The darkness meant that the police were moving slowly towards him from both ends of the alley, trapping him in between. There was nothing doubtful about the fate of an armed Earthman caught here. He didn't care. Neel's fear wasn't gone—he just had not time to think about it. His long shot had paid off and there was still a chance he could get Costa out of the trap he had let him walk into.

The lights had burned an after-image into his retina. Before it faded he reached out and felt his fingers slide across the dusty ground into a patch of wetness. He scrubbed at it with his sleeve, soaking up the blood, wiping the spot fiercely. With his other hand he pushed together a pile of dust and dirt, spreading it over the stain. As soon as he was sure the stain was covered he slid forward, groping for the second telltale splash.

Time was his enemy and he had no way to measure it. He could have been lying in the rubble of that alley for an hour—or a second. What was to be done, had to be done at once without a sound. There were silent, deadly men coming towards him through the darkness.

After the second smear was covered there was a drawn out moment of fear when he couldn't find the third and last. His fingers touched it finally, much farther on than he had expected. Time had certainly run out. Yet he forced himself to do as good a job here as he had with the other two. Only when it was dried and covered did he allow himself to slide forward into the cellar entrance.

Everything was going too fast. He had time for a single deep breath before the shriek of a whistle paralyzed him again. Footsteps slapped towards him and one of the searchlights burned with light. The footsteps speeded up and the man ran by, close enough for Neel to touch if he had reached out a hand. His clothing was shapeless and torn, his head and face thick with hair. That was all Neel had time to see before the guns roared and burned the life from the runner.

Some derelict, sleeping in the alley, who had paid with his life for being in the wrong spot at the wrong time. But his death had bought Neel a little more time. He turned and looked into the barrel of a gun.

Shock after shock had destroyed his capacity for fear. There was nothing left that could move him, even his own death. He looked quietly—dully—at the muzzle of the gun. With slow determination his mind turned over and he finally realized that this time there was nothing to fear.

"It's me, Adao," he whispered. "You'll be all right now."

"Ahh, it is you—" the voice came softly out of the darkness, the gun barrel wavered and sank. "Lift me up so I can get at this door. Can't seem to stand too well any more."

Neel reached down, found Costa's shoulders and slowly dragged him to his feet. His eyes were adjusting to the glare above them now, and he could make out the gleam of reflected light on the metal in Costa's fingers. The UN man's other hand was clutched tightly to his waist. The gun had vanished. The metal device wasn't a key, but Costa used it like one. It turned in the lock and the door swung open under their weight. Neel half carried, half dragged the other man's dead weight through it, dropping him to the floor inside. Before he closed the door he reached down and felt a great pool of blood outside.

There was no time to do a perfect job, the hard footsteps were coming, just a few yards away. His sleeves were sodden with blood as he blotted, then pushed rubble into the stain. He pulled back inside and the door closed with only the slightest click.

"I don't know how you managed it, but I'm glad you found me," Costa said. There was weakness as well as silence in his whisper.

"It was only chance I found you," Neel said bitterly. "But criminal stupidity on my part that let you walk into this trap."

"Don't worry about it, I knew what I was getting into. But I still had to go. Spring the trap to see if it *was* a trap."

"You suspected then that Hengly was—" Neel couldn't finish the sentence. He knew what he wanted to say, but the idea was too unbearable to put into words. Costa had no such compunction.

"Yes. Dear Hengly, graduate of the University and Practitioner of Societics. A traitor. A warmonger, worse than any of his predecessors because he knew just what to sell

and how to sell it. It's never happened before ... but there was always the chance ... the weight of responsibility was too much ... he gave in—" Costa's voice had died away almost to a whisper. Then it was suddenly loud again, no louder than normal speaking volume, but sounding like a shout in the secret basement.

"Neel!"

"It's all right. Take it easy—"

"Nothing is all right—don't you realize that. I've been sending my reports back, so the UN and your Societics people will know how to straighten this mess out. But Hengly can turn this world upside down and might even get a shooting-war going before they get here. I'm out of it, but I can tell you who to contact, people who'll help. Hold the k-factor down—"

"That wouldn't do any good," Neel said quietly. "The whole thing is past the patch and polish stage now. Besides—I blew the whole works up. My machines and records, your—"

"You're a fool!" For the first time there was pain in Costa's voice.

"No. I was before—but not any more. As long as I thought it was a normal problem I was being outguessed at every turn. You must understand the ramifications of Societics. To a good operator there is no interrelationship that cannot be uncovered. Hengly would be certain to keep his eyes open for another field check. Our kind of operation is very easy to spot if you know where—and how—to look. The act of getting information implies contact of some kind, that contact can be detected. He's had our location marked and has been sitting tight, buying time. But our time ran out when you showed them we were ready to fight back. That's why I destroyed our setup, and cut our trail."

"But ... then we're defenseless! What can we possibly do?"

Neel knew the answer, but he hesitated to put it into words. It would be final then. He suddenly realized he had forgotten about Costa's wound.

"I'm sorry ... I forgot about your being hurt. What can I do?"

"Nothing," Costa snapped. "I put a field dressing on, that'll do. Answer my question. What is there left? What can be done now?"

"I'll have to kill Hengly. That will set things right until the team gets here."

"But what good will that accomplish?" Costa asked, trying to see the other man in the darkness of the cellar. "You told me yourself that a war couldn't be averted by assassination. No one individual means that much."

"Only in a normal situation," Neel explained. "You must look at the power struggle between planets as a kind of celestial chess game. It has its own rules. When I talked about individuals earlier I was talking about pieces on this chessboard. What I'm proposing now is a little more dramatic. I'm going to win the chess game in a slightly more unorthodox way. I'm going to shoot the other chess player."

There was silence for a long moment, broken only by the soft sigh of their breathing. Then Costa stirred and there was the sound of metal clinking slightly on the floor.

"It's really my job," Costa said, "but I'm no good for it. You're right, you'll have to go. But I can help you, plan it so you will be able to get to Hengly. You might even stand

a better chance than me, because you are so obviously an amateur. Now listen carefully, because we haven't much time."

Neel didn't argue. He knew what needed doing, but Costa could tell him how best to go about it. The instructions were easy to memorize, and he put the weapons away as he was told.

"Once you're clear of this building, you'll have to get cleaned up," Costa said. "But that's the only thing you should stop for. Get to Hengly while he is still rattled, catch him off guard as much as possible. Then—after you finish with him—dig yourself in. Stay hidden at least three days before you try to make any contacts. Things should have quieted down a bit by then."

"I don't like leaving you here," Neel said.

"It's the best way, as well as being the only way. I'll be safe enough. I've a nice little puncture in me, but there's enough medication to see me through."

"If I'm going to hole up, I'll hole up here. I'll be back to take care of you."

Costa didn't answer him. There was nothing more to say. They shook hands in the darkness and Neel crawled away.

There was little difficulty in finding the front door of the building, but Neel hesitated before he opened it. Costa had been sure Neel could get away without being noticed, but he didn't feel so sure himself. There certainly would be plenty of police in the streets, even here. Only as he eased the door did he understand why Costa had been so positive about this.

Gunfire hammered somewhere behind him; other guns answered. Costa must have had another gun. He had planned it this way and the best thing Neel could do was not to think about it and go ahead with the plan. A car whined by in the roadway. As soon as it had passed Neel slipped out and crossed the empty street to the nearest monosub entrance. Most of the stations had valet machines.

It was less than an hour later when he reached Hengly's apartment. Washed, shaved—and with his clothes cleaned—Neel felt a little more sure of himself. No one had stopped him or even noticed him. The lobby had been empty and the automatic elevator left him off at the right floor when he gave it Hengly's name. Now, facing the featureless door, he had a sharp knife of fear. It was too easy. He reached out slowly and tried the handle. The door was unlocked. Taking a deep breath, he opened it and stepped inside.

It was a large room, but unlit. An open door at the other end had a dim light shining through it. Neel started that way and pain burst in his head, spinning him down, face forward.

He never quite lost consciousness, but details were vague in his memory. When full awareness returned he realized that the lights were on in the room. He was lying on his back, looking up at them. Two men stood next to him, staring down at him from above the perspective columns of their legs. One held a short metal bar that he kept slapping into his open palm.

The other man was Hengly.

"Not very friendly for an old classmate," he said, holding out Neel's gun. "Now get inside, I want to talk to you."

Neel rolled over painfully and crawled to his feet. His head throbbed with pain, but he tried to ignore it. As he stood up his hand brushed his ankle. The tiny gun Costa had given him was still in the top of his shoe. Perhaps Hengly wasn't being as smart as he should.

"I can take care of him," Hengly said to the man with the metal rod. "He's the only one left now, so you can get some sleep. See you early in the morning though." The man nodded agreement and left.

Slouched in the chair Neel looked forward to a certain pleasure in killing Hengly. Costa was dead, and this man was responsible for his death. It wouldn't even be like killing a friend, Hengly was very different from the man he had known. He had put on a lot of weight and affected a thick beard and flowing mustache. There was something jovial and paternal about him—until you looked into his eyes. Neel slumped forward, worn out, letting his fingers fall naturally next to the gun in his shoe. Hengly couldn't see his hand, the desk was in the way. All Neel had to do was draw and fire.

"You can pull out the gun," Hengly said with a grim smile, "but don't try to shoot it." He had his own gun now, aimed directly at Neel. Leaning forward he watched as Neel carefully pulled out the tiny weapon and threw it across the room. "That's better," he said, placing his own gun on the desk where he could reach it easily. "Now we can talk."

"There's nothing I have to say to you, Hengly." Neel leaned back in the chair, exhausted. "You're a traitor!"

Hengly hammered the desk in sudden anger and shouted. "Don't talk to me of treachery, my little man of peace. Creeping up with a gun to kill a friend. Is that peaceful? Where are the ethos of humanism now, you were very fond of them when we were in the University!"

Neel didn't want to listen to the words, he thought instead of how right Costa had been. He was dead, but this was still his operation. It was going according to plan.

"Walk right in there," Costa had said. "He won't kill you. Not at first, at least. He's the loneliest man in the universe, because he has given up one world for another that he hasn't gained yet. There will be no one he can confide in. He'll know you have come to kill him, but he won't be able to resist talking to you first. Particularly if you make it easy for him to defeat you. Not too easy—he must feel he is outthinking you. You'll have a gun for him to take away, but that will be too obvious. This small gun will be hidden as well, and when he finds that, too, he should be taken off his guard. Not much, but enough for you to kill him. Don't wait. Do it at the first opportunity."

Out of the corner of his eye, Neel could see the radiophone clipped to the front of his jacket. It was slightly tarnished, looking like any one of ten thousand in daily use—almost a duplicate of the one Hengly wore. A universal symbol of the age, like the keys and small change in his pockets.

Only Neel's phone was a deadly weapon. Product of a research into sudden death that he had never been aware of before. All he had to do was get it near Hengly, the mechanism had been armed when he put it on. It had a range of two feet. As soon as it was that far from any part of his body it would be actuated.

“Can I ask you a question, Hengly?” His words cut loudly through the run of the other man’s speech.

Hengly frowned at the interruption, then nodded permission. “Go ahead,” he said. “What would you like to know?”

“The obvious. Why did you do it? Change sides I mean. Give up a positive work, for this ... this negative corruption....”

“That’s how much you know about it.” Hengly was shouting now. “Positive, negative. War, peace. Those are just words, and it took me years to find it out. What could be more positive than making something of my life—and of this planet at the same time. It’s in my power to do it, and I’ve done it.”

“Power, perhaps that’s the key word,” Neel said, suddenly very tired. “We have the stars now but we have carried with us our little personal lusts and emotions. There’s nothing wrong with that, I suppose, as long as we keep them personal. It’s when we start inflicting them on others the trouble starts. Well, it’s over now. At least this time.”

With a single, easy motion he unclipped the radiophone and flipped it across the desk towards Hengly.

“Good-by,” he said.

The tiny mechanism clattered onto the desk and Hengly leaped back, shouting hoarsely. He pulled the gun up and tried to aim at the radiophone and at Neel at the same time. It was too late to do either. There was a brief humming noise from the phone.

Neel jerked in his chair. It felt as if a slight electric shock had passed through him. He had felt only a microscopic percentage of the radiation.

Hengly got it all. The actuated field of the device had scanned his nervous system, measured and tested it precisely. Then adjusted itself to the exact micro-frequency that carried the messages in his efferent nervous system. Once the adjustment had been made, the charged condensers had released their full blasts of energy on that frequency.

The results were horribly dramatic. Every efferent neuron in his system carried the message full power. Every muscle in his body responded with a contraction of full intensity.

Neel closed his eyes, covered them, turned away gasping. It couldn’t be watched. An epileptic in a seizure can break the bones in a leg or arm by simultaneous contraction of opposing muscles. When all the opposed muscles of Hengly’s body did this the results were horrible beyond imagining.

When Neel recovered a measure of sanity he was in the street, running. He slowed to a walk, and looked around. It was just dawn and the streets were empty. Ahead was the glowing entrance of a monotube and he headed for it. The danger was over now, as long as he was careful.

Pausing on the top step, he breathed the fresh air of the new morning. There was a sighing below as an early train pulled into the station. The dawn-lit sky was the color of blood.

“Blood,” he said aloud. Then, “Do we have to keep on killing? Isn’t there another way?”

He started guiltily as his voice echoed in the empty street, but no one had heard him. Quickly, two at a time, he ran down the steps.

Down to Earth

“Gino ... Gino ... help me! For God’s sake, do something!”

The tiny voice scratched in Gino Lombardi’s earphone, weak against the background roar of solar interference. Gino lay flat in the lunar dust, half buried by the pumice-fine stuff, reaching far down into the cleft in the rock. Through the thick fabric of his suit he felt the edge crumbling and pulled hastily back. The dust and pieces of rock fell instantly, pulled down by the light lunar gravity and unimpeded by any trace of air. A fine mist of dust settled on Glazer’s helmet below, partially obscuring his tortured face.

“Help me, Gino—get me out of here,” he said, stretching his arm up over his head.

“No good—” Gino answered, putting as much of his weight onto the crumbling lip of rock as he dared, reaching far down. His hand was still a good yard short of the other’s groping glove. “I can’t reach you—and I’ve got nothing here I can let down for you to grab. I’m going back to the Bug.”

“Don’t leave ...” Glazer called, but his voice was cut off as Gino slid back from the crevice and scrambled to his feet. Their tiny helmet radios did not have enough power to send a signal through the rock; they were good only for line-of-sight communication.

Gino ran as fast as he could, long gliding jumps one after the other back towards the Bug. It did look more like a bug here, a red beetle squatting on the lunar landscape, its four spidery support legs sunk into the dust. He cursed under his breath as he ran: what a hell of an ending for the first moon flight! A good blast off and a perfect orbit, the first two stages had dropped on time, the lunar orbit was right, the landing had been right—and ten minutes after they had walked out of the Bug Glazer had to fall into this crevice hidden under the powdery dust. To come all this way—through all the multiple hazards of space—then to fall into a hole.... There was just no justice.

At the base of the ship Gino flexed his legs and bounded high up towards the top section of the Bug, grabbing onto the bottom of the still open door of the cabin. He had planned his moves while he ran—the magnetometer would be his best bet. Pulling it from the rack he yanked at its long cable until it came free in his hand, then turned back without wasting a second. It was a long leap back to the surface—in Earth gravitational terms—but he ignored the apparent danger and jumped, sinking knee deep in the dust when he landed. The row of scuffed tracks stretched out towards the slash of the lunar crevice and he ran all the way, chest heaving in spite of the pure oxygen he was breathing. Throwing himself flat he skidded and wriggled like a snake, back to the crumbling lip.

“Get ready, Glazer,” he shouted, his head ringing inside the helmet with the captive sound of his own voice. “Grab the cable....”

The crevice was empty. More of the soft rock had crumbled away and Glazer had fallen from sight.

For a long time Major Gino Lombardi lay there, flashing his light into the seemingly bottomless slash in the satellite's surface, calling on his radio with the power turned full on. His only answer was static, and gradually he became aware of the cold from the eternally chilled rocks that was seeping through the insulation of his suit. Glazer was gone, that was all there was to it.

After this Gino did everything that he was supposed to do in a methodical, disinterested way. He took rock samples, dust samples, meter readings, placed the recording instruments exactly as he had been shown and fired the test shot in the drilled hole. Then he gathered the records from the instruments and when the next orbit of the Apollo spacecraft brought it overhead he turned on the cabin transmitter and sent up a call.

"Come in Dan.... Colonel Danton Coye, can you hear me...?"

"Loud and clear," the speaker crackled. "Tell me you guys, how does it feel to be walking on the moon?"

"Glazer is dead. I'm alone. I have all the data and photographs required. Permission requested to cut this stay shorter than planned. No need for a whole day down here."

For long seconds there was a crackling silence, then Dan's voice came in, the same controlled, Texas drawl.

"Roger, Gino—stand by for computer signal, I think we can meet in the next orbit."

The moon takeoff went as smoothly as the rehearsals had gone in the mock-up on Earth, and Gino was too busy doing double duty to have time to think about what had happened. He was strapped in when the computer radio signal fired the engines that burned down into the lower portion of the Bug and lifted the upper half free, blasting it up towards the rendezvous in space with the orbiting mother ship. The joined sections of the Apollo came into sight and Gino realized he would pass in front of it, going too fast: he made the course corrections with a sensation of deepest depression. The computer had not allowed for the reduced mass of the lunar rocket with only one passenger aboard. After this, matching orbits was not too difficult and minutes later Gino was crawling through the entrance of the command module and sealing it behind him. Dan Coye stayed at the controls, not saying anything until the cabin pressure had stabilized and they could remove their helmets.

"What happened down there, Gino?"

"An accident—a crack in the lunar surface, covered lightly, sealed over by dust. Glazer just ... fell into the thing. That's all. I tried to get him out, I couldn't reach him. I went to the Bug for some wire, but when I came back he had fallen deeper ... it was...."

Gino had his face buried in his hands, and even he didn't know if he was sobbing or just shaking with fatigue and strain.

"I'll tell you a secret, I'm not superstitious at all," Dan said, reaching deep into a zippered pocket of his pressure suit. "Everybody thinks I am, which just goes to show you how wrong everybody can be. Now I got this mascot, because all pilots are supposed to have mascots, and it makes good copy for the reporters when things are dull." He pulled the little black rubber doll from his pocket, made famous on millions of TV screens, and waved it at Gino. "Everybody knows I always tote my little good-

luck mascot with me, but nobody knows just what kind of good luck it has. Now *you* will find out, Major Gino Lombardi, and be privileged to share my luck. In the first place this bitty doll is not rubber, which might have a deleterious effect on the contents, but is constructed of a neutral plastic.”

In spite of himself, Gino looked up as Dan grabbed the doll’s head and screwed it back.

“Notice the wrist motion as I decapitate my friend, within whose bosom rests the best luck in the world, the kind that can only be brought to you by sour mash one-hundred and fifty proof bourbon. Have a slug.” He reached across and handed the doll to Gino.

“Thanks, Dan.” He raised the thing and squeezed, swallowing twice. He handed it back.

“Here’s to a good pilot and a good joe, Eddie Glazer,” Dan Coye said raising the flask, suddenly serious. “He wanted to get to the moon and he did. It belongs to him now, all of it, by right of occupation.” He squeezed the doll dry and methodically screwed the head back on and replaced it in his pocket. “Now let’s see what we can do about contacting control, putting them in the picture, and start cutting an orbit back towards Earth.”

Gino turned the radio on but did not send out the call yet. While they had talked their orbit had carried them around to the other side of the moon and its bulk successfully blocked any radio communication with Earth. They hurtled their measured arc through the darkness and watched another sunrise over the sharp lunar peaks: then the great globe of the Earth swung into sight again. North America was clearly visible and there was no need to use repeater stations. Gino beamed the signal at Cape Canaveral and waited the two and a half seconds for his signal to be received and for the answer to come back the 480,000 miles from Earth. The seconds stretched on and on, and with a growing feeling of fear he watched the hand track slowly around the clock face.

“They don’t answer....”

“Interference, sunspots ... try them again,” Dan said in a suddenly strained voice.

The control at Canaveral did not answer the next message, nor was there any response when they tried the emergency frequencies. They picked up some aircraft chatter on the higher frequencies, but no one noticed them or paid any attention to their repeated calls. They looked at the blue sphere of Earth, with horror now, and only after an hour of sweating strain would they admit that, for some unimaginable reason, they were cut off from all radio contact with it.

“Whatever happened, happened during our last orbit around the moon. I was in contact with them while you were matching orbits,” Dan said, tapping the dial of the ammeter on the radio. “There couldn’t be anything wrong...?”

“Not at this end,” Gino said grimly. “But something has happened down there.”

“Could it be ... a war?”

“It might be. But with *whom* and why? There’s nothing unusual on the emergency frequencies and I don’t think....”

“*Look!*” Dan shouted hoarsely, “The lights—where are the lights?”

In their last orbit the twinkling lights of the American cities had been seen clearly through their telescope. The entire continent was now black.

“Wait, see South America—the cities are lit up there, Gino. What could possibly have happened at home while we were in that orbit?”

“There’s only one way to find out. We’re going back. With or without any help from ground control.”

They disconnected the lunar Bug and strapped into their acceleration couches in the command module while they fed data to the computer. Following its instructions they jockeyed the Apollo into the correct attitude for firing. Once more they orbited the airless satellite and at the correct instant the computer triggered the engines in the attached service module. They were heading home.

With all the negative factors taken into consideration, it was not that bad a landing. They hit the right continent and were only a few degrees off in latitude, though they entered the atmosphere earlier than they liked. Without ground control of any kind it was an almost miraculously good landing.

As the capsule screamed down through the thickening air its immense velocity was slowed and the airspeed began to indicate a reasonable figure. Far below, the ground was visible through rents in the cloud cover.

“Late afternoon,” Gino said. “It will be dark soon after we hit the ground.”

“At least it will still be light. We could have been landing in Peking at midnight, so let’s hear no complaints. Stand by to let go the parachutes.”

The capsule jumped twice as the immense chutes boomed open. They opened their face-plates, safely back in the sea of air once more.

“Wonder what kind of reception we’ll get?” Dan asked, rubbing the bristle on his big jaw.

With the sharp crack of split metal a row of holes appeared in the upper quadrant of the capsule: air whistled in, equalizing their lower pressure.

“Look!” Gino shouted, pointing at the dark shape that hurtled by outside. It was egg-shaped and stub-winged, black against the afternoon sun. Then it twisted over in a climbing turn and for a long moment its silver skin was visible to them as it arched over and came diving down. Back it came, growing instantly larger, red flames twinkling in its wing roots.

Grey haze cut off the sunlight as they fell into a cloud. Both men looked at each other: neither wanted to speak first.

“A jet,” Gino finally said. “I never saw that type before.”

“Neither did I—but there was something familiar—Look, you saw the wings didn’t you? You saw...?”

“If you mean did I see black crosses on the wings, yes I did, but I’m not going to admit it! Or I wouldn’t if it wasn’t for those new air-conditioning outlets that were just installed in our hull. Do you have any idea what it means?”

“None. But I don’t think we’ll be too long finding out. Get ready for the landing—just two thousand feet to go.”

The jet did not reappear. They tightened their safety harness and braced themselves for the impact. It was a bumping crash and the capsule tilted up on its side, jarring them with vibration.

“Parachute jettisons,” Dan Coye ordered, “We’re being dragged.”

Gino had hit the triggers even as Dan spoke. The lurching stopped and the capsule slowly righted itself.

“Fresh air,” Dan said and blew the charges on the port. It sprang away and thudded to the ground. As they disconnected the multiple wires and clasps of their suits hot, dry air poured in through the opening, bringing with it the dusty odor of the desert.

Dan raised his head and sniffed. “Smells like home. Let’s get out of this tin box.”

Colonel Danton Coye went first, as befitted the commander of the First American Earth-Moon Expedition. Major Gino Lombardi followed. They stood side by side silently, with the late afternoon sun glinting on their silver suits. Around them, to the limits of vision, stretched the thin tangle of greyish desert shrub, mesquite, cactus. Nothing broke the silence nor was there any motion other than that caused by the breeze that was carrying away the cloud of dust stirred up by their landing.

“Smells good, smells like Texas,” Dan said, sniffing.

“Smells awful, just makes me thirsty. But ... Dan ... what happened? First the radio contact, then that jet....”

“Look, our answer is coming from over there,” the big officer said, pointing at a moving column of dust rolling in from the horizon. “No point in guessing, because we are going to find out in five minutes.”

It was less than that. A large, sand-colored half-track roared up, followed by two armored cars. They braked to a halt in the immense cloud of their own dust. The half-track’s door slammed open and a goggled man climbed down, brushing dirt from his tight black uniform.

“*Hande hoch!*” he ordered, waving their attention to the leveled guns on the armored cars. “Hands up and keep them that way. You are my prisoners.”

They slowly raised their arms as though hypnotized, taking in every detail of his uniform. The silver lightning bolts on the lapels, the high, peaked cap—the predatory eagle clasping a swastika.

“You’re—you’re a *German!*” Gino Lombardi gasped.

“Very observant,” the officer observed humorlessly. “I am Hauptmann Langenscheidt. You are my prisoners. You will obey my orders. Get into the *kraftwagen*.”

“Now just one minute,” Dan protested. “I’m Col. Coye, USAF and I would like to know what is going on here....”

“Get in,” the officer ordered. He did not change his tone of voice, but he did pull his long-barreled Luger from its holster and leveled it at them.

“Come on,” Gino said, putting his hand on Dan’s tense shoulder. “You outrank him, but he got there fustest with the mostest.”

They climbed into the open back of the half-track and the captain sat down facing them. Two silent soldiers with leveled machine-pistols sat behind their backs. The tracks clanked and they surged forward: stifling dust rose up around them.

Gino Lombardi had trouble accepting the reality of this. The moon flight, the landing, even Glazer's death he could accept, they were things that could be understood. But this...? He looked at his watch, at the number twelve in the calendar opening.

"Just one question, Langenscheidt," he shouted above the roar of the engine. "Is today the twelfth of September?"

His only answer was a stiff nod.

"And the year—of course it is—1971?"

"Yes, of course. No more questions. You will talk to the *Oberst*, not to me."

They were silent after that, trying to keep the dust out of their eyes. A few minutes later they pulled aside and stopped while the long, heavy form of a tank transporter rumbled by them, going in the opposite direction. Evidently the Germans wanted the capsule as well as the men who had arrived in it. When the long vehicle had passed the half-track ground forward again. It was growing dark when the shapes of two large tanks loomed up ahead, cannons following them as they bounced down the rutted track. Behind these sentries was a car park of other vehicles, tents and the ruddy glow of gasoline fires burning in buckets of sand. The half-track stopped before the largest tent and at gunpoint the two astronauts were pushed through the entrance.

An officer, his back turned to them, sat writing at a field desk. He finished his work while they stood there, then folded some papers and put them into a case. He turned around, a lean man with burning eyes that he kept fastened on his prisoners while the captain made a report in rapid German.

"That is most interesting, Langenscheidt, but we must not keep our guests standing. Have the orderly bring some chairs. Gentlemen permit me to introduce myself. I am Colonel Schneider, commander of the 109th Panzer division that you have been kind enough to visit. Cigarette?"

The colonel's smile just touched the corners of his mouth, then instantly vanished. He handed over a flat package of Player's cigarettes to Gino, who automatically took them. As he shook one out he saw that they were made in England—but the label was printed in German.

"And I'm sure you would like a drink of whisky," Schneider said, flashing the artificial smile again. He placed a bottle of *Ould Highlander* on the table before them, close enough for Gino to read the label. There was a picture of the highlander himself, complete with bagpipes and kilt, but he was saying *Ich hätte gern etwas zu trinken WHISKEY!*

The orderly pushed a chair against the back of Gino's legs and he collapsed gratefully into it. He sipped from the glass when it was handed to him—it was good scotch whisky. He drained it in a single swallow.

The orderly went out and the commanding officer settled back into his camp chair, also holding a large drink. The only reminder of their captivity was the silent form of the captain near the entrance, his hand resting on his holstered gun.

“A most interesting vehicle that you gentlemen arrived in. Our technical experts will of course examine it, but there is a question—”

“I am Colonel Danton Coye, United States Air Force, serial number....”

“Please, colonel,” Schneider interrupted. “We can dispense with the formalities....”

“Major Giovanni Lombardi, United States Air Force,” Gino broke in, then added his serial number. The German colonel flickered his smile again and sipped from his drink.

“Do not take me for a fool,” he said suddenly, and for the first time the cold authority in his voice matched his grim appearance. “You will talk for the Gestapo, so you might just as well talk to me. And enough of your childish games. I know there is no American Air Force, just your Army Air Corps that has provided such fine targets for our fliers. Now—what were you doing in that device?”

“That is none of your business, Colonel,” Dan snapped back in the same tones. “What I would like to know is, just what are German tanks doing in Texas?”

A roar of gunfire cut through his words, sounding not too far away. There were two heavy explosions and distant flames lit up the entrance to the tent. Captain Langenscheidt pulled his gun and rushed out of the tent while the others leaped to their feet. There was a muffled cry outside and a man stepped in, pointing a bulky, strange looking pistol at them. He was dressed in stained khaki and his hands and face were painted black.

“*Verdamm ...*” the colonel gasped and reached for his own gun: the newcomer’s pistol jumped twice and emitted two sighing sounds. The panzer officer clutched his stomach and doubled up on the floor.

“Don’t just stand there gaping, boys,” the intruder said, “get moving before anyone else wanders in here.” He led the way from the tent and they followed.

They slipped behind a row of parked trucks and crouched there while a squad of scuttle-helmeted soldiers ran by them towards the hammering guns. A cannon began firing and the flames started to die down. Their guide leaned back and whispered.

“That’s just a diversion—just six guys and a lot of noise—though they did get one of the fuel trucks. These krautheads are going to find it out pretty quickly and start heading back here on the double. So let’s make tracks—*now!*”

He slipped from behind the trucks and the three of them ran into the darkness of the desert. After a few yards the astronauts were staggering, but they kept on until they almost fell into an arroyo where the black shape of a jeep was sitting. The motor started as they hauled themselves into it and, without lights, it ground up out of the arroyo and bumped through the brush.

“You’re lucky I saw you come down,” their guide said from the front seat. “I’m Lieutenant Reeves.”

“Colonel Coye—and this is Major Lombardi. We owe you a lot of thanks, lieutenant. When those Germans grabbed us, we found it almost impossible to believe. Where did they come from?”

“Breakthrough, just yesterday from the lines around Corpus. I been slipping along behind this division with my patrol, keeping San Antone posted on their movements. That’s how come I saw your ship, or whatever it is, dropping right down in front of their scouts. Stars and stripes all over it. I tried to reach you first, but had to turn back before their scout cars spotted me. But it worked out. We grabbed the tank carrier as soon as it got dark and two of my walking wounded are riding it back to Cotulla where we got some armor and transport. I set the rest of the boys to pull that diversion and you know the results. You Air Corps jockeys ought to watch which way the wind is blowing or something, or you’ll have all your fancy new gadgets falling into enemy hands.”

“You said the Germans broke out of Corpus—Corpus Christi?” Dan asked. “What are they doing there—how long have they been there—or where did they come from in the first place?”

“You flyboys must sure be stationed in some hideaway spot,” Reeves said, grunting as the jeep bounded over a ditch. “The landings on the Texas side of the Gulf were made over a month ago. We been holding them, but just barely. Now they’re breaking out and we’re managing to stay ahead of them.” He stopped and thought for a moment. “Maybe I better not talk to you boys too much until we know just what you were doing there in the first place. Sit tight and we’ll have you out of here inside of two hours.”

The other jeep joined them soon after they hit a farm road and the lieutenant murmured into the field radio it carried. Then the two cars sped north, past a number of tank traps and gun emplacements and finally into the small town of Cotulla, straddling the highway south of San Antonio. They were led into the back of the local supermarket where a command post had been set up. There was a lot of brass and armed guards about, and a heavy-jawed one star general behind the desk. The atmosphere and the stares were reminiscent in many ways of the German colonel’s tent.

“Who are you two, what are you doing here—and what is that *thing* you rode down in?” the general asked in a no-nonsense voice.

Dan had a lot of questions he wanted to ask first, but he knew better than to argue with a general. He told about the moon flight, the loss of communication, and their return. Throughout the general looked at him steadily, nor did he change his expression. He did not say a word until Dan was finished. Then he spoke.

“Gentlemen, I don’t know what to make of all your talk of rockets, moon-shots, Russian sputniks or the rest. Either you are both mad or I am, though I admit you have an impressive piece of hardware out on that tank carrier. I doubt if the Russians have time or resources now for rocketry, since they are slowly being pulverized and pushed back across Siberia. Every other country in Europe has fallen to the Nazis and they have brought their war to this hemisphere, have established bases in Central America, occupied Florida and made more landings along the Gulf coast. I can’t pretend to understand what is happening here so I’m sending you off to the national capitol in Denver in the morning.”

In the plane next day, somewhere over the high peaks of the Rockies, they pieced together part of the puzzle. Lieutenant Reeves rode with them, ostensibly as a guide, but his pistol was handy and the holster flap loose.

“It’s the same date and the same world that we left,” Gino explained, “but some things are *different*. Too many things. It’s all the same up to a point, then changes radically. Reeves, didn’t you tell me that President Roosevelt died during his first term?”

“Pneumonia, he never was too strong, died before he had finished a year in office. He had a lot of wild-sounding schemes but they didn’t help. Vice-president Garner took over, but it didn’t seem the same when John Nance said it as when Roosevelt had said it. Lots of fights, trouble in congress, depression got worse, and things didn’t start getting better until about ‘36 when Landon was elected. There were still a lot of people out of work, but with the war starting in Europe they were buying lots of things from us, food, machines, even guns.”

“Britain and the allies, you mean?”

“I mean everybody, Germans too, though that made a lot of people here mad. But the policy was no-foreign-entanglements and do business with anyone who’s willing to pay. It wasn’t until the invasion of Britain that people began to realize that the Nazis weren’t the best customers in the world, but by then it was too late.”

“It’s like a mirror image of the world—a warped mirror,” Dan said, drawing savagely on his cigarette. “While we were going around the moon something happened to change the whole world to the way it would have been if history had been altered some time in the early thirties.”

“World didn’t change, boys,” Reeves said, “it’s always been just the way it is now. Though I admit the way you tell it it sounds a lot better. But it’s either the whole world or you, and I’m banking on the simpler of the two. Don’t know what kind of an experiment the Air Corps had you two involved in but it must have addled your grey matter.”

“I can’t buy that,” Gino insisted. “I know I’m beginning to feel like I have lost my marbles, but whenever I do I think about the capsule we landed in. How are you going to explain that away?”

“I’m not going to try. I know there are a lot of gadgets and things that got the engineers and the university profs tearing their hair out, but that doesn’t bother me. I’m going back to the shooting war where things are simpler. Until it is proved differently I think that you are both nuts, if you’ll pardon the expression, sirs.”

The official reaction in Denver was basically the same. A staff car, complete with MP out-riders, picked them up as soon as they had landed at Lowry Field and took them directly to Fitzsimmons Hospital. They were taken directly to the laboratories and what must have been a good half of the giant hospital’s staff took turns prodding, questioning and testing them. They were encouraged to speak—many times with lie-detector instrumentation attached to them—but none of their questions were answered. Occasional high-ranking officers looked on gloomily, but took no part in the examination. They talked for hours into tape recorders, answering questions in every possible field from history to physics, and when they tired were kept going on

benzedrine. There was more than a week of this in which they saw each other only by chance in the examining rooms, until they were weak from fatigue and hazy from the drugs. None of their questions were answered, they were just reassured that everything would be taken care of as soon as the examinations were over. When the interruption came it was a welcome surprise, and apparently unexpected. Gino was being probed by a drafted history professor who wore oxidized captain's bars and a gravy-stained battlejacket. Since his voice was hoarse from the days of prolonged questioning, Gino held the microphone close to his mouth and talked in a whisper.

"Can you tell me who was the Secretary of the Treasury under Lincoln?" the captain asked.

"How the devil should I know? And I doubt very much if there is anyone else in this hospital who knows—besides you. And do you know?"

"Of course—"

The door burst open and a full colonel with an MP brassard looked in. A very high-ranking messenger boy: Gino was impressed.

"I've come for Major Lombardi."

"You'll have to wait," the history-captain protested, twisting his already rumpled necktie. "I've not finished...."

"That is not important. The major is to come with me at once."

They marched silently through a number of halls until they came to a dayroom where Dan was sprawled deep in a chair smoking a cigar. A loudspeaker on the wall was muttering in a monotone.

"Have a cigar," Dan called out, and pushed the package across the table.

"What's the drill now?" Gino asked, biting off the end and looking for a match.

"Another conference, big brass, lots of turmoil. We'll go in in a moment as soon as some of the shouting dies down. There is a theory now as to what happened, but not much agreement on it even though Einstein himself dreamed it up...."

"Einstein! But he's dead...."

"Not now he isn't, I've seen him. A grand old gent of over ninety, as fragile as a stick but still going strong. He ... say, wait— isn't that a news broadcast?"

They listened to the speaker that one of the MP's had turned up.

"... in spite of fierce fighting the city of San Antonio is now in enemy hands. Up to an hour ago there were still reports from the surrounded Alamo where units of the 5th Cavalry have refused to surrender, and all America has been following this second battle of the Alamo. History has repeated itself, tragically, because there now appears to be no hope that any survivors...."

"Will you gentlemen please follow me," a staff officer broke in, and the two astronauts went out after him. He knocked at a door and opened it for them. "If you please."

"I am very happy to meet you both," Albert Einstein said, and waved them to chairs.

He sat with his back to the window, his thin, white hair catching the afternoon sunlight and making an aura about his head.

“Professor Einstein,” Dan Coye said, “can you tell us what has happened? What has changed?”

“Nothing has changed, that is the important thing that you must realize. The world is the same and you are the same, but you have—for want of a better word I must say—*moved*. I am not being clear. It is easier to express in mathematics.”

“Anyone who climbs into a rocket has to be a bit of a science fiction reader, and I’ve absorbed my quota,” Dan said. “Have we got into one of those parallel worlds things they used to write about, branches of time and all that?”

“No, what you have done is *not* like that, though it may be a help to you to think of it that way. This is the same *objective* world that you left—but not the same *subjective* one. There is only one galaxy that we inhabit, only one universe. But our awareness of it changes many of its aspects of reality.”

“You’ve lost me,” Gino sighed.

“Let me see if I get it,” Dan said. “It sounds like you are saying that things are just as we think we see them, and our thinking keeps them that way. Like that tree in the quad I remember from college.”

“Again not correct, but an approximation you may hold if it helps you to clarify your thinking. It is a phenomenon that I have long suspected, certain observations in the speed of light that might be instrumentation errors, gravitic phenomena, chemical reactions. I have suspected something, but have not known where to look. I thank you gentlemen from the bottom of my heart for giving me this opportunity at the very end of my life, for giving me the clues that may lead to a solution to this problem.”

“Solution...” Gino’s mouth opened. “Do you mean there is a chance we can go back to the world as we knew it?”

“Not only a chance—but the strongest possibility. What happened to you was an accident. You were away from the planet of your birth, away from its atmospheric envelope and, during parts of your orbit, even out of sight of it. Your sense of reality was badly strained, and your physical reality and the reality of your mental relationships changed by the death of your comrade. All these combined to allow you to return to a world with a slightly different aspect of reality from the one you have left. The historians have pinpointed the point of change. It occurred on the seventeenth of August, 1933, the day that President Roosevelt died of pneumonia.”

“Is that why all those medical questions about my childhood?” Dan asked. “I had pneumonia then, I was just a couple of months old, almost died, my mother told me about it often enough afterwards. It could have been at the same time. It isn’t possible that I lived and the president died...?”

Einstein shook his head. “No, you must remember that you both lived in the world as you knew it. The dynamics of the relationship are far from clear, though I do not doubt that there is some relationship involved. But that is not important. What is important is that I think I have developed a way to mechanically bring about the translation from one reality aspect to another. It will take years to develop it to translate matter from one reality to a different order, but it is perfected enough

now—I am sure—to return matter that has already been removed from another order.”

Gino’s chair scraped back as he jumped to his feet. “Professor—am I right in saying, and I may have got you wrong, that you can take us and pop us back to where we came from?”

Einstein smiled. “Putting it as simply as you have, major ... the answer is *yes*. Arrangements are being made now to return both of you and your capsule as soon as possible. In return for which we ask you a favor.”

“Anything, of course,” Dan said, leaning forward.

“You will have the reality-translator machine with you, and microcopies of all our notes, theories and practical conclusions. In the world that you come from all of the massive forces of technology and engineering can be summoned to solve the problem of mechanically accomplishing what you both did once by accident. You might be able to do this within months, and that is all the time that there is left.”

“Exactly what do you mean?”

“We are losing the war. In spite of all the warning we were not prepared, we thought it would never come to us. The Nazis advance on all fronts. It is only a matter of time until they win. We can still win, but only with your atom bombs.”

“You don’t have atomic bombs now?” Gino asked.

Einstein sat silent for a moment before he answered. “No, there was no opportunity. I have always been sure that they could be constructed, but have never put it to the test. The Germans felt the same, and at one time even had a heavy water project that aimed towards controlled nuclear fission. But their military successes were so great that they abandoned it along with other far-fetched and expensive schemes such as the hollow-globe theory. I myself have never wanted to see this hellish thing built, and from what you have told about it, it is worse than my most terrible dream. But I have approached the President about it, when the Nazi threat was closing in, but nothing was done. Too expensive. Now it is too late. But perhaps it isn’t. If *your* America will help us, the enemy will be defeated. And after that, what a wealth of knowledge we shall have once our worlds are in contact. Will you do it?”

“Of course,” Dan Coye said. “But the brass will take a lot of convincing. I suggest some films be made of you and others explaining some of this. And enclose some documents, anything that will help convince them what has happened.”

“I can do something better,” Einstein said, taking a small bottle from a drawer of the table. “Here is a recently developed drug, and the formula, that has proved effective in arresting certain of the more violent forms of cancer. This is an example of what I mean by the profit that can accrue when our two worlds can exchange information.”

Dan pocketed the precious bottle as they turned to leave. With a sense of awe they gently shook hands with the frail old man who had been dead many years in the world they knew, to which they would be soon returning.

The military moved fast. A large jet bomber was quickly converted to carry one of the American solid-fuel rocket missiles. Not yet operational, it was doubtful if they ever would be at the rate of the Nazi advance. But given an aerial boost by the bomber it

could reach up out of the ionosphere—carrying the payload of the moon capsule with its two pilots. Clearing the fringes of the atmosphere was essential to the operation of the instrument that was to return them to what they could only think of as their own world. It seemed preposterously tiny to be able to change worlds.

“Is that *all*?” Gino asked when they settled themselves back into the capsule. A square case, containing records and reels of film, was strapped between their seats. On top of it rested a small grey metal box.

“What do you expect—an atom smasher?” Dan asked, checking out the circuits. The capsule had been restored as much as was possible to the condition it was in the day it had landed. The men wore their pressure suits. “We came here originally by accident, by just thinking wrong or something like that, if my theory’s correct.”

“It isn’t—but neither is mine, so we can’t let it bug us.”

“Yeah, I see what you mean. The whole crazy business may not be simple, but the mechanism doesn’t have to be physically complex. All we have to do is throw the switch, right?”

“Roger. The thing is self-powered. We’ll be tracked by radar, and when we hit apogee in our orbit they’ll give us a signal on our usual operating frequency. We throw the switch—and drop.”

“Drop right back to where we came from, I hope.”

“Hello there cargo,” a voice crackled over the speaker. “Pilot here. We are about to take off. All set?”

“In the green, all circuits,” Dan reported, and settled back.

The big bomber rumbled the length of the field and slowly pulled itself into the air, heavily under the weight of the rocket slung beneath its belly. The capsule was in the nose of the rocket and all the astronauts could see was the shining skin of the mother ship. It was a rough ride. The mathematics had indicated that probability of success would be greater over Florida and the south Atlantic, the original re-entry target. This meant penetrating enemy territory. The passengers could not see the battle being fought by the accompanying jet fighters, and the pilot of the converted bomber did not tell them. It was a fierce battle and at one point almost a lost one: only a suicidal crash by one of the escort fighters prevented an enemy jet from attacking the mother ship.

“Stand by for drop,” the radio said, and a moment later came the familiar sensation of free fall as the rocket cropped clear of the plane. Pre-set controls timed the ignition and orbit. Acceleration pressed them into their couches.

A sudden return to weightlessness was accompanied by the tiny explosions as the carrying-rocket blasted free the explosive bolts that held it to the capsule. For a measureless time their inertia carried them higher in their orbit while gravity tugged back. The radio crackled with a carrier wave, then a voice broke in.

“Be ready with the switch ... ready to throw it ... NOW!”

Dan flipped the switch and nothing happened. Nothing that they could perceive in any case. They looked at each other silently, then at the altimeter as they dropped back towards the distant Earth.

“Get ready to open the chute,” Dan said heavily, just as a roar of sound burst from the radio.

“Hello Apollo, is that you? This is Canaveral control, can you hear me? Repeat—can you hear me? Can you answer ... in heaven’s name, Dan, are you there ... are you there...?”

The voice was almost hysterical, bubbling over itself. Dan flipped the talk button.

“Dan Coye here—is that you, Skipper?”

“Yes—but how did you get there? Where have you been since.... Cancel, repeat cancel that last. We have you on the screen and you will hit in the sea and we have ships standing by....”

The two astronauts met each other’s eyes and smiled. Gino raised his thumb up in a token of victory. They had done it. Behind the controlled voice that issued them instructions they could feel the riot that must be breaking after their unexpected arrival. To the observers on Earth—*this* Earth—they must have vanished on the other side of the moon. Then reappeared suddenly some weeks later, alive and sound long days after their oxygen and supplies should have been exhausted. There would be a lot to explain.

It was a perfect landing. The sun shone, the sea was smooth, there was scarcely any cross wind. They resurfaced within seconds and had a clear view through their port over the small waves. A cruiser was already headed their way, only a few miles off.

“It’s over,” Dan said with an immense sigh of relief as he unbuckled himself from the chair.

“Over!” Gino said in a choking voice. “Over? Look—look at the flag there!”

The cruiser turned tightly, the flag on its stern standing out proudly in the air. The red and white stripes of Old Glory, the fifty white stars on the field of deepest blue.

And in the middle of the stars, in the center of the blue rectangle, lay a golden crown.

Sense of Obligation

I

A man said to the universe:

"Sir, I exist!"

"However," replied the universe,

"The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation."

Stephen Crane

Sweat covered Brion's body, trickling into the tight loincloth that was the only garment he wore. The light fencing foil in his hand felt as heavy as a bar of lead to his exhausted muscles, worn out by a month of continual exercise. These things were of no importance. The cut on his chest, still dripping blood, the ache of his overstrained eyes—even the soaring arena around him with the thousands of spectators—were trivialities not worth thinking about. There was only one thing in his universe: the button-tipped length of shining steel that hovered before him, engaging his own weapon. He felt the quiver and scrape of its life, knew when it moved and moved himself to counteract it. And when he attacked, it was always there to beat him aside.

A sudden motion. He reacted—but his blade just met air. His instant of panic was followed by a small sharp blow high on his chest.

"Touch!" A world-shaking voice bellowed the word to a million waiting loud-speakers, and the applause of the audience echoed back in a wave of sound.

"One minute," a voice said, and the time buzzer sounded.

Brion had carefully conditioned the reflex in himself. A minute is not a very large measure of time and his body needed every fraction of it. The buzzer's whirr triggered his muscles into complete relaxation. Only his heart and lungs worked on at a strong, measured rate. His eyes closed and he was only distantly aware of his handlers catching him as he fell, carrying him to his bench. While they massaged his limp body and cleansed the wound, all of his attention was turned inward. He was in reverie, sliding along the borders of consciousness. The nagging memory of the previous night loomed up then, and he turned it over and over in his mind, examining it from all sides.

It was the very unexpectedness of the event that had been so unusual. The contestants in the Twenties needed undisturbed rest, therefore nights in the dormitories were quiet as death. During the first few days, of course, the rule wasn't observed too closely. The men themselves were too keyed up and excited to rest easily. But as soon as the scores begin to mount and eliminations cut into their ranks, there is complete silence after dark. Particularly so on this last night, when only two of the little cubicles were occupied, the thousands of others standing with dark, empty doors.

Angry words had dragged Brion from a deep and exhausted sleep. The words were whispered but clear, two voices, just outside the thin metal of his door. Someone spoke his name.

"... Brion Brandd. Of course not. Whoever said you could was making a big mistake and there is going to be trouble—"

“Don’t talk like an idiot!” This other voice snapped with a harsh urgency, clearly used to command. “I’m here because the matter is of utmost importance, and Brandd is the one I must see. Now stand aside!”

“The Twenties—”

“I don’t give a damn about your games, hearty cheers and physical exercises. This is *important* or I wouldn’t be here!”

The other didn’t speak—he was surely one of the officials—and Brion could sense his outraged anger. He must have drawn his gun, because the other man said quickly, “Put that away. You’re being a fool!”

“Out!” was the single snarled word of the response. There was silence then and, still wondering, Brion was once more asleep.

“Ten seconds.”

The voice chopped away Brion’s memories and he let awareness seep back into his body. He was unhappily conscious of his total exhaustion. The month of continuous mental and physical combat had taken its toll. It would be hard to stay on his feet, much less summon the strength and skill to fight and win a touch.

“How do we stand?” he asked the handler who was kneading his aching muscles.

“Four ... four. All you need is a touch to win!”

“That’s all he needs, too,” Brion grunted, opening his eyes to look at the wiry length of the man at the other end of the long mat. No one who had reached the finals in the Twenties could possibly be a weak opponent, but this one, Irolg, was the pick of the lot. A red-haired, mountain of a man, with an apparently inexhaustible store of energy. That was really all that counted now. There could be little art in this last and final round of fencing. Just thrust and parry, and victory to the stronger.

Brion closed his eyes again and knew the moment he had been hoping to avoid had arrived.

Every man who entered the Twenties had his own training tricks. Brion had a few individual ones that had helped him so far. He was a moderately strong chess player, but he had moved to quick victory in the chess rounds by playing incredibly unorthodox games. This was no accident, but the result of years of work. He had a standing order with offplanet agents for archaic chess books, the older the better. He had memorized thousands of these ancient games and openings. This was allowed. Anything was allowed that didn’t involve drugs or machines. Self-hypnosis was an accepted tool.

It had taken Brion over two years to find a way to tap the sources of hysterical strength. Common as the phenomenon seemed to be in the textbooks, it proved impossible to duplicate. There appeared to be an immediate association with the death-trauma, as if the two were inextricably linked into one. Berserkers and juramentados continue to fight and kill though carved by scores of mortal wounds. Men with bullets in the heart or brain fight on, though already clinically dead. Death seemed an inescapable part of this kind of strength. But there was another type that could easily be brought about in any deep trance—hypnotic rigidity. The strength that enables someone in a trance to hold his body stiff and unsupported except at two points, the head and heels. This is physically impossible when conscious. Working

with this as a clue, Brion had developed a self-hypnotic technique that allowed him to tap these reservoirs of unknown strength. The source of “second wind,” the survival strength that made the difference between life and death.

It could also kill. Exhaust the body beyond hope of recovery, particularly when in a weakened condition as his was now. But that wasn’t important. Others had died before during the Twenties, and death during the last round was in some ways easier than defeat.

Breathing deeply, Brion softly spoke the auto-hypnotic phrases that triggered the process. Fatigue fell softly from him, as did all sensations of heat, cold and pain. He could feel with acute sensitivity, hear, and see clearly when he opened his eyes.

With each passing second the power drew at the basic reserves of life, draining it from his body.

When the buzzer sounded he pulled his foil from his second’s startled grasp, and ran forward. Irolg had barely time to grab up his own weapon and parry Brion’s first thrust. The force of his rush was so great that the guards on their weapons locked, and their bodies crashed together. Irolg looked amazed at the sudden fury of the attack—then smiled. He thought it was a last burst of energy, he knew how close they both were to exhaustion. This must be the end for Brion.

They disengaged and Irolg put up a solid defense. He didn’t attempt to attack, just let Brion wear himself out against the firm shield of his defense.

Brion saw something close to panic on his opponent’s face when the man finally recognized his error. Brion wasn’t tiring. If anything he was pressing the attack. A wave of despair rolled out from Irolg—Brion sensed it and knew the fifth point was his.

Thrust—thrust—and each time the parrying sword a little slower to return. Then the powerful twist that thrust it aside. In and under the guard. The slap of the button on flesh and the arc of steel that reached out and ended on Irolg’s chest over his heart.

Waves of sound—cheering and screaming—lapped against Brion’s private world, but he was only remotely aware of their existence. Irolg dropped his foil, and tried to shake Brion’s hand, but his legs suddenly gave way. Brion had an arm around him, holding him up, walking towards the rushing handlers. Then Irolg was gone and he waved off his own men, walking slowly by himself.

Except something was wrong and it was like walking through warm glue. Walking on his knees. No, not walking, falling. At last. He was able to let go and fall.

II

Ihjel gave the doctors exactly one day before he went to the hospital. Brion wasn't dead, though there had been some doubt about that the night before. Now, a full day later, he was on the mend and that was all Ihjel wanted to know. He bullied and strong-armed his way to the new Winner's room, meeting his first stiff resistance at the door.

"You're out of order, Winner Ihjel," the doctor said. "And if you keep on forcing yourself in here, where you are not wanted, rank or no rank I shall be obliged to break your head."

Ihjel had just begun to tell him, in some detail, just how slim his chances were of accomplishing that, when Brion interrupted them both. He recognized the newcomer's voice from the final night in the barracks.

"Let him in, Dr. Caulry," he said. "I want to meet a man who thinks there is something more important than the Twenties."

While the doctor stood undecided, Ihjel moved quickly around him and closed the door in his flushed face. He looked down at the Winner in the bed. There was a drip plugged into each one of Brion's arms. His eyes peered from sooty hollows; the eyeballs were a network of red veins. The silent battle he fought against death had left its mark. His square, jutting jaw now seemed all bone, as did his long nose and high cheekbones. They were prominent landmarks rising from the limp grayness of his skin. Only the erect bristle of his close-cropped hair was unchanged. He had the appearance of having suffered a long and wasting illness.

"You look like sin," Ihjel said. "But congratulations on your victory."

"You don't look so very good yourself—for a Winner," Brion snapped back. His exhaustion and sudden peevish anger at this man let the insulting words slip out. Ihjel ignored them.

But it was true, Winner Ihjel looked very little like a Winner, or even an Anvharian. He had the height and the frame all right, but it was draped in billows of fat. Rounded, soft tissue that hung loosely from his limbs and made little limp rolls on his neck and under his eyes. There were no fat men on Anvhar and it was incredible that a man so gross could ever have been a Winner. If there was muscle under the fat, it couldn't be seen. Only his eyes appeared to still hold the strength that had once bested every man on the planet to win the annual games. Brion turned away from their burning stare, sorry now he had insulted the man without good reason. He was too sick though to bother about apologizing.

Ihjel didn't care either. Brion looked at him again and felt the impression of things so important that himself, his insults, even the Twenties were of no more interest than dust motes in the air. It was only a fantasy of sick mind, Brion knew, and he tried to shake the feeling off. The two men stared at each other, sharing a common emotion.

The door opened soundlessly behind Ihjel and he wheeled about, moving as only an athlete of Anvhar can move. Dr. Caulry was halfway through the door, off balance. Two more men in uniform came close behind him. Ihjel's body pushed against them, his speed and the mountainous mass of his flesh sending them back in a tangle of arms and legs. He slammed the door and locked it in their faces.

“I have to talk to you,” he said, turning back to Brion. “Privately,” he added, bending over and ripping out the communicator with a sweep of one hand.

“Get out,” Brion told him. “If I were able—”

“Well you’re not, so you’re just going to have to lie there and listen. I imagine we have about five minutes before they decide to break the door down, and I don’t want to waste any more of that. Will you come with me offworld? There’s a job that must be done, it’s my job but I’m going to need help. You’re the only one who can give me that help.

“Now refuse,” he added as Brion started to answer.

“Of course I refuse,” Brion said, feeling a little foolish and slightly angry, as if the other man had put the words into his mouth. “Anvhar is my planet—why should I leave? My life is here and so is my work. I also might add that I have just won the Twenties, I have a responsibility to remain.”

“Nonsense. I’m a Winner and I left. What you really mean is you would like to enjoy a little of the ego-inflation you have worked so hard to get. Off Anvhar no one even knows what a Winner is—much less respects one. You have to face a big universe out there and I don’t blame you for being a little frightened.”

Someone was hammering loudly on the door.

“I haven’t the strength to get angry,” Brion said hoarsely. “And I can’t bring myself to admire your ideas when they permit you to insult a man too ill to defend himself.”

“I apologize,” Ihjel said, with no hint of apology or sympathy in his voice. “But there are more desperate issues involved other than your hurt feelings. We don’t have much time now, so I want to impress you with an idea.”

“An idea that will convince me to go offplanet with you? That’s expecting a lot.”

“No, this idea won’t convince you—but thinking about it will. If you really *consider* it you will find a lot of your illusions shattered. Like everyone else on Anvhar you’re a Scientific Humanist with your faith firmly planted in the Twenties. You accept both of those noble institutions without an instant’s thought. All of you haven’t a single thought for the past, for the untold billions who led the bad life as mankind slowly built up the good life for you to lead. Do you ever think of all the people who suffered and died in misery and superstition while civilization was clicking forward one more slow notch?”

“Of course I don’t think about them,” Brion snapped back. “Why should I? I can’t change the past.”

“But you can change the future!” Ihjel said. “You owe something to the suffering ancestors who got you where you are today. If Scientific Humanism means anything more than plain words to you, you must possess a sense of responsibility. Don’t you want to try and pay off a bit of this debt by helping others who are just as backward and disease ridden today as great-grandfather Troglodyte ever was?”

The hammering on the door was louder, this and the drug-induced buzzing in Brion’s ears made thinking difficult. “Abstractedly I, of course, agree with you,” he said haltingly. “But you know there is nothing I can do personally without being emotionally involved. A logical decision is valueless for action without personal meaning.”

“Then we have reached the crux of the matter,” Ihjel said gently. His back was braced against the door, absorbing the thudding blows of some heavy object on the outside. “They’re knocking, so I must be going soon. I have no time for details, but I can assure you, upon my word of honor as a Winner, that there is something you can do. Only you. If you help me, we might save seven million human lives. That is a fact....”

The lock burst and the door started to open. Ihjel shouldered it back into the frame for a final instant.

“... Here is the idea I want you to consider: Why is it that the people of Anvhar in a galaxy filled with warring, hate-filled, backward planets, should be the only ones who base their entire existence on a complicated series of games?”

III

This time there was no way to hold the door. Ihjel didn't try. He stepped aside and two men stumbled into the room. He walked out behind their backs without saying a word.

"What happened? What did he do?" the doctor asked, rushing in through the ruined door. He swept a glance over the continuous recording dials at the foot of Brion's bed. Respiration, temperature, heart, blood pressure—all were normal. The patient lay quietly and didn't answer him.

For the rest of that day, Brion had much to think about. It was difficult. The fatigue, mixed with the tranquilizers and other drugs had softened his contact with reality. His thoughts kept echoing back and forth in his mind, unable to escape. What had Ihjel meant? What was that nonsense about Anvhar? Anvhar was that way because ... well it just was. It had come about naturally. Or had it? The planet had a very simple history.

From the very beginning there had never been anything of real commercial interest on Anvhar. Well off the interstellar trade routes, there were no minerals worth digging and transporting the immense distances to the nearest inhabited worlds. Hunting the winter beasts for their pelts was a profitable but very minor enterprise, never sufficient for mass markets. Therefore no organized attempt had ever been made to colonize the planet. In the end it had been settled completely by chance. A number of offplanet scientific groups had established observation and research stations, finding unlimited data to observe and record during Anvhar's unusual yearly cycle. The long-duration observations encouraged the scientific workers to bring their families and, slowly but steadily, small settlements grew up. Many of the fur hunters settled there as well, adding to the small population. This had been the beginning.

Few records existed of those early days, and the first six centuries of Anvharian history were more speculation than fact. The Breakdown occurred about that time and in the galaxy-wide disruption, Anvhar had to fight its own internal battle. When the Earth Empire collapsed it was the end of more than an era. Many of the observation stations found themselves representing institutions that no longer existed. The professional hunters no longer had markets for their furs, since Anvhar possessed no interstellar ships of its own. There had been no real physical hardship involved in the Breakdown, as it affected Anvhar, since the planet was completely self sufficient. Once they had made the mental adjustment to the fact that they were now a sovereign world, not a collection of casual visitors with various loyalties, life continued unchanged. Not easy—living on Anvhar is never easy—but at least without difference on the surface.

The thoughts and attitudes of the people were however going through a great transformation. Many attempts were made to develop some form of stable society and social relationship. Again little record exists of these early trials, other than the fact of their culmination in the Twenties.

To understand the Twenties, you have to understand the unusual orbit that Anvhar tracks around its sun, 70 Ophiuchi. There are other planets in this system, all of them more or less conforming to the plane of the ecliptic. Anvhar is obviously a rogue,

perhaps a captured planet of another sun. For the greatest part of its 780-day year it arcs far out from its primary, in a high-angled sweeping cometary orbit. When it returns there is a brief, hot summer of approximately eighty days before the long winter sets in once more. This severe difference in seasonal change has caused profound adaptations in the native life forms. During the winter most of the animals hibernate, the vegetable life lying dormant as spores or seeds. Some of the warm-blooded herbivores stay active in the snow-covered tropics, preyed upon by fur-insulated carnivores. Though unbelievably cold, the winter is a season of peace in comparison to the summer.

This is a time of mad growth. Plants burst into life with a strength that cracks rocks, growing fast enough for the motion to be seen. The snow fields melt into mud and within days a jungle stretches high into the air. Everything grows, swells, proliferates. Plants climb on top of plants, fighting for the life-energy of the sun. Everything is eat and be eaten, grow and thrive in the short season. Because when the first snow of winter falls again, ninety per cent of the year must pass until the next coming of warmth.

Mankind has had to adapt to the Anvharian cycle in order to stay alive. Food must be gathered and stored, enough to last out the long winter. Generation after generation had adapted until they look on the mad seasonal imbalance as something quite ordinary. The first thaw of almost-nonexistent spring triggers a wide reaching metabolic change in the humans. Layers of subcutaneous fat vanish and half-dormant sweat glands come to life. Other changes are more subtle than the temperature adjustment, but equally important. The sleep center of the brain is depressed. Short naps or a night's rest every third or fourth day become enough. Life takes on a hectic and hysterical quality that is perfectly suited to the environment. By the time of the first frost, rapid growing crops have been raised and harvested, sides of meat either preserved or frozen in mammoth lockers. With his supreme talent of adaptability mankind has become part of the ecology and guaranteed his own survival during the long winter.

Physical survival has been guaranteed. But what about mental survival? Primitive Earth Eskimos can fall into a long doze of half-conscious hibernation. Civilized men might be able to do this, but only for the few cold months of terrestrial mid-winter. It would be impossible to do during a winter that is longer than an Earth year. With all the physical needs taken care of, boredom became the enemy of any Anvharian who was not a hunter. And even the hunters could not stay out on solitary trek all winter. Drink was one answer and violence another. Alcoholism and murder were the twin terrors of the cold season, after the Breakdown.

It was the Twenties that ended all that. When they became a part of normal life the summer was considered just an interlude between games. The Twenties were more than just a contest—they became a way of life that satisfied all the physical, competitive and intellectual needs of this unusual planet. They were a decathlon—rather a doubled decathlon—raised to its highest power, where contests in chess and poetry composition held equal place with those in ski-jumping and archery. Each year there were two planet-wide contests held, one for men and one for women. This was not an attempt at sexual discrimination, but a logical facing of facts. Inherent differences prevented fair contests—for example, it is impossible for a woman to win a large chess tournament—and this fact was recognized. Anyone could enter for any number of years, there were no scoring handicaps.

When the best man won he was really the best man. A complicated series of playoffs and eliminations kept contestants and observers busy for half the winter. They were only preliminary to the final encounter that lasted a month, and picked a single winner. That was the title he was awarded. Winner. The man—and woman—who had bested every other contestant on the entire planet and who would remain unchallenged until the following year.

Winner. It was a title to take pride in. Brion stirred weakly on his bed and managed to turn so he could look out of the window. Winner of Anvhar. His name was already slated for the history books, one of the handful of planetary heroes. School children would be studying him now, just as he had read of the Winners of the past. Weaving daydreams and imaginary adventures around Brion's victories, hoping and fighting so some day equal them. To be a Winner was the greatest honor in the universe.

Outside, the afternoon sun shimmered weakly in a dark sky. The endless icefields soaked up the dim light, reflecting it back as a colder and harsher illumination. A single figure on skis cut a line across the empty plain; nothing else moved. The depression of the ultimate fatigue fell on Brion and everything changed, as if he looked in a mirror at a previously hidden side.

He saw suddenly—with terrible clarity—that to be a Winner was to be absolutely nothing. Like being the best flea, among all the fleas on a single dog.

What was Anvhar after all? An ice-locked planet, inhabited by a few million human fleas, unknown and unconsidered by the rest of the galaxy. There was nothing here worth fighting for, the wars after the Breakdown had left them untouched. The Anvharian had always taken pride in this—as if being so unimportant that no one else even wanted to come near you, could possibly be a source of pride. All the worlds of man grew, fought, won, lost, changed. Only on Anvhar did life repeat its sameness endlessly, like a loop of tape in a player....

Brion's eyes were moist, he blinked. *Tears!!* Realization of this incredible fact wiped the maudlin pity from his mind and replaced it with fear. Had his mind snapped in the strain of the last match? These thoughts weren't his. Self-pity hadn't made him a Winner—why was he feeling it now? Anvhar was his universe—how could he even imagine it as a tag-end planet at the outer limb of creation? What had come over him and induced this inverse thinking.

As he thought the question, the answer appeared at the same instant. Winner Ihjel. The fat man with the strange pronouncements and probing questions. Had he cast a spell like some sorcerer—or the devil in "Faust"? No, that was pure nonsense. But he had done something. Perhaps planted a suggestion when Brion's resistance was low. Or used subliminal vocalization like the villain in "Cerebrus Chained." Brion could find no adequate reason on which to base his suspicions. But he knew that Ihjel was responsible.

He whistled at the sound-switch next to his pillow and the repaired communicator came to life. The duty nurse appeared in the small screen.

"The man who was here today," Brion said, "Winner Ihjel, do you know where he is? I must contact him."

For some reason this flustered her professional calm. The nurse started to answer, excused herself, and blanked the screen. When it lit again a man in Guard's uniform had taken her place.

"You made an inquiry," the Guard said, "about Winner Ihjel. We are holding him here in the hospital following the disgraceful way in which he broke into your room."

"I have no charges to make. Will you ask him to come and see me at once?"

The Guard controlled his shock. "I'm sorry, Winner—I don't see how we can. Dr. Caulry left specific orders that you were not to be—"

"The doctor has no control over my personal life," Brion snapped at him. "I'm not infectious, or ill with anything more than extreme fatigue. I want to see that man. At once."

The Guard took a deep breath, and made a quick decision. "He is on the way up now," he said, and rung off.

"What did you do to me?" Brion asked as soon as Ihjel had entered and they were alone. "You won't deny that you have put alien thoughts in my head?"

"No, I won't deny it. Because the whole point of my being here is to get those 'alien' thoughts across to you."

"Tell me how you did it," Brion insisted. "I must know."

"I'll tell you—but there are many things you should understand first, before you decide to leave Anvhar. You must not only hear them, you will have to believe them. The primary thing, the clue to the rest, is the true nature of your life here. How do you think the Twenties originated?"

Brion carefully took a double dose of the mild stimulant he was allowed before he answered. "I don't think," he said, "I know. It's a matter of historical record. The founder of the games was Giroldi, the first contest was held in 378 A.B. The Twenties have been held every year since then. They were strictly local affairs in the beginning, but were soon well established on a planet-wide scale."

"True enough," Ihjel said, "but you're describing *what* happened. I asked you *how* the Twenties originated. How could any single man take a barbarian planet, lightly inhabited by half-mad hunters and alcoholic farmers, and turn it into a smooth-running social machine built around the artificial structure of the Twenties? It just can't be done."

"But it was done!" Brion insisted. "You can't deny that. And there is nothing artificial about the Twenties. They are a logical way to live a life on a planet like this."

Ihjel had to laugh, a short ironic bark. "Very logical," he said, "but how often does logic have anything to do with the organization of social groups and governments? You're not thinking. Put yourself in founder Giroldi's place. Imagine that you have glimpsed the great idea of the Twenties and you want to convince others. So you walk up to the nearest louse-ridden, brawling, superstitious, booze-embalmed hunter and explain clearly. How a program of his favorite sports—things like poetry, archery and chess—can make his life that much more interesting and virtuous. You do that. But keep your eyes open and be ready for a fast draw."

Even Brion had to smile at the absurdity of the suggestion. Of course it couldn't happen that way. Yet, since it had happened, there must be a simple explanation.

"We can beat this back and forth all day," Ihjel told him, "and you won't get the right idea unless—" He broke off suddenly, staring at the communicator. The operation light had come on, though the screen stayed dark. Ihjel reached down a meaty hand and pulled loose the recently connected wires. "That doctor of yours is very curious—and he's going to stay that way. The truth behind the Twenties is none of his business. But it's going to be yours. You must come to realize that the life you lead here is a complete and artificial construction, developed by Societics experts and put into application by skilled field workers."

"Nonsense!" Brion broke in. "Systems of society can't be dreamed up and forced on people like that. Not without bloodshed and violence."

"Nonsense, yourself," Ihjel told him. "That may have been true in the dawn of history, but not any more. You have been reading too many of the old Earth classics, you imagine that we still live in the Ages of Superstition. Just because Fascism and Communism were once forced on reluctant populations, you think this holds true for all time. Go back to your books. In exactly the same era democracy and self-government were adapted by former colonial states, like India and the Union of North Africa, and the only violence was between local religious groups. Change is the lifeblood of mankind. Everything we today accept as normal was at one time an innovation. And one of the most recent innovations is the attempt to guide the societies of mankind into something more consistent with the personal happiness of individuals."

"The God complex," Brion said, "forcing human lives into a mold whether they want to be fitted into it or not."

"Societics can be that," Ihjel agreed. "It was in the beginning, and there were some disastrous results of attempts to force populations into a political climate where they didn't belong. They weren't all failures—Anvhar here is a striking example of how good the technique can be when correctly applied. It's not done this way anymore, though. Like all of the other sciences, we have found out that the more we know, the more there is to know. We no longer attempt to guide cultures towards what we consider a beneficial goal. There are too many goals, and from our limited vantage point it is hard to tell the good ones from the bad ones. All we do now is try to protect the growing cultures, give a little jolt to the stagnating ones—and bury the dead ones. When the work was first done here on Anvhar the theory hadn't progressed that far. The understandably complex equations that determine just where in the scale from a Type I to a Type V a culture is, had not yet been completed. The technique then was to work out an artificial culture that would be most beneficial for a planet, then bend it into the mold."

"But how?" Brion asked.

"We've made some progress—you're finally asking 'how'. The technique here took a good number of agents, and a great deal of money. Personal honor was emphasized in order to encourage dueling, this led to a heightened interest in the technique of personal combat. When this was well entrenched Girolodi was brought in, and he showed how organized competitions could be more interesting than haphazard encounters. Tying the intellectual aspects onto the framework of competitive sports was a little more difficult, but not overwhelmingly so. The details aren't important,

all we are considering now is the end product. Which is you. You're needed very much."

"Why me?" Brion asked. "Why am I special? Because I won the Twenties? I can't believe that. Taken objectively there isn't that much difference between myself and the ten runners-up. Why don't you ask one of them—they could do your job as well as I."

"No they couldn't. I'll tell you later why you are the only man I can use. Our time is running out and I must convince you of some other things first." Ihjel glanced at his watch. "We have less than three hours to dead-deadline. Before that time I must explain enough of our work to you to enable you to decide voluntarily to join us."

"A very tall order," Brion said. "You might begin by telling me just who this mysterious 'we' is that you keep referring to."

"The Cultural Relationships Foundation. A nongovernmental body, privately endowed, existing to promote peace and ensure the sovereign welfare of independent planets, so that all will prosper from the good will and commerce thereby engendered."

"Sounds like you're quoting," Brion told him. "No one could possibly make up something that sounds like that on the spur of the moment."

"I was quoting from our charter of organization. Which is all very fine in a general sense, but I'm talking specifically now. About you. You are the product of a tightly knit and very advanced society. Your individuality has been encouraged by your growing up in a society so small in population that only a mild form of government control is necessary. The normal Anvharian education is an excellent one, and participation in the Twenties has given you a general and advanced education second to none in the galaxy. It would be a complete waste of your entire life if you now took all this training and wasted it on some rustic farm."

"You give me very little credit. I plan to teach—"

"Forget Anvhar!" Ihjel cut him off with a chop of his hand. "This world will roll on quite successfully whether you are here or not. You must forget it, think of its relative unimportance on a galactic scale, and consider instead the existing, suffering, hordes of mankind. You must think what you can do to help them."

"But what can I do—as an individual? The day is long past when a single man, like Caesar or Alexander, could bring about world-shaking changes."

"True—but not true," Ihjel said. "There are key men in every conflict of forces, men who act like catalysts applied at the right instant to start a chemical reaction. You might be one of those men, but I must be honest and say that I can't prove it yet. So in order to save time and endless discussion, I think I will have to spark your personal sense of obligation."

"Obligation to whom?"

"To mankind of course, to the countless billions of dead who kept the whole machine rolling along that allows you the full, long and happy life you enjoy today. What they gave to you, you must pass on to others. This is the keystone of humanistic morals."

"Agreed. And a very good argument in the long run. But not one that is going to tempt me out of this bed within the next three hours."

“A point of success,” Ihjel said. “You agree with the general argument. Now I apply it specifically to you. Here is the statement I intend to prove. There exists a planet with a population of seven million people. Unless I can prevent it, this planet will be completely destroyed. It is my job to stop that destruction, so that is where I am going now. I won’t be able to do the job alone. In addition to others I need you. Not anyone like you—but you and you alone.”

“You have precious little time left to convince me of all that,” Brion told him, “so let me make the job easier for you. The work you do, this planet, the imminent danger of the people there—these are all facts that you can undoubtedly supply. I’ll take a chance that this whole thing is not a colossal bluff and admit that given time, you could verify them all. This brings the argument back to me again. How can you possibly prove that I am the only person in the galaxy who can help you?”

“I can prove it by your singular ability, the thing I came here to find.”

“What ability? I am different in no way from the other men on my planet.”

“You’re wrong,” Ihjel said. “You are the embodied proof of evolution. Rare individuals with specific talents occur constantly in any species, man included. It has been two generations since an empathetic was last born on Anvhar and I have been watching carefully most of that time.”

“What in blazes is an empathetic—and how do you recognize it when you have found it?” Brion chuckled, this talk was getting preposterous.

“I can recognize one because I’m one myself—there is no other way. As to how projective empathy works, you had a demonstration of that a little earlier, when you felt those strange thoughts about Anvhar. It will be a long time before you can master that, but receptive empathy is your natural trait. This is mentally entering into the feeling, or what could be called the spirit of another person. Empathy is not thought perception, it might better be described as the sensing of someone else’s emotional makeup, feelings and attitudes. You can’t lie to a trained empathetic because he can sense the real attitude behind the verbal lies. Even your undeveloped talent has proved immensely useful in the Twenties. You can outguess your opponent because you know his movements even as his body tenses to make them. You accept this without ever questioning it.”

“How do you know—?” This was Brion’s understood, but never voiced secret.

Ihjel smiled. “Just guessing. But I won the Twenties too, remember, also without knowing a thing about empathy at the time. On top of our normal training, it’s a wonderful trait to have. Which brings me to the proof we mentioned a minute ago. When you said you would be convinced if I could prove you were the only person who could help me. I *believe* you are—and that is one thing I cannot lie about. It’s possible to lie about a belief verbally, to have a falsely based belief, or to change a belief. But you can’t lie about it to yourself.”

“Equally important—you can’t lie about a belief to an empathetic. Would you like to see how I feel about this? ‘See’ is a bad word—there is no vocabulary for this kind of thing yet. Better, would you join me in my feelings? Sense my attitudes, memories and emotions just as I do?”

Brion tried to protest, but he was too late. The doors of his senses were pushed wide and he was overwhelmed.

“Dis ...” Ihjel said aloud. “Seven million people ... hydrogen bombs ... Brion Brandd.” These were just key words, land marks of association. With each one Brion felt the rushing wave of the other man’s emotions.

There could be no lies here, Ihjel was right in that. This was the raw stuff that feelings are made of, the basic reactions to the things and symbols of memory.

DIS ... DIS ... DIS ... it was a word it was a planet and the word thundered like a drum a drum the sound of its thunder surrounded and was

a wasteland a planet
of death a planet where
living was dying and
dying was very
better than
living
crude barbaric
backward miserable
dirty beneath
consideration
planet

DIS

hot burning scorching
wasteland of sands
and sands and sands and
sands that burned had burned
will burn forever

the people of this planet so
crude dirty miserable barbaric
subhuman in-human less-than-human
but
they
were
going
to
be

DEAD

and DEAD they would be seven million
blackened corpses that
would blacken your dreams
all dreams dreams
forever because those
H Y D R O G E N B O M B S
were waiting
to kill
them unless ... unless ... unless ...
you Ihjel stopped it you Ihjel
(DEATH) ... you (DEATH) ...
you (DEATH) alone couldn’t do
it you (DEATH)
must have

BRION BRANDD wet-behind-the-ears-raw-untrained-Brion-Brand-to help-you he was the only one in the galaxy who could finish the job....

As the flow of sensation died away, Brion realized he was sprawled back weakly on his pillows, soaked with sweat, washed with the memory of the raw emotion. Across from him Ihjel sat with his face bowed into his hands. When he lifted his head Brion saw within his eyes a shadow of the blackness he had just experienced.

“Death,” Brion said. “That terrible feeling of death. It wasn’t just the people of Dis who would die. It was something more personal.”

“Myself,” Ihjel said, and behind this simple word were the repeated echoes of night that Brion had been made aware of with his newly recognized ability. “My own death, not too far away. This is the wonderfully terrible price you must pay for your talent. *Angst* is an inescapable part of empathy. It is a part of the whole unknown field of psi phenomena that seems to be independent of time. Death is so traumatic and final that it reverberates back along the time line. The closer I get, the more aware of it I am. There is no exact feeling of date, just a rough location in time. That is the horror of it. I *know* I will die soon after I get to Dis—and long before the work there is finished. I know the job to be done there, and I know the men who have already failed at it. I also know you are the only person who can possibly complete the work I have started. Do you agree now? Will you come with me?”

“Yes, of course,” Brion said. “I’ll go with you.”

IV

"I've never seen anyone quite as angry as that doctor," Brion said.

"Can't blame him," Ihjel shifted his immense weight and grunted from the console, where he was having a coded conversation with the ship's brain. He hit the keys quickly, and read the answer from the screen. "You took away his medical moment of glory. How many times in his life will he have a chance to nurse back to rugged smiling health the triumphantly exhausted Winner of the Twenties?"

"Not many, I imagine. The wonder of it is how you managed to convince him that you and the ship here could take care of me as well as his hospital."

"I could never convince him of that," Ihjel said. "But I and the Cultural Relationships Foundation have some powerful friends on Anvhar. I'm forced to admit I brought a little pressure to bear." He leaned back and read the course tape as it streamed out of the printer. "We have a little time to spare, but I would rather spend it waiting at the other end. We'll blast as soon as I have you tied down in a stasis field."

The completeness of the stasis field leaves no impression on the body or mind. In it there is no weight, no pressure, no pain—no sensation of any kind. Except for a stasis of very long duration, there is no sensation of time. To Brion's consciousness, Ihjel flipped the switch off with a continuation of the same motion that had turned it on. The ship was unchanged, only outside of the port was the red-shot blankness of jump space.

"How do you feel?" Ihjel asked.

Apparently the ship was wondering the same thing. Its detector unit, hovering impatiently just outside of Brion's stasis field, darted down and settled on his forearm. The doctor back on Anvhar had given the medical section of the ship's brain a complete briefing. A quick check of a dozen factors of Brion's metabolism was compared to the expected norm. Apparently everything was going well, because the only reaction was the expected injection of vitamins and glucose.

"Can't say I'm feeling wonderful yet," Brion answered, levering himself higher on the pillows. "But every day it's a bit better, steady progress."

"I hope so, because we have about two weeks before we get to Dis. Think you'll be back in shape by that time?"

"No promises," Brion said, giving a tentative squeeze to one bicep. "It should be enough time, though. Tomorrow I start mild exercise and that will tighten me up again. Now—tell me more about Dis and what you have to do there."

"I'm not going to do it twice, so just save your curiosity a while. We're heading for a rendezvous-point now to pick up another operator. This is going to be a three-man team, you, me and an exobiologist. As soon as he is aboard I'll do a complete briefing for you both at the same time. What you can do now is get your head into the language box and start working on your Disan. You'll want to speak it perfectly by the time we touch down."

With an autohypno for complete recall, Brion had no difficulty in mastering the grammar and vocabulary of Disan. Pronunciation was a different matter altogether.

Almost all the word endings were swallowed, muffled or gargled. The language was rich in glottal stops, clicks and guttural strangling sounds. Ihjel stayed in a different part of the ship, when Brion used the voice mirror and analysis scope, claiming that the awful noises interfered with his digestion.

Their ship angled through jump-space along its calculated course. It kept its fragile human cargo warm, fed them and supplied breathable air. It had orders to worry about Brion's health, so it did, checking constantly against its recorded instructions and noting his steady progress. Another part of the ship's brain counted microseconds with moronic fixation, finally closing a relay when a predetermined number had expired in its heart. A light flashed and a buzzer hummed gently but insistently.

Ihjel yawned, put away the report he had been reading, and started for the control room. He shuddered when he passed the room where Brion was listening to a playback of his Disan efforts.

"Turn off that dying brontosaurus and get strapped in," he called through the thin door. "We're coming to the point of optimum possibility and we'll be dropping back into normal space soon."

The human mind can ponder the incredible distances between the stars, but cannot possibly contain within itself a real understanding of them. Marked out on a man's hand an inch is a large unit of measure. In interstellar space a cubical area with sides a hundred-thousand miles long is a microscopically fine division. Light crosses this distance in a fraction of a second. To a ship moving with a relative speed far greater than that of light, this measuring unit is even smaller. Theoretically it appears impossible to find a particular area of this size. Technologically it was a repeatable miracle that occurred too often to even be interesting.

Brion and Ihjel were strapped in when the jump-drive cut off abruptly, lurching them back into normal space and time. They didn't unstrap, just sat and looked at the dimly distant pattern of stars. A single sun, of apparent fifth magnitude was their only neighbor in this lost corner of the universe. They waited while the computer took enough star sights to triangulate a position in three dimensions, muttering to itself electronically while it did the countless calculations to find their position. A warning bell chimed and the drive cut on and off so quickly the two acts seemed simultaneous. This happened again, twice, before the brain was satisfied it had made as good a fix as possible and flashed a NAVIGATION POWER OFF light. Ihjel unstrapped, stretched and made them a meal.

Ihjel had computed their passage time with criminally precise allowances. Less than ten hours after they arrived a powerful signal blasted into their waiting receiver. They strapped in again as the NAVIGATION POWER ON signal blinked insistently.

A ship had paused in flight somewhere relatively near in the vast volume of space. It had entered normal space just long enough to emit a signal of radio query on an assigned wave length. Ihjel's ship had detected this and instantly responded with a verifying signal. The passenger spacer had accepted this assurance and gracefully laid a ten-foot metal egg in space. As soon as this had cleared its jump field the parent ship vanished towards its destination, light-years away.

Ihjel's ship climbed up the signal it had received. This signal had been recorded and examined minutely. Angle, strength and Doppler movement were computed to find course and distance. A few minutes of flight were enough to get within range of the

far weaker transmitter in the dropcapsule. Homing on this signal was so simple, a human pilot could have done it himself. The shining sphere loomed up, then vanished out of sight of the viewports as the ship rotated to bring the space lock into line. Magnetic clamps cut in when they made contact.

“Go down and let the bug-doctor in,” Ihjel said. “I’ll stay and monitor the board in case of trouble.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Get into a suit and open the outer lock. Most of the drop sphere is made of inflatable metallic foil so don’t bother to look for the entrance. Just cut a hole in it with the oversize can opener you’ll find in the tool box. After Dr. Morees gets aboard jettison the thing. Only get the radio and locator unit out first—it gets used again.”

The tool did look like a giant opener. Brion carefully felt the resilient metal skin that covered the lock entrance, until he was sure there was nothing on the other side. Then he jabbed the point through and cut a ragged hole in the thin foil. Dr. Morees boiled out of the sphere, knocking Brion aside.

“What’s the matter?” Brion asked.

There was no radio on the other’s suit, he couldn’t answer. But he did shake his fist angrily. The helmet ports were opaqued so there was no way to tell what expression went with the gesture. Brion shrugged and turned back to salvaging the equipment pack, pushing the punctured balloon free and sealing the lock. When pressure was pumped back to ship-normal he cracked his helmet and motioned the other to do the same.

“You’re a pack of dirty lying dogs!” Dr. Morees said when the helmet came off. Brion was completely baffled. Dr. Lea Morees had long dark hair, large eyes and a delicately shaped mouth now taut with anger. Dr. Morees was a woman.

“Are you the filthy swine responsible for this atrocity?” Lea asked menacingly.

“In the control room,” Brion said quickly, knowing when cowardice was much preferable to valor. “A man named Ihjel. There’s a lot of him to hate, you can have a good time doing it. I just joined up myself—” He was talking to her back as she stormed from the room. Brion hurried after her, not wanting to miss the first human spark of interest in the trip to date.

“Kidnaped! Lied to and forced against my will! There is no court in the galaxy that won’t give you the maximum sentence and I’ll scream with pleasure as they roll your fat body into solitary—”

“They shouldn’t have sent a woman,” Ihjel said, completely ignoring her words. “I asked for a highly-qualified exobiologist for a difficult assignment. Someone young and tough enough to do field work under severe conditions. So the recruiting office sends me the smallest female they can find, one who’ll melt in the first rain.”

“I will not!” Lea shouted. “Female resiliency is a well known fact and I’m in far better condition than the average woman. Which has nothing to do with what I’m telling you. I was hired for a job in the university on Moller’s World and signed a contract to that effect. Then this bully of an agent tells me the contract has been changed, read sub paragraph 189-C or some such nonsense, and I’ll be transshipping. He stuffed me into that suffocation basketball without a by-your-leave and they threw me overboard. If that is not a violation of personal privacy—”

“Cut a new course, Brion,” Ihjel broke in. “Find the nearest settled planet and head us there. We have to drop this woman and find a man for this job. We are going to what is undoubtedly the most interesting planet an exobiologist ever conceived of, but we need a man who can take orders and not faint when it gets too hot.”

Brion was lost. Ihjel had done all the navigating and Brion had no idea how to begin a search like this.

“Oh no you don’t,” Lea said. “You don’t get rid of me that easily. I placed first in my class and most of the five-hundred other students were male. This is only a man’s universe because the men say so. What is the name of this garden planet where we are going?”

“Dis. I’ll give you a briefing as soon as I get this ship on course.” He turned to the controls and Lea slipped out of her suit and went into the lavatory to comb her hair. Brion closed his mouth, aware suddenly it had been open for a long time. “Is that what you call applied psychology?” he asked.

“Not really. She was going to go along with the job in the end—since she did sign the contract even if she didn’t read the fine print—but not until she had exhausted her feelings. I just shortened the process by switching her onto the male-superiority hate. Most women, who succeed in normally masculine fields, have a reflexive antipathy there, they have been hit on the head with it so much.” He fed the course tape into the console and scowled. “But there was a good chunk of truth in what I said. I wanted a young, fit and highly qualified biologist from recruiting. I never thought they would find a female one. And it’s too late to send her back now. Dis is no place for a woman.”

“Why?” Brion asked, as Lea appeared in the doorway.

“Come inside, and I’ll show you both,” Ihjel said.

V

“Dis,” Ihjel said, consulting a thick file. “Third planet out from its primary, Epsilon Eridani. The fourth planet is Nyjord—remember that because it is going to be very important. Dis is a place you need a good reason to visit and no reason at all to leave. Too hot, too dry, the temperature in the temperate zones rarely drops below a hundred Fahrenheit. The planet is nothing but scorched rock and burning sand. Most of the water is underground and normally inaccessible. The surface water is all in the form of briny, chemically saturated swamps. Undrinkable without extensive processing. All the facts and figures are here in the folders and you can study them later. Right now I want you just to get the idea that this planet is as loathsome and inhospitable as they come. So are the people. This is a solido of a Disan.”

Lea gasped at the three-dimensional representation on the screen. Not at the physical aspects of the man, as the biologist trained in the specialty of alien life she had seen a lot stranger sights. It was the man’s pose, the expression on his face. Tensed to leap, his lips drawn back to show all of his teeth.

“He looks like he wanted to kill the photographer,” she said.

“He almost did—just after the picture was taken. Like all Disans he has an overwhelming hatred and loathing of offworlders. Not without good reason though. His planet was settled completely by chance during the Breakdown. I’m not sure of the details, but the overall picture is clear, since the story of their desertion forms the basis of all the myths and animistic religions on Dis.”

“Apparently there were large scale mining operations carried on there once, the world is rich enough in minerals and mining it is very simple.” But water came only from expensive extraction processes and I imagine most of the food came from offworld. Which was good enough until the settlement was forgotten, the way a lot of other planets were during the Breakdown. All the records were destroyed in the fighting and the ore carriers pressed into military service. Dis was on its own. What happened to the people there is a tribute to the adaptation possibilities of Homo sapiens. Individuals died, usually in enormous pain, but the race lived. Changed a good deal, but still human.

“As the water and food ran out and the extraction machinery broke down, they must have made heroic efforts to survive. They didn’t do it mechanically, but by the time the last machine collapsed, enough people were adjusted to the environment to keep the race going. Third (Their? n. of transc.) descendants are still there, completely adapted to the environment. Their body temperatures are around one hundred and thirty degrees. They have specialized tissue in the gluteal area for storing water. These are minor changes compared to the major ones they have done in fitting themselves for this planet.

“I’m not sure of the exact details, but the reports are very enthusiastic about symbiotic relationships. They assure us that this is the first time Homo sapiens has been an active part of either commensalism or inquilinism other than in the role of host.”

“Wonderful!” Lea enthused.

“Is it?” Ihjel scowled. “Perhaps from the abstract scientific point of view. If you can keep notes, perhaps you might write a book about it some time. But I’m not interested. I’m sure all these morphological changes and disgusting intimacies will fascinate you, Dr. Morees. But while you are counting blood types and admiring your thermometers, I hope you will be able to devote a little time to a study of the Disans’ obnoxious personalities. We must either find out what makes these people tick—or we are going to have to stand by and watch the whole lot blown up!”

“Going to do what?” Lea gasped. “Destroy them? Wipe out this fascinating genetic pool? Why?”

“Because they are so incredibly loathsome, that’s why!” Ihjel said. “These aboriginal hotheads have managed to lay their hands on some primitive cobalt bombs. They want to light the fuse and drop these bombs on Nyjord, the next planet. Nothing said or done can convince them differently. They demand unconditional surrender or else. This is impossible for a lot of reasons—most important because the Nyjorders would like to keep their planet for their very own. They have tried every kind of compromise but none of them work. The Disans are out to commit racial suicide. A Nyjord fleet is now over Dis and the deadline has almost expired for the surrender of the cobalt bombs. The Nyjord ships carry enough H-bombs to turn the entire planet into an atomic pile. That is what we must stop.”

Brion looked at the *solido* on the screen, trying to make some judgment of the man. Bare, horny feet—a bulky, ragged length of cloth around the waist was the only garment. What looked like a piece of green vine was hooked over one shoulder. From a plaited belt were suspended a number of odd devices made of hand-beaten metal, drilled stone and looped leather. The only recognizable one was a thin knife of unusual design. Loops of piping, flared bells, carved stones tied in senseless patterns of thonging gave the rest of the collection a bizarre appearance. Perhaps they had some religious significance. But the well-worn and handled look of most of them gave Brion an uneasy sensation. If they were used—what in the universe could they be used *for*?

“I can’t believe it,” he finally concluded. “Except for the exotic hardware, this lowbrow looks like he has sunk back into the stone age. I don’t see how his kind can be of any real threat to another planet.”

“The Nyjorders believe it, and that’s good enough for me,” Ihjel said. “They are paying our Cultural Relationships Foundation a good sum to try and prevent this war. Since they are our employers, we must do what they ask.” Brion ignored this large lie, since it was obviously designed as an explanation for Lea. But he made an mental note to query Ihjel later about the real situation.

“Here are the tech reports.” Ihjel dropped them on the table. “Dis has some spacers as well as the cobalt bombs—though these are the real threat. A tramp trader was picked up *leaving* Dis. It had delivered a jump-space launcher that can drop those bombs on Nyjord while anchored to the bedrock of Dis. While essentially a peaceful and happy people the Nyjorders were justifiably annoyed at this and convinced the tramp’s captain to give them some more information. It’s all here. Boiled down it gives a minimum deadline by which time the launcher can be set up and start throwing bombs.”

“When is that deadline?” Lea asked.

“In ten days. If the situation hasn’t been changed drastically by then the Nyjorders are going to wipe all life from the face of Dis. I assure you they don’t want to do it. But they will drop the bombs in order to assure their own survival.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Lea asked, annoyedly flipping the pages of the report. “I don’t know a thing about nucleonics or jump-space. I’m an exobiologist with a supplementary degree in anthropology. What help could I possibly be?”

Ihjel looked down at her, fondling his jaw, fingers sunk deep into the rolls of flesh. “My faith in our recruiters is restored,” he said. “That’s a combination that is probably rare—even on Earth. You’re as scrawny as an underfed chicken but young enough to survive if we keep a close eye on you.” He cut off Lea’s angry protest with a raised hand. “No more bickering. There isn’t time. The Nyjorders must have lost over thirty agents trying to find the bombs. Our Foundation has had six people killed—including my late predecessor in charge of the project. He was a good man, but I think he went at this problem the wrong way. I think it is a cultural one, not a physical one.”

“Run it through again with the power turned up,” Lea said frowning. “All I hear is static.”

“It’s the old problem of genesis. Like Newton and the falling apple, Levy and the hysteresis in the warp field. Everything has a beginning. If we can find out why these people are so hell-bent on suicide, we might be able to change the reasons. Not that I intend to stop looking for the bombs or the jump-space generator either. We are going to try anything that will avert this planetary murder.”

“You’re a lot brighter than you look,” Lea said, rising and carefully stacking the sheets of the report. “You can count on me for complete co-operation. Now I’ll study all this in bed if one of you overweight gentlemen will show me to a room with a strong lock on the inside of the door. Don’t call me, I’ll call you when I want breakfast.”

Brion wasn’t sure how much of her barbed speech was humor and how much serious, so he said nothing. He showed her to an empty cabin—she did lock the door—then looked for Ihjel. The Winner was in the galley adding to his girth with an immense gelatin dessert that filled a good-sized tureen.

“Is she short for a native Terran?” Brion asked. “The top of her head is below my chin.”

“That’s the norm. Earth is a reservoir of tired genes. Weak backs, vermiform appendixes, bad eyes. If they didn’t have the universities and the trained people we need, I would never use them.”

“Why did you lie to her about the Foundation?”

“Because it’s a secret— isn’t that reason enough?” Ihjel rumbled angrily, scraping the last dregs from the bowl. “Better eat something. Build up the strength. The Foundation has to maintain its undercover status if it is going to accomplish anything. If she returns to Earth after this, it’s better that she should know nothing of our real work. If she joins up, there’ll be time enough to tell her. But I doubt if she will like the way we operate. Particularly since I plan to drop some H-bombs on Dis myself—if we can’t turn off the war.”

“I don’t believe it!”

“You heard me correctly. Don’t bulge your eyes and look moronic. As a last resort I’ll drop the bombs myself, rather than let the Nyjorders do it. That might save them.”

“Save them—they’d all be radiated and dead!” Brion’s voice was raised in anger.

“Not the Disans. I want to save the Nyjorders. Stop clenching your fists and sit down and have some of this cake. It’s delicious. The Nyjorders are all that counts here. They have a planet blessed by the laws of chance. When Dis was cut off from outside contact the survivors turned into a gang of swamp-crawling homicidals. It did the opposite for Nyjord. You can survive there just by pulling fruit off a tree.”

“The population was small, educated, intelligent. Instead of sinking into an eternal siesta they matured into a vitally different society. Not mechanical—they weren’t even using the wheel when they were rediscovered. They became sort of cultural specialists, digging deep into the philosophical aspects of interrelationship. The thing that machine societies never have had time for. Of course this was ready made for the Cultural Relationships Foundation, and we have been working with them ever since. Not guiding so much as protecting them from any blows that might destroy this growing idea. But we’ve fallen down on the job.”

“Nonviolence is essential to those people—they have vitality without needing destruction. But if they are forced to blow up Dis for their own survival—against every one of their basic tenets—their philosophy won’t endure. Physically they’ll live on. As just one more dog-eat-dog planet with an A-bomb for any of the competition who drop behind.”

“Sounds like paradise now.”

“Don’t be smug. It’s just another world full of people with the same old likes, dislikes and hatreds. But they are evolving a way of living together, without violence, that may some day form the key to mankind’s survival. They are worth looking after. Now get below and study your Disan and read the reports. Get it all pat before we land.”

VI

“Identify yourself, please.” The quiet words from the speaker in no way appeared to coincide with the picture on the screen. The spacer that had matched their orbit over Dis had recently been a freighter. A quick conversion had tacked the hulking shape of a primary weapons turret on top of her hull. The black disk of the immense muzzle pointing squarely at them. Ihjel switched open the ship-to-ship communication channel.

“This is Ihjel. Retinal pattern 490-Bj4-67—which is also the code that is supposed to get me through your blockade. Do you want to check that pattern?”

“There will be no need, thank you. If you will turn on your recorder, I have a message relayed to you from Prime-four.”

“Recording and out,” Ihjel said “Damn! Trouble already and four days to blowup. Prime-four is our headquarters on Dis. This ship carries a cover cargo so we can land at the spaceport. This is probably a change of plan and I don’t like the smell of it.”

There was something behind Ihjel’s grumbling this time, and without conscious effort Brion could sense the chilling touch of the other man’s *angst*. Trouble was waiting for them on the planet below. When the message was typed by the decoder Ihjel hovered over it, reading each word as it appeared on the paper. He only snorted when it was finished and went below to the galley. Brion pulled the message out of the machine and read it.

IHJEL IHJEL IHJEL SPACEPORT LANDING DANGER NIGHT LANDING
PREFERABLE CO-ORDINATES MAP 46 J92 MN75 REMOTE YOUR SHIP VION
WILL MEET END END END

Dropping into the darkness was safe enough. It was done on instruments and the Disans were thought to have no detection apparatus. The altimeter dials spun backwards to zero and a soft vibration was the only indication they had landed. All of the cabin lights were off except for the fluorescent glow of the instruments. A white-speckled gray filled the infrared screen, radiation from the still-warm sand and stone. There were no moving blips on it, nor the characteristic shape of a shielded atomic generator.

“We’re here first,” Ihjel said, opaquing the ports and turning on the cabin lights. They blinked at each other, faces damp with perspiration.

“Must you have the ship this hot?” Lea asked, patting her forehead with an already sodden kerchief. Stripped of her heavier clothing she looked even tinier to Brion. But the thin cloth tunic—reaching barely halfway to her knees—concealed very little. Small she may have appeared to him—unfeminine she was not. In fact she was quite attractive.

“Shall I turn around so you can stare at the back, too?” she asked Brion. Five days’ experience had taught him that this type of remark was best ignored. It only became worse if he tried to answer.

“Dis is hotter than this cabin,” he said, changing the subject. “By raising the interior temperature we can at least prevent any sudden shock when we go out—”

“I know the theory—but it doesn’t stop me from sweating,” she snapped.

“Best thing you can do is sweat,” Ihjel said. He looked like a glistening captive balloon in shorts. Finishing a bottle of beer he took another from the freezer. “Have a beer.”

“No thank you. I’m afraid it would dissolve the last shreds of tissue and my kidneys would float completely away. On Earth we never—”

“Get Professor Morees’ luggage for her,” Ihjel said. “Vion’s coming, there’s his signal. I’m sending this ship up before any of the locals spot it.”

When he cracked the outer port the puff of air struck them like the exhaust from a furnace. Dry and hot as a tongue of flame. Brion heard Lea’s gasp in the darkness. She stumbled down the ramp and he followed her slowly, careful of the weight of packs and equipment he carried. The sand burned through his boots, still hot from the day. Ihjel came last, the remote-control unit in his hand. As soon as they were clear he activated it and the ramp slipped back like a giant tongue. As soon as the lock had swung shut the ship lifted and drifted upwards silently towards its orbit, a shrinking darkness against the stars.

There was just enough starlight to see the sandy wastes around them, as wave-filled as a petrified sea. The dark shape of a sandcar drew up over a dune and hummed to a stop. When the door opened Ihjel stepped towards it and everything happened at once.

Ihjel broke into a blue nimbus of crackling flame, his skin blackening, charred, dead in an instant. A second pillar of flame bloomed next to the car and a choking scream, cut off even as it began. Ihjel died silently.

Brion was diving even as the electrical discharges still crackled in the air. The boxes and packs dropped from him and he slammed against Lea, knocking her to the ground. He hoped she had the sense to stay there and be quiet. This was his only conscious thought, the rest was reflex. Rolling over and over as fast as he could.

The spitting electrical flames flared again, playing over the bundles of luggage he had dropped. This time Brion was expecting it, pressed flat to the ground a short distance away. He was facing the darkness away from the sandcar and saw the brief, blue glow of the ion-rifle discharge. His own gun was in his hand. When Ihjel had given him the missile weapon he had asked no questions, just strapped it on. There had been no thought that he would need it this quickly. Holding it firmly before him in both hands he let his body aim at the spot where the glow had been. A whiplash of explosive slugs ripped the night air. They found their target and something thrashed voicelessly and died.

In the brief instant after he fired a jarring weight landed on his back and a line of fire circled his throat. Normally he fought with a calm mind, with no thoughts other than the contest. But Ihjel, a friend, a man of Anvhar, had died a few seconds earlier and Brion found himself welcoming this physical violence and pain.

There are many foolish and dangerous things that can be done, such as smoking next to high octane fuel and putting fingers into electrical sockets. Just as dangerous, and equally deadly, is physically attacking a Winner of the Twenties.

Two men hit Brion together, though this made very little difference. The first died suddenly as hands like steel claws found his neck and in a single spasmodic contraction did such damage to the large blood vessels there that they burst and tiny

hemorrhages filled his brain. The second man had time for a single scream, though he died just as swiftly when those hands closed on his larynx.

Running in a crouch, partially on his knuckles, Brion swiftly made a circle of the area, gun ready. There were no others. Only when he touched the softness of Lea's body did the blood anger seep from him. He was suddenly aware of the pain and fatigue, the sweat soaking his body and the breath rasping in his throat. Holstering the gun he ran light fingers over her skull, finding a bruised spot on one temple. Her chest was rising and falling regularly. She had struck her head when he pushed her. It had undoubtedly saved her life.

Sitting down suddenly he let his body relax, breathing deeply. Everything was a little better now, except for the pain at his throat. His fingers found a thin strand on the side of his neck with a knobby weight on the end. There was another weight on his other shoulder and a thin line of pain across his neck. When he pulled on them both the strangler's cord came away in his hand. It was thin fiber, strong as a wire. When it had been pulled around his neck it had sliced the surface skin and flesh like a knife, halted only by the corded bands of muscle below. Brion threw it from him, into the darkness where it had come from.

He could think again and he carefully kept his thoughts from the men he had killed. Knowing it was useless he went to Ihjel's body. A single touch of the scorched flesh was enough.

Behind him Lea moaned with returning consciousness and he hurried on to the sandcar, stepping over the charred body outside the door. The driver was slumped, dead, killed perhaps by the same strangling cord that had sunk into Brion's throat. He laid the man gently on the sand and closed the lids over the staring horror of the eyes. There was a canteen in the car and he brought it back to Lea.

"My head—I've hurt my head," Lea said groggily.

"Just a bruise," he reassured her. "Drink some of this water and you'll soon feel better. Lie back. Everything's over for the moment and you can rest."

"Ihjel's dead!" she said with sudden shocked memory. "They've killed him! What's happened?" She tensed, tried to rise, and he pressed her back gently.

"I'll tell you everything. Just don't try to get up yet. There was an ambush and they killed Vion and the driver of the sandcar, as well as Ihjel. Three men did it and they're all dead now, too. I don't think there are any more around, but if there are I'll hear them coming. We're just going to wait a few minutes until you feel better then we're getting out of here in the car."

"Bring the ship down!" There was a thin edge of hysteria in her voice. "We can't stay here alone. We don't know where to go or what to do. With Ihjel dead the whole thing's spoiled. We have to get out—"

There are some things that can't sound gentle, no matter how gently they are said. This was one of them. "I'm sorry, Lea, but the ship is out of our reach right now. Ihjel was killed with an ion gun and it fused the control unit into a solid lump. We must take the car and get to the city. We'll do it now. See if you can stand up—I'll help you."

She rose, not saying anything, and as they walked towards the car a single, reddish moon cleared the hills behind them. In its light Brion saw a dark line bisecting the rear panel of the sandcar. He stopped abruptly. "What's the matter?" Lea asked.

The unlocked engine cover could have only one significance and he pushed it open knowing in advance what he would see. The attackers had been very thorough and fast. In the short time available to them they had killed the driver and the car as well. Ruddy light shone on torn wires, ripped out connections. Repair would be impossible.

"I think we'll have to walk," he told her, trying to keep the gloom out of his voice. "This spot is roughly a hundred and fifty meters from the city of Hovedstad, where we have to go. We should be able to—"

"We're going to die. We can't walk anywhere. This whole planet is a death trap. Let's get back in the ship!" There was a thin shrillness of hysteria at the edge of her voice, as well as a subtle slurring of the sounds.

Brion didn't try to reason with her or bother to explain. She had a concussion from the blow, that much was obvious. He made her sit and rest while he made what preparations he could for the long walk.

Clothing first. With each passing minute the desert air was growing colder as the day's heat ebbed away. Lea was beginning to shiver and he took some heavier clothing from her charred bag and made her pull it on over her light tunic. There was little else that was worth carrying. The canteen from the car and a first-aid kit he found in one of the compartments. There were no maps or radio. Navigation was obviously done by compass on this almost-featureless desert. The car was equipped with an electrically operated gyro-compass, of no possible use to him. He did use it to check the direction to Hovedstad, as he remembered it from the map, and found it lined up perfectly with the tracks the car had cut into the sand. It had come directly from the city. They could find their way by back-tracking.

Time was slipping away. He would like to have buried Ihjel and the men from the car, but the night hours were too valuable to be wasted. The best he could do was put the three corpses in the car, for protection from the Disan animals. Locking the door he threw the key as far as he could in the blackness. Lea had slipped into a restless sleep and he carefully shook her awake.

"Come," Brion said, "we have a little walking to do."

VII

With the cool air and firmly packed sand under foot walking should have been easy. Lea spoiled that. The concussion seemed to have temporarily cut off the reasoning part of her brain leaving a direct connection to her vocal cords. As she stumbled along, only half conscious, she mumbled all of her darkest fears that were better left unvoiced. Occasionally there was relevancy in her complaints. They would lose their way, never find the city, die of thirst, freezing, heat or hunger. Interspersed and entwined with these were fears from her past that still floated, submerged in the timeless ocean of her subconscious. Some Brion could understand, though he tried not to listen. Fears of losing credits, not getting the highest grade, falling behind, a woman alone in a world of men, leaving school, being lost, trampled among the nameless hordes that struggled for survival in the crowded city-states of Earth.

There were other things she was afraid of that made no sense to a man of Anvhar. Who were the alkians that seemed to trouble her? Or what was canceri? Daydle and haydle? Who was Mansean whose name kept coming up, over and over, each time accompanied by a little moan?

Brion stopped and picked her up in both arms. With a sigh she settled against the hard width of his chest and was instantly asleep. Even with the additional weight he made better time now, and he stretched to his fastest, kilometer-consuming stride to make good use of these best hours.

Somewhere on a stretch of gravel and shelving rock he lost the track of the sandcar. He wasted no time looking for it. By carefully watching the glistening stars rise and set he had made a good estimate of the geographic north. Dis didn't seem to have a pole star, however a boxlike constellation turned slowly around the invisible point of the pole. Keeping this positioned in line with his right shoulder guided him on the westerly course he needed.

When his arms began to grow tired he lowered Lea gently to the ground, she didn't wake. Stretching for an instant, before taking up his burden again, Brion was struck by the terrible loneliness of the desert. His breath made a vanishing mist against the stars, all else was darkness and silence. How distant he was from his home, his people, his planet. Even the constellations of the night sky were different. He was used to solitude, but this was a loneliness that touched some deep-buried instinct. A shiver that wasn't from the desert cold touched lightly along his spine, prickling at the hairs on his neck.

It was time to go on. He shrugged the disquieting sensations off and carefully tied Lea into the jacket he had been wearing. Slung like a pack on his back it made walking easier. The gravel gave way to sliding dunes of sand that seemed to continue to infinity. A painful, slipping climb to the top of each one, then and equally difficult descent to the black-pooled hollow at the foot of the next.

With the first lightening of the sky in the east he stopped, breath rasping in his chest, to mark his direction before the stars faded. One line scratched in the sand pointed due north, a second pointed out the course they should follow. When they were aligned to his satisfaction he washed his mouth out with a single swallow of water and sat on the sand next to the still form of the girl.

Gold fingers of fire searched across the sky, wiping out the stars. It was magnificent, Brion forgot his fatigue in appreciation. There should be some way of preserving it. A quatrain would be best. Short enough to be remembered, yet requiring attention and skill to compact everything into it. He had scored high with his quatrains in the Twenties. This would be a special one. Taind, his poetry mentor would have to get a copy.

“What are you mumbling about?” Lea asked, looking up at the craggy blackness of his profile against the reddening sky.

“Poem,” he said. “*Shhh*. Just a minute.”

It was too much for Lea, coming after the tension and dangers of the night. She began to laugh, laughing even harder when he scowled at her angrily. Only when she heard the tinge of growing hysteria did she make an attempt to break off the laughter. The sun cleared the horizon, washing a sudden warmth over them. Lea gasped.

“Your throat’s been cut! You’re bleeding to death!”

“Not really,” he said, touching his fingertips lightly against the blood-clotted wound that circled his neck. “Just superficial.”

Depression sat on him as he suddenly remembered the battle and death of the previous night. Lea didn’t notice his face. She was busy digging in the pack he had thrown down. He had to use his fingers to massage and force away the grimace of pain that twisted his mouth. Memory was more painful than the wound. How easily he had killed. Three men. How close to the surface of the civilized man the animal dwelled. In the countless matches he had used those holds, always drawing back from the exertion of the full killing power. They were part of a game, part of the Twenties. Yet when his friend had been killed he had become a killer himself. He believed in nonviolence and the sanctity of life. Until the first test when he had killed without hesitation. More ironic was the fact he really felt no guilt. Shock at the change, yes. But no more than that.

“Lift your chin,” Lea said, brandishing the antiseptic applier she had found in the medicine kit. He lifted obligingly and the liquid drew a cool, burning line across his neck. Antibio pills would do a lot more good, since the wound was completely clotted by now, but he didn’t speak his thoughts aloud. For the moment Lea had forgotten herself in taking care of him. He put some of the antiseptic on her scalp bruise and she squeaked, pulling back. They both swallowed the pills.

“That sun is hot already,” Lea grumbled, peeling off her heavy clothing. “Let’s find a nice cool cave to crawl into for the day.”

“I don’t think there are any here, just sand. We have to walk—”

“I know we have to walk,” she interrupted angrily. “There’s no need for a lecture about it. You’re as seriously cubical as the Bank of Terra. Relax. Take ten and start again.” Lea was making empty talk while she listened to the memory of hysteria tittering at the fringes of her brain.

“No time for that. We have to keep going.” Brion climbed slowly to his feet after stowing everything in the pack. When he sighted along his marker at the western horizon he saw nothing to mark their course, only the marching dunes. He helped Lea to her feet and began walking slowly towards them.

“Just hold on a second,” Lea called after him. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“In that direction,” he said pointing. “I hoped there would be some landmarks. There aren’t. We’ll have to keep on by dead reckoning. The sun will keep us pretty well on course. If we aren’t there by night, the stars will be a better guide.”

“All this on an empty stomach? How about breakfast? I’m hungry—and thirsty.”

“No food.” He shook the canteen that gurgled emptily. It has been only partly filled when he found it. “The water’s low and we’ll need it later.”

“I need it now,” she snapped. “My mouth tastes like an unemptied ashtray and I’m dry as paper.”

“Just a single swallow,” he said. “This is all we have.”

Lea sipped at it with her eyes closed in appreciation. He sealed the top and returned it to the pack without taking any himself. They were sweating as they started up the first dune.

The desert was barren of life; they were the only things moving under that merciless sun. Their shadows pointed the way ahead of them, and as the shadows shortened the heat rose. It had an intensity Lea had never experienced before, a physical weight that pushed at her with a searing hand. Her clothing was sodden with perspiration, and it trickled burning into her eyes. The light and heat made it hard to see and she leaned on the immovable strength of Brion’s arm. He walked on steadily, apparently ignoring the heat and discomfort.

“I wonder if those things are edible—or store water?” Brion’s voice was a harsh rasp. Lea blinked and squinted at the leathery shape on the summit of the dune. Plant or animal, it was hard to tell. The size of a man’s head, wrinkled and gray as dried-out leather, knobbed with thick spikes. Brion pushed it up with his toe and they had a brief glimpse of a white roundness, like a shiny taproot, going down into the dune. Then the thing contracted, pulling itself lower into the sand. At the same instant something thin and sharp lashed out through a fold in the skin, striking at Brion’s boot and withdrawing. There was a scratch on the hard plastic, beaded with drops of green liquid.

“Probably poison,” he said, digging his toe into the sand. “This thing is too mean to fool with—without a good reason. Let’s keep going.”

It was before noon when Lea fell down. She really wanted to go on, but her body wouldn’t obey. The thin soles of her shoes were no protection against the burning sand and her feet were lumps of raw pain. Heat hammered down, poured up from the sand and swirled her in an oven of pain. The air she gasped in was molten metal that dried and cracked her mouth. Each pulse of her heart throbbed blood to the wound in her scalp until it seemed her skull would burst with the agony. She had stripped down to the short tunic—in spite of Brion’s insistence that she keep her body protected from the sun—and that clung to her, soaked with sweat. She tore at it in a desperate effort to breathe. There was no escape from the unending heat.

Though the baked sand burned torture into her knees and hands she couldn’t rise. It took all her strength not to fall farther. Her eyes closed and everything swirled in immense circles.

Brion blinking through slitted eyes, saw her go down. He lifted and carried her again as he had the night before. The hot touch of her body shocked his bare arms. Her skin was flushed pink. Wiping his palm free of sweat and sand he touched her skin and felt the ominous hot dryness.

Heat-shock, all the symptoms. Dry, flushed skin, the ragged breathing. Her temperature rising quickly as her body stopped fighting the heat and succumbed.

There was nothing he could do here to protect her from the heat. He measured a tiny portion of the remaining water into her mouth and she swallowed convulsively. The thinnest of the clothing protected her slight body from the direct rays of the sun. After that he could only take her in his arms and keep on toward the horizon. An outcropping of rock there threw a tiny patch of shade and he walked toward it.

The ground here, shielded from the direct rays of the sun, felt almost cool by contrast. Lea opened her eyes when he put her down, peering up at him through a haze of pain. She wanted to apologize to him for her weakness, but no words came from the dried membrane of her throat. His body above her seemed to swim back and forth in the heat waves, swaying like a tree in a high wind.

Shock drove her eyes open, cleared her mind for the instant. He really was swaying. With sudden horror she realized how much she had come to depend on the eternal solidity of his strength. Now it was failing. All over his body the corded muscles contracted in ridges, striving to keep him erect. She saw his mouth pulled open by the taut cords of his neck and the gaping, silent scream was more terrible than any sound. Then she screamed herself as his eyes rolled back, leaving just the empty white of the eyeballs staring terribly at her. He went over, back down, like a felled tree, thudding heavily on the sand. Unconscious or dead she couldn't tell. She pulled limply at his leg, but couldn't drag his immense weight into the shade.

Brion lay on his back in the sun, sweating. Lea saw this and knew that he was still alive. Yet what was happening? She groped for memory in the red haze of her mind, but could remember nothing from her medical studies that would explain this. On every square inch of his body the sweat glands seethed with sudden activity. From every pore oozed great globules of oily liquid, far thicker than normal perspiration. Brion's arms rippled with motion and Lea stared, horrified as the hairs there writhed and stirred as though endowed with separate life. His chest rose and fell rapidly, deep, gasping breaths wracking his body. Lea could only stare through the dim redness of unreality and wonder if she was going mad before she died.

A coughing fit broke the rhythm of his rasping breath, and when it was over his breathing was easier. The perspiration still covered his body, the individual beads touching and forming tiny streams that seeped down his body and vanished in the sand. He stirred and rolled onto his side, facing her. His eyes open and normal now as he smiled.

"Didn't mean to frighten you. It caught me suddenly, coming at the wrong season and everything. It was a bit of a jar to my system. I'll get you some water now, there's still a bit left."

"What happened? When you looked like that, when you fell—"

"Take two swallows, no more," he said, holding the canteen to her mouth. "Just summer change, that's all. Happens to us every year on Anvhar—only not that violently, of course. In the winter our bodies store a layer of fat under the skin for insulation and sweating almost ceases completely. Lot of internal changes, too. When

the weather warms up the process is reversed. The fat is metabolized and the sweat glands enlarge and begin working overtime as the body prepares for two months of hard work, heat and little sleep. I guess the heat here triggered off the summer change early.”

“You mean—you’ve adapted to this terrible planet?”

“Just about. Though it does feel a little warm. I’ll need a lot more water soon, so we can’t remain here. Do you think you can stand the sun if I carry you?”

“No, but I won’t feel any better staying here.” She was light-headed, scarcely aware of what she said. “Keep going, I guess. Keep going.”

As soon as she was out of the shadow of the rock the sunlight burst over her again in a wave of hot pain. She was unconscious at once. Her slight weight was no burden to Brion and he made his best speed, heading toward the spot on the horizon where the sun would set. Without water he knew he could not last more than a day or two at best.

When sunset came he was still walking steadily. Only when the air chilled did he stop to dress them both in the warm clothes and push on. Lea regained consciousness in the cool night air and finished the last mouthfuls of water. She wanted to walk, but could only moan with pain when her burned feet touched the ground. He put ointment on them and wrapped them in cloth. They were too swollen to go back into the ragged shoes. Lifting his burden he walked on into the night, following the guiding stars.

Except for the nagging thirst, it was an easy night. He wouldn’t need sleep for two or three days more, so that didn’t bother him. His muscles had a plentiful supply of fuel at hand in the no longer wanted subcutaneous fatty layer. Metabolizing it kept him warm. By running at a ground-eating pace whenever the footing was smooth he made good time. By dawn he was feeling a little tired and was at least ten kilos lighter due to the loss of the burned up fat.

There was no sight of the city yet. This was the last day. Massive as the adaptation of his body was to the climate, it still needed water to function. As his pores opened in the heat he knew the end was very close. Weaving, stumbling, trying not to fall with the unconscious girl, he climbed dune after unending dune. Before his tortured eyes the sun expanded and throbbed like a gigantic beating heart. He struggled to the top of the mountain of sand and looked at the Disan standing a few feet away.

They were both too surprised by the sudden encounter to react at once. For a breath of time they stared at each other, unmoving. When they reacted it was with the same defense of fear. Brion dropped the girl, bringing the gun up from the holster in the return of the same motion. The Disan jerked a belled tube from his waistband and raised it to his mouth.

Brion didn’t fire. A dead man had taught him how to train his empathetic sense, and to trust it. In spite of the fear that wanted him to jerk the trigger, a different sense read the unvoiced emotions of the native Disan. There was fear there, and hatred. Welling up around these was a strong desire not to commit violence this time, to communicate instead. Brion felt and recognized all this in a small part of a second. He had to act instantly to avoid a tragic accident. A jerk of his wrist threw the gun to one side.

As soon as it was gone, he regretted his loss. He was gambling their lives on an ability he still was not sure of. The Disan had the tube to his mouth when the gun hit the ground. He held the pose, unmoving, thinking. Then he accepted Brion's action and thrust the tube back into his waistband.

"Do you have any water?" Brion asked, the guttural Disan words hurting his throat.

"I have water," the man said. He still didn't move. "Who are you?"

"We're from offplanet. We had ... an accident. We want to go to the city. The water."

The Disan looked at the unconscious girl and made his decision. Over one shoulder he wore one of the green objects that Brion remembered from the solido. He pulled it off and the thing writhed slowly in his hands. It was alive. A green length a meter long, like a noded section of a thick vine. One end flared out into a petallike formation. The Disan took a hook-shaped object from his waist and thrust it into the petaled orifice. When he turned the hook in a quick motion the length of green writhed and curled around his arm. He pulled something small and dark out and threw it to the ground, extending the twisting green shape towards Brion. "Put your mouth to the end and drink," he said.

Lea needed the water more, but he drank first, suspicious of the living water source. A hollow below the writhing petals was filling with straw-colored water from the fibrous, reedy interior. He raised it to his mouth and drank. The water was hot and tasted swampy. Sudden sharp pains around his mouth made him jerk the thing away. Tiny glistening white barbs projected from the petals, pink tipped now with his blood. Brion swung towards the Disan angrily—and stopped when he looked at the other man's face. His mouth was surrounded by many small scars.

"The vaede does not like to give up its water, but it always does," the man said.

Brion drank again then put the vaede to Lea's mouth. She moaned without regaining consciousness, her lips seeking reflexively for the life-saving liquid. When she was satisfied Brion gently drew the barbs from her flesh and drank again. The Disan hunkered down on his heels and watched them expressionlessly. Brion handed back the vaede, then held some of the clothes so Lea was in their shade. He settled into the same position as the native and looked closely at him.

Squatting immobile on his heels, the Disan appeared perfectly comfortable under the flaming sun. There was no trace of perspiration on his naked, browned skin. Long hair fell to his shoulders and startlingly blue eyes stared back at Brion from deep-set sockets. The heavy kilt around his loins was the only garment he wore. Once more the vaede rested over his shoulder, still stirring unhappily. Around his waist was the same collection of leather, stone and brass objects that had been in the solido. Two of them now had meaning to Brion. The tube-and-mouthpiece; a blowgun of some kind. And the specially shaped hook for opening the vaede. He wondered if the other strangely formed things had equally realistic functions. If you accepted them as artifacts with a purpose—not barbaric decorations—you had to accept their owner as something more than the crude savage he resembled.

"My name is Brion. And you—"

"You may not have my name. Why are you here? To kill my people?"

Brion forced the memory of the last night away. Killing was just what he had done. Some expectancy in the man's manner, some sensed feeling of hope prompted Brion to speak the truth.

“I’m here to stop your people from being killed. I believe in the end of the war.”

“Prove it.”

“Take me to the Cultural Relationships Foundation in the city and I’ll prove it. I can do nothing here in the desert. Except die.”

For the first time there was emotion on the Disan’s face. He frowned and muttered something to himself. There was a fine beading of sweat above his eyelids now as he fought an internal battle. Coming to a decision he rose, and Brion stood, too.

“Come with me. I’ll take you to Hovedstad. But wait, there is one thing I must know. Are you from Nyjord?”

“No.”

The nameless Disan merely grunted and turned away. Brion shouldered Lea’s unconscious body and followed him. They walked for two hours, the Disan setting a cruel pace, before they reached a wasteland of jumbled rock. The native pointed to the highest tower of sand-eroded stone. “Wait near this,” he said. “Someone will come for you.” He watched while Brion placed the girl’s still body in the shade, and passed over the vaede for the last time. Just before leaving he turned back, hesitating.

“My name is ... Ulv,” he said. Then he was gone.

Brion did what he could to make Lea comfortable, but it was very little. If she didn’t get medical attention soon she would be dead. Dehydration and shock were uniting to destroy her.

VIII

Just before sunset Brion heard clanking, and the throbbing whine of a sandcar's engine coming from the west.

With each second the noise grew louder, coming their way. The tracks squeaked as the car turned around the rock spire, obviously seeking them out. A large carrier, big as a truck. It stopped before them in a cloud of its own dust and the driver kicked the door open.

"Get in here—and fast!" the man shouted. "You're letting in all the heat." He gunned the engine, ready to kick in the gears, looking at them irritatedly.

Ignoring the driver's nervous instructions, Brion carefully placed Lea on the rear seat before he pulled the door shut. The car surged forward instantly, a blast of icy air pouring from the air-cooling vents. It wasn't cold in the vehicle—but the temperature was at least forty degrees lower than the outer air. Brion covered Lea with all their extra clothing to prevent any further shock to her system. The driver, hunched over the wheel and driving with an intense speed, hadn't said a word to them since they had entered.

Brion looked up as another man stepped from the engine compartment in the rear of the car. He was thin, harried looking. Pointing a gun.

"Who are you," he said, without a trace of warmth in his voice.

It was a strange reception, but Brion was beginning to realize that Dis was a strange planet. He sat, relaxed and unmoving, keeping his voice pitched low. The other man chewed at his lip nervously and Brion didn't want to startle him into pulling the trigger.

"My name is Brandd. We landed from space two nights ago and have been walking in the desert ever since. Now don't get excited and shoot the gun when I tell you this—but both Vion and Ihjel are dead."

The man with the gun gasped, his eyes widened. The driver threw a single frightened look over his shoulder then turned quickly back to the wheel. Brion's probe had hit its mark. If these men weren't from the Cultural Relationships Foundation, they at least knew a lot about it. It seemed safe to assume they were C.R.F. men.

"When they were shot the girl and I escaped. We were trying to reach the city and contact you. You are from the Foundation, aren't you?"

"Yes. Of course," the man said, lowering the gun. He stared glassy-eyed into space for a moment, nervously working his teeth against his lip. Startled at his own inattention he raised the gun again.

"If you're Brandd, there's something I want to know." Rummaging in his breast pocket with his free hand he brought out a yellow message form. He moved his lips as he reread the message. "Now answer me—if you can—what are the last three events in the"—he took a quick look at the paper again—"in the Twenties?"

"Chess finals, rifle prone position and fencing playoffs. Why?"

The man grunted and slid the pistol back into its holder, satisfied. "I'm Faussel," he said, and waved the message at Brion. "This is Ihjel's last will and testament, relayed

to us by the Nyjord blockade control. He thought he was going to die and he sure was right. Passed on his job to you. You're in charge. I was Mervv's second-in-command, until he was poisoned. I was supposed to work for Ihjel and now I guess I'm yours. At least until tomorrow when we'll have everything packed and get off this hell planet?"

"What do you mean tomorrow?" Brion asked. "It's three days to deadline and we still have a job to do."

Faussel had dropped heavily into one of the seats and he sprang to his feet again, clutching the seat back to keep his balance in the swaying car.

"Three days, three weeks, three minutes—what difference does it make?" His voice rose shrilly with each word and he had to make a definite effort to master himself before he could go on. "Look. You don't know anything about this. You just came and that's your bad luck. My bad luck is being assigned to this death trap and watching the depraved and filthy things the natives do. And trying to be polite to them even when they are killing my friends, and those Nyjord bombers up there with their hands on the triggers. One of those bombardiers is going to start thinking about home and about the cobalt bombs down here and he's going to press that button—deadline or no deadline."

"Sit down, Faussel. Sit down and take a rest." There was sympathy in Brion's voice—but also the firmness of an order. Faussel swayed for a second longer, then collapsed. He sat with his cheek against the window, eyes closed. A pulse throbbed visibly in his temple and his lips worked. Under too much tension for too long a time.

This was the atmosphere that hung heavily in the air at the C.R.F. building when they arrived. Despair and defeat. The doctor was the only one who didn't share this mood as he bustled Lea off to the clinic with prompt efficiency. He obviously had enough patients to keep his mind occupied. With the others the feeling of depression was unmistakable. From the first instant they had driven through the automatic garage door Brion had swum in this miasma of defeat. It was omnipresent and hard to ignore.

As soon as he had eaten he went with Faussel into what was to have been Ihjel's office. Through the transparent walls he could see the staff packing the records, crating them for shipment. Faussel seemed less nervous now that he was no longer in command. Brion rejected any idea he had of letting the man know that he was only a green novice in the Foundation. He was going to need all the authority he could muster, since they would undoubtedly hate him for what he was going to do.

"Better take notes of this Faussel, and have it typed. I'll sign it." The printed words always carried the most authority. "All preparations for leaving are to be stopped at once. Records are to be returned to the files. We are going to stay here just as long as we have clearance from the Nyjorders. If this operation is unsuccessful, we will all leave together when the time expires. We will take whatever personal baggage we can carry by hand, everything else stays here. Perhaps you don't realize we are here to save a planet—not file cabinets full of papers." Out of the corner of his eye he saw Faussel flush, then angrily transcribe his notes. "As soon as that is typed bring it back. And all the reports as to what has been accomplished on this project. That will be all for now."

Faussel stamped out and a minute later Brion saw the shocked, angry looks from the workers in the outer office. Turning his back to them he opened the drawers in the

desk, one after another. The top drawer was empty, except for a sealed envelope. It was addressed to Winner Ihjel.

Brion looked at it thoughtfully, then ripped it open. The letter inside was handwritten.

Ihjel:

I've had the official word that you are on the way to relieve me and I am forced to admit I feel only an intense satisfaction. You've had the experience on these outlaw planets and can get along with the odd types. I have been specializing in research for the last twenty years, and the only reason I was appointed planetary supervisor on Nyjord was because of the observation and application facilities. I'm the research type not the office type, no one has ever denied that.

You're going to have trouble with the staff, so you had better realize that they are all compulsory volunteers. Half are clerical people from my staff. The others a mixed bag of whoever was close enough to be pulled in on this crash assignment. It developed so fast we never saw it coming. And I'm afraid we've done little or nothing to stop it. We can't get access to the natives here, not in the slightest. It's frightening! They don't fit! I've done Poisson Distributions on a dozen different factors and none of them can be equated. The Pareto Extrapolations don't work. Our field men can't even talk to the natives and two have been killed trying. The ruling class is unapproachable and the rest just keep their mouths shut and walk away.

I'm going to take a chance and try to talk to Lig-magte, perhaps I can make him see sense. I doubt if it will work and there is a chance he will try violence with me, the nobility here are very prone to violence. If I get back all right, you won't see this note. Otherwise—good-by Ihjel, try to do a better job than I did.

Aston Mervv

P.S. There is a problem with the staff. They are supposed to be saviors, but without exception they all loathe the Disans. I'm afraid I do, too.

Brion ticked off the relevant points in the letter. He had to find some way of discovering what Pareto Extrapolations were—without uncovering his own lack of knowledge. The staff would vanish in five minutes if they knew how green he was at the job. Poisson Distribution made more sense. It was used in physics as the unchanging probability of an event that would be true at all times. Such as the number of particles that would be given off by a lump radioactive matter during a short period. From the way Mervv used it in his letter it looked as if the Societies people had found measurable applications in societies and groups—at least on other planets. None of the rules seemed to be working on Dis. Ihjel had admitted that, and Mervv's death had proven it. Brion wondered who this Lig-magte was who appeared to have killed Mervv.

A forged cough broke through Brion's concentration, and he realized that Faussel had been standing in front of his desk for some minutes. When Brion looked up at the man he was mopping perspiration from his face.

"Your air conditioner seems to be out of order," he said. "Should I have the mechanic look at it?"

“There’s nothing wrong with the machine, I’m just adapting to Dis climate. Anything else, Faussel?”

The assistant had a doubting look that he didn’t succeed in hiding. He also had trouble believing the literal truth. He placed the small stack of file folders on the desk.

“These are the reports to date, everything we have uncovered about the Disans. It’s not very much; however, considering the antisocial attitudes on this lousy world, it is the best we could do.” A sudden thought hit him, and his eyes narrowed slyly. “It can’t be helped, but some of the staff have been wondering out loud about that native that contacted us. How did you get him to help you? We’ve never gotten to first base with these people and as soon as you land you have one working for you. You can’t stop people from thinking about it, you being a newcomer and a stranger. After all, it looks a little odd....” He broke off in mid-sentence as Brion looked up in a cold fury.

“I can’t stop people from thinking about it—but I can stop them from talking. Our job is to contact the Disans and end this suicidal war. I have done more in one day than all of you have done since you arrived. I have accomplished this because I am better at my work than the rest of you. That is all the information any of you are going to receive. You are dismissed.”

White with anger, Faussel turned on his heel and stamped out. Out to spread the word about what a slave-driver the new director was. They would then all hate him passionately which was just the way he wanted it. He couldn’t risk exposure as the tyro he was. And perhaps a new emotion, other than disgust and defeat, might jar them into a little action. They certainly couldn’t do any worse than they had been doing.

It was a frightening amount of responsibility. For the first time since setting foot on this barbaric planet Brion had time to stop and think. He was taking an awful lot upon himself. He knew nothing about this world, nor about the powers involved in the conflict. Here he sat pretending to be in charge of an organization he had first heard about only a few weeks earlier. It was a frightening situation. Should he slide out from under?

There was just one possible answer, and that was *no*. Until he found someone else who could do better, he seemed to be the one best suited for the job. And Ihjel’s opinion had to count for something. Brion had felt the surety of the man’s convictions that Brion was the only one who might possibly succeed in this difficult spot.

Let it go at that. If he had any qualms, it would be best to put them behind him. Aside from everything else there was a primary bit of loyalty involved. Ihjel had been an Anvharian and a Winner. Maybe it was a provincial attitude to hold in this great big universe—Anvhar was certainly far enough away from here—but honor is very important to a man who must stand alone. He had a debt to Ihjel and he was going to pay it off.

Once the decision had been made he felt easier. There was an intercom on the desk in front of him and he leaned with a heavy thumb on the button labeled *Faussel*.

“Yes?” Even through the speaker the man’s voice was cold and efficient with ill-concealed hatred.

“Who is Lig-magte? And did the former director ever return from seeing him?”

“Magte is a title that means roughly noble or lord, Lig-magte is the local overlord. He has an ugly stoneheap of a building just outside the city. He seems to be the mouthpiece for the group of magter that are pushing this idiotic war. As to your second question I have to answer yes and no. We found Director Mervv’s head outside the door next morning with all the skin gone. We knew it was him because the doctor identified the bridgework in his mouth. *Do you understand?*”

All pretense of control had vanished and Faussel almost shrieked the last words. They were all close to cracking up, if he was any example. Brion broke in quickly.

“That will be all, Faussel. Just get word to the doctor that I would like to see him as soon as I can.” He broke the connection and opened the first of the folders. By the time the doctor called he had skimmed the reports and was reading the relevant ones in greater detail. Putting on his warm coat he went through the outer office. The few workers still on duty turned their backs in frigid silence.

Dr. Stine had a pink and shiny bald head that rose above a thick black beard. Brion liked him at once. Anyone with enough firmness of mind to keep a beard in this climate was a pleasant exception after what he had met so far.

“How’s the new patient, doctor?”

Stine combed his beard with stubby fingers before answering. “Diagnosis: heat-syncope. Prognosis: complete recovery. Condition fair, considering the dehydration and extensive sunburn. I’ve treated the burns and a saline drip is taking care of the other. She just missed going into heat-shock. I have her under sedation now.”

“I’d like to have her up and helping me tomorrow morning. Could she do this—with stimulants or drugs?”

“She could—but I don’t like it. There might be side factors, perhaps long-standing debilitation. It’s a chance.”

“A chance we will have to take. In less than seventy hours this planet is due for destruction. In attempting to avert that tragedy I’m expendable as is everyone else here. Agreed?”

The doctor grunted deep in his beard and looked Brion’s immense frame up and down. “Agreed,” he said, almost happily. “It is a distinct pleasure to see something beside black defeat around here. I’ll go along with you.”

“Well you can help me right now. I checked the personnel roster and discovered that out of the twenty-eight people working here there isn’t a physical scientist of any kind—other than yourself.”

“A scruffy bunch of button-pushers and theoreticians. Not worth a damn for field work, the whole bunch of them!” The doctor toed the floor switch on a waste receptacle and spat into it with feeling.

“Then I’m going to depend on you for some straight answers,” Brion said. “This is an un-standard operation and the standard techniques just don’t begin to make sense. Even Poisson Distributions and Pareto Extrapolations don’t apply here.” Stine nodded agreement and Brion relaxed a bit. He had just relieved himself of his entire knowledge of Societics and it had sounded authentic. “The more I look at it the more I believe that this is a physical problem; something to do with the exotic and massive

adjustments the Disans have made to this hellish environment. Could this tie up in any way with their absolutely suicidal attitude towards the cobalt bombs?"

"Could it? Could it?" Dr. Stine paced the floor rapidly on his stocky legs, twining his fingers behind his back. "You are bloody well right it could. Someone is thinking at last and not just punching bloody numbers into a machine and sitting and scratching while waiting for the screen to light up with the answers. Do you know how Disans exist?" Brion shook his head no. "The fools here think it disgusting, but I call it fascinating. They have found ways to join in a symbiotic relationship with the life forms on this planet. Even a parasitic relationship. You must realize, that living organisms will do anything to survive. Castaways at sea will drink any liquid at all in their search for water. Disgust at this is only the attitude of the over-protected who have never experienced extreme thirst or hunger. Well, here on Dis you have a planet of castaways."

Stine opened the door of the pharmacy. "This talk of thirst makes me dry." With economically efficient motions he poured grain alcohol into a beaker, thinned it with distilled water and flavored it with some flavor crystals from a bottle. He filled two glasses and handed Brion one. It didn't taste bad at all.

"How do you mean parasitic, doctor? Aren't we all parasites of the lower life forms? Meat animals, vegetables and such?"

"No, no—you miss the point! I speak of parasitic in the exact meaning of the word. You must realize that to a biologist there is no real difference between a parasitism, symbiosis, mutualism, biontergasy, commensalism—"

"Stop, stop!" Brion said. "Those are just meaningless sounds to me. If that is what makes this planet tick, I'm beginning to see why the rest of the staff has that lost feeling."

"It is just a matter of degree of the same thing. Look. You have a kind of crustacean living in the lakes here, very much like an ordinary crab. It has large claws in which it holds anemones, tentacled sea animals with no power of motion. The crustacean waves these around to gather food, and eats the pieces they capture that are too big for them. This is biontergasy, two creatures living and working together, yet each capable of existing alone. Now, this same crustacean has a parasite living under its shell, a degenerated form of a snail that has lost all powers of movement. A true parasite that takes food from its host's body and gives nothing in return. Inside this snail's gut there is a protozoan that lives off the snail's ingested food. Yet this little organism is not a parasite as you might think at first, but a symbiote. It takes food from the snail, but at the same time it secretes a chemical that aids the snail's digestion of the food. Do you get the picture? All these life forms exist in a complicated interdependence."

Brion frowned in concentration, sipping at the drink. "It's making some kind of sense now. Symbiosis, parasitism and all the rest are just ways of describing variations of the same basic process of living together. And there is probably a grading and shading between some of these that make the exact relationship hard to define."

"Precisely. Existence is so difficult on this world that the competing forms have almost died out. There are still a few left, preying off the others. It was the co-operating and interdependent life forms that really won out in the race for survival. I say life forms with intent; the creatures here are mostly a mixture of plant and

animal, like the lichens you have elsewhere. The Disans have a creature they call a vaede that they use for water when traveling. It has rudimentary powers of motion from its animal parts, yet uses photosynthesis and stores water like a plant. When the Disans drink from it the thing taps their blood stream for food elements.”

“I know,” Brion said wryly. “I drank from one. You can see my scars. I’m beginning to comprehend how the Disans fit into the physical pattern of their world, and I realize it must have all kinds of psychological effects on them. Do you think this has any effect on their social organization?”

“An important one. But maybe I’m making too many suppositions now, perhaps your researchers upstairs can tell you better, after all this is their field.”

Brion had studied the reports on the social setup and not one word of them made sense. They were a solid maze of unknown symbols and cryptic charts. “Please continue, doctor,” he insisted. “The Societics reports are valueless so far. There are factors missing. You are the only one I have talked to so far who can give me any intelligent reports or answers.”

“All right then—be it on your own head. The way I see it you’ve got no society here at all, just a bunch of rugged individualists. Each one for himself, getting nourishment from the other life forms of the planet. If they have a society, it is orientated towards the rest of the planetary life—instead of towards other human beings. Perhaps that’s why your figures don’t make sense. They are setup for human societies. In their relations with each other these people are completely different.”

“What about the magter, the upper-class types who build castles and are causing all this trouble?”

“I have no explanation,” Dr. Stine grumbled. “My theories hold water and seem logical enough up to this point. But the magter are the exception and I have no idea why. They are completely different from the rest of the Disans. Argumentative, bloodthirsty, looking for planetary conquest instead of peace. They aren’t rulers, not in the real sense. They hold power because nobody else wants it. They grant mining concessions to offworlders because they are the only ones with a sense of property. Maybe I’m going out on a limb. But if you can find out *why* they are so different you may be onto the clue to our difficulties.”

For the first time since his arrival Brion began to feel a touch of enthusiasm. Plus the remote possibility that there might even be a solution to the deadly problem. He drained his glass and stood up. “I hope you’ll wake your patient early, doctor. You might be as interested in talking to her as I am. If what you told me is true, she could well be our key to the answer. Her name is Professor Lea Morees and she is just out from Earth with degrees in exobiology and anthropology, and has a head stuffed with vital facts.”

“Wonderful!” Stine said. “I shall take care of the head not only because it is so pretty but because of its knowledge. Though we totter on the edge of atomic destruction I have a strange feeling of optimism—for the first time since I landed on this planet.”

IX

The guard inside the front entrance of the Foundation building jumped at the thunderous noise and reached for his gun. He dropped his hand sheepishly when he realized it was only a sneeze—though a gargantuan one. Brion came up, sniffing, huddling down into his coat. “I’m going out before I catch pneumonia,” he said. The guard saluted dumbly and after checking his proximity detector screens he turned off the light and opened the door. Brion slipped out and the heavy portal thudded shut behind him. The street was still warm from the heat of the day and he sighed happily and opened his coat.

This was partially a reconnaissance trip—and partly to get warmed up. There was little else he could do in the building, the staff had long since retired. He had slept himself, for half an hour, and now was refreshed and ready to work. All of the reports he could understand had been read and reread until they were memorized. He could use the time now, while the rest of them were asleep, to get better acquainted with the main city of Dis.

As he walked the dark streets he realized how alien the Disan way of life was to everything he knew. This city—Hovedstad—literally meant “main place” in the native language. And that’s all it was. It was only the presence of the offworlders that made it into a city. Building after building, standing deserted, bore the names of mining companies, traders, space transporters. None of them were occupied now. Some still had lights burning, switched on by automatic apparatus, others were as dark as the Disan structures. There weren’t many of these native constructions and they seemed out of place among the rammed earth and prefab offworld buildings. Brion examined one that was dimly illumined by the light on the corner of VEGAN SMELTERS, LTD.

It consisted of a single large room, resting flat on the ground. There were no windows and the whole thing appeared to have been constructed of some sort of woven material plastered with stone-hard mud. There was nothing blocking the door and he was thinking seriously of going in when he became aware that he was being followed.

It was only a slight noise, almost lost in the night. Normally it would never have been noticed, but tonight Brion was listening with his entire body. Someone was behind him, swallowed up in the pools of darkness. Brion shrank back against the wall. There was very little chance this could be anyone but a Disan. He had a sudden memory of Mervv’s severed head as it had been discovered outside the door.

Ihjel had helped him train his empathetic sense and he reached out with it. It was difficult working in the dark, he could be sure of nothing. Was he getting a reaction—or just wishing for one? Why did it have a ring of familiarity to it. A sudden idea struck him.

“Ulv,” he said, very softly. “This is Brion.” He crouched, ready for any attack.

“I know,” a voice said softly in the night. “Do not talk. Walk in the direction you were going before.”

Asking questions now would accomplish nothing. Brion turned instantly and did as he was bidden. The buildings grew farther apart until he realized from the sand underfoot that he was back in the planet-wide desert. It could be a trap—he hadn’t recognized the voice behind the whisper—yet he still had to take this chance. A

darker shape appeared in the dark night near him, and a burning hot hand touched his arm lightly.

“We can talk here.” The words were louder and this time Brion recognized the voice. “I have brought you to the city as I told you I would. Have you done as you said you would?”

“I am doing it—but I need your help, Ulv. It is your life that needs saving and you must do your part—”

“What is truth?” Ulv interrupted. “All I hear is difference. The magter have done well though they live the wrong way. I myself have had bronze from them and there is water just for going. Now they tell us they are getting a different world for us all from the sky people and that is good, too. Your people are the essence of evil and there is no harm in killing them.”

“Why didn’t you kill me when you had the chance?”

“I could have. But there is something more important. What is truth? What is on the papers that fall from the sky?” He sighed once, deeply. “There are black marks on them that some can tell meaning from. What did the ship voices mean when they said the magter were destroying the world and must be put down? I did not hear the voices, but I know one who did and he went to talk to Lig-magte which was foolish, because he was killed as he should have known he would be.”

“The ships were telling you the truth, Ulv. The magter have bombs that will destroy Nyjord—the next planet—there.” He pointed to the star newly rising in the east. “The bombs cannot be stopped. Unless the bombs are found or the magter drop their suicidal plans, this planet will burst into flames in three days time.”

Ulv turned and started away. Brion called after him. “Wait. Will you help me stop this? How can I find you again?”

“I must think,” the Disan answered still moving away. “I will find you.”

He was gone. Brion shivered in the sudden chill of the air, and wrapped the coat tighter around him. He started walking back towards the warmer streets of the city.

It was dawn when he reached the Foundation building; a new guard was at the front entrance. No amount of hammering or threats could convince the man to open until Faussel came down, yawning and blinking with sleep. He was starting some complaint when Brion cut him off curtly and ordered him to finish dressing and report for work at once. Still feeling elated he steamed into his office and cursed the overly-efficient character who had turned on his air conditioner to chill the room again. When he turned it off this time he removed enough of the vital parts to keep it out of order for the duration.

When Faussel came in he was still yawning behind his fist. Obviously a low morning-sugar type. “Before you fall on your face, go out and get some coffee,” Brion said. “Two cups. I’ll have a cup, too.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Faussel said, drawing himself up stiffly. “I’ll call the canteen if you wish some.” He said it in the iciest tone he could manage this early in the morning.

In his enthusiasm Brion had forgotten the hate campaign he had directed against himself. “Suit yourself,” he snapped, getting back into the role. “But the next time

you yawn there'll be a negative entry in your service record. If that's clear—you can brief me on this organization's visible relations with the Disans. How do they take us?"

Faussel choked and swallowed a yawn. "I believe they look on the C.R.F people as some species of simpleton, sir. They hate all offworlders, memory of their desertion has been passed on verbally for generations. So by their one-to-one logic we should either hate back or go away. We stay instead. And give them food, water, medicine and artifacts. Because of this they let us remain on sufferance. I imagine they consider us do-gooder idiots, and, as long as we cause no trouble, they'll let us stay." He was struggling miserably to suppress a yawn, so Brion turned his back and gave him a chance to get it out.

"What about the Nyjorders? How much do they know of our work?" Brion looked out the window at dusty buildings, outlined in purple against the violent colors of the desert sunrise.

"Nyjord is a co-operating planet, and has full knowledge at all executive levels. They are giving us all the aid they can."

"Well now is the time to ask for more. Can I contact the commander of the blockading fleet?"

"There is a scrambler connection right through to him. I'll set it up." Faussel bent over the desk and punched a number into the phone controls. The screen flowed with the black and white patterns of the scrambler.

"That's all, Faussel. I want privacy for this talk. What's the commander's name?"

"Professor Krafft, he's a physicist. They have no military men at all, so they called him in for the construction of the bombs and energy weapons. He's still in charge." Faussel yawned extravagantly as he went out the door.

The professor-commander was very old, with wispy gray hair and a network of wrinkles surrounding his eyes. His image shimmered then cleared as the scrambler units aligned.

"You must be Brion Brandd," he said. "I have to tell you how sorry we all are that your friend Ihjel—and the two others—had to die. After coming so far to help us. I'm sure you are very happy to have had a friend like that."

"Why ... yes, of course," Brion said, reaching for the scattered fragments of his thought processes. It took an effort to remember the first conflict now that he was worrying about the death of a planet. "Very kind of you to mention it. But I would like to find out a few things about you, if I could."

"Anything at all, we are at your disposal. Before we begin though, I shall pass on the thanks of our council for your aid in joining us. Even if we are eventually forced to drop the bombs, we shall never forget that your organization did everything possible to avert the disaster."

Once again Brion was caught off balance. For an instant he wondered if Krafft was being insincere, then recognized the baseness of this thought. The completeness of the man's humanity was obvious and compelling. The thought passed through Brion's mind that now he had an additional reason for wanting the war ended without destruction on either side. He very much wanted to visit Nyjord and see these people on their home grounds.

Professor Krafft waited, patiently and silently, while Brion pulled his thoughts together and answered. "I still hope that this thing can be stopped in time. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I want to see Lig-magte and I thought it would be better if I had a legitimate reason. Are you in contact with him?"

Krafft shook his head. "No, not really in contact. When this trouble started I sent him a transceiver so we could talk directly. But he has delivered his ultimatum, speaking for the *magter*. The only terms he will hear are unconditional surrender. His receiver is on but he has said that is the only message he will answer."

"Not much chance of him ever being told that," Brion said.

"There was—at one time. I hope you realize Brion that the decision to bomb Dis was not easily arrived at. A great many people—myself included—voted for unconditional surrender. We lost the vote by a very small margin."

Brion was getting used to these philosophical body blows and he rolled with the punches now. "Are there any of your people left on this planet? Or do you have any troops I can call on for help? This is still a remote possibility, but, if I do find out where the bombs or the launcher are, a surprise raid would knock them out."

"We have no people left in Hovedstad now—all the ones who weren't evacuated were killed. But there are commando teams standing by here to make a landing if the weapons are detected. The Disans must depend on secrecy to protect their armament since we have both the manpower and the technology to reach any objective. We also have technicians and other volunteers looking for the weapon sites. They have not been successful as yet, and most of them were killed soon after landing." Krafft hesitated for a moment. "There is another group that you should know about, you will need all the factors. There are some of our people in the desert outside of Hovedstad. We do not officially approve of them, though they have a good deal of popular support. Mostly young men, operating as raiders, killing and destroying with very little compunction. They are attempting to uncover the weapons by sheer strength of arms."

This was the best news yet. Brion controlled his voice and kept his expression calm when he spoke. "I don't know how far I can stretch your co-operation—but could you possibly tell me how to contact them?"

Krafft allowed himself a small smile. "I'll give you the wave length on which you can reach their radio. They call themselves the 'Nyjord Army.' When you talk to them you can do me a favor. Pass on a message. Just to prove things aren't bad enough—they've become a little worse. One of our technical crews has detected jump-space energy transmissions in the planetary crust. The Disans are apparently testing their projector, sooner than we had estimated. Our deadline has been revised by one day. I'm afraid there are only two days left before you must evacuate." His eyes were large with compassion. "I'm sorry. I know this will make your job that much harder."

Brion didn't want to think about the loss of a full day from his already small deadline. "Have you told the Disans this as yet?"

"No," Krafft told him. "The decision was reached just a few minutes before your call. It is going on the radio to Lig-magte now."

"Can you cancel the transmission and let me take the message in person?"

“I can do that,” Krafft thought for a moment, “but it would surely mean your death at their hands. They have no hesitation in killing any of our people. I would prefer to send it by radio.”

“If you do that, you will be interfering with my plans, and perhaps destroying them under the guise of saving my life. Isn’t my life my own—to dispose of as I will?”

For the first time, Professor Krafft was upset. “I’m sorry, terribly sorry. I’m letting my concerns and worry wash over into my public affairs. Of course you may do as you please. I could never think of stopping you.” He turned and said something inaudible offscreen. “The call is cancelled. The responsibility is yours. All our wishes for success go with you. End of transmission.”

“End of transmission,” Brion said, and the screen went dark.

“Faussel!” he shouted into the intercom. “Get me the best and fastest sandcar we have, a driver who knows his way around and two men, who can handle a gun and know how to take orders. We’re going to get some positive action at last.”

X

"It's suicide," the taller guard grumbled.

"Mine not yours, so don't worry about it," Brion snapped at him. "Your job is to remember your orders and keep them straight. Now—let's hear them again."

The guard rolled his eyes up in silent rebellion and repeated in a toneless voice. "We stay here in the car and keep the motor running while you go inside the stone pile there. We don't let anybody in the car and we try and keep them clear of the car—short of shooting them that is. We don't come in no matter what happens or what it looks like, but wait for you here. Unless you call on the radio in which case we come in with the automatics going and shoot the place up and it doesn't matter who we hit. This will only be used as a last resort."

"See if you can't arrange that last resort thing if you can," the other guard said, patting the heavy blue barrel of his weapon.

"I meant that *last* resort," Brion said angrily. "If any guns go off without my permission, you will pay for it and pay with your necks. I want that clearly understood. You are here as a rear guard and a base for me to get back to. This is my operation and mine alone—unless I call you in. Understood?"

He waited until all three men had nodded in agreement, then checked the charge on his gun. Fully loaded. It would be foolish not to go in armed. But he had to. One gun wouldn't save him. He put it aside. The button radio on his collar was working and had a strong enough signal to get through any number of walls. He took off his coat, threw open the door and stepped out into the searing brilliance of the Disan noon.

There was only the desert silence, broken by the steady throb of the car's motor behind him. Stretching away to the horizon in every direction were the eternal deserts of sand. The keep stood nearby, solitary, a massive pile of black rocks. Brion plodded closer, watching for any motion from the walls. Nothing stirred. The high-walled, irregularly shaped construction sat in a ponderous silence. Brion was sweating now, only partially from the heat.

He circled the thing, looking for a gate. There wasn't one at ground level. A slanting cleft in the stone could be climbed easily, but it seemed incredible that this might be the only entrance. A complete circuit proved that it was. Brion looked unhappily at the slanting and broken ramp, then cupped his hands and shouted loudly.

"I'm coming up. Your radio doesn't work any more. I'm bringing the message from Nyjord that you have been waiting to hear." A slight bending of the truth without fracturing it. There was no answer. Just the hiss of wind-blown sand against the rock and the mutter of the car in the background. He started to climb.

The rock underfoot was crumbling and he had to watch where he put his feet. At the same time he fought a constant impulse to look up, watching for anything falling from above. Nothing happened. When he reached the top of the wall he was breathing hard, sweat moistened his body. There was still no one in sight. He stood on an unevenly shaped wall that appeared to circle the building. Instead of a courtyard inside it, the wall was the outer face of the structure, the domed roof rising from it. At varying intervals dark openings gave access to the interior. When Brion

looked down the sandcar was just a dun-colored bump in the desert, already far behind him.

Stooping, he went through the nearest door. There was still no one in sight. The room inside was something out of a madman's funhouse. It was higher than it was wide, irregular, and more like a hallway than a room. At one end it merged into an incline that became a stairwell. The other ended in a hole that vanished in darkness below. Light of sorts filtered in through slots and holes drilled into the thick stone wall. Everything was built of the same crumble-textured but strong rock. Brion took the stairs. After a number of blind passages and wrong turns he saw a stronger light ahead. There was food, metal, even artifacts of the unusual Disan design in the different rooms he passed through. Yet no people. The light ahead grew stronger as he approached, the passageway opening and swelling out until it met the larger central chamber.

This was the heart of the strange structure. All the rooms, passageways and halls existed just to give form to this gigantic hall. The walls rose sharply, the room circular in cross section and growing narrower towards the top. It was a truncated cone since there was no ceiling; a hot blue disk of sky cast light on the floor below.

On the floor stood a knot of men staring at Brion.

Out of the corner of his eyes, and with the very periphery of his consciousness, he was aware of the rest of the room. Barrels, stores, machinery, a radio transceiver, various bundles and heaps that made no sense at first glance. There was no time to look closer. Every fraction of his attention was focused on the muffled and hooded men.

He had found the enemy.

Everything that happened to him so far on Dis had been preparation for this moment. The attack in the desert, the escape, the dreadful heat of sun and sand. All this had tempered and prepared him. It had been nothing in itself. Now the battle would begin in earnest.

None of this was conscious. His fighter's reflexes bent his shoulders, curved his hands before him as he walked softly in balance, ready to spring in any direction. Yet none of this was really necessary. All the danger so far was nonphysical. When he gave this thought conscious thought he stopped, startled. What was wrong here? None of the men had moved or made a sound. How could he even know they were men? They were so muffled and wrapped in cloth that only their eyes were exposed.

No doubt existed in Brion's mind. In spite of muffled cloth and silence he knew them for what they were. The eyes were empty of expression and unmoving, yet filled with the same negative emptiness as a bird of prey. They could look on life, death, and the rending of flesh with the same lack of interest and compassion. All this Brion knew in an instant of time, without words being spoken. Between the time he lifted one foot and walked a step he understood what he had to face. There could be no doubt, not to an empathetic.

From the group of silent men poured a frost-white wave of unemotion. An empathetic shares what other men feel. He gets his knowledge of their reaction by sensing lightly their emotions, the surges of interest, hate, love, fear, desire, the sweep of large and small sensations that accompany all thought and action. The

empathetic is always aware of this constant and silent surge, whether he makes the effort to understand it or not. He is like a man glancing across the open pages of a tableful of books. He can see that the type, words, paragraphs, thoughts are there even without focusing his attention to understand any of it.

Then how does the man feel when he glances at the open books and sees only blank pages? The books are there—the words are not. He turns the pages of one, then others, flipping pages, searching for meaning. There is no meaning. All of the pages are blank.

This was the way in which the magter were blank, without emotions. There was a barely sensed surge and return that must have been neural impulses on a basic level. The automatic adjustments of nerve and muscle that keep an organism alive. Nothing more. Brion reached for other sensations and there was nothing there to grasp. Either these men were apparently without emotions or they were able to block them from his detection, it was impossible to tell which.

Very little time has passed in the objective world while Brion made these discoveries. The knot of men still looked at him, silent and unmoving. They weren't expectant, their attitude could not have been called interest. But he had come to them and now they waited to find out why. Any questions or statements they spoke would be redundant, so they didn't speak. The responsibility was his.

"I have come to talk with Lig-magte. Who is he?" Brion didn't like the tiny sound his voice made in the immense room.

One of the men gave a slight motion to draw attention to himself. None of the others moved. They still waited.

"I have a message for you," Brion said, talking slowly to fill the silence of the room and the emptiness of his thoughts. This had to be handled right. But what was right? "I'm from the Foundation in the city, as you undoubtedly know. I've been talking to the people on Nyjord. They have a message for you."

The silence grew longer. Brion had no intention of making this a monologue. He needed facts to operate, to form an opinion. Looking at the silent forms was telling him nothing. Time stretched taut and finally Lig-magte spoke.

"The Nyjorders are going to surrender."

It was an impossibly strange sentence. Brion had never realized before how much of the content of speech was made up of emotion. If the man had given it a positive emphasis, perhaps said it with enthusiasm, it would have meant, "Success! The enemy is going to surrender!" This wasn't the meaning.

With a rising inflection on the end it would have been a question. "Are they going to surrender?" It was neither of these. The sentence carried no other message than that contained in the simplest meanings of the separate words. It had intellectual connotations, but these could only be gained from past knowledge, not from the sound of the words. There was only one message they were prepared to receive from Nyjord. Therefore, Brion was bringing the message. If that was not the message Brion was bringing, the men here were not interested.

This was the vital fact. If they were not interested he could have no further value to them. Since he came from the enemy he was the enemy. Therefore, he would be killed. Because this was vital to his existence Brion took the time to follow the thought through. It made logical sense—and logic was all he could depend on now.

He could be talking to robots or alien creatures for the amount of human response he was receiving.

“You can’t win this war—all you can do is hurry your own deaths.” He said this with as much conviction as he could, realizing at the same time that it was wasted effort. No flicker of response stirred in the men before him. “The Nyjorders know you have cobalt bombs, and they have detected your jump-space projector. They can’t take any more chances. They have pushed the deadline closer by an entire day. There are one and a half days left before the bombs fall and you are all destroyed. Do you realize what that means—”

“Is that the message?” Lig-magte asked.

“Yes,” Brion said.

Two things saved his life then. He had guessed what would happen as soon as they had his message, though he hadn’t been sure. But even the suspicion had put him on his guard. This, combined with the reflexes of a Winner of the Twenties, was barely enough to enable him to survive.

From frozen mobility Lig-magte had catapulted into headlong attack. As he leaped forward he drew a curved, double-edged blade from under his robes. It plunged unerringly through the spot where Brion’s body had been an instant before.

There had been no time to tense his muscles and jump, just space to relax them and fall to one side. His reasoning mind joined the battle as he hit the floor. Lig-magte plunged by him, turning and bringing the knife down at the same time. Brion’s foot lashed out and caught the other man’s leg, sending him sprawling.

They were both on their feet at the same instant, facing each other. Brion now had his hands clasped before him in the unarmed man’s best defense against a knife, the two arms protecting the body, the two hands joined to beat aside the knife arm from whichever direction it came. The Disan hunched low, flipped the knife quickly from hand to hand, then thrust it again at Brion’s midriff.

Only by the merest fractional margin did Brion evade the attack for the second time. Lig-magte fought with complete violence. Every action was as intense as possible, deadly and thorough. There could be only one end to this unequal contest if Brion stayed on the defensive. The man with the knife had to win.

With the next charge Brion changed tactics. He leaped inside the thrust, clutching for the knife arm. A burning slice of pain cut across his arm, then his fingers clutched the tendoned wrist. Clamped down hard, grinding shut, compressing with the tightening intensity of a closing vise.

It was all he could do to simply hold on. There was no science in it, just his greater strength from exercise and existence on a heavier planet. All of this strength went to his clutching hand, because he held his own life in that hand, forcing away the knife that wanted to terminate it forever. Nothing else mattered. Neither the frightening force of the knees that thudded into his body nor the hooked fingers that reached for his eyes to tear them out. He protected his face as well as he could, while the nails tore furrows through his flesh and the cut on his arm bled freely. These were only minor things to be endured. His life depended on the grasp of the fingers of his right hand.

There was a sudden immobility as he succeeded in clutching Lig-magte's other arm. It was a good grip and he could hold the arm immobilized. They had reached stasis, standing knee to knee, their faces only a few inches apart. The muffling cloth had fallen from the Disan's face during the struggle and empty, frigid eyes stared into Brion's. No flicker of emotion crossed the harsh planes of the other man's face. A great puckered white scar covered one cheek and pulled up a corner of the mouth in a cheerless grimace. It was false, there was still no expression here. Even when the pain must be growing more intense.

Brion was winning—if no one broke the impasse. His greater weight and strength counted now. The Disan would have to drop the knife before his arm was dislocated at the shoulder. He didn't do it. With sudden horror Brion realized that he wasn't going to drop it—no matter what happened.

A dull, hideous snap jerked through the Disan's body and the arm hung limp and dead. No expression crossed the other man's face. The knife was still locked in the fingers of the paralyzed hand. With his other hand Lig-magte reached across and started to pry the blade loose, ready to continue the battle one-handed. Brion raised his foot and kicked the knife free, sending it spinning across the room.

Lig-magte made a fist of his good hand and crashed it into Brion's body. He was still fighting, as if nothing had changed. Brion backed slowly away from the man. "Stop it," he said. "You can't win now. It's impossible." He called to the other men who were watching the unequal battle with expressionless immobility. No one answered him.

With a terrible sinking sensation Brion then realized what would happen and what he had to do. Lig-magte was as heedless of his own life as he was of the life of his planet. He would press the attack no matter what damage was done to him. Brion had an insane vision of him breaking the man's other arm, fracturing both his legs, and the limbless broken creature still coming forward. Crawling, rolling, teeth bared since they were the only remaining weapon.

There was only one way to end it. Brion feinted and the Lig-magte's arm moved clear of his body. The engulfing cloth was thin and through it Brion could see the outlines of the Disan's abdomen and rib cage. The clear location of the great nerve ganglion.

It was the death blow of the kara-te. Brion had never used it on a man. In practice he had broken heavy boards, splintering them instantly with the short, precise stroke. The stiffened hand moving forward in a sudden surge, all the weight and energy of his body concentrated in his joined fingertips. Plunging deep into the other's flesh.

Killing, not by accident or in sudden anger. Killing because this was the only way the battle could possibly end.

Like a ruined tower of flesh the Disan crumpled and fell.

Dripping blood, exhausted, Brion stood over the body of Lig-magte and stared at the dead man's allies.

Death filled the room.

XI

Facing the silent Disans, Brion's thoughts hurtled about in sweeping circles. There would be no more than an instant's tick of time before the magter avenged themselves bloodily and completely. He felt a fleeting regret for not having brought his gun, then abandoned the thought. There was no time for regrets—what could he do NOW.

The silent watchers hadn't attacked instantly, and Brion realized that they couldn't be positive yet that Lig-magte had been killed. Only Brion knew the deadliness of that blow. Their lack of knowledge might buy him a little more time.

"Lig-magte is unconscious, but will revive quickly," Brion said, pointing at the huddled body. As the eyes turned automatically to follow his finger, he began walking slowly towards the exit. "I did not want to do this, but he forced me to, because he wouldn't listen to reason. Now I have something else to show you, something that I hoped it would not be necessary to reveal."

He was saying the first words that came into his head, trying to keep them distracted as long as possible. He must only appear to be going across the room, that was the feeling he must generate. There was even time to stop for a second and straighten his rumpled clothing and brush the sweat from his eyes. Talking easily, walking slowly towards the hall out of the chamber. He was halfway there when the spell broke and the rush began. One of the magter knelt and touched the body, and shouted a single word.

"Dead."

Brion hadn't waited for the official announcement. At the first movement of feet he dived headlong for the shelter of the exit. There was a spatter of tiny missiles on the wall next to him and he had a brief glimpse of raised blowguns before the wall intervened. He went up the dimly-lit stairs five at a time.

The pack was just behind him, voiceless and deadly. He could not gain on them—if anything they closed the distance as he pushed his already tired body to the utmost. There was no subtlety or trick he could use now, just straightforward flight back the way he had come. A single slip on the irregular steps and it would be all over.

There was someone ahead of him. If the woman had waited a few seconds more, he would certainly have been killed. But instead of slashing at him as he went by the doorway she made the mistake of rushing to the center of the stairs, the knife ready to impale him as he came up. Without slowing Brion fell onto his hands and easily dodged under the blow. As he passed he twisted and seized her around the waist, picking her from the ground.

When her legs lifted from under her the woman screamed—the first human sound Brion had heard in this human anthill. His pursuers were just behind him, and he hurled the woman into them with all his strength. They fell in a tangle and Brion used the precious seconds gained to reach the top of the building.

There must have been other stairs and exits because one of the magter stood between Brion and the way down out of this trap. Armed and ready to kill him if he tried to pass.

As he ran towards the executioner, Brion flicked on his collar radio and shouted into it. "I'm in trouble here, can you—"

The guards in the car must have been waiting for this message. Before he had finished there was the thud of a high-velocity slug hitting flesh and the Disan spun and fell, blood soaking his shoulder. Brion leaped over him and headed for the ramp.

"The next one is me—hold your fire!" he called.

Both guards must have had their telescopic sights zeroed on the spot. They let Brion pass, then threw in a hail of semiautomatic fire that tore chunks from the stone and screamed away in noisy ricochets. Brion didn't try to see if anyone was braving this hail of covering fire; he concentrated his energies on making as quick and erratic a descent as he could. Above the sounds of the firing he heard the car motor howl as it leaped forward. With their careful aim spoiled, the gunners switched to full automatic and unleashed a hailstorm of flying metal that bracketed the top of the tower.

"Cease ... firing!" Brion gasped into the radio as he ran. The driver was good and timed his arrival with exactitude. The car reached the base of the tower at the same instant Brion did, and he burst through the door while it was still moving. No orders were necessary. He fell headlong onto a seat as the car swung in a dust-raising turn and ground into high gear back to the city.

Reaching over carefully, the tall guard gently extracted a bit of pointed wood and fluff from a fold of Brion's pants. He cracked open the car door, and just as delicately threw it out.

"I knew that thing didn't touch you," he said, "since you are still among the living. They got a poison on those blowgun darts that takes all of twelve seconds to work. Lucky."

Lucky! Brion was beginning to realize just how lucky he was to be out of the trap alive. With information. Now that he knew more about the magter he shuddered at his innocence in walking alone and unarmed into the tower. Skill had helped him survive—but better than average luck had been necessary. Curiosity had gotten him in, brashness and speed had taken him out. He was exhausted, battered and bloody—but cheerfully happy. The facts about the magter were shaping themselves into a theory that might explain their attempt at racial suicide. It just needed a little time to be put into shape.

A pain cut across his arm and he jumped, startled, pieces of his thoughts crashing into ruin around him. The gunner had cracked the first aid box and was swabbing his arm with antiseptic. The knife wound was long, but not deep. Brion shivered while the bandage was going on, then quickly slipped into his coat. The air conditioner whined industriously, bringing down the temperature.

There was no attempt to follow the car. When the black tower had dropped over the horizon the guards relaxed, ran cleaning rods through their guns and compared marksmanship. All of their antagonism towards Brion was gone—they actually smiled at him. He had given them the first chance to shoot back since they had been on this planet.

The ride was uneventful and Brion was scarcely aware of it. A theory was taking form in his mind. It was radical, unusual and startling—yet it seemed to be the only one that fitted the facts. He pushed at it from all sides, but if there were any holes he couldn't find them. What it needed was dispassionate proving or disproving. There was only one person on Dis who was qualified to do this.

Lea was working in the lab when he came in, bent over a low-power binocular microscope. Something small, limbless and throbbing was on the slide. She glanced up when she heard his footsteps, smiling warmly when she recognized him. Fatigue and pain had drawn her face, her skin glistening with burn ointment, was chapped and peeling. "I must look a wreck," she said, putting the back of her hand to her cheek. "Something like a well-oiled and lightly cooked piece of beef." She lowered her arm suddenly and took his hand in both of hers. Her palms were warm and slightly moist.

"Thank you, Brion," was all she could say. Her society on Earth was highly civilized and sophisticated, able to discuss any topic without emotion and without embarrassment. This was fine in most circumstances, but made it difficult to thank a person for saving your life. However you tried to phrase it, it came out sounding like a last act speech from an historical play. There was no doubt, however, as to what she meant. Her eyes were large and dark, the pupils dilated by the drugs she had been given. They could not lie, nor could the emotions he sensed. He did not answer, just held her hand an instant longer.

"How do you feel?" he asked, concerned. His conscience twinged as he remembered that he was the one who had ordered her out of bed and back to work today.

"I should be feeling terrible," she said, with an airy wave of her hand. "But I'm walking on top of the world. I'm so loaded with pain-killers and stimulants that I'm high as the moon. All the nerves to my feet feel turned off—it's like walking on two balls of fluff. Thanks for getting me out of that awful hospital and back to work."

Brion was suddenly ashamed of having driven her from her sick bed. "Don't be sorry!" Lea said, apparently reading his mind, but really seeing only his sudden drooped expression. "I'm feeling no pain. Honestly, I feel a little light-headed and foggy at times, nothing more. And this is the job I came here to do. In fact ... well, it's almost impossible to tell you just how fascinating it all is! It was almost worth getting baked and parboiled for."

She swung back to the microscope, centering the specimen with a turn of the stage adjustment screw. "Poor Ihjel was right when he said this planet was exobiologically fascinating. This is a gastropod, a lot like *Odostomia*, but it has parasitical morphological changes so profound—"

"There's something else I remember," Brion said, interrupting her enthusiastic lecture, only half of which he could understand. "Didn't Ihjel also hope that you would give some study to the natives as well as their environment. The problem is with the Disans—not the local wild life."

"But I am studying them," Lea insisted. "The Disans have attained an incredibly advanced form of commensalism. Their lives are so intimately connected and integrated with the other life forms that they must be studied in relation to their environment. I doubt if they show as many external physical changes as little eating-foot *Odostomia* on the slide here, but there will be surely a number of psychological

changes and adjustments that will crop up. One of these might be the explanation of their urge for planetary suicide.”

“That may be true—but I don’t think so,” Brion said. “I went on a little expedition this morning and found something that has more immediate relevancy.”

For the first time Lea became aware of his slightly battered condition. Her drug-grooved mind could only follow a single idea at a time and had overlooked the significance of the bandage and dirt.

“I’ve been visiting,” Brion said, forestalling the question on her lips. “The magter are the ones who are responsible for causing the trouble, and I had to see them up close before I could make any decision. It wasn’t a very pleasant thing, but I found out what I wanted to know. They are different in every way from the normal Disans. I’ve compared them. I’ve talked to Ulv—the native who saved us in the desert—and I can understand him. He is not like us in many ways—he would certainly have to be, living in this oven—but he is still undeniably human. He gave us drinking water when we needed it, then brought help. The magter, the upper-class lords of Dis, are the direct opposite. As cold-blooded and ruthless a bunch of murderers as you can possibly imagine. They tried to kill me when they met me, without reason. Their clothes, habits, dwellings, manners—everything about them differs from that of the normal Disan. More important, the magter are as coldly efficient and inhuman as a reptile. They have no emotions, no love, no hate, anger, fear—nothing. Each of them is a chilling bundle of thought processes and reactions, with all the emotions removed.”

“Aren’t you exaggerating?” Lea asked. “After all, you can’t be sure. It might just be part of their training not to reveal any emotional state. Everyone must experience emotional states whether they like it or not.”

“That’s my main point. Everyone does—except the magter. I can’t go into all the details now, so you’ll just have to take my word for it. Even at the point of death they have no fear or hatred. It may sound impossible, but it is true.”

Lea tried to shake the knots from her drug-hazed mind. “I’m dull today,” she said, “you’ll have to excuse me. If these rulers had no emotional responses, that might explain their present suicidal position. But an explanation like this raises more new problems than it supplies answers to the old ones. How did they get this way? It doesn’t seem humanly possible to be without emotions.”

“Just my point. Not *humanly* possible. I think these ruling class Disans aren’t human at all, like the other Disans. I think they are alien creatures—robots or androids—anything except men. I think they are living in disguise among the normal human dwellers.”

First Lea started to smile, then she changed her mind when she saw his face. “You are serious?” she asked.

“Never more so. I realize it must sound as if I’ve had my brains bounced around too much this morning. Yet this is the only idea I can come up with that fits all of the facts. Look at the evidence yourself. One simple thing stands out clearly, and must be considered first if any theory is to hold up. That is the magters’ complete indifference to death—their own or anyone else’s. Is that normal to mankind?”

“No—but I can find a couple of explanations that I would rather explore first, before dragging in an alien life form. There may have been a mutation or an inherited disease that had deformed or warped their minds.”

“Wouldn’t that be sort of self-eliminating?” Brion asked. “Antisurvival? People who die before puberty would find it a little difficult to pass on a mutation to their children. But let’s not beat this one point to death—it’s the totality of these people that I find so hard to accept. Any one thing might be explained away, but not the collection of them. What about their complete lack of emotion? Or their manner of dress and their secrecy in general? The ordinary Disan wears a cloth kilt, while the magter cover themselves as completely as possible. They stay in their black towers and never go out except in groups. Their dead are always removed so they can’t be examined. In every way they act like a race apart—and I think they are.”

“Granted for the moment that this outlandish idea might be true, how did they get here? And why doesn’t anyone know about it besides them?”

“Easily enough explained,” Brion insisted. “There are no written records on this planet. After the breakdown, when the handful of survivors were just trying to exist here, the aliens could have landed and moved in. Any interference could have been wiped out. Once the population began to grow the invaders found they could keep control by staying separate, so their alien difference wouldn’t be noticed.”

“Why should that bother them?” Lea asked. “If they are so indifferent to death, they can’t have any strong thoughts on public opinion or alien body odor. Why would they bother with such a complex camouflage? And if they arrived from another planet what has happened to the scientific ability that brought them here?”

“Peace,” Brion said. “I don’t know enough to even be able to guess at answers to half those questions. I’m just trying to fit a theory to the facts. And the facts are clear. The magter are so inhuman they would give me nightmares—if I were sleeping these days. What we need is more evidence.”

“Then get it,” Lea said with finality. “I’m not telling you to turn murderer—but you might try a bit of grave-digging. Give me a scalpel and one of your fiends stretched out on a slab and I’ll quickly tell you what he is or is not.” She turned back to the microscope and bent over the eyepiece.

That was really the only way to hack the Gordion knot. Dis had only thirty-six more hours to live, so individual deaths shouldn’t be of any concern. He had to find a dead magter, and if none were obtainable in the proper condition he had to violently get one of them that way. For a planetary savior he was personally doing in an awful lot of the citizenry. He stood behind Lea, looking down at her thoughtfully while she worked. The back of her neck was turned up to him, lightly covered with gently curling hair. With one of the about-face shifts the mind is capable of his thoughts flipped from death to life, and he experienced a strong desire to lightly caress this spot, to feel the yielding texture of female flesh....

Plunging his hands deep into his pockets he walked quickly to the door. “Get some rest soon,” he called to her. “I doubt if those bugs will give you the answer. I’m going now to see if I can get the full-sized specimen you want.”

“The truth could be anywhere, I’ll stay on these until you come back,” she said, not looking up from the microscope.

Up under the roof was a well-equipped communications room, Brion had taken a quick look at it when he had first toured the building. The duty operator had earphones on—though only one of the phones covered an ear—and was monitoring through the bands. His shoeless feet were on the edge of the table and he was eating a thick sandwich with his free hand. His eyes bugged when he saw Brion in the doorway and he jumped into a flurry of action.

“Hold the pose,” Brion told him, “it doesn’t bother me. And if you make any sudden moves you are liable to break a phone, electrocute yourself or choke to death. Just see if you can set the transceiver on this frequency for me.” Brion wrote the number on a scratchpad and slid it over to the operator. It was the frequency Professor-commander Krafft had given him for the radio of the illegal terrorists—the Nyjord army.

The operator plugged in a handset and gave it to Brion. “Circuit open,” he mumbled around a mouthful of still unswallowed sandwich.

“This is Brandd, director of the C.R.F. Come in please.” He went on repeating this for more than ten minutes before he got an answer.

“What do you want?”

“I have a message of vital urgency for you—and I would also like your help. Do you want any more information on the radio?”

“No. Wait there—we’ll get in touch with you after dark.” The carrier wave went dead.

Thirty-five hours to the end of the world—and all he could do was wait.

XII

On Brion's desk when he came in, were two neat piles of paper. As he sat down and reached for them he was conscious of an arctic coldness in the air, a frigid blast. It was coming from the air-conditioner grille which was now covered by welded steel bars. The control unit was sealed shut. Someone was either being very funny or very efficient. Either way it was cold. Brion kicked at the cover plate until it buckled, then bent it aside. After a careful look into the interior he disconnected one wire and shorted it to another. He was rewarded by a number of sputtering cracks and a good quantity of smoke. The compressor moaned and expired.

Faussel was standing in the door with more papers and a shocked expression. "What do you have there?" Brion asked. Faussel managed to straighten out his face and brought the folders to the desk, arranging them on the piles already there.

"These are the progress reports you asked for, from all units. Details to date, conclusions, suggestions, et cetera."

"And the other pile?" Brion pointed.

"Offplanet correspondence, commissary invoices, requisitions," he straightened the edges of the stack while he answered. "Daily report, hospital log—" His voice died away and stopped as Brion carefully pushed the stack off the edge of the desk into the wastebasket.

"In other words, red tape," Brion said. "Well it's all filed."

One by one the progress reports followed the first stack into the basket, until his desk was clear. Nothing. It was just what he had expected. But there had always been the off-chance that one of the specialists could come up with a new approach. They hadn't, they were all too busy specializing.

Outside the sky was darkening. The front entrance guard had been told to let in anyone who came asking for the director. There was nothing else Brion could do until the Nyjord rebels made contact. Irritation bit at him. At least Lea was doing something constructive, he could look in on her.

He opened the door to the lab with a feeling of pleasant anticipation. It froze and shattered instantly. Her microscope was hooded and she was gone. *She's having dinner*, he thought, *or—she's in the hospital*. The hospital was on the floor below and he went there first.

"Of course she's here!" Dr. Stine grumbled. "Where else should a girl in her condition be? She was out of bed long enough today. Tomorrow's the last day, and if you want to get any more work out of her before the deadline, you have better let her rest tonight. Better let the whole staff rest. I've been handing out tranquilizers like aspirin all day. They're falling apart."

"The world's falling apart. How is Lea doing?"

"Considering her shape she's fine. Go in and see for yourself if you won't take my word for it. I have other patients to look at."

"Are you that worried, doctor?"

“Of course I am! I’m just as prone to the ills of the flesh as the rest of you. We’re sitting on a ticking bomb and I don’t like it. I’ll do my job as long as it is necessary, but I’ll also be glad to see the ships land to pull us out. The only skin that I really feel emotionally concerned about right now is my own. And if you want to be let in on a public secret—the rest of your staff feels the same way. So don’t look forward to too much efficiency.”

“I never did,” Brion said.

Lea’s room was dark, illuminated only by the light of Dis’ moon slanting in the window. Brion let himself in and closed the door behind him. Walking quietly he went over to the bed. She was sleeping soundly, her breathing gentle and regular. A night’s sleep now would do as much good as all the medication.

He should have gone then, instead he sat down in the chair placed next to the head of the bed. The guards knew where he was, he could wait here just as well as any place else.

It was a stolen moment of peace on a world at the brink of destruction. He was grateful for it. Everything looked less harsh in the moonlight and he rubbed some of the tension from his eyes. Lea’s face was ironed smooth by the light, beautiful and young; a direct contrast to everything else on this poisonous world. Her hand was outside of the covers and he took it in his own, obeying a sudden impulse. Looking out of the window at the desert in the distance, he let the peace wash over him, forcing himself to forget for the moment that in one more day life would be stripped from this planet.

Later, when he looked back at Lea he saw that her eyes were open, though she hadn’t moved. How long had she been awake? He jerked his hand away from hers, feeling suddenly guilty.

“Is the boss-man looking after the serfs, to see if they’re fit for the treadmill in the morning?” she asked. It was the kind of remark she had used with such frequency in the ship, though it didn’t sound quite as harsh now. And she was smiling. Yet it reminded him too well of her superior attitude towards the rubes from the stellar sticks. Here he might be the director, but on ancient Earth he would be only one more gaping yokel.

“How do you feel?” he asked, realizing and hating the triteness of the words, even as he said them.

“Terrible. I’ll be dead by morning. Reach me a piece of fruit from that bowl, will you? My mouth tastes like an old boot heel. Wonder how fresh fruit ever got here? Probably a gift to the working classes from the smiling planetary murderers on Nyjord,” she took the apple Brion gave her and bit into it. “Did you ever think of going to Earth?”

Brion was startled, this was too close to his own thoughts about planetary backgrounds. There couldn’t possibly be a connection though. “Never,” he told her. “Up until a few months ago I never even considered leaving Anvhar. The Twenties are such a big thing at home that it is hard to imagine that anything else exists while you are still taking part in them.”

“Spare me the Twenties,” she pleaded. “After listening to you and Ihjel I know far more about them than I shall ever care to know. But what about Anvhar itself? Do you have big city-states like Earth?”

“Nothing like that. For its size it has a very small population. No big cities at all. I guess the largest centers of population are around the schools, packing plants, things like that.”

“Any exobiologists there?” Lea asked, with a woman’s eternal ability to make any general topic personal.

“At the universities, I suppose, though I wouldn’t know for sure. And you must realize that when I say no big cities, I also mean no little cities. We aren’t organized that way at all. I imagine the basic physical unit is family and the circle of friends. Friends get important quickly since the family breaks up when children are still relatively young. Something in the genes I suppose, we all enjoy being alone. Suppose you might call it an inbred survival trait.”

“Up to a point,” she said, biting delicately into the apple. “Carry that sort of thing too far and you end up with no population at all. A certain amount of proximity is necessary for that.”

“Of course there is. And there must be some form of recognized relationship or control—that or complete promiscuity. On Anvhar the emphasis is on personal responsibility, and that seems to take care of the problem. If we didn’t have an adult way of looking at ... things, our kind of life would be impossible. Individuals are brought together either by accident or design, and with this proximity must be some certainty of relations—”

“You’re losing me,” Lea protested. “Either I’m still foggy from the dope or you are suddenly unable to speak a word of less than four syllables in length. You know—whenever this happens with you I get the distinct impression that you are trying to cover up something. For Occam’s sake be specific! Bring together two of these hypothetical individuals and tell me what happens.”

Brion took a deep breath. He was in over his head and far from shore. “Well—take a bachelor like myself. Since I like cross-country skiing I make my home in this big house our family has, right at the edge of the Broken Hills. In summer I looked after a drumtum herd, but after slaughtering my time was my own all winter. I did a lot of skiing, and used to work for the Twenties. Sometimes I would go visiting. Then again, people would drop in on me—houses are few and far between on Anvhar. We don’t even have locks on our front doors. You accept and give hospitality without qualification. Whoever comes. Male—female—in groups or just traveling alone—”

“I get the drift. Life must be dull for a single girl on your iceberg planet, she must surely have to stay home a lot.”

“Only if she wants to. Otherwise she can go wherever she wishes and be welcomed as another individual. I suppose it is out of fashion in the rest of the galaxy—and would probably raise a big laugh on Earth—but a platonic, disinterested friendship between man and woman is an accepted thing on Anvhar.”

“Sounds exceedingly dull. If you are all such cool and distant friends, what keeps your birthrate going?”

Brion felt his ears flushing, not quite sure if he was being teased or not. “There are plenty of happy marriages. But it is up to the woman always to indicate if she is interested in a man. A girl who isn’t interested won’t get any proposals. I imagine this is a lot different from other planets—but so is our world. The system works well enough for us.”

“Just about the opposite of Earth,” Lea told him, dropping the apple core into a dish and carefully licking the tips of her fingers. “I guess you Anvharians would describe Earth as a planetary hotbed of sin. The reverse of your system, and going full blast all the time. There are far too many people there for comfort. Birth control came late and is still being fought—if you can possibly imagine that. There are just too many crack-brained ideas that have been long entrenched in custom. The world’s overcrowded. Men, women, children, a boiling mob wherever you look. And all of the physically mature ones seem to be involved in the Great Game of Love. The male is always the aggressor, and women take the most outrageous kinds of flattery for granted. At parties these are always a couple of hot breaths of passion fanning your neck. A girl has to keep her spike heels filed sharp.”

“She has to *what*—?”

“A figure of speech, Brion. Meaning you fight back all the time, if you don’t want to be washed under by the flood.”

“Sounds rather”—Brion weighed the word before he said it, but could find none other suitable—“repellent.”

“From your point of view, it would be. I’m afraid we get so used to it that we even take it for granted. Sociologically speaking—” She stopped and looked at Brion’s straight back and almost rigid posture. Her eyes widened and her mouth opened in an unspoken *oh* of sudden realization.

“I’m being a fool,” she said. “You weren’t speaking generally at all! You had a very specific subject in mind. Namely *me*!”

“Please, Lea, you must understand—”

“But I do!” she laughed. “All the time I thought you were being a frigid and hard-hearted lump of ice, you were really being very sweet. Just playing the game in good old Anvharian style. Waiting for a sign from me. We’d still be playing by different rules if you hadn’t had more sense than I, and finally realized that somewhere along the line we must have got our signals mixed. And I thought you were some kind of frosty offworld celibate.” She let her hand go out and her fingers rustled through his hair. Something she had been wanting to do for a long time.

“I had to,” he said, trying to ignore the light touch of her fingers. “Because I thought so much of you, I couldn’t have done anything to insult you. Until I began to worry where the insult would lie, since I knew nothing about your planet’s mores.”

“Well you know now,” she said very softly. “The men aggress. Now that I understand, I think I like your way better. But I’m still not sure of all the rules. Do I explain that yes, Brion, I like you so very much? You are more man, in one great big wide shouldered lump, than I have ever met before—”

His arms were around her, holding her to him, and their lips sought each other’s in the darkness.

XIII

“He wouldn’t come in, sir. Just hammered on the door and said, *I’m here, tell Brandd.*”

“Good enough,” Brion said, seating his gun in the holster and sliding the extra clips into his pocket. “I’m going out now, and I should return before dawn. Get one of the wheeled stretchers down here from the hospital. I’ll want it waiting when I get back.”

Outside the street was darker than he remembered. Brion frowned and his hand moved towards his gun. Someone had put all the nearby lights out of commission. There was just enough illumination from the stars to enable him to make out the dark bulk of a sandcar.

The motor roared as soon as he had closed the door. Without lights the sandcar churned a path through the city and out into the desert. Though the speed picked up, the driver still drove in the dark, feeling his way with a light touch on the controls. The ground rose, and when they reached the top of a flat mesa he killed the engine. Neither the driver nor Brion had spoken a word since they left.

A switch snapped and the instrument lights came on. In their dim glow Brion could just make out the other man’s hawklike profile. When he moved Brion saw that his figure was cruelly shortened. Either accident or a mutated gene had warped his spine, hunching him forward in eternally bent supplication. Warped bodies are rare—his was the first Brion had ever seen. He wondered what series of events had kept him from medical attention all his life. This might explain the bitterness and pain in the man’s voice.

“Did the mighty brains on Nyjord bother to tell you that they have chopped another day off the deadline? That this world is about to come to an end?”

“Yes, I know,” Brion said. “That’s why I’m asking your group for help. Our time is running out too fast.”

The man didn’t answer, merely grunted and gave his full attention to the radar pings and glowing screen. The electronic senses reached out as he made a check on all the search frequencies to see if they were being followed.

“Where are we going?” Brion asked.

“Out into the desert,” the driver made a vague wave of his hand. “Headquarters of the army. Since the whole thing will be blown up in another day, I guess I can tell you it’s the only camp we have. All the cars, men and weapons are based there. And Hys. He’s the man in charge. Tomorrow it will be all gone—along with this cursed planet. What’s your business with us?”

“Shouldn’t I be telling Hys that?”

“Suit yourself.” Satisfied with the instrument search the driver kicked the car to life again and churned on across the desert. “But we’re a volunteer army and we have no secrets from each other. Just from the fools at home who are going to kill this world.” There was a bitterness in his words that he made no attempt to conceal. “They fought among themselves and put off a firm decision so long that now they are forced to commit murder.”

“From what I had heard, I thought that it was the other way around. They call your Nyjord Army terrorists.”

“We are. Because we are an army and we’re at war. The idealists at home only understood that when it was too late. If they had backed us in the beginning, we would have blown open every black castle on Dis—searched until we found those bombs. But that would have meant wanton destruction and death. They wouldn’t consider that. Now they are going to kill everyone, destroy everything.” He flicked on the panel lights just long enough to take a compass bearing, and Brion saw the tortured unhappiness in his twisted body.

“It’s not over yet,” Brion said. “There is more than a day left, and I think I’m onto something that might stop the war—without any bombs being dropped.”

“You’re in charge of the Cultural Relationships Free Bread and Blankets Foundation, aren’t you? What good can your bunch do when the shooting starts?”

“None. But maybe we can put off the shooting. If you are trying to insult me—don’t bother. My irritation quotient is very high.”

The driver just grunted at this, slowing down as they ran through a field of broken rock. “What is it you want?” he asked.

“We want to make a detailed examination of one of the magter. Alive or dead, it doesn’t make any difference. You wouldn’t happen to have one around?”

“No. We’ve fought with them often enough, but always on their home grounds. They keep all their casualties, and a good number of ours. What good will it do you anyway? A dead one won’t tell you where the bombs or the jump-space projector is.”

“I don’t see why I should explain that to you—unless you are in charge. You are Hys, aren’t you?”

The driver grunted angrily and was silent while he drove. Finally he asked, “What makes you think that?”

“Call it a hunch. You don’t act very much like a sandcar driver for one thing. Of course your army may be all generals and no privates—but I doubt it. I also know that time has almost run out for all of us. This is a long ride and it would be a complete waste of time if you just sat out in the desert and waited for me. By driving me yourself you could make your mind up before we arrived. Have a decision ready whether you are going to help me or not. Are you?”

“Yes—I’m Hys. But you still haven’t answered my question. What do you want the body for?”

“We’re going to cut it open and take a good long look. I don’t think the magter are human. They are something living among men and disguised as men—but still not human.”

“Secret aliens?” Hys exploded the words in a mixture of surprise and disgust.

“Perhaps. The examination will tell us that.”

“You’re either stupid or incompetent,” Hys said bitterly. “The heat of Dis has cooked your brains in your head. I’ll be no part of this kind of absurd plan.”

“You must,” Brion said, surprised at his own calmness. He could sense the other man’s interest hidden behind his insulting manner. “I don’t even have to give you my reasons. In another day this world ends and you have no way to stop it. I just might have an idea that could work and you can’t afford to take any chances—not if you are really sincere. Either you are a murderer, killing Disans for pleasure, or you honestly want to stop the war. Which is it?”

“You’ll have your body all right,” Hys grated, hurling the car viciously around a spire of rock. “Not that it will accomplish anything—but I can find no fault in killing another magter. We can fit your operation into our plans without any trouble. This is the last night and I have sent every one of my teams out on raids. We’re breaking into as many magter towers as possible before dawn. There is a slim chance that we might uncover something. It’s really just shooting in the dark, but it’s all we can do now. My own team is waiting and you can ride along with us. The others left earlier. We’re going to hit a small tower on this side of the city. We raided it once before and captured a lot of small arms that they had stored there. There is a good chance that they may have been stupid enough to store something there again. Sometimes the magter seem to suffer from a complete lack of imagination.”

“You have no idea just how right you are,” Brion told him.

The sandcar slowed down now, as they approached a slab-sided mesa that rose vertically from the desert. They crunched across broken rocks, leaving no tracks. A light blinked on the dashboard and Hys stopped instantly and killed the engine. They climbed out, stretching and shivering in the cold desert night.

It was dark walking in the shadow of the cliff and they had to feel their way along a path through the tumbled boulders. A sudden blaze of light made Brion wince and shield his eyes. Near him, on the ground, was the humming shape of a cancellation projector, sending out a fan-shaped curtain of vibration that absorbed all the light rays falling upon it. This incredible blackness made a lightproof wall for the recessed hollow at the foot of the cliff. In this shelter, under the overhang of rock, were three open sandcars. They were large and armor-plated, warlike in their scarred gray paint. Men sprawled, talked and polished their weapons. Everything stopped when Hys and Brion appeared.

“Load up,” Hys called out. “We’re going to attack now, same plan I outlined earlier. Get Telt over here.” Talking to his own men some of the harshness was gone from his voice. The tall soldiers of Nyjord moved in ready obedience to the commander. They loomed over his bent figure, most of them twice as tall as him. Yet there was no hesitation in jumping when he commanded. They were the body of the Nyjord striking force—he was the brains.

A square-cut, compact man rolled up to Hys and saluted with a leisurely flick of his hand. He was weighted and slung about with packs and electronic instruments. His pockets bulged with small tools.

“This is Telt,” Hys said to Brion, “he’ll take care of you. Telt’s my personal technical squad. Goes along on all my operations with his meters to test the interiors of the Disan forts. So far he’s found no trace of a jump-space generator, or excess radioactivity that might indicate a bomb. Since he’s useless and you’re useless, you can both take care of each other. Use the car we came in.”

Telt's wide face split in a frog-like grin, his voice was hoarse and throaty. "Wait! Just wait! Some day those needles gonna flicker and all our troubles be over. What you want me to do with the stranger?"

"Supply him with a corpse—one of the magter," Hys said. "Take it where he wants and then report back here." Hys scowled at Telt. "Some day your needles will flicker! Poor fool—this is the last day." He turned away and waved the men into their sandcars.

"He likes me," Telt said, attaching a final piece of equipment. "You can tell because he calls me names like that. He's a great man, Hys is, but they never found out until it was too late. Hand me that meter, will you?"

Brion followed the technician out to the car and helped him load his equipment aboard. When the larger cars appeared out of the darkness, Telt swung around after them. They snaked forward in a single line through the rocks, until they came to the desert of rolling sand dunes. Then they spread out in line abreast and rushed towards their goal.

Telt hummed to himself hoarsely as he drove. He broke off suddenly and looked at Brion. "What you want the dead Dis for?"

"A theory," Brion answered sluggishly. He had been half napping in the chair, taking the opportunity for some rest before the attack. "I'm still looking for a way to avert the end."

"You and Hys," Telt said with satisfaction. "Couple of idealists. Trying to stop a war you didn't start. They never would listen to Hys. He told them in the beginning exactly what would happen, and he was right. They always thought his ideas were crooked, like him. Growing up alone in the hill camp, with his back too twisted and too old to be fixed when he finally did come out. Ideas twisted the same way. Made himself an authority on war. Hah! War on Nyjord. That's like being an icecube specialist in hell. But he knew all about it, but they never would let him use what he knew. Put granddaddy Krafft in charge instead."

"But Hys is in charge of an army now?"

"All volunteers, too few of them and too little money. Too little and too damned late to do any good. I'll never be good enough. And for this we get called butchers." There was a catch in Telt's voice now, an undercurrent of emotion he couldn't suppress. "At home they think we like to kill. Think we're insane. They can't understand we're doing the only thing that has to be done—" He broke off as he quickly locked on the brakes and killed the engine. The line of sandcars had come to a stop. Ahead, just visible over the dunes, was the summit of a dark tower.

"We walk from here," Telt said, standing and stretching. "We can take our time because the other boys go in first, soften things up. Then you and I head for the sub-cellar for a radiation check and find you a handsome corpse."

Walking at first, then crawling when the dunes no longer shielded them, they crept up on the Disan keep. Dark figures moved ahead of them, stopping only when they reached the crumbling black walls. They didn't use the ascending ramp, but made their way up the sheer outside face of the ramparts.

“Linethrowers,” Telt whispered. “Anchor themselves when the missile hits, have some kind of quicksetting goo. Then we go up the filament with a line-climbing motor. Hys invented them.”

“Is that the way you and I are going in?” Brion asked.

“No, we get out of the climbing. I told you we hit this rock once before. I know the layout inside.” He was moving while he talked, carefully pacing the distance around the base of the tower. “Should be right about here.”

High-pitched keening sliced the air and the top of the magter building burst into flame. Automatic weapons hammered above them. Something fell silently through the night and hit heavily on the ground near them.

“Attack’s started,” Telt shouted. “We have to get through now, while all the creepies are fighting it out on top.” He pulled a plate-shaped object from one of his bags and slapped it hard against the wall. It hung there. He twisted the back of it, pulled something and waved Brion to the ground. “Shaped charge. Should blow straight in, but you never can tell.”

The ground jumped under them and the ringing thud was a giant fist punching through the wall. A cloud of dust and smoke rolled clear and they could see the dark opening in the rock, a tunnel driven into the wall by the directional force of the explosion. Telt shone a light through the hole at the crumbled chamber inside.

“Nothing to worry about from anybody who was leaning against this wall. But let’s get in and out of this black beehive before the ones upstairs come down to investigate.”

Shattered rock was thick on the floor, and they skidded and tumbled over it. Telt pointed the way with his light, down a sharply angled ramp. “Underground chambers in the rock. They always store their stuff down there—”

A smoking, black sphere arced out of the tunnel’s mouth, hitting at their feet. Telt just gaped, but even as it hit the floor Brion was jumping forward. He caught it with the side of his foot, kicking it back into the dark opening of the tunnel. Telt hit the ground next to him as the orange flame of an explosion burst below. Bits of shrapnel rattled from the ceiling and wall behind them.

“Grenades!” Telt gasped. “They only used them once before—can’t have many. Gotta warn Hys.” He plugged a throat mike into the transmitter on his back and spoke quickly into it. There was a stirring below and Brion poured a rain of fire into the tunnel.

“They’re catching it bad on top, too! We gotta pull out. Go first and I’ll cover you.”

“I came for my Disan—I’m not leaving until I get one.”

“You’re crazy! You’re dead if you stay!”

Telt was scrambling back towards their crumbled entrance as he talked. His back was turned when Brion fired. The magter appeared silently as the shadow of death. They charged without a sound, running with expressionless faces into the bullets. Two died at once, curling and folding, the third one fell at Brion’s feet. Shot, pierced, dying, but not yet dead. Leaving a crimson track it hunched closer, lifting its knife to Brion. He didn’t move. How many times must you murder a man? Or was it a man.

His mind and body rebelled against the killing and was almost ready to accept death himself, rather than kill again.

Telt's bullets tore through the body and it dropped with grim finality.

"There's your corpse—now get it out of here!" Telt screeched.

Between them they worked the sodden weight of the dead magter through the hole, their exposed backs crawling with the expectation of instant death. There were no more attacks as they ran from the tower, other than a grenade that exploded too far behind them to do any harm.

One of the armored sandcars circled the keep, headlights blazing, keeping up a steady fire from its heavy weapons. The attackers climbed into it as they beat a retreat. Telt and Brion dragged the Disan behind them, struggling through the loose sand toward the circling car. Telt glanced over his shoulder and broke into a shambling run.

"They're following us—!" he gasped. "The first time they ever chased us after a raid!"

"They must know we have the body," Brion said.

"Leave it behind—!" Telt choked. "Too heavy to carry ... anyway!"

"I'd rather leave you," Brion snapped. "Let me have it." He pulled the corpse away from the unresisting Telt and heaved it across his shoulders. "Now use your gun to cover us!"

Telt threw a rain of slugs back towards the dark figures following them. The driver must have seen the flare of their fire, because the truck turned and started towards them. It braked in a choking cloud of dust and ready hands reached to pull them up. Brion pushed the body in ahead of himself and scrambled after it. The truck engine throbbed and they churned away into the blackness, away from the gutted tower.

"You know, that was more like kind of a joke, when I said I'd leave the corpse behind," Telt told Brion. "You didn't believe me, did you?"

"Yes," Brion said, holding the dead weight of the magter against the truck's side. "I thought you meant it."

"Ahhh—" Telt grumbled. "You're as bad as Hys. Take things too seriously."

Brion suddenly realized that he was wet with blood, his clothing sodden. His stomach rose at the thought and he clutched the edge of the sandcar. Killing like this was too personal. Talking abstractedly about a body was one thing. But murdering a man, then lifting his dead flesh and feeling his blood warm upon you is an entirely different matter. Yet the magter weren't human, he knew that. The thought was only mildly comforting.

After they had reached the rest of the waiting sandcars, the raiding party split up. "Each one goes in a different direction," Telt said, "so they can't track us to the base." He clipped a piece of paper next to the compass and kicked the motor into life. "We'll make a big *U* in the desert and end up in Hovedstad, I got the course here. Then I'll dump you and your friend and beat it back to our camp. You're not still burned at me for what I said, are you? Are you?"

Brion didn't answer. He was staring fixedly out of the side window. "What's doing?" Telt asked. Brion pointed out at the rushing darkness.

“Over there,” he said, pointing to the growing light on the horizon.

“Dawn,” Telt said. “Lotta rain on your planet? Didn’t you ever see the sun come up before?”

“Not on the last day of a world.”

“Lock it up,” Telt grumbled. “You give me the crawls. I know they’re going to be blasted. But at least I know I did everything I could to stop it. How do you think they are going to be feeling at home—on Nyjord—from tomorrow on?”

“Maybe we can still stop it?” Brion said, shrugging off the feeling of gloom, Telt’s only answer was a wordless sound of disgust.

By the time they had cut a large loop in the desert the sun was high in the sky, the daily heat begun. Their course took them through a chain of low, flinty hills that cut their speed almost to zero. They ground ahead in low gear while Telt sweated and cursed, struggling with the controls. Then they were on firm sand and picking up speed towards the city.

As soon as Brion saw Hovedstad clearly he felt a clutch of fear. From somewhere in the city a black plume of smoke was rising. It could have been one of the deserted buildings aflame, a minor blaze. Yet the closer they came, the greater the tension grew. Brion didn’t dare put it into words himself, it was Telt who vocalized the thought.

“A fire or something. Coming from your area, somewhere close to your building.”

Within the city they saw the first signs of destruction. Broken rubble on the streets. The smell of greasy smoke in their nostrils. More and more people appeared, going in the same direction they were. The normally deserted streets of Hovedstad were now almost crowded. Disans, obvious by their bare shoulders, mixed with the few offworlders who still remained.

Brion made sure the tarpaulin was well wrapped around the body before they pushed slowly through the growing crowd.

“I don’t like all this publicity,” Telt complained, looking at the people. “It’s the last day, or I’d be turning back. They know our cars, we’ve raided them often enough.” Turning a corner he braked suddenly.

Ahead was destruction. Black, broken rubble had been churned into desolation. It was still smoking, pink tongues of flame licking over the ruins. A fragment of wall fell with a rumbling crash.

“It’s your building—the Foundation building!” Telt shouted. “They’ve been here ahead of us, must have used the radio to call a raid. They did a job, explosive of some kind.”

Hope was dead. Dis was dead. In the ruin ahead, mixed and broken with the other rubble, were the bodies of all the people who had trusted him. Lea. Beautiful and cruelly dead Lea. Dr. Stine, his patients, Faussel, all of them. He had kept them on this planet and now they were dead. Every one of them. Dead.

Murderer!

XIV

Life was ended. Brion's mind contained nothing but despair and the pain of irretrievable loss. If his brain had been complete master of his body he would have died there, for at that moment there was no will to live. Unaware of this his heart continued to beat and the regular motion of his lungs drew in the dreadful sweetness of the smoke-tainted air. With automatic directness his body lived on.

"What you gonna do?" Telt asked, even his natural exuberation stilled by this. Brion only shook his head as the words penetrated. What could he do? What could possibly be done?

"Follow me," a voice said in guttural Disan through the opening of a rear window. The speaker was lost in the crowd before they could turn. Aware now, Brion saw a native move away from the edge of the crowd and turn in their direction. It was Ulv.

"Turn the car—that way!" He punched Telt's arm and pointed. "Do it slowly and don't draw any attention to us." There was sudden hope, which he kept himself from considering. The building was gone and the people in it all dead. That fact had to be faced.

"What's going on?" Telt asked. "Who was that talked in the window?"

"A native—that one up ahead. He saved my life in the desert, and I think he is on our side. Even though he's a native Disan, he can understand facts that the magter can't. He knows what will happen to this planet." Brion was talking, filling his brain with words so he wouldn't begin to have hope.

Ulv moved slowly and naturally through the streets, never looking back. They followed, as far behind as they dared, yet still keeping him in sight. There were fewer people about here among the deserted offworld storehouses. Ulv vanished into one, LIGHT METALS TRUST LTD. the sign read above the door. Telt slowed the car.

"Don't stop here," Brion said. "Drive on around the corner, and pull up."

Brion climbed out of the car with an ease he did not feel. There was no one in sight now, in either direction. Walking slowly back to the corner he checked the street they had just left—hot, silent and empty!

A sudden blackness appeared where the door of the warehouse had been, and the sudden flickering motion of a hand. Brion signaled Telt to start, and jumped into the already moving sandcar.

"Into that open door—quickly before anyone sees us!" The car rumbled down a ramp into the dark interior and the door slid shut behind them.

"Ulv. What is it? Where are you?" Brion called, blinking in the murky interior. A gray form appeared next to him.

"I am here."

"Did you—" There was no way to finish the sentence.

"I heard of the raid. The magter called together all of us they could to help them carry explosives. I went along. I could not stop them and there was no time to warn anyone in the building."

“Then they are all dead—?”

“Yes,” Ulv nodded, “all except one. I knew I could possibly save one, and I was not sure who. So I took the woman you were with in the desert, she is here now. She was hurt, but not badly, when I brought her out.”

Guilty relief flooded through Brion. He shouldn’t exult, not with the death of everyone in the Foundation still fresh in his mind. But at that instant he was happy.

“May I see her?” he asked Ulv. He was seized by the sudden fear that there might be a mistake. Perhaps Ulv had saved a different girl.

Ulv led the way across the empty loading bay. Brion followed closely, fighting down the temptation to tell him to hurry. When he saw that Ulv was heading towards an office in the far wall, he could control himself no longer and ran on ahead.

It was Lea, lying unconscious on a couch. Sweat beaded her face and she moaned and stirred without opening her eyes.

“I gave her *sover*, then wrapped her in cloth so no one would know,” Ulv said.

Telt was close behind them looking in through the open door.

“*Sover* is a drug they take from one of their plants,” he said. “We got a lot of experience with it. A little makes a good knock-out drug, but it’s deadly poison in large doses. I got the antidote in the car, wait and I’ll get it.” He went out.

Brion sat next to Lea and wiped her face clean of dirt and perspiration. The dark shadows under her eyes were almost black now and her elfin face even thinner. Yet she was alive, that was the important thing. Some of the tension drained away and he could think again. There was still the job to do. After this last experience she should be in a hospital bed. Yet this was impossible. He had to drag her to her feet and put her back to work. The answer might still be found. Each second ticked away another fraction of the planet’s life.

“Good as new in a minute,” Telt said, banging down the heavy medbox. He watched intently as Ulv left the room. “Hys should know about this renegade. Might be useful as a spy or for information. Of course it’s too late now to do anything, so the hell with it.” He pulled a pistol-shaped hypodermic gun from the box and dialed a number on the side. “Now, if you’ll roll her sleeve up I’ll bring her back to life.” He pressed the bell-shaped sterilizing muzzle against her skin and pulled the trigger. The hypo gun hummed briefly, ending its cycle with a large click.

“Does it work fast?” Brion asked.

“Couple of minutes. Just let her be and she’ll come to by herself.”

“Killer!” Ulv hissed from the doorway. His blowgun was in his hand, half raised to his mouth.

“He’s been in the car—he’s seen it!” Telt shouted and grabbed for his gun.

Brion sprang between them, raising his hands. “Stop it! No more killing!” he shouted this in Disan. Then he shook his fist at Telt. “Fire that gun and I’ll stuff it down your throat. I’ll handle this.” He turned to face Ulv who hadn’t raised the blowgun any closer to his lips. This was a good sign. The Disan was still uncertain.

“You have seen the body in the car, Ulv. So you must have seen that it is that of a magter. I killed him myself, because I would rather kill one, ten or even a hundred men rather than have everyone on this planet destroyed. I killed him in a fair fight and now I am going to examine his body. There is something very strange and different about the magter, you know that yourself. If I can find out what it is, perhaps we can make them stop this war, and not bomb Nyjord.”

Ulv was still angry, yet he lowered the blowgun a little. “I wish there were no offworlders, that none of you had ever come. Nothing was wrong until you started coming. The magter were the strongest, and they killed, but they also helped. Now they want to fight a war with your weapons and for this you are going to kill my world. And you want me to help you?”

“Not me—yourself!” Brion said wearily. “There’s no going back, that’s the one thing we can’t do. Maybe Dis would have been better off without offplanet contact. Maybe not. In any case you have to forget about that. You have contact now with the rest of the galaxy, for better or for worse. You’ve got a problem to solve, and I’m here to help you solve it.”

Seconds ticked by as Ulv, unmoving, fought with questions that were novel to his life. Could killing stop death? Could he help his people by helping strangers to fight and kill them? His world had changed and he didn’t like it. He must make a giant effort to change with it.

Abruptly, he pushed the blowgun into a thong at his waist, turned and strode out.

“Too much for my nerves,” Telt said, settling his gun back in the holster. “You don’t know how happy I’m gonna be when this thing is over. Even if the planet goes bang, I don’t care. I’m finished.” He walked out to the sandcar, keeping a careful eye on the Disan crouched against the wall.

Brion turned back to Lea whose eyes were open, staring at the ceiling. He went to her.

“Running,” she said, and her voice had a toneless emptiness that screamed louder than any emotion. “They ran by the open door of my room and I could see them when they killed Dr. Stine. Just butchered him like an animal, chopping him down. Then one came into the room and that’s all I remember.” She turned her head slowly and looked at Brion. “What happened? Why am I here?”

“They’re ... dead,” he told her. “All of them. After the raid the Disans blew up the building. You’re the only one that survived. That was Ulv who came into your room, the Disan we met in the desert. He brought you away and hid you here in the city.”

“When do we leave?” she said, in the same empty tones, turning her face to the wall. “When do we get off this planet?”

“Today is the last day. The deadline is midnight. Krafft will have a ship pick us up when we are ready. But we still have our job to do. I’ve got that body. You’re going to have to examine it. We must find out about the magter—”

“Nothing can be done now except leave,” her voice was a dull monotone. “There is only so much that a person can do and I’ve done it. Please have the ship come, I want to leave now.”

Brion chewed his lip in helpless frustration. Nothing seemed to be able to penetrate the apathy she had sunk into. Too much shock, too much terror, in too short a time. He took her chin in his hand and turned her head to face him. She didn't resist, but her eyes were shining with tears, tears trickled down her cheeks.

"Take me home, Brion, please take me home."

He could only brush her sodden hair back from her face then and force himself to smile at her. The particles of time were running out, faster and faster, and he no longer knew what to do. The examination had to be made. Yet he couldn't force her. He looked for the medbox and saw that Telt had taken it back to the sandcar. There might be something in it that could help. A tranquilizer perhaps.

Telt had some of his instruments open on the chart table and was examining a tape with a pocket magnifier. He jumped nervously and put the tape behind his back when Brion entered, then relaxed when he saw who it was.

"Thought you were the creepie out there, coming for a look," he whispered. "Maybe you trust him—but I can't afford to. Can't even use the radio. I'm getting out of here now, I have to tell Hys!"

"Tell him what?" Brion asked sharply. "What is all the mystery about?"

Telt handed him the magnifier and tape. "Look at that. Recording tape from my scintillation counter. Red verticals are five-minute intervals, the wiggly black horizontal line is the radioactivity level. All this where the line goes up and down, that's when we were driving out to the attack. Varying hot level of the rock and ground."

"What's the big peak in the middle?"

"That coincides exactly with our visit to the house of horrors! When we went through the hole in the bottom of the tower!" He couldn't keep the enthusiasm out of his voice.

"Does it mean that—"

"I don't know. I'm not sure. I have to compare it with the other tapes back at base. It could be the stone of the tower, some of these heavy rocks got a high natural count. There maybe could be a box of instruments there with fluorescent dials. Or it might be one of those tactical atom bombs they threw at us already, some arms runner sold them a few."

"Or it could be the cobalt bombs?"

"It could be," Telt said, packing his instruments swiftly. "A badly shielded bomb, or an old one with a crack in the skin, could give a trace like that. Just a little radon leaking out would do it."

"Why don't you call Hys on the radio, let him know."

"Don't want Granddaddy Krafft's listening posts to hear about it. This is our job—if I'm right. And I have to check my old tapes to make sure. But it's gonna be worth a raid, I can feel that in my bones. Let's unload your corpse." He helped Brion, then slipped into the driver's seat.

"Hold it," Brion said. "Do you have anything in the medbox I can use for Lea. She seems to have cracked. Not hysterical, but withdrawn. Won't listen to reason, won't do anything but lie there and ask to go home."

“Got the potion here,” Telt said, cracking the medbox. “Slaughter-syndrome is what our medic calls it. Hit a lot of our boys. Grow up all your life hating the idea of violence, it goes rough when you have to start killing people. Guys breakup, breakdown, go to pieces lots of different ways. The medic mixed up this stuff. Don’t know how it works, probably tranquilizers and some of the cortex drugs. But it peels off recent memories. Maybe for the last ten, twelve hours. You can’t get upset about what you don’t remember.” He pulled out a sealed package. “Directions on the box. Good luck.”

“Luck,” Brion said, and shook the technician’s calloused hand. “Let me know if the traces are strong enough to be bombs.” He checked the street to make sure it was clear, then pressed the door button. The sandcar churned out into the brilliant sunshine and was gone, the throb of its motor dying in the distance. Brion closed the door and went back to Lea. Ulv was still crouched against the wall.

There was a one-shot disposable hypodermic in the box. Lea made no protest when he broke the seal and pressed the needle against her arm. She sighed and her eyes closed again. When he saw she was resting easily, he dragged in the tarpaulin-wrapped body of the magter. A workbench ran along one wall and he struggled the corpse up onto it. He unwrapped the tarpaulin and the sightless eyes stared accusingly up into his.

Using his knife, Brion cut away the loose, bloodsoaked clothing. Strapped under the clothes, around the man’s waist, was the familiar collection of Disan artifacts. This could have significance either way. Human or humanoid, it would still have to live on Dis. Brion threw it aside, along with the rest of the clothing. Nude, pierced, bloody, the corpse lay before him.

In every external physical detail the man was human.

Brion’s theory was becoming more preposterous with each discovery. If the magter weren’t alien, how could he explain their complete lack of emotions? A mutation of some kind? He didn’t see how it was possible. There *had* to be something alien, about the dead man before him. The future of a world rested on this flimsy hope. If Telt’s lead to the bombs proved to be false, there would be no hope left at all.

Lea was still unconscious when he looked at her. There was no way of telling how long the coma would last. He would probably have to waken her out of it, but didn’t want to do it too early. It took an effort to control his impatience, even though he knew the drug needed time to work in. He finally decided on at least a minimum of an hour before he should try to disturb her. That would be noon—twelve hours before destruction.

One thing he should do was get in touch with Professor-Commander Krafft. Maybe it was being defeatist, yet he had to make sure that they had a way off this planet if the mission failed. Krafft had installed a relay radio that would forward calls from his personal set. If this relay had been in the Foundation building, contact was broken. This had to be found out before it was too late. He thumbed on his radio and sent the call. The reply came back instantly.

“This is fleet communications. Will you please keep this circuit open? Commander Krafft is waiting for this call and it is being put directly through to him now.” Krafft’s voice broke in while the operator was still talking.

“Who is making this call—is it anyone from the Foundation?” The old man’s voice was shaky with emotion.

“Brandd here. I have Lea Morees with me—”

“No more? Are there no other survivors from the disaster that destroyed your building?”

“That’s it, other than us it’s a ... complete loss. With the building and all the instruments gone I have no way to contact our ship in orbit. Can you arrange to get us out of here if necessary?”

“Give me your location, a ship is coming now—”

“I don’t need a ship now,” Brion interrupted. “Don’t send it until I call. If there is a way to stop your destruction, I’ll find it. So I’m staying—to the last minute if necessary.”

Krafft was silent. There was just the crackle of an open mike and the sound of breathing. “That is your decision,” he said finally. “I’ll have a ship standing by. But won’t you let us take Miss Morees out now?”

“No. I need her here. We are still working, looking for—”

“What answer can you find that could possibly avert destruction now?” His tone was between hope and despair. Brion couldn’t help him.

“If I succeed—you’ll know. Otherwise, that will be the end of it. End of transmission.” He switched the radio off.

Lea was sleeping easily when he looked at her, and there was still a good part of the hour left before he could wake her. How could he put it to use? She would need tools, instruments to examine the corpse, there were certainly none here. Perhaps there were some he could find in the ruins of the Foundation building. With this thought he had the sudden desire to see the wreckage up close, and talk to the men he had seen working there. There might be other survivors. He had to find out.

Ulv was still crouched against the wall in the outer room. He looked up angrily when Brion came over, but said nothing.

“Will you help me again?” Brion asked. “Stay and watch the girl while I go out. I’ll be back at noon.” Ulv didn’t answer. “I am still looking for the way to save Dis,” Brion said.

“Go, I’ll watch the girl!” Ulv spat the words in impotent fury. “I do not know what to do. You may be right. Go. She will be safe with me.”

Brion slipped out into the deserted street and half running, half walking, made his way towards the rubble that had been the Cultural Relationships Foundation. He used a different course than the one they had come by, striking first towards the outer edge of the city. Once there he could swing and approach from the other side, so there would be no indication where he had come from. The magter might be watching and he didn’t want to lead them to Lea and the stolen body.

Turning a corner he saw a sandcar stopped in the street ahead. There was something familiar about the lines of it. It could be the one he and Telt had used, but he wasn’t sure. He looked around, but the dusty, packed-dirt street was white and empty, shimmering in silence under the sun. Staying close to the wall and watching

carefully, Brion slipped towards the car. When he came close to the rear tracks he was positive it was the one he had been in the night before. What was it doing here?

Silence and heat filled the street. Windows and doors were empty and there was no motion in their shadows. Putting his foot on a bogey wheel he reached up and grabbed the searing metal rim of the open window. He pulled himself up and stared at Telt's smiling face.

Smiling in death. The lips pulled back to reveal the grinning teeth, the eyes bursting from the head, the features swollen and contorted from the deadly poison. A tiny, tufted dart of wood stuck innocently in the brown flesh on the side of his neck.

XV

Brion hurled himself backward and sprawled flat in the dust and filth of the road. No poison dart sought him out, the empty silence still reigned. Telt's murderers had come and gone. Moving quickly, using the bulk of the car as a shield, he opened the door and slipped inside.

They had done a thorough job of destruction. All of the controls had been battered into uselessness, the floor was a junk heap of crushed equipment, intertwined with loops of recording tape bulging like mechanical intestines. A gutted machine, destroyed like its driver.

It was easy enough to reconstruct what had happened. The car had been seen when they entered the city—probably by some of the magter who had destroyed the Foundation building. They had not seen where it had gone, or Brion would surely be dead by now. But they must have spotted it when Telt tried to leave the city. And stopped it in the most effective way possible, a dart through the open window into the unsuspecting driver's neck.

Telt dead. The brutal impact of the man's death had driven all thought of its consequences from Brion's mind. Now he began to realize. Telt had never sent word of his discovery of the radioactive trace to the Nyjord army. He had been afraid to use the radio, and had wanted to tell Hys in person, and to show him the tape. Only now the tape was torn and mixed with all the others, the brain that could have analyzed it dead.

Brion looked at the dangling entrails of the radio and spun for the door. Running swiftly and erratically he fled from the sandcar. His own survival and the possible survival of Dis depended on his not being seen near it. He must contact Hys and pass on the information. Until he did that he was the only offworlder on Dis who knew which magter tower might contain the world-destroying bombs.

Once out of sight of the sandcar he went slower, wiping the sweat from his streaming face. He hadn't been seen leaving the car, and he wasn't being followed. The streets here weren't familiar, but he checked his direction by the sun and walked at a steady fast pace towards the destroyed building. More of the native Disans were in the streets now. They all noticed him, some even stopped and scowled fiercely. With his empathic awareness he felt their anger and hatred. A knot of men radiated death and he put his hand on his gun as he passed them. Two of them had their blowguns ready, but didn't use them. By the time he had turned the next corner he was soaked with nervous perspiration.

Ahead was the rubble of the destroyed building. Grounded next to it was the tapered form of a spacer's pinnace. Two men had come from the open lock and were standing at the edge of the burnt area.

Brion's boots grated loudly on the broken wreckage. The men turned quickly towards him, guns raised. Both of them carried ion-rifles. They relaxed when they saw his offworld clothes.

“Savages,” one of them growled. He was a heavyplanet man, a squashed down column of muscle and gristle, whose head barely reached Brion’s chest. A pushed-back cap had the crossed-sliderule symbol of ship’s computer man.

“Can’t blame them, I guess,” the second man said. He wore purser’s insignia. His features were different, but with the same compacted body they were as physically alike as twins. Probably from the same home planet. “They gonna get their whole world blown from under them at midnight. Looks like the poor slob in the streets finally realized what is happening. Hope we’re in jump-space by then. I saw Estrada’s World get it and I don’t want to see that again, not twice in one lifetime!”

The computer man was looking closely at Brion, head tilted sideways to see his face. “You need transportation offworld?” he asked. “We’re the last ship at the port, and we’re going to boil out of here as soon as the rest of our cargo is aboard. Give you a lift if you need it.”

Only by a tremendous effort at control did Brion conceal the destroying sorrow that overwhelmed him when he looked at that shattered wasteland, the graveyard of so many. “No,” he said. “That won’t be necessary. I’m in touch with the blockading fleet and they’ll pick me up before midnight.”

“You from Nyjord?” the purser growled.

“No,” Brion said, still only half aware of the men. “But there is trouble with my own ship.” He realized that they were looking intently at him, that he owed them some kind of explanation. “I thought I could find a way to stop the war. Now ... I’m not so sure.” He hadn’t intended to be so frank with the spacemen, but the words had been topmost in his thoughts and had simply slipped out.

The computer man started to say something, but his shipmate speared him in the side with his elbow. “We blast soon—and I don’t like the way these Disans are looking at us. Captain said to find out what caused the fire, then get back. So let’s go.”

“Don’t miss your ship,” the computer man said to Brion and started for the pinnace. Then he hesitated and turned. “Sure there’s nothing we can do for you.”

Sorrow would accomplish nothing. Brion fought to sweep the dregs of emotion from his mind and to think clearly. “You can help me,” he said. “I could use a scalpel or any other surgical instruments you might have.” Lea would need those. Then he remembered Telt’s undelivered message. “Do you have a portable radio transceiver—I can pay you for it.”

The computer man vanished inside the rocket and reappeared a minute later with a small package. “There’s a scalpel and a magnetized tweezers in here, all I could find in the medkit. Hope they’ll do.” He reached inside and swung out the metal case of a self-contained transceiver. “Take this, it’s got plenty of range, even on the longer frequencies.” He raised his hand at Brion’s offer to pay. “My donation,” he said. “If you can save this planet, I’ll give you the whole pinnace as well. We’ll tell the captain we lost the radio in some trouble with the natives. Isn’t that right, Moneybags?” He prodded the purser in the chest with a finger that would have punched a hole in a weaker man.

“I read you loud and clear,” the purser said. “I’ll make out an invoice so stating, back in the ship.” They were both in the pinnace then, and Brion had to move fast to get clear of the take-off blast.

Sense of obligation, the spacemen had felt it too. The realization of this raised Brion's spirits a bit as he searched through the rubble for anything useful. He recognized part of a wall still standing as a corner of the laboratory. Poking through the ruins he unearthed broken instruments and a single, battered case that had barely missed destruction. Inside was the binocular microscope, the right tube bent, its lenses cracked and obscured. The left eyepiece still seemed to be functioning. Brion carefully put it back in the case. He looked at his watch.

It was almost noon. These few pieces of equipment would have to do for the dissection. Watched suspiciously by the onlooking Disans, he started back to the warehouse. It was a long, circuitous walk, since he didn't dare give any clues to his destination. Only when he was positive he had not been observed or followed did he slip through the building's entrance, locking it behind him.

Lea's frightened eyes met his when he went into the office. "A friendly smile here among the cannibals," she called. Her strained expression gave the lie to the cheeriness of her words. "What has happened? Since I woke up, the great stone face over there," she pointed to Ulv, "has been telling me exactly nothing."

"What's the last thing you can remember?" Brion asked carefully. He didn't want to tell her too much, less this bring on the shock again. Ulv had shown great presence of mind in not talking to her.

"If you must know," Lea said, "I remember quite a lot, Brion Brandd. I shan't go into details, since this sort of thing is best kept from the natives. For the record then, I can recall going to sleep after you left. And nothing since then. It's weird. I went to sleep in that lumpy hospital bed and woke up on this couch. Feeling simply terrible. With *him* just simply sitting there and scowling at me. Won't you please tell me what is going on?"

A partial truth was best, saving all of the details that he could for later. "The magter attacked the Foundation building," he said. "They are getting angry at all offworlders now. You were still knocked out by a sleeping drug, so Ulv helped bring you here. It's afternoon now—"

"Of the last day?" She sounded horrified. "While I'm playing sleeping beauty the world is coming to an end. Was anyone hurt in the attack? Or killed?"

"There were a number of casualties—and plenty of trouble," Brion said. He had to get her off the subject. Walking over to the corpse he threw back the cover from its face. "But this is more important right now. It's one of the magter. I have a scalpel and some other things here—will you perform an autopsy?"

Lea huddled back on the couch, her arms around herself, looking chilled in spite of the heat of the day. "What happened to the people at the building?" she asked in a thin voice. The injection had removed her memories of the tragedy, but echoes of the strain and shock still reverberated in her mind and body. "I feel so ... exhausted. Please tell me what happened. I have the feeling you're hiding something."

Brion sat next to her and took her hands in his, not surprised to find them cold. Looking into her eyes he tried to give her some of his strength. "It wasn't very nice," he said. "You were shaken up by it, I imagine that's why you feel the way you do now. But—Lea, you'll have to take my word for this. Don't ask any more questions. There's nothing we can do now about it. But we can still find out about the magter. Will you examine the corpse?"

She tried to ask something, then changed her mind. When she dropped her eyes Brion felt the thin shiver that went through her body. “There’s something terribly wrong,” she said. “I know that. I guess I’ll have to take your word that it’s best not to ask questions. Help me up, will you, darling? My legs are absolutely liquid.”

Leaning on him, with his arm around her supporting most of her weight, she went slowly across to the corpse. She looked down and shuddered. “Not what you would call a natural death,” she said. Ulv watched intently as she took the scalpel out of its holder. “You don’t have to look at this,” she told him in halting Disan. “Not if you don’t want to.”

“I want to,” he told her, not taking his eyes from the body. “I have never seen a magter dead before, or without covering, like ordinary people.” He continued to stare fixedly.

“Find me some drinking water, will you Brion,” Lea said. “And spread the tarp under the body. These things are quite messy.”

After drinking the water she seemed stronger, and could stand without holding onto the table with both hands. Placing the tip of the scalpel just below the magter’s breast bone, she made the long continuous post-mortem incision down to the pubic symphysis. The great, body-length wound gaped open like a red mouth. Across the table Ulv shuddered but didn’t avert his eyes.

One by one she dissected the internal organs and removed them. Once she looked up at Brion, then quickly returned to work. The silence stretched on and on until Brion had to break it.

“Tell me, can’t you. Have you found out anything?”

His words snapped the thin strand of her strength, and she staggered back to the couch and collapsed on to it. Her blood-stained hands hung over the side, making a strangely terrible contrast to the whiteness of her skin.

“I’m sorry, Brion,” she said. “But there’s nothing, nothing at all. There are minor differences, organic changes I’ve never seen before—his liver is tremendous for one thing. But changes like this are certainly consistent within the pattern of *Homo sapiens* as adopted to a different planet. He’s a man. Changed, adopted, modified—but still just as human as you or I.”

“How can you be sure?” Brion broke in. “You haven’t examined him completely, have you?” She shook her head now. “Then go on. The other organs. His brain. A microscopic examination. Here!” he said, pushing the microscope case towards her with both hands.

She dropped her head onto her forearms and sobbed. “Leave me alone, can’t you! I’m tired and sick and fed up with this awful planet. Let them die. I don’t care! Your theory is false, useless. Admit that! And let me wash the filth from my hands—” Sobbing drowned out her words.

Brion stood over her and drew in a shuddering breath. Was he wrong? He didn’t dare think about that. He had to go on. Looking down at the thinness of her bent back, with the tiny projections of her spine pushing through the thin cloth, he felt an immense pity—a pity he couldn’t surrender to. This thin, helpless, frightened woman was his only resource. She had to work. He had to *make* her work.

Ihjel had done it. Used projective empathy to impress his emotions upon Brion. Now Brion must do it with Lea. There had been some sessions in the art, but not nearly enough to make him proficient. Nevertheless he had to try.

Strength was what Lea needed. Aloud he said simply "You can do it. You have the will and the strength to finish." And silently his mind cried out the order to obey, to share his power now that hers was drained and finished.

Only when she lifted her face and he saw the dried tears did he realize that he had succeeded. "You will go on?" he asked simply.

Lea merely nodded and rose to her feet. She shuffled like a sleep-walker, jerked along by invisible strings. Her strength wasn't her own and it reminded him unhappily of that last event of the Twenties when he had experienced the same kind of draining activity. Wiping her hands roughly on her clothes she opened the microscope case.

"The slides are all broken," she said.

"This will do," Brion told her, crashing his heel through the glass partition. Shards tinkled and crashed to the floor. He took some of the bigger pieces and broke them to rough squares that would fit under the clips on the stage. Lea accepted them without a word. Putting a drop of the magter's blood on the slide she bent over the eyepiece.

Her hands shook when she tried to adjust the focusing. Using low power she examined the specimen, squinting through the angled tube. Once she turned the substage mirror a bit to catch direct the light streaming in the window. Brion stood behind her, fists clenched, forcefully controlling his anxiety. "What do you see?" he finally blurted out.

"Phagocytes, platelets ... leucocytes ... everything seems normal." Her voice was dull, exhausted, her eyes blinking with fatigue as she stared into the tube.

Anger at defeat burned through Brion. Even faced with failure he refused to accept it. He reached over her shoulder and savagely twisted the turret of microscope until the longest lens was in position. "If you can't see anything—try the high power! It's there—I know it's there! I'll get you a tissue specimen." He turned back to the disemboweled cadaver.

His back was turned and he did not see the sudden stiffening of her shoulders, or the sudden eagerness that seized her fingers as they adjusted the focus. But he did feel the wave of emotion that welled from her, impinging directly on his empathic sense. "What is it?" he called to her, as if she had spoken aloud.

"Something ... something here," she said, "in this leucocyte. It's not a normal structure, but it's familiar. I've seen something like it before, but I just can't remember." She turned away from the scope and unthinkingly pressed her gory knuckles to her forehead. "I know I've seen it before."

Brion squinted into the deserted microscope and made out a dim shape in the center of the field. It stood out sharply when he focused—the white, jellyfish shape of a single-celled leucocyte. To his untrained eye there was nothing unusual about it. He couldn't know what was strange—when he had no idea of what was normal.

"Do you see those spherical green shapes grouped together?" Lea asked. Before Brion could answer she gasped "I remember now!" Her fatigue was forgotten in her excitement. "*Icerya purchasi* that was the name, something like that. It's a coccid, a

little scale insect. It had those same shapes collected together within its individual cells.”

“What do they mean? What is the connection with Dis?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “it’s just that they look so similar. And I never saw anything like this in a human cell before. In the coccids, the green particles grow into a kind of yeast that lives within the insect. Not a parasite, but a real symbiote—”

Her eyes opened wide as she caught the significance of her own words. A symbiote—and Dis was the world where symbiosis and parasitism had become more advanced and complex than on any other planet. Lea’s thoughts spun around this fact and chewed at the fringes of the logic. Brion could sense her concentration and absorption. He did nothing to break the mood. Her hands were clenched into fists, her eyes staring unseeingly at the wall as her mind raced.

Brion and Ulv sat quietly, watching her, waiting for her conclusions. The pieces were falling into shape at last.

Lea opened her clenched fists and smoothed them on her sodden skirt. She blinked and turned until she saw Brion. “Is there a tool box here?” she asked.

Her words were so unexpected that it took Brion a moment to answer. Before he could say anything she spoke again.

“No hand tools, it would take too long. Could you find anything like a power saw—that would be ideal?” She turned back to the microscope, so he didn’t have any opportunity to question her. Ulv was still looking at the body of the magter and had understood nothing of what they had said. Brion went out into the loading bay.

There was nothing he could use on the ground floor, so he took the stairs to the floor above. A corridor here passed by a number of rooms. All of the doors were locked, including one with the hopeful sign TOOL ROOM on it. He battered at the metal door with his shoulder without budging it. As he stopped to look for a way in he glanced at his watch.

Two o’clock! In ten hours the bombs would fall on Dis.

The need for haste tore at him. Yet there could be no noise—someone in the street might hear it. He quickly stripped off his shirt and wrapped it in a loose roll around the barrel of his gun, extending it in a loose tube in front of the barrel. Holding the rolled cloth in his left hand, he jammed the gun up tight against the door, the muzzle against the lock. The single shot was only a dull thud, inaudible outside of the building. Pieces of broken mechanism jarred and rattled inside the lock and the door swung open.

Lea was standing by the body when he came back, holding up the small power saw with a rotary blade. “Will this do?” he asked. “Runs off its own battery, almost fully charged, too.”

“Perfect,” she answered. “You’re both going to have to help me.” She switched into the Disan language. “Ulv, would you find some place where you can watch the street without being seen. Signal me when it is empty. I’m afraid this saw is going to make a lot of noise.”

Ulv nodded and went out into the bay, climbing a heap of empty crates so he could peer through the small windows set high in the wall. He looked carefully in both directions, then waved to her to go ahead.

“Stand to one side and hold the cadaver’s chin, Brion,” she said. “Hold it firmly so the head doesn’t shake around when I cut. This is going to be a little gruesome. I’m sorry. But it’ll be the fastest way to cut the bone.” The saw bit into the skull.

Once Ulv waved them into silence, and shrank back himself into the shadows next to the window. They waited impatiently until he gave them a sign to continue again. Brion held steady while the saw cut a circle completely around the skull.

“Finished,” Lea said and the saw dropped from her limp fingers to the floor. She massaged life back into her hands before she finished the job. Carefully and delicately she removed the cap of bone from the magter’s head, exposing his brain to the shaft of light from the window.

“You were right all the time, Brion,” she said. “There is your alien.”

XVI

Ulv joined them as they looked down at the exposed brain of the magter. The thing was so clearly evident that even Ulv noticed it.

"I have seen dead animals and my people dead with their heads open, but I have never seen anything like that before," he said.

"What is it?" Brion asked.

"The invader, the alien you were looking for," Lea told him.

The magter's brain was only two-thirds of its normal size. Instead of filling the skull completely, it shared the space with a green, amorphous shape. This was ridged somewhat like a brain, but the green shape had still darker nodules and extensions. Lea took her scalpel and gently prodded the dark moist mass.

"It reminds me very much of something that I've seen before on Earth," she said.

"The green-fly—*Drepanosiphum platanoides*—and an unusual organ it has, called the pseudova. Now that I have seen this growth in the magter's skull I can think of a positive parallel. The fly *Drepanosiphum* also has a large green organ, only it fills half of the body cavity instead of the head. Its identity puzzled biologists for years, and they had a number of complex theories to explain it away. Finally someone managed to dissect and examine it. The pseudova turned out to be a living plant, a yeastlike growth that helps with the green-fly's digestion. It produces enzymes that enable the fly to digest the great amounts of sugar it gets from plant juice."

"That's not unusual," Brion said, puzzled. "Termites and human beings are a couple of other creatures whose digestion is helped by internal flora. What's the difference in the green-fly?"

"Reproduction, mainly. All the other gut-living plants have to enter the host and establish themselves as outsiders, permitted to remain as long as they are useful. The green-fly and its yeast plant have a permanent symbiotic relationship that is essential to the existence of both. The plant spores appear in many places throughout the fly's body—but they are *always* in the germ cells. Every egg cell has some, and every egg that grows to maturity is infected with the plant spores. The continuation of the symbiosis is unbroken and guaranteed.

"Do you think those green spheres in the magter's blood cells could be the same kind of thing?" Brion asked.

"I'm sure of it," Lea said. "It must be the same process. There are probably green spheres throughout the magters' bodies, spores or offspring of those things in their brains. Enough will find their way to the germ cells to make sure that every young magter is infected at birth. While the child is growing—so is the symbiote. Probably a lot faster since it seems to be a simpler organism. I imagine it is well established in the brain pan within the first six months of the infant's life."

"But why?" Brion asked. "What does it do?"

"I'm only guessing now, but there is plenty of evidence that gives us an idea of its function. I'm willing to bet that the symbiote itself is not a simple organism, it's probably an amalgam of plant and animal like most of the other creatures on Dis. The thing is just too complex to have developed since mankind has been on this

planet. The magter must have caught the symbiotic infection by eating some Disan animal. The symbiote lived and flourished in its new environment. Well protected by a bony skull in a long-lived host. In exchange for food, oxygen and comfort, the brain-symbiote must generate hormones and enzymes that enable the magter to survive. Some of these might aid digestion, enabling the magter to eat any plant or animal life they can lay their hands on. The symbiote might produce sugars, scavenge the blood of toxins—there are so many things it could do. Things it must have done, since the magter are obviously the dominant life form on this planet. They paid a high price for their symbiote, but it didn't really matter to race-survival until now. Did you notice that the magter's brain is no smaller than normal?"

"It must be—or how else could that brain-symbiote fit in inside the skull with it?" Brion said.

"If the magter's total brain were smaller in volume than normal, it could fit into the remaining space in the cranial hollow. But the brain is full-sized—it is just that part of it is missing, absorbed by the symbiote."

"The frontal lobes," Brion said with sudden realization. "This hellish growth has performed a prefrontal lobotomy!"

"It's done even more than that," Lea said, separating the convolutions of the gray matter with her scalpel to uncover a green filament beneath. "These tendrils penetrate farther back into the brain, but always remain in the cerebrum. The cerebellum appears to be untouched. Apparently just the higher functions of mankind have been interfered with, selectively. Destruction of the frontal lobes made the magter creatures without emotions or ability for really abstract thought. Apparently they survived better without these. There must have been some horrible failures before the right balance was struck. The final product is a man-plant-animal symbiote that is admirably adapted for survival on this disaster world. No emotions to cause complications or desires that might interfere with pure survival. Complete ruthlessness—mankind has always been strong on this anyway, so it didn't take much of a push."

"The other Disans, like Ulv here, managed to survive without turning into such a creature. So why was it necessary for the magter to go so far?"

"Nothing is necessary in evolution, you know that," Lea said. "Many variations are possible and all the better ones continue. You might say that Ulv's people survive, but the magter survive better. If offworld contact hadn't been re-established, I imagine that the magter would slowly have become the dominant race. Only they won't have the chance now. It looks as though they have succeeded in destroying both races with their suicidal urge."

"That's the part that doesn't make sense," Brion said. "The magter have survived and climbed right to the top of the evolutionary heap here. Yet they are suicidal. How come they haven't been wiped out before this?"

"Individually they have been aggressive to the point of suicide. They will attack anything and everything with the same savage lack of emotion. Luckily there are no bigger animals on this planet. So where they have died as individuals, their utter ruthlessness has guaranteed their survival as a group. Now they are faced with a problem that is too big for their half-destroyed minds to handle. Their personal policy has become their planetary policy—and that's never a very smart thing. They

are like men with knives who have killed all the men who were only armed with stones. Now they are facing men with guns and they are going to keep charging and fighting until they are all dead.”

“It’s a perfect case of the utter impartiality of the forces of evolution. Men infected by this Disan life form were the dominant creatures on this planet. The creature in the magters’ brains was a true symbiote then, giving something and receiving something. Making a union of symbiotes where all were stronger together than any could be separately. Now this is changed. The magter brain cannot understand the concept of racial death, in a situation where it must understand to be able to survive. Therefore, the brain-creature is no longer a symbiote but a parasite.”

“And as a parasite it must be destroyed!” Brion broke in. “We’re not fighting shadows any more,” he exulted. “We’ve found the enemy—and it’s not the magter at all. Just a sort of glorified tapeworm that is too stupid to know when it is killing itself off. Does it have a brain—can it think?”

“I doubt it very much,” Lea said. “A brain would be of absolutely no use to it. So even if it originally possessed reasoning powers they would be gone by now. Symbiotes or parasites that live internally like this always degenerate to an absolute minimum of functions....”

“Tell me about it? What is this thing?” Ulv broke in, producing the soft form of the brain-symbiote. He had heard all their excited talk but had not understood a word.

“Explain it to him, will you Lea, as best you can,” Brion said, looking at her and realized how exhausted she was. “And sit down while you do it, you’re long overdue for a rest. I’m going to try—” He broke off when he looked at his watch.

It was after four in the afternoon—less than eight hours to go. What was he to do? Enthusiasm faded as he realized that only half of the problem was solved. The bombs would drop on schedule unless the Nyjorders could understand the significance of this discovery. Even if they understood—would it make any difference to them? The threat of the hidden cobalt bombs would not be changed.

With this thought came the guilty realization that he had forgotten completely about Telt’s death. Even before he contacted the Nyjord fleet he must tell Hys and his rebel army what had happened to Telt and his sandcar. Also about the radioactive traces. They couldn’t be checked against the records now to see how important they might be, but Hys might make another raid on the strength of the suspicion. This call wouldn’t take long, then he would be free to tackle Professor-Commander Krafft.

Carefully setting the transmitter on the frequency of the rebel army, he sent out a call to Hys. There was no answer.

There was always a chance the set was broken. He quickly twisted the transmitter to the frequency of his personal radio, then whistled in the microphone. The received signal was so loud that it hurt his ears. He tried to call Hys again, and was relieved to get a response this time.

“Brion Brandd here, can you read me? I want to talk to Hys at once.”

Shockingly, it was Professor-Commander Krafft who answered.

“I’m sorry Brion, but it’s impossible to talk to Hys. We are monitoring his frequency and your call was relayed to me. Hys and his rebels lifted ship about a half an hour

ago, and are already on the way back to Nyjord. Are you ready to leave now? It will soon become dangerous to make any landings. Even now I will have to ask for volunteers to get you out of there.”

Hys and the rebel army gone. Brion assimilated the thought at the same moment he realized he was talking to Krafft. He was thrown off balance, not prepared for the encounter.

“If they’re gone—well, then there’s nothing I can do about it,” Brion said. “I was going to call you, so I can talk to you now. Listen and try to understand. You must cancel the bombing. I’ve found out about the magter, found what causes their mental aberration. If we can correct that, we can stop them from attacking Nyjord—”

“Can they be corrected by midnight tonight?” Krafft broke in. He was abrupt and sounded annoyed. Even saints get tired.

“No, of course not.” Brion frowned at the microphone, realizing the talk was going all wrong, but not knowing how to fix it. “But it won’t take too long. I have evidence here that will convince you that what I say is the truth.”

“I believe you without seeing it, Brion.” The trace of anger was gone from Krafft’s voice now and it was heavy with fatigue and defeat. “I’ll admit you are probably right. A little while ago I admitted to Hys, too, that he was probably right in his original estimation of the correct way to tackle the problem of Dis. We have made a lot of mistakes, and in making them we have run out of time. I’m afraid that is the only fact that is relevant now. The bombs fall at twelve and even then they may drop too late. A ship is already on its way from Nyjord with my replacement. I exceeded my authority by running a day past the maximum the technicians gave me. I realize now I was gambling the life of my own world in the vain hope I could save Dis. They can’t be saved. They’re dead. I won’t hear any more about it.”

“You must listen—”

“I must destroy the planet below me, that is what I must do. That fact will not be changed by anything you say. All the offworlders—other than your party—are gone. I’m sending a ship down now to pick you up. As soon as that ship lifts I am going to drop the first bombs. Now—tell me where you are so they can come for you.”

“Don’t threaten me, Krafft!” Brion shook his fist at the radio in an excess of anger. “You’re a killer and a world destroyer, don’t try and make yourself out as anything else. I have the knowledge to avert this slaughter and you won’t listen to me. And I know where the cobalt bombs are—in the magter tower that Hys raided last night. Get those bombs and there is no need to drop any of your own!”

“I’m sorry, Brion. I appreciate what you’re trying to do, yet at the same time I know the futility of it. I’m not going to accuse you of lying, but do you realize how thin your evidence sounds from this end? First a dramatic discovery of the cause of the magters’ intransigency. Then, when that had no results, you suddenly remember that you know where the bombs are. The best kept magter secret....”

“I don’t know for sure, but there is a very good chance,” Brion said, trying to repair his defenses. “Telt made readings, he had other records of radioactivity in this same magter keep. Proof that something is there. But Telt is dead now, the records destroyed. Don’t you see—” He broke off, realizing how vague and unprovable his case was. This was defeat.

The radio was silent, with just the hum of the carrier wave as Krafft waited for him to continue. When Brion did speak his voice was empty of all hope.

“Send your ship down,” he said tiredly. “We’re in a building that belonged to the Light Metals Trust Ltd., a big warehouse of some kind. I don’t know the address here, but I’m sure you have someone there who can find it. We’ll be waiting for you.”

“You win Krafft.”

He turned off the radio.

XVII

“Do you mean what you said, about giving up?” Lea asked. Brion realized that she had stopped talking to Ulv some time ago, and had been listening to his conversation with Krafft. He shrugged, trying to put his feeling into words.

“We’ve tried—and almost succeeded. But if they won’t listen what can we do? What can one man possibly do against a fleet loaded with H-bombs?”

As if in answer to his question Ulv’s voice drowned him out. The harsh Disan words slashing the silence of the room.

“Kill you, the enemy!” he said. “Kill you *umedvirk*!”

He shouted the last word and his hand flashed to his belt. In a single swift motion he lifted his blowgun and placed it to his lips. A tiny dart quivered in the already dead flesh of the creature in the magter’s skull. The action had all the symbolism of a broken lance, the declaration of war.

“Ulv understands it a lot better than you might think,” Lea said. “He knows things about symbiosis and mutualism that would get him a job as a lecturer in any university on Earth. He knows just what the brain-symbiote is and what it does. They even have a word for it, one that never appeared in our Disan language lessons. A life form that you can live with or co-operate with is called *medvirk*. One that works to destroy you is *umedvirk*. He also understands that life forms can change, and be *medvirk* or *umedvirk* at different times. He has just decided that the brain symbiote is *umedvirk* and is out to kill it. So will the rest of the Disans as soon as he can show them the evidence and explain.”

“You’re sure of this,” Brion asked, interested in spite of himself.

“Positive. The Disans have a very absolute attitude towards survival, you should realize that. Not the same as the magter, but not much different in the results. They will kill the brain-symbiote, even if it means killing every magter who harbors one.”

“If that is the case, we can’t leave now,” Brion said. With these words it suddenly became very clear what he had to do. “The ship is coming down now from the fleet. Get in it and take the body of the magter. I won’t go.”

“Where will you be?” she asked.

“Fighting the magter. My presence on the planet means that Krafft won’t keep his threat to drop the bombs any earlier than the midnight deadline. That would be deliberately murdering me. I doubt if my presence past midnight will stop him, but it should keep the bombs away at least until then.”

“What will you accomplish besides committing suicide?” Lea pleaded. “You just told me how a single man can’t stop the bombs. What will happen to you at midnight?”

“I’ll be dead—but in spite of that I can’t run away. Not now. I must do everything possible right up until the last instant. Ulv and I will go to the magter tower, try to find out if the bombs are there. He will fight on our side now. He may even know more about the bombs, things that he didn’t want to tell me before. We can get help from his people. Some of them must know where the bombs are, being native to this planet.” Lea started to say something, but he rushed on, drowning out her words.

“You have just as big a job. Show the magter to Krafft, explain the significance of the brain-parasite to him. Try and get him to talk to Hys about the last raid. Try to get him to hold off the attack. I’ll keep the radio with me and as soon as I know anything I’ll call in. This is all last resort, finger in the dike kind of stuff, but it is all we can do.”

“Because if we do nothing it means the end of Dis.”

Lea tried to argue with him, but he wouldn’t listen to her. He only kissed her, and with a lightness he did not feel tried to convince her that everything would be all right. In their hearts they both knew it wasn’t, yet they left it that way because it was the least painful solution.

A sudden rumbling shook the building and the windows darkened as a ship settled in the street outside. The Nyjord crew came in with guns pointed, alert for anything. With a little convincing they took the cadaver, as well as Lea, when they lifted ship. Brion watched the spacer become a pinpoint in the sky and vanish. He shrugged his shoulders, trying to shake off the feeling that this was the last time he would see any of them.

“Let’s get out of here fast,” he told Ulv, picking up the radio. “Before anyone comes around to see why the ship landed.”

“What will you do,” Ulv asked, as they went down the street towards the desert.

“What can we do in the few hours we have left?” He pointed at the sun, nearing the horizon. Brion shifted the weight of the radio to his other hand before replying.

“Get to the magter tower we raided last night, that’s the best chance. The bombs might be there. Unless you know where the bombs are?”

Ulv shook his head. “I do not know, but some of my people may. We will capture a magter then kill him so they can all see the *umedvirk*. Then they will tell us everything they know.”

“The tower first then, for bombs or a sample magter. What’s the fastest way we can get there?”

Ulv frowned in thought. “If you can drive one of the cars the offworlders use, I know where there are some locked in buildings in this city. None of my people know how they are made to move.”

“I can work them—let’s go.”

Chance was with them this time. The first sandcar they found still had the keys in the lock. It was battery powered, but contained a full charge. Much quieter than the heavy atomic cars it sped smoothly out of the city and across the sand. Ahead of them the sun sank in a red wave of color and it was six o’clock. By the time they reached the tower it was seven and Brion’s nerves felt as if they were writhing under his skin.

Even though it looked like suicide, attacking the tower brought blessed relief. It was movement and action, and for moments at a time he forgot the bombs hanging over his head.

The attack was nerve-wrackingly anticlimactic. They used the main entrance, Ulv ranging soundlessly ahead. There was no one in sight. Once inside they crept down towards the lower rooms where the radiation had been detected. Only gradually did they realize that the magter tower was completely empty.

“Everyone gone,” Ulv grunted, sniffing the air in every room that they passed. “Many magter were here earlier, they are gone now.”

“Do they often desert their towers?” Brion asked.

“Never. I have never heard of it happening before. I can think of no reason why they should do a thing like this.”

“Well I can,” Brion told him. “They would leave their home if they took something with them of greater value. The bombs. If the bombs were hidden here, they might move them after the attack.” Sudden fear hit him. “Or they might move them because it is time to take them—to the launcher! Let’s get out of here, the quickest way we can.”

“I smell air from outside,” Ulv said, “coming from down there. This cannot be, because the magter have no entrances this low in their towers.”

“We blasted one in earlier—that could be it. Can you find it?”

Moonlight shone ahead as they turned an angle of the corridor, and stars were visible through the gaping opening in the wall.

“It looks bigger than it was,” Brion said, “as if the magter enlarged it.” He looked through and saw the tracks on the sand outside. “As if they enlarged it to bring something bulky up from below—and carried it away in whatever made those tracks!”

Using the opening themselves they ran back to the sandcar. Brion ground it fiercely around and turned the headlights on the tracks. There were the marks of a sandcar’s treads, half obscured by thin, unmarked wheel tracks. He turned off the lights and forced himself to move slowly and to do an accurate job. A quick glimpse of his watch showed him there were four hours left to go. The moonlight was bright enough to illuminate the tracks. Driving with one hand he turned on the radio transmitter, already set for Krafft’s wave length.

When the operator acknowledged his signal Brion reported what they had discovered and his conclusions. “Get that message to Commander Krafft now. I can’t wait to talk to him—I’m following the tracks.” He killed the transmission and stamped on the accelerator. The sandcar churned and bounced down the track.

“They are going to the mountains,” Ulv said half an hour later, as the tracks still pointed straight ahead. “There are caves here and many magter have been seen near them, that is what I have heard.”

The guess was correct. Before nine o’clock the ground humped into a range of foothills and the darker masses of mountains could be seen behind them, rising up to obscure the stars.

“Stop the car here,” Ulv said, “The caves begin not too far ahead. There may be magter watching or listening, so we must go quietly.”

Brion followed the deep-cut grooves, carrying the radio. Ulv came and went on both sides, silently as a shadow, scouting for hidden watchers. As far as he could discover there were none.

By nine-thirty Brion realized they had deserted the sandcar too soon. The tracks wound on and on, and seemed to have no end. They passed some caves, Ulv pointed

them out to him, but the tracks never stopped. Time was running out and the nightmare stumbling through the darkness continued.

“More caves ahead,” Ulv said. “Go quietly.”

They came cautiously to the crest of the hill, as they had done so many times before, and looked into the shallow valley beyond. Sand covered the valley floor, and the light of the setting moon shone over the tracks at a flat angle, setting them off sharply as lines of shadow. They ran straight across the sandy valley and disappeared into the dark mouth of a cave on the far side.

Sinking back behind the hilltop, Brion covered the pilot light with his hand and turned on the transmitter. Ulv stayed above him, staring at the opening of the cave.

“This is an important message,” Brion whispered into the mike, “Please record.” He repeated this for thirty seconds, glancing at his watch to make sure of the time, since the seconds of waiting stretched to minutes in his brain. Then, clearly as possible without raising his voice above a whisper, he told of the discovery of the tracks and the cave.

“... The bombs may or may not be in here, but we are going in to find out. I’ll leave my personal transmitter here with the broadcast power turned on, so you can home on its signal. That will give you a directional beacon to find the cave. I’m taking the other radio in, it has more power. If we can’t get back to the entrance, I’ll try a signal from inside. I doubt if you will hear it because of the rock, but I’ll try. End of transmission. Don’t try to answer me because I have the receiver turned off. There are no earphones on this set and the speaker would be too loud here.”

He switched off, held his thumb on the button for an instant, then flicked it back on.

“Good-by, Lea,” he said, and killed the power for good.

They circled and reached the rocky wall of the cliff. Creeping silently in the shadows here they slipped up on the dark entrance of the cave. Nothing moved ahead and there was no sound from the entrance of the cave. Brion glanced at his watch and was instantly sorry.

Ten-thirty.

The last shelter concealing them was five meters from the cave. They started to rise, to rush the final distance when Ulv suddenly waved Brion down. He pointed to his nose, then to the cave. He could smell the magter there.

A dark figure separated itself from the greater darkness of the cave mouth. Ulv acted instantly. He stood up and his hand went to his mouth; air hissed faintly through the tube in his hand. Without a noise the magter folded and fell to the ground. Before the body hit Ulv crouched low and rushed in. There was the sudden scuffling of feet on the floor, then silence.

Brion walked in, gun ready and alert, not knowing what he would find. His toe pushed against a body on the ground and from the darkness Ulv whispered. “There were only two. We can go on now.”

Finding their way through the cave was a maddening torture. They had no light, nor could they dare use one if they had. There were no wheel marks to follow on the stone floor. Without Ulv’s sensitive nose they would have been completely lost. The caves branched and rejoined and they soon lost all sense of direction.

Walking was maddening and almost impossible. They had to grope with their hands before them like blind men. Stumbling and falling against the rock, their fingers were soon throbbing and raw from brushing against the rough walls. Ulv followed the scent of the magter that hung in the air where they had passed. When it grew thin he knew they had left the frequently used tunnels and entered deserted ones. They could only retrace their steps and start again in a different direction.

More maddening than the walking was the time. Inexorably the glowing hands crept around the face of Brion's watch until they stood at fifteen minutes before twelve.

"There is a light ahead," Ulv whispered, and Brion almost gasped with relief. They moved slowly and silently until they stood, concealed by the darkness, looking out into a domed chamber brightly lit by glowing tubes.

"What is it," Ulv asked, blinking in the painful wash of illumination after the long darkness.

Brion had to fight to control his voice, to stop from shouting.

"The cage with the metal webbing is a jump-space generator. The pointed, sliver shapes next to it are bombs of some kind, probably the cobalt bombs. We've found it!"

His first impulse was to instantly send the radio call that would stop the waiting fleet of H-bombers. But an unconvincing message would be worse than no message at all. He had to describe exactly what he saw here so the Nyjorders would know he wasn't lying. What he told them had to fit exactly with the information they already had about the launcher and the bombs.

The launcher had been jury-rigged from a ship's jump-space generator, that was obvious. The generator and its controls were neatly cased and mounted. Cables ran from them to a roughly constructed cage of woven metal straps, hammered and bent into shape by hand. Three technicians were working on the equipment. Brion wondered what sort of bloodthirsty war-lovers the magter had found to handle the bombing for them. Then he saw the chains around their necks and the bloody wounds on their backs. He still found it difficult to have any pity for them. They had been obviously willing to accept money to destroy another planet—or they wouldn't have been working here. They had probably rebelled only when they had discovered how suicidal the attack would be.

Thirteen minutes to midnight.

Cradling the radio against his chest, Brion rose to his feet. He had a better view of the bombs now. There were twelve of them, alike as eggs from the same deadly clutch. Pointed like the bow of a spacer, each one swept smoothly back for its two meters of length, to a sharply chopped off end. They were obviously incomplete, the war heads of rockets. One had its base turned towards him and he saw six projecting studs that could be used to attach it to the missing rocket. A circular inspection port was open in the flat base of the bomb.

This was enough. With this description the Nyjorders would know he couldn't be lying about finding the bombs. Once they realized this they couldn't destroy Dis without first trying to neutralize them.

Brion carefully counted fifty paces before he stopped. He was far enough from the cavern so he couldn't be heard, and an angle of the cave cut off all light from behind him. With carefully controlled movements he turned on the power, switched the set to transmit and checked the broadcast frequency. All correct. Then, slowly and clearly, he described what he had seen in the cavern behind him. He kept his voice emotionless, recounting facts, leaving out anything that might be considered an opinion.

It was six minutes before midnight when he finished. He thumbed the switch to receive and waited.

There was only silence.

Slowly, the empty quality of the silence penetrated his numbed mind. There were no crackling atmospherics nor hiss of static, even when he turned the power full on. The mass of rock and earth of the mountain above was acting as a perfect grounding screen, absorbing his signal even at maximum output.

They hadn't heard him. The Nyjord fleet didn't know that the cobalt bombs had been discovered before their launching. The attack would go ahead as planned. Even now the bomb-bay doors were opening, armed H-bombs hung above the planet, held in place only by their shackles. In a few minutes the signal would be given and the shackles would spring open, the bombs drop clear....

"Killers!" Brion shouted into the microphone. "You wouldn't listen to reason, you wouldn't listen to Hys, or me, or to any voice that suggested an alternative to complete destruction. You are going to destroy Dis and *it's not necessary!* There were a lot of ways you could have stopped it. You didn't do any of them and now it's too late. You'll destroy Dis and in turn this will destroy Nyjord. Ihjel said that and now I believe him. You're just another failure in a galaxy full of failures!"

He raised the radio above his head and sent it crashing into the rock floor. Then he was running back to Ulv, trying to run away from the realization that he, too, had tried and failed. The people on the surface of Dis had less than two minutes left to live.

"They didn't get my message," Brion said to Ulv. "The radio won't work this far underground."

"Then the bombs will fall?" Ulv asked, looking searchingly at Brion's face in the dim reflected light from the cavern.

"Unless something happens that we know nothing about, the bombs will fall."

They said nothing after that, they simply waited. The three technicians in the cavern were also aware of the time. They were calling to each other and trying to talk to the magter. The emotionless, parasite-ridden brains of the magter saw no reason to stop work, so the men were beaten back to their tasks. In spite of the blows they didn't go, just gaped in horror as the clock hands moved remorselessly towards twelve. Even the magter dimly felt some of the significance of the occasion. They stopped, too, and waited.

The hour hand touched twelve on Brion's watch, then the minute hand. The second hand closed the gap and for a tenth of a second the three black hands were one. Then the second hand moved on.

Brion's immediate sensation of relief was washed away by the chilling realization that he was deep underground. Sound and seismic waves were slow and the flare of atomic explosions couldn't be seen here. If the bombs had been dropped at twelve, they wouldn't know it at once.

A distant rumble filled the air. A moment later the ground heaved under them and the lights in the cavern flickered. Fine dust drifted down from the roof above.

Ulv turned to him, but Brion looked away. He could not face the accusation in the Disan's eyes.

XVIII

One of the technicians was running and screaming. The magter knocked him down and beat him into silence. Seeing this the other two men returned to work with shaking hands. Even if all life on the surface of the planet were dead, this would have no effect on the magter. They would go ahead as planned, without emotion or imagination enough to alter their set course. As they worked the technicians' attitude changed from shocked numbness to anger. Right and wrong were forgotten. They had been killed—the invisible death of radiation must already be penetrating into the caves—but they also had the chance for vengeance. Swiftly they brought their work to completion, with a speed and precision they had concealed before.

“What are those offworlders doing?” Ulv asked.

Brion stirred from his lethargy of defeat and looked across the cavern floor. The men had a wheeled hand-truck and were rolling one of the atomic warheads onto it. They pushed it over to the latticework of the jump-field.

“They are going to bomb Nyjord now, just as Nyjord bombed Dis. That machine will hurl the bombs in a special way to the other planet.”

“Will you stop them?” Ulv asked. He had his deadly blowgun in his hand and his face was an expressionless mask.

Brion almost smiled at the irony of the situation. In spite of everything he had done to prevent it, Nyjord had dropped the bombs. And this act alone may have destroyed their own planet. Brion had it within his power now to stop the launching in the cavern. Should he? Should he save the lives of his killers? Or should he practice the ancient blood-oath that had echoed and destroyed down through the ages—*An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*. It would be so simple. He literally had to do nothing. The score would be evened and his and the Disans' deaths avenged.

Did Ulv have his blowgun ready to kill Brion if he should try to stop the launchings? Or had he misread the Disan entirely?

“Will *you* stop them, Ulv?” he asked.

How large was mankind's sense of obligation? The cave man first had this feeling for his mate, then for his family. It grew until men fought and died for the abstract ideas of cities and nations, then for whole planets. Would the time ever come when men might realize that the obligation should be to the largest and most encompassing reality of all? Mankind. And beyond that to life of all kinds.

Brion saw this idea not in words, but as a reality. When he posed the question to himself in this way he found that it stated clearly its inherent answer. He pulled his gun out, and as he did he wondered what Ulv's answer might be.

“Nyjord is *medvirk*,” Ulv said, raising his blowgun and sending a dart across the cavern. It struck one of the technicians who gasped and fell to the floor.

Brion's shots crashed into the control board, shorting and destroying it, removing the menace to Nyjord for all time.

Medvirk, Ulv had said. A life form that co-operates and aids other life forms. It may kill in self-defense, but is essentially not a killer or destroyer. Ulv had a lifetime of knowledge about the interdependency of life. He grasped the essence of the idea and

ignored all the verbal complications and confusions. He had killed the magter, who were his own people, because they were *umedvirk*—against life. And saved his enemies because they were *medvirk*.

With this realization came the painful knowledge that the planet and the people that had produced this understanding were dead.

In the cavern the magter saw the destruction of their plans, and the cave mouth from which the bullets had come. Silently they rushed to kill their enemy. A concerted wave of emotionless fury.

Brion and Ulv fought back. Even the knowledge that he was doomed no matter what happened could not resign Brion to death at the hands of the magter. To Ulv, the decision was much easier. He was simply killing *umedvirk*. A believer in life, he destroyed the anti-life.

They retreated into the darkness, still firing. The magter had lights and ion-rifles, and were right behind them. Knowing the caverns better than the men they chased, pursuers circled. Brion saw lights ahead and dragged Ulv to a stop.

“They know their way through these caves, and we don’t,” he said. “If we try to run, they’ll just shoot us down. Let’s find a spot we can defend and settle into it.”

“Back here,” Ulv gave a tug in the right direction, “there is a cave with only one very narrow entrance.”

“Let’s go!”

Running as silently as they could in the darkness, they reached the deadend cavern without being seen. What noise they made was lost in other footsteps that echoed and sounded through the connecting caves. Once inside they found cover behind a ridge and waited. The end was certain.

The magter ran swiftly into their cave, flashing his light into all the places of concealment. The beam passed over the two hidden men and at the same instant Brion fired. The shot boomed loudly as the magter fell. Even if his loss was not known, the shot would surely have been heard.

Before anyone else came into the cave, Brion ran over and grabbed the still functioning light. Propping it on the rocks so it shone on the entrance, he hurried back to shelter beside Ulv. They waited for the attack.

It was not long in coming. Two magter rushed in and died. There were more outside, and Brion wondered how long it would be before they remembered the grenades and rolled one into their shelter.

An indistinct murmur sounded outside and some sharp explosions. In their shelter, Brion and Ulv crouched low and wondered why the attack didn’t come. Then one of the magter came in and Brion hesitated before shooting.

The man had *backed* in, firing behind him as he came.

Ulv had no compunctions about killing, only his darts couldn’t penetrate the magter’s thick clothing. As the magter turned Ulv’s breath pulsed once and death stung the back of the other man’s hand. He collapsed into a crumpled heap.

“Don’t shoot,” a voice said from outside the cave, and a man stepped through the swirling dust and smoke to stand in the beam from the light.

Brion clutched wildly at Ulv's arm, dragging the blowgun from the Disan's mouth. The man in the light wore a protective helmet, thick boots and a pouch-hung uniform.

He was a Nyjorder.

This shock of reality was almost impossible to accept. Brion had heard the bombs fall. Yet the Nyjord soldier was here. The two facts couldn't be accepted together.

"Would you keep a hold on his arm, sir, just in case," the soldier said, glancing warily at Ulv's blowpipe. "I know what those darts can do." He pulled a microphone from one of his pockets and spoke into it.

More soldiers crowded into the cave and Professor-Commander Krafft came in behind them. He looked strangely out of place in the dusty combat uniform. The gun was even more grotesque in his blue-veined hand. After relievedly giving the pistol to the nearest soldier, he stumbled quickly over to Brion and took his hand.

"It is a profound and sincere pleasure to meet you in person," he said. "And your friend Ulv as well."

"Would you kindly explain what is going on," Brion said thickly. He was obsessed by the strange feeling that none of this could possibly be happening.

"We will always remember you as the man who saved us from ourselves," Krafft said, once again the professor instead of the commander.

"What he wants are facts, Grandpa, not speeches," Hys said. The bent form of the leader of the rebel Nyjord army pushed through the crowd of taller men until he stood next to Krafft. "Simply stated, Brion, your plan succeeded. Krafft relayed your message to me—and as soon as I heard it I turned back and met him on his ship. I'm sorry that Telt's dead—but he found what we were looking for. I couldn't ignore his report of radioactive traces. Your girl friend arrived with the hacked up corpse at the same time I did, and we all took a long look at the green leech in its skull. Her explanation of what it is made significant sense. We were already carrying out landings when we had your call about something having been stored in the magter tower. After that it was just a matter of following tracks—and the transmitter you planted."

"But the explosions at midnight," Brion broke in, "I heard them!"

"You were supposed to," Hys laughed. "Not only you, but the magter in this cave. We figured they would be armed and the cave strongly defended. So at midnight we dropped a few large chemical explosive bombs at the entrance. Enough to kill the guards without bringing the roof down. We also hoped that the magter deeper in would leave their posts or retreat from the imagined radiation. They did. Worked like a charm. We came in quietly and took them by surprise. Made a clean sweep. Killed the ones we couldn't capture."

"One of the renegade jump-space technicians was still alive," Krafft said. "He told us about your stopping the bombs aimed at Nyjord, the two of you."

None of the Nyjorders there could add anything to his words, not even the cynical Hys. Yet Brion could empathize their feelings, the warmth of their intense relief and happiness. It was a sensation he would never forget.

“There is no more war,” Brion translated for Ulv, realizing that the Disan had understood nothing of the explanation. As he said it, he realized that there was one glaring error in the story.

“You couldn’t have done it,” Brion said, astonished. “You landed on this planet *before* you had my message about the tower. That means you still expected the magter to be sending their bombs to Nyjord—and you made the landings in spite of this knowledge.”

“Of course,” Professor Krafft said, astonished at Brion’s lack of understanding. “What else could we do? The magter are sick!”

Hys laughed aloud at Brion’s baffled expression. “You have to understand Nyjord psychology,” he said. “When it was a matter of war and killing my planet could never agree on an intelligent course. War is so alien to our philosophy that it couldn’t even be considered correctly. That’s the trouble with being a vegetable eater in a galaxy of carnivores. You’re easy prey for the first one that lands on your back. Any other planet would have jumped on the magter with both feet and shaken the bombs out of them. We fumbled it so long it almost got both worlds killed. Your mind-parasite drew us back from the brink.”

“I still don’t understand,” Brion said. “Why—”

“Simple matter of definition. Before you came we had no way to deal with the magter here on Dis. They really were alien to us. Nothing they did made sense—and nothing we did seemed to have the slightest effect on them. But you discovered that they were *sick*, and that’s something we know how to handle. We’re united again, my rebel army was instantly absorbed into the rest of the Nyjord forces by mutual agreement. Doctors and nurses are on the way here now. Plans were put under way to evacuate what part of the population we could until the bombs were found. The planet is united again and working hard.”

“Because the magter are sick, infected by a destructive life form?” Brion asked.

“Exactly so,” Professor Krafft said. “We are civilized, after all. You can’t expect us to fight a war—and you surely can’t expect us to ignore the plight of sick neighbors?”

“No ... you surely can’t,” Brion said, sitting down heavily. He looked at Ulv, who knew nothing of the incomprehensible speech. Beyond him Hys wore his most cynical expression as he considered the frailties of his people.

“Hys,” Brion called out. “You translate all that into Disan and explain to Ulv. I wouldn’t dare.”

XIX

Dis was a floating golden ball, looking like a schoolroom globe in space. No clouds obscured its surface, and from this distance it seemed warm and attractive set against the cold darkness. Brion almost wished he were back there now, as he sat shivering inside the heavy coat. He wondered how long it would be before his confused body-temperature controls decided to turn off the summer adjustment.

Delicate as a dream, Lea's reflection swam in space next to the planet. She had come up quietly behind him in the spaceship's corridor, only her gentle breath and mirrored face telling him she was there. He turned quickly and took her hands in his.

"You're looking better," he said.

"Well I should," she said, pushing her hair in an unconscious gesture with the back of her hand. "I've been doing nothing but lie in the ship's hospital, while you were having such a fine time this last week. Rushing around down there shooting all the magter."

"Just gassing them," he told her. "The Nyjorders can't bring themselves to kill any more, even if it does raise their own casualty rate. In fact they are having difficulty restraining the Disans led by Ulv, who are happily killing any magter they see as being pure *umedvirk*."

"What will they do when they have all those frothing magter madmen?"

"They don't know yet," he said. "They won't really know until they see what an adult magter is like with his brain-parasite dead and gone. They're having better luck with the children. If they catch them early enough, the parasite can be destroyed before it has done too much damage."

Lea shuddered delicately.

"I hate to think of a magter deprived of his symbiote," she said. "If his system can stand the shock, I imagine there will be nothing left except a brainless hulk. This is one series of experiments I don't care to witness. I rest secure in the knowledge that the Nyjorders will find the most humane solution."

"I'm sure they will," Brion said.

"Now what about us," she said disconcertingly.

This jarred Brion. He didn't have her ability to put past horrors out of the mind by substituting present pleasures. "Well, what about us?" he said with masterful inappropriateness.

She smiled and leaned against him. "You weren't as vague as that, the night in the hospital room. I seem to remember a few other things you said. You can't claim you're completely indifferent to me, Brion Brandd. So I'm only asking you what any outspoken Anvharian girl would. Where do we go from here? Get married?"

There was a definite pleasure in holding her slight body in his arms and feeling her hair against his cheek. They both sensed it, and this awareness made his words sound that much more ugly.

"Lea ... darling! You know how important you are to me—but you certainly realize that we could never get married."

Her body stiffened and she tore herself away from him.

“Why you great, fat, egotistical slab of meat,” she screamed. “What do you mean by that? I like you Lea, we have plenty of fun and games together, but surely you realize that you aren’t the kind of girl one takes home to mother!”

“Lea, hold on,” he said. “You know better than to say a thing like that. What I said has nothing to do with how I feel towards you. But marriage means children, and you are biologist enough to know about Earth’s genes—”

“Intolerant yokel!” she cried, slapping his face. He didn’t move or attempt to stop her. “I expected better from you, with all your pretensions of understanding. But all you can think of are the horror stories about the worn out genes of Earth. You’re the same as every other big, strapping bigot from the frontier planets. I know how you look down on our small size, our allergies and hemophilia and all the other weaknesses that have been bred back and preserved by the race. You hate—”

“But that’s not what I meant at all,” he interrupted, shocked, his voice drowning hers out. “Yours are the strong genes, the viable strains—*mine* are the deadly ones. A child of mine would kill itself and you in a natural birth, if it managed to live to term. You’re forgetting that you are the original *Homo sapiens*. I’m a recent mutation.”

Lea was frozen by his words. They revealed a truth she had known, but would never permit herself to consider.

“Earth is home, the planet where mankind developed,” he said. “The last few thousand years you may have been breeding weaknesses back into the genetic pool. But that’s nothing compared to the hundred millions of years that it took to develop man. How many newborn babies live to be a year of age on Earth?”

“Why ... almost all of them.”

“Earth is home,” he said gently. “When men leave home they can adapt to different planets, but a price must be paid. A terrible price in dead infants. The successful mutations live, the failures die. Natural selection is a brutally simple affair. When you look at me you see a success. I have a sister—a success too. Yet my mother had six other children who died when they were still babies. And at least fifteen others that never came to term. You know these things, don’t you Lea?”

“I know, I know....” she said sobbing into her hands. He held her now and she didn’t pull away. “I know it all as a biologist—but I am so awfully tired of being a biologist, and top of my class and a mental match for any man. But when I think about you, I do it as a woman, and can’t admit any of this. I need someone Brion, and I needed you so much because I loved you.” She sniffed and pushed at her eyes. “You’re going home, aren’t you? Back to Anvhar. When?”

“I can’t wait too long,” he said, unhappily. “Aside from my personal wants I find myself remembering that I’m a part of Anvhar. When you think of the number of people who suffered and died—or adapted—so that I could be sitting here now. Well, it’s a little frightening. I suppose it doesn’t make sense logically that I should feel indebted to them. But I do. Whatever I do now, or in the next few years, won’t be as important as getting back to Anvhar.”

“And I won’t be going back with you.” It was a flat statement the way she said it, not a question.

“No, you won’t be,” he said.

Lea was looking out of the port at Dis and her eyes were dry now. "Way back in my deeply buried unconscious I think I knew it would end this way," she said. "If you think your little lecture on the Origins of Man was a novelty, it wasn't. Just reminded me of a number of things my glands had convinced me to forget. In a way I envy you your weightlifter wife-to-be, and your happy kiddies. But not very much. Very early in life I resigned myself to the fact that there was no one on Earth I would care to marry. I always had these teen-age dreams of a hero from space who would carry me off, and I guess I slipped you into the pattern without realizing it."

"Don't we look happy," Hys said, shambling towards them.

"Fall dead and make me even happier then," Lea snapped bitterly.

Hys ignored the acid tone of her answer and sat down on the couch next to them. Since leaving command of his rebel Nyjord Army he seemed much mellower. "Going to keep on working for the Cultural Relationships Foundation, Brion?" he asked. "You're the kind of man we need."

Brion's eyes widened as the meaning of the last words penetrated. "Are you in the C.R.F.?"

"Field agent for Nyjord," he said. "I hope you don't think those helpless office types like Faussel or Mervv really represented us there? They just took notes and acted as a front and cover for the organization. Nyjord is a fine planet, but a gentle guiding hand behind the scenes is needed, to help them find their place in the galaxy before they are pulverized."

"What's your dirty game, Hys?" Lea asked, scowling. "I've had enough hints to suspect for a long time that there was more to the C.R.F. than the sweetness-and-light-part I have seen. Are you people egomaniacs, power hungry or what?"

"That's the first charge that would be leveled at us, if our activities were publicly known," Hys told her. "That's why we do most of our work under cover. The best fact I can give you to counter the charge is *money*. Just where do you think we get the funds for an operation this size?" He smiled at their blank looks. "You'll see the records later so there won't be any doubt. The truth is that all our funds are donated by planets we have helped. Even a tiny percentage of a planetary income is large—add enough of them together and you have enough money to help other planets. And voluntary gratitude is a perfect test, if you stop to think about it. You can't talk people into liking what you have done. They have to be convinced. There have always been people on C.R.F. worlds who knew about our work, and agreed with it enough to see that we are kept in funds."

"Why are you telling me all this super-secret stuff," Lea asked.

"Isn't that obvious? We want you to keep on working for us. You can name whatever salary you like, as I've said there is no shortage of ready cash." Hys glanced quickly at them both and delivered the clinching argument. "I hope Brion will go on working with us, too. He is the kind of field agent we desperately need, and it is almost impossible to find."

"Just show me where to sign," she said, and there was life in her voice once again.

"I wouldn't exactly call it blackmail," Brion smiled, "yet I suppose if you people can juggle planetary psychologies, you must find that individuals can be pushed around

like chess men. Though you should realize that very little pushing is required this time.”

“Will you sign on?” Hys asked.

“I must go back to Anvhar,” Brion said, “but there really is no pressing hurry.”

“Earth,” said Lea, “is overpopulated enough as it is.”

The Stainless Steel Rat

I

When the office door opened suddenly I knew the game was up. It had been a money-maker—but it was all over. As the cop walked in I sat back in the chair and put on a happy grin. He had the same somber expression and heavy foot that they all have—and the same lack of humor. I almost knew to the word what he was going to say before he uttered a syllable.

“James Bolivar diGriz I arrest you on the charge—”

I was waiting for the word *charge*, I thought it made a nice touch that way. As he said it I pressed the button that set off the charge of black powder in the ceiling, the crossbeam buckled and the three-ton safe dropped through right on the top of the cop’s head. He squashed very nicely, thank you. The cloud of plaster dust settled and all I could see of him was one hand, slightly crumpled. It twitched a bit and the index finger pointed at me accusingly. His voice was a little muffled by the safe and sounded a bit annoyed. In fact he repeated himself a bit.

“... On the charge of illegal entry, theft, forgery—”

He ran on like that for quite a while, it was an impressive list but I had heard it all before. I didn’t let it interfere with my stuffing all the money from the desk drawers into my suitcase. The list ended with a new charge and I would swear on a stack of thousand credit notes *that* high that there was a hurt tone in his voice.

“In addition the charge of assaulting a police robot will be added to your record. This was foolish since my brain and larynx are armored and in my midsection—”

“That I know well, George, but your little two-way radio is in the top of your pointed head and I don’t want you reporting to your friends just yet.”

One good kick knocked the escape panel out of the wall and gave access to the steps to the basement. As I skirted the rubble on the floor the robot’s fingers snapped out at my leg, but I had been waiting for that and they closed about two inches short. I have been followed by enough police robots to know by now how indestructible they are. You can blow them up or knock them down and they keep coming after you; dragging themselves by one good finger and spouting saccharine morality all the while. That’s what this one was doing. Give up my life of crime and pay my debt to society and such. I could still hear his voice echoing down the stairwell as I reached the basement.

Every second was timed now. I had about three minutes before they would be on my tail, and it would take me exactly one minute and eight seconds to get clear of the building. That wasn’t much of a lead and I would need all of it. Another kick panel opened out into the label-removing room. None of the robots looked up as I moved down the aisle—I would have been surprised if they had. They were all low-grade M types, short on brains and good only for simple, repetitive work. That was why I hired them. They had no curiosity as to why they were taking the labels off the filled cans of azote fruits, or what was at the other end of the moving belt that brought the cans through the wall. They didn’t even look up when I unlocked the Door That Was Never Unlocked that led through the wall. I left it open behind me as I had no more secrets now.

Keeping next to the rumbling belt, I stepped through the jagged hole I had chopped in the wall of the government warehouse. I had installed the belt too, this and the hole were the illegal acts that I had to do myself. Another locked door opened into the warehouse. The automatic fork-lift truck was busily piling cans onto the belt and digging fresh ones out of the ceiling-high piles. This fork-lift had hardly enough brains to be called a robot, it just followed taped directions to load the cans. I stepped around it and dog-trotted down the aisle. Behind me the sounds of my illegal activity died away. It gave me a warm feeling to still hear it going full blast like that.

It *had* been one of the nicest little rackets I had ever managed. For a small capital outlay I had rented the warehouse that backed on the government warehouse. A simple hole in the wall and I had access to the entire stock of stored goods, long-term supplies that I knew would be untouched for months or years in a warehouse this size. Untouched, that is, until I came along.

After the hole had been made and the belt installed it was just a matter of business. I hired the robots to remove the old labels and substitute the colorful ones I had printed. Then I marketed my goods in a strictly legal fashion. My stock was the best and due to my imaginative operation my costs were very low. I could afford to undersell my competitors and still make a handsome profit. The local wholesalers had been quick to sense a bargain and I had orders for months ahead. It *had* been a good operation—and could have gone on for quite a while.

I stifled that train of thought before it started. One lesson that has to be remembered in my line of business is that when an operation is over it is OVER! The temptation to stay just one more day or to cash just one more check can be almost overwhelming, ah, how well I know. I also know that it is also the best way to get better acquainted with the police.

Turn your back and walk away—

And live to graft another day.

That's my motto and it's a good one. I got where I am because I stuck to it.

And daydreams aren't part of getting away from the police.

I pushed all thoughts from my mind as I reached the end of the aisle. The entire area outside must have been swarming with cops by this time and I had to move fast and make no mistakes. A fast look right and left. Nobody in sight. Two steps ahead and press the elevator button. I had put a meter on this back elevator and it showed that the thing was used once a month on the average.

It arrived in about three seconds, empty, and I jumped in, thumbing the roof button at the same time. The ride seemed to go on forever, but that was just subjective. By the record it was exactly fourteen seconds. This was the most dangerous part of the trip. I tightened up as the elevator slowed. My .75 caliber recoilless was in my hand, that would take care of one cop, but no more.

The door shuffled open and I relaxed. Nothing. They must have the entire area covered on the ground so they hadn't bothered to put cops on the roof.

In the open air now I could hear the sirens for the first time—a wonderful sound. They must have had half of the entire police force out from the amount of noise they were making. I accepted it as any artist accepts tribute.

The board was behind the elevator shaft where I had left it. A little weather-stained but still strong. A few seconds to carry it to the edge of the parapet and reach it across to the next building.

Gently, this was the one dangerous spot where speed didn't count. Carefully onto the end of the board, the suitcase held against my chest to keep my center of gravity over the board. One step at a time. A thousand-foot drop to the ground. If you don't look down you can't fall....

Over. Time for speed. The board behind the parapet, if they didn't see it at first my trail would be covered for a while at least. Ten fast steps and there was the door to the stairwell. It opened easily—and it better have—I had put enough oil on the hinges. Once inside I threw the bolt and took a long, deep breath. I wasn't out of it yet, but the worst part where I ran the most risk was past. Two uninterrupted minutes here and they would never find James Bolivar, alias "Slippery Jim", diGriz.

The stairwell at the roof was a musty, badly lit cubicle that was never visited. I had checked it carefully a week before for phono and optic bugs and it had been clear. The dust looked undisturbed, except for my own footprints. I had to take a chance that it hadn't been bugged since then. The calculated risk must be accepted in this business.

Good-bye James diGriz, weight ninety-eight kilos, age about forty-five, thick in the middle and heavy in the jowls, a typical business man whose picture graces the police files of a thousand planets—also his fingerprints. They went first. When you wear them they feel like a second skin, a touch of solvent though and they peel off like a pair of transparent gloves.

All my clothes next—and then the girdle in reverse—that lovely paunch that straps around my belly and holds twenty kilos of lead mixed with thermite. A quick wipe from the bottle of bleach and my hair was its natural shade of brown, the eyebrows, too. The nose plugs and cheek pads hurt coming out, but that only lasts a second. Then the blue-eyed contact lenses. This process leaves me mother-naked and I always feel as if I have been born again. In a sense it is true, I had become a new man, twenty kilos lighter, ten years younger and with a completely different description. The large suitcase held a complete change of clothes and a pair of dark-rimmed glasses that replaced the contact lenses. All the loose money fitted neatly into a brief case.

When I straightened up I really felt as if ten years had been stripped from me. I was so used to wearing that weight that I never noticed it—until it was gone. Put a real spring in my step.

The thermite would take care of all the evidence. I kicked it all into a heap and triggered the fuse. It caught with a roar and bottles, clothes, bag, shoes, weights, et al, burned with a cheerful glare. The police would find a charred spot on the cement and micro-analysis might get them a few molecules off the walls, but that was all they would get. The glare of the burning thermite threw jumping shadows around me as I walked down three flights to the one hundred twelfth floor.

Luck was still with me, there was no one on the floor when I opened the door. One minute later the express elevator let me and a handful of other business types out into the lobby.

Only one door was open to the street and a portable TV camera was trained on it. No attempt was being made to stop people from going in and out of the building, most of them didn't even notice the camera and the little group of cops around it. I walked towards it at an even pace. Strong nerves count for a lot in this business.

For one instant I was square in the field of that cold, glass eye, then I was past. Nothing happened so I knew I was clear. That camera must have fed directly to the main computer at police headquarters, if my description had been close enough to the one they had on file those robots would have been notified and I would have been pinned before I had taken a step. You can't outmove a computer-robot combination, not when they move and react in microseconds—but you can outthink them. I had done it again.

A cab took me about ten blocks away. I waited until it was out of sight then took another one. It wasn't until I was in the third cab that I felt safe enough to go to the space terminal. The sounds of sirens were growing fainter and fainter behind me and only an occasional police car tore by in the opposite direction.

They were sure making a big fuss over a little larceny, but that's the way it goes on these overcivilized worlds. Crime is such a rarity now that the police really get carried away when they run across some. In a way I can't blame them, giving out traffic tickets must be an awful dull job. I really believe they ought to thank me for putting a little excitement in their otherwise dull lives.

II

It was a nice ride to the spaceport being located, of course, far out of town. I had time to lean back and watch the scenery and gather my thoughts. Even time to be a little philosophical. For one thing I could enjoy a good cigar again, I smoked only cigarettes in my other personality and never violated that personality, even in strictest privacy. The cigars were still fresh in the pocket humidior where I had put them six months ago. I sucked a long mouthful and blew the smoke out at the flashing scenery. It was good to be off the job, just about as good as being on it. I could never make my mind up which period I enjoyed more—I guess they are both right at the time.

My life is so different from that of the overwhelming majority of people in our society that I doubt if I could even explain it to them. They exist in a fat, rich union of worlds that have almost forgotten the meaning of the word crime. There are few malcontents and even fewer that are socially maladjusted. The few of these that are born, in spite of centuries of genetic control, are caught early and the aberration quickly adjusted. Some don't show their weakness until they are adults, they are the ones who try their hand at petty crime—burglary, shop-lifting or such. They get away with it for a week or two or a month or two, depending on the degree of their native intelligence. But sure as atomic decay—and just as predestined—the police reach out and pull them in.

That is almost the full extent of crime in our organized, dandified society. Ninety-nine per cent of it, let's say. It is that last and vital one per cent that keeps the police departments in business. That one per cent is me, and a handful of men scattered around the galaxy. Theoretically we can't exist, and if we do exist we can't operate—but we do. We are the rats in the wainscoting of society—we operate outside of their barriers and outside of their rules. Society had more rats when the rules were looser, just as the old wooden buildings had more rats than the concrete buildings that came later. But they still had rats. Now that society is all ferroconcrete and stainless steel there are fewer gaps between the joints, and it takes a smart rat to find them. A stainless steel rat is right at home in this environment.

It is a proud and lonely thing to be a stainless steel rat—and it is the greatest experience in the galaxy if you can get away with it. The sociological experts can't seem to agree why we exist, some even doubt that we do. The most widely accepted theory says that we are victims of delayed psychological disturbance that shows no evidence in childhood when it can be detected and corrected and only appears later in life. I have naturally given a lot of thought to the topic and I don't hold with that idea at all.

A few years back I wrote a small book on the subject—under a nom de plume of course—that was rather well received. My theory is that the aberration is a philosophical one, not a psychological one. At a certain stage the realization strikes through that one must either live outside of society's bonds or die of absolute boredom. There is no future or freedom in the circumscribed life and the only other life is complete rejection of the rules. There is no longer room for the soldier of fortune or the gentleman adventurer who can live both within and outside of society. Today it is all or nothing. To save my own sanity I chose the nothing.

The cab just reached the spaceport as I hit on this negative line of thought and I was glad to abandon it. Loneliness is the thing to fear in this business, that and self-pity can destroy you if they get the upper hand. Action has always helped me, the elation of danger and escape always clears my mind. When I paid the cab I short-changed the driver right under his nose, palming one of the credit notes in the act of handing it to him. He was blind as a riveted bulkhead, his gullibility had me humming with delight. The tip I gave him more than made up the loss since I only do this sort of petty business to break the monotony.

There was a robot clerk behind the ticket window, he had that extra third eye in the center of this forehead that meant a camera. It clicked slightly as I purchased a ticket, recording my face and destination. A normal precaution on the part of the police, I would have been surprised if it hadn't happened. My destination was inter-system so I doubted if the picture would appear any place except in the files. I wasn't making an interstellar hop this time, as I usually did after a big job, it wasn't necessary. After a job a single world or a small system is too small for more work, but Beta Cygnus has a system of almost twenty planets all with terrafied weather. This planet, III, was too hot now, but the rest of the system was wide open. There was a lot of commercial rivalry within the system and I knew their police departments didn't co-operate too well. They would pay the price for that. My ticket was for Moriy, number XVIII, a large and mostly agricultural planet.

There were a number of little stores at the spaceport. I shopped them carefully and outfitted a new suitcase with a complete wardrobe and travelling essentials. The tailor was saved for last. He ran up a couple of traveling suits and a formal kilt for me and I took them into the fitting booth. Strictly by accident I managed to hang one of the suits over the optic bug in the wall and made undressing sounds with my feet while I doctored the ticket I had just bought. The other end of my cigar cutter was a punch; with it I altered the keyed holes that indicated my destination. I was now going to planet X, not XVIII, and I had lost almost two hundred credits with the alteration. That's the secret of ticket and order changing. Don't raise the face value—there is too good a chance that this will be noticed. If you lower the value and lose money on the deal, even if it is caught, people will be sure it is a mistake on the machine's part. There is never the shadow of a doubt, since why should anyone change a ticket to lose money?

Before the police could be suspicious I had the suit off the bug and tried it on, taking my time. Almost everything was ready now, I had about an hour to kill before the ship left. I spent the time wisely by going to an automatic cleaner and having all my new clothes cleaned and pressed. Nothing interests a customs man more than a suitcase full of unworn clothes.

Customs was a snap and when the ship was about half full I boarded her and took a seat near the hostess. I flirted with her until she walked away, having classified me in the category of MALE, BRASH, ANNOYING. An old girl who had the seat next to mine also had me filed in the same drawer and was looking out of the window with obvious ice on her shoulder. I dozed off happily since there is one thing better than not being noticed and that is being noticed and filed into a category. Your description gets mixed up with every other guy in the file and that is the end of it.

When I woke up we were almost to planet X, I half dozed in the chair until we touched down, then smoked a cigar while my bag cleared customs. My locked brief case of money raised no suspicions since I had foresightedly forged papers six

months ago with my occupation listed as *bank messenger*. Interplanet credit was almost nonexistent in this system, so the customs men were used to seeing a lot of cash go back and forth.

Almost by habit I confused the trail a little more and ended up in the large manufacturing city of Brouggh over one thousand kilometers from the point where I had landed. Using an entirely new set of identification papers I registered at a quiet hotel in the suburbs.

Usually after a big job like this I rest up for a month or two; this was one time though I didn't feel like a rest. While I was making small purchases around town to rebuild the personality of James diGriz, I was also keeping my eyes open for new business opportunities. The very first day I was out I saw what looked like a natural—and each day it looked better and better.

One of the main reasons I have stayed out of the arms of the law for as long as I have, is that I have never repeated myself. I have dreamed up some of the sweetest little rackets, run them off once, then stayed away from them forever after. About the only thing they had in common was the fact that they all made money. About the only thing I hadn't hit to date was out and out armed robbery. It was time for a change and it looked like that was it.

While I was rebuilding the paunchy personality of Slippery Jim I was making plans for the operation. Just about the time the fingerprint gloves were ready the entire business was planned. It was simple like all good operations should be, the less details there are, the less things there are that can go wrong.

I was going to hold up Moraio's, the largest retail store in the city. Every evening at exactly the same time, an armored car took the day's receipts to the bank. It was a tempting prize—a gigantic sum in untraceable small bills. The only real problem as far as I was concerned was how one man could handle the sheer bulk and weight of all that money. When I had an answer to that the entire operation was ready.

All the preparations were of course, made only in my mind until the personality of James diGriz was again ready. The day I slipped that weighted belly back on, I felt I was back in uniform. I lit my first cigarette almost with satisfaction, then went to work. A day or two for some purchases and a few simple thefts and I was ready. I scheduled the following afternoon for the job.

A large tractor-truck that I had bought was the key to the operation—along with some necessary alterations I had made to the interior. I parked the truck in an "L" shaped alley about a half mile from Moraio's. The truck almost completely blocked the alley but that wasn't important since it was used only in the early morning. It was a leisurely stroll back to the department store, I reached it at almost the same moment that the armored truck pulled up. I leaned against the wall of the gigantic building while the guards carried out the money. My money.

To someone of little imagination I suppose it would have been an awe-inspiring sight. At least five armed guards standing around the entrance, two more inside the truck as well as the driver and his assistant. As an added precaution there were three monocycles purring next to the curb. They would go with the truck as protection on the road. Oh, very impressive. I had to stifle a grin behind my cigarette when I thought about what was going to happen to those elaborate precautions.

I had been counting the handtrucks of money as they rolled out of the door. There were always fifteen, no more, no less; this practice made it easy for me to know the

exact time to begin. Just as fourteen was being loaded into the armored truck, load number fifteen appeared in the store entrance. The truck driver had been counting the way I had, he stepped down from the cab and moved to the door in the rear in order to lock it when loading was finished.

We synchronized perfectly as we strolled by each other. At the moment he reached the rear door I reached the cab. Quietly and smoothly I climbed up into it and slammed the door behind me. The assistant had just enough time to open his mouth and pop his eyes when I placed an anesthetic bomb on his lap; he slumped in an instant. I was, of course, wearing the correct filter plugs in my nostrils. As I started the motor with my left hand, I threw a larger bomb through the connecting window to the rear with my right. There were some reassuring thumps as the guards there dropped over the bags of change.

This entire process hadn't taken six seconds. The guards on the steps were just waking up to the fact that something was wrong. I gave them a cheerful wave through the window and gunned the armored truck away from the curb. One of them tried to run and throw himself through the open rear door but he was a little too late. It all had happened so fast that not one of them had thought to shoot, I had been sure there would be a *few* bullets. The sedentary life on these planets does slow the reflexes.

The monocycle drivers caught on a lot faster, they were after me before the truck had gone a hundred feet. I slowed down until they had caught up, then stamped on the accelerator, keeping just enough speed so they couldn't pass me.

Their sirens were screaming of course and they had their guns working; it was just as I had planned. We tore down the street like jet racers and the traffic melted away before us. They didn't have time to think and realize that *they* were making sure the road was clear for my escape. The situation was very humorous and I'm afraid I chuckled out loud as I toolled the truck around the tight corners.

Of course the alarm had been turned in and the road blocks must have been forming up ahead—but that half mile went by fast at the speed we were doing. It was a matter of seconds before I saw the alley mouth ahead. I turned the truck into it, at the same time pressing the button on my pocket short wave.

Along the entire length of the alley my smoke bombs ignited. They were, of course, home made, as was all my equipment, nevertheless they produced an adequately dense cloud in that narrow alley. I pulled the truck a bit to the right until the fenders scraped the wall and only slightly reduced my speed, this way I could steer by touch. The monocycle drivers of course couldn't do this and had the choice of stopping or rushing headlong into the darkness. I hope they made the right decision and none of them were hurt.

The same radio impulse that triggered the bombs was supposed to have opened the rear door of the trailer truck up ahead and dropped the ramp. It had worked fine when I had tested it, I could only hope now that it did the same in practice. I tried to estimate the distance I had gone in the alley by timing my speed, but I was a little off. The front wheels of the truck hit the ramp with a destructive crash and the armored truck bounced rather than rolled into the interior of the larger van. I was jarred around a bit and had just enough sense left to jam on the brakes before I plowed right through into the cab.

Smoke from the bombs made a black midnight of everything, that and my shaken-up brains almost ruined the entire operation. Valuable seconds went by while I leaned against the truck wall trying to get oriented. I don't know how long it took, when I finally did stumble back to the rear door I could hear the guards' voices calling back and forth through the smoke. They heard the bent ramp creak as I lifted it so I threw two gas bombs out to quiet them down.

The smoke was starting to thin as I climbed up to the cab of the tractor and gunned it into life. A few feet down the alley and I broke through into sunlight. The alley mouth opened out into a main street a few feet ahead and I saw two police cars tear by. When the truck reached the street I stopped and took careful note of all witnesses. None of them showed any interest in the truck or the alley. Apparently all the commotion was still at the other end of the alley. I poured power into the engine and rolled out into the street, away from the store I had just robbed.

Of course I only went a few blocks in that direction then turned down a side street. At the next corner I turned again and headed back towards Moraio's, the scene of my recent crime. The cool air coming in the window soon had me feeling better, I actually whistled a bit as I threaded the big truck through the service roads.

It would have been fine to go up the highway in front of Moraio's and see all the excitement, but that would have been only asking for trouble. Time was still important. I had carefully laid out a route that avoided all congested traffic and this was what I followed. It was only a matter of minutes before I was pulling into the loading area in the back of the big store. There was a certain amount of excitement here but it was lost in the normal bustle of commerce. Here and there a knot of truck drivers or shipping foremen were exchanging views on the robbery, since robots don't gossip the normal work was going on. The men were, of course, so excited that no attention was paid to my truck when I pulled into the parking line next to the other vans. I killed the engine and settled back with a satisfied sigh.

The first part was complete. The second part of the operation was just as important though. I dug into my paunch for the kit that I always take on the job—for just such an emergency as this. Normally, I don't believe in stimulants, but I was still groggy from the banging around. Two cc's of Linoten in my ante cubital cleared that up quickly enough. The spring was back in my step when I went into the back of the van.

The driver's assistant and the guards were still out and would stay that way for at least ten hours. I arranged them in a neat row in the front of the truck where they wouldn't be in my way, and went to work.

The armored car almost filled the body of the trailer as I knew it would; therefore I had fastened the boxes to the walls. They were fine, strong shipping boxes with Moraio's printed all over them. It had been a minor theft from their warehouse that should go unnoticed. I pulled the boxes down and folded them for packing, I was soon sweating and had to take my shirt off as I packed the money bundles into the boxes.

It took almost two hours to stuff and seal the boxes with tape. Every ten minutes or so I would check through the peephole in the door; only the normal activities were going on. The police undoubtedly had the entire town sealed and were tearing it apart building by building looking for the truck. I was fairly sure that the last place they would think of looking was the rear of the robbed store.

The warehouse that had provided the boxes had also provided a supply of shipping forms. I fixed one of these on each box, addressed to different pick-up addresses and marked paid of course, and was ready to finish the operation.

It was almost dark by this time, however I knew that the shipping department would be busy most of the night. The engine caught on the first revolution and I pulled out of the parking rank and backed slowly up to the platform. There was a relatively quiet area where the shipping dock met the receiving dock, I stopped the trailer as close to the dividing line as I could. I didn't open the rear door until all the workmen were faced in a different direction. Even the stupidest of them would have been interested in why a truck was unloading the firm's own boxes. As I piled them up on the platform I threw a tarp over them, it only took a few minutes. Only when the truck gates were closed and locked did I pull off the tarp and sit down on the boxes for a smoke.

It wasn't a long wait. Before the cigarette was finished a robot from the shipping department passed close enough for me to call him.

"Over there. The M-19 that was loading these burned out a brakeband, you better see that they're taken care of."

His eyes glowed with the light of duty. Some of these higher M types take their job very seriously. I had to step back quickly as the fork lifts and M-trucks appeared out of the doors behind me. There was a scurry of loading and sorting and my haul vanished down the platform. I lighted another cigarette and watched for a while as the boxes were coded and stamped and loaded on the outgoing trucks and local belts.

All that was left for me now was the disposing of the truck on some side street and changing personalities.

As I was getting into the truck I realized for the first time that something was wrong. I, of course, had been keeping an eye on the gate—but not watching it closely enough. Trucks had been going in and out. Now the realization hit me like a hammer blow over the solar plexus. They were the same trucks going both ways. A large, red cross-country job was just pulling out. I heard the echo of its exhaust roar down the street—then die away to an idling grumble. When it roared up again it didn't go away, instead the truck came in through the second gate. There were police cars waiting outside that wall. Waiting for me.

III

For the first time in my career I felt the sharp fear of the hunted man. This was the first time I had ever had the police on my trail when I wasn't expecting them. The money was lost, that much was certain, but I was no longer concerned with that. It was me they were after now.

Think first, then act. I was safe enough for the moment. They were, of course, moving in on me, going slowly as they had no idea of where I was in the giant loading yard. How had they found me? *That* was the important point. The local police are used to an almost crimeless world, they couldn't have found my trail this quickly. In fact, I hadn't left a trail. Whoever had set the trap here had done it with logic and reason.

Unbidden the words jumped into my mind.

The Special Corps.

Nothing was ever printed about it, only a thousand whispered words heard on a thousand worlds around the galaxy. The Special Corps, the branch of the League that took care of the troubles that individual planets couldn't solve. The Corps was supposed to have finished off the remnants of Haskell's Raiders after the peace, of putting the illegal T & Z Traders out of business, of finally catching Inskipp. And now they were after me.

They were out there waiting for me to make a break. They were thinking of all the ways out just as I was—and they were blocking them. I had to think fast and I had to think right.

Only two ways out. Through the gates or through the store. The gates were too well covered to make a break, in the store there would be other exits. It had to be that way. Even as I made the conclusion I knew that other minds had made it too, that men were moving in to cover those doors. That thought brought fear—and made me angry as well. The very idea that someone could outthink me was odious. They could try all right—but I would give them a run for their money. I still had a few tricks left.

First, a little misdirection. I started the truck, left it in low gear and aimed it at the gate. When it was going straight I locked the steering wheel with the friction clamp and dropped out the far side of the cab and strolled back to the warehouse. Once inside I moved faster. Behind me I heard some shots, a heavy crump, and a lot of shouting. That was more like it.

The night locks were connected on the doors that led to the store proper. An old-fashioned alarm that I could disconnect in a few moments. My pick-locks opened the door and I gave it a quick kick with my foot and turned away. There were no alarm bells, but I knew that somewhere in the building an indicator showed that the door was opened. As fast as I could run I went to the last door on the opposite side of the building. This time I made sure the alarm was disconnected before I went through the door. I locked it behind me.

It is the hardest job in the world to run and be quiet at the same time. My lungs were burning before I reached the employees' entrance. A few times I saw flashlights ahead and had to double down different aisles, it was mostly luck that I made it without being spotted. There were two men in uniform standing in front of the door I wanted to go out of. Keeping as close to the wall as I could, I made it to within twenty

feet of them before I threw the gas grenade. For one second I was sure that they had gas masks on and I had reached the end of the road—then they slumped down. One of them was blocking the door, I rolled him aside and slid it open a few inches.

The searchlight couldn't have been more than thirty feet from the door; when it flashed on the light was more pain than glare. I dropped the instant it came on and the slugs from the machine pistol ate a line of glaring holes across the door. My ears were numb from the roar of the exploding slugs and I could just make out the thud of running footsteps. My own .75 was in my hand and I put an entire clip of slugs through the door, aiming high so I wouldn't hurt anyone. It would not stop them, but it should slow them down.

They returned the fire, must have been a whole squad out there. Pieces of plastic flew out of the back wall and slugs screamed down the corridor. It was good cover, I knew there was nobody coming up behind me. Keeping as flat as I could I crawled in the opposite direction, out of the line of fire. I turned two corners before I was far enough from the guns to risk standing up. My knees were shaky and great blobs of color kept fogging my vision. The searchlight had done a good job, I could barely see at all in the dim light.

I kept moving slowly, trying to get as far away from the gunfire as possible. The squad outside had fired as soon as I had opened the door, that meant standing orders to shoot at anyone who tried to leave the building. A nice trap. The cops inside would keep looking until they found me. If I tried to leave I would be blasted. I was beginning to feel very much like a trapped rat.

Every light in the store came on and I stopped, frozen. I was near the wall of a large farm-goods showroom. Across the room from me were three soldiers. We spotted each other at the same time, I dived for the door with bullets slapping all around me. The military was in it too, they sure must have wanted me bad. A bank of elevators was on the other side of the door—and stairs leading up. I hit the elevator in one bounce and punched the sub-basement button, and just got out ahead of the closing doors. The stairs were back towards the approaching soldiers, I felt like I was running right into their guns. I must have made the turn into the stairs a split second ahead of their arrival. Up the stairs and around the first landing before they were even with the bottom. Luck was still on my side. They hadn't seen me and were sure I had gone down. I sagged against the wall, listening to the shouts and whistle blowing as they turned the hunt towards the basement.

There was one smart one in the bunch. While the others were all following the phony trail I heard him start slowly up the stairs. I didn't have any gas grenades left, all I could do was climb up ahead of him, trying to do it without making a sound.

He came on slowly and steadily and I stayed ahead of him. We went up four flights that way, me in my stockinged feet with my shoes around my neck, his heavy boots behind me making a dull rasping on the metal stairs.

As I started up the fifth flight I stopped, my foot halfway up a step.

Someone else was coming down, someone wearing the same kind of military boots. I found the door to the hall, opened it behind me and slipped through. There was a long hall in front of me lined with offices of some kind. I began to run the length of it, trying to reach a turning before the door behind me could open and those exploding

slugs tear me in half. The hall seemed endless and I suddenly realized I would never reach the end in time.

I was a rat looking for a hole—and there was none. The doors were locked, all of them, I tried each as I came to it, knowing I would never make it. That stairwell door was opening behind me and the gun was coming up, I didn't dare turn and look but I could feel it. When the door opened under my hand I fell through before I realized what had happened. I locked it behind me and leaned against it in the darkness, panting like a spent animal. Then the light came on and I saw the man sitting behind the desk, smiling at me.

There is a limit to the amount of shock the human body can absorb. I'd had mine. I didn't care if he shot me or offered a cigarette—I had reached the end of my line. He did neither. He offered me a cigar instead.

“Have one of these, diGriz, I believe they're your brand.”

The body is a slave of habit. Even with death a few inches away it will respond to established custom. My fingers moved of their own volition and took the cigar, my lips clenched it and my lungs sucked it into life. And all the time my eyes watched the man behind the desk waiting for death to reach out.

It must have shown. He waved towards a chair and carefully kept both hands in sight on top of the desk. I still had my gun, it was trained on him.

“Sit down diGriz and put that cannon away. If I wanted to kill you, I could have done it a lot easier than herding you into this room.” His eyebrows moved up in surprise when he saw the expression on my face. “Don't tell me you thought it was an accident that you ended up here?”

I had, up until that moment, and the lack of intelligent reasoning on my part brought on a wave of shame that snapped me back to reality. I had been outwitted and outfought, the least I could do was surrender graciously. I threw the gun on the desk and dropped into the offered chair. He swept the pistol neatly into a drawer and relaxed a bit himself.

“Had me worried there for a minute, the way you stood there rolling your eyes and waving this piece of field artillery around.”

“Who are you?”

He smiled at the abruptness of my tone. “Well, it doesn't matter who I am. What does matter is the organization that I represent.”

“The Corps?”

“Exactly. The Special Corps. You didn't think I was the local police, did you? They have orders to shoot you on sight. It was only after I told them how to find you that they let the Corps come along on the job. I have some of my men in the building, they're the ones who herded you up here. The rest are all locals with itchy trigger fingers.”

It wasn't very flattering but it was true. I had been pushed around like a class M robot, with every move charted in advance. The old boy behind the desk—for the first time I realized he was about sixty-five—really had my number. The game was over.

“All right Mr. Detective, you have me so there is no sense in gloating. What’s next on the program? Psychological reorientation, lobotomy—or just plain firing squad?”

“None of those, I’m afraid. I am here to offer you a job on the Corps.”

The whole thing was so ludicrous that I almost fell out of the chair laughing. Me. James diGriz, the interplanet thief working as a policeman. It was just too funny. He sat patiently, waiting until I was through.

“I will admit it has its ludicrous side—but only at first glance. If you stop to think, you will have to admit that who is better qualified to catch a thief than another thief?”

There was more than a little truth in that, but I wasn’t buying my freedom by turning stool pigeon.

“An interesting offer, but I’m not getting out of this by playing the rat. There is even a code among thieves, you know.”

That made him angry. He was bigger than he looked sitting down and the fist he shook in my face was as large as a shoe.

“What kind of stupidity do you call that? It sounds like a line out of a TV thriller. You’ve never met another crook in your whole life and you know it! And if you did you would cheerfully turn him in if you could make a profit on the deal. The entire essence of your life is individualism—that and the excitement of doing what others can’t do. Well that’s over now, and you better start admitting it to yourself. You can no longer be the interplanet playboy you used to be—but you *can* do a job that will require every bit of your special talents and abilities. Have you ever killed a man?”

His change of pace caught me off guard, I stumbled out an answer.

“No ... not that I know of.”

“Well you haven’t, if that will make you sleep any better at night. You’re not a homicidal, I checked that on your record before I came out after you. That is why I know you will join the Corps and get a great deal of pleasure out of going after the *other* kind of criminal who is sick, not just socially protesting. The man who can kill and enjoy it.”

He was too convincing, he had all the answers. I had only one more argument and I threw it in with the air of a last ditch defense.

“What about the Corps, if they ever find out you are hiring half-reformed criminals to do your dirty work we will both be shot at dawn.”

This time it was his turn to laugh. I could see nothing funny so I ignored him until he was finished.

“In the first place my boy, *I* am the Corps—at least the man at the top—and what do you think *my* name is? Harold Peters Inskipp, that’s what it is!”

“Not the Inskipp that—”

“The same. Inskipp the Uncatchable. The man who looted the Pharsydion II in mid-flight and pulled all those other deals I’m sure you read about in your misspent youth. I was recruited just the way you were.”

He had me on the ropes and knew it. He moved in for the kill.

“And who do you think the rest of our agents are? I don’t mean the bright-eyed grads of our technical schools, like the ones on my squad downstairs. I mean the full agents. The men who plan the operations, do the preliminary fieldwork and see that everything comes off smoothly. They’re crooks. All crooks. The better they were on their own, the better a job they do for the Corps. It’s a great, big, brawling universe and you would be surprised at some of the problems that come up. The only men we can recruit to do the job are the ones who have already succeeded at it.

“Are you on?”

It had happened too fast and I hadn’t had time to think. I would probably go on arguing for an hour. But way down in the back of my mind the decision had been made. I was going to do it, I couldn’t say no.

I was losing something, and I hoped I wouldn’t miss it. No matter what freedom I had working with an organization, I would still be working with other people. The old carefree, sole responsibility days were over. I was joining the ranks of society again.

There was the beginning of a warm feeling at the thought. It would at least be the end of loneliness. Friendship would make up for what I had lost.

IV

I have never been more wrong.

The people I met were dull to the point of extinction. They treated me like just another cog going around with the rest of the wheels. I was coggy all right, and kept wondering how I had ever gotten into this mess. Not really wondering, since the memory was still quite vivid. I was carried along with the rest of the gears, their teeth sunk into mine.

We ended up on a planetoid, that much was obvious. But I hadn't the dimmest idea of what planets we were near or even what solar system we were in. Everything was highly secret and hush-hush, as this place was obviously the super-secret headquarters and main base of the Corps School too.

This part I liked. It was the only thing that kept me from cracking out. Dull as the cubes were who taught the courses, the material was something I could really sink my teeth into and shake. I began to see how crude my operations had been. With the gadgetry and techniques I soaked up I could be ten times the crook I had been before. Pushing the thought firmly away helped for a while, but it had a way of sneaking back and whispering nastily in my ear during periods of depression and gloom.

Things went from dull to dead. Half my time was spent working at the files, learning about the numberless successes and few failures of the Corps. I contemplated cracking out, yet at the same time couldn't help but wonder if this wasn't part of a testing period—to see if I had enough sticktoitiveness to last. I swallowed my temper, muffled my yawns, and took a careful look around. If I couldn't crack out—I could crack *in*. There had to be something I could do to terminate this term of penal servitude.

It wasn't easy—but I found it. By the time I tracked everything down it was well into sleep period. But that was all right. In some ways it even made it more interesting.

When it comes to picking locks and cracking safes I admit to no master. The door to Inskipp's private quarters had an old-fashioned tumbler drum that was easier to pick than my teeth. I must have gone through that door without breaking step. Quiet as I was though, Inskipp still heard me. The light came on and there he was sitting up in bed pointing a .75 caliber recoilless at my sternum.

"You should have more brains than that, diGriz," he snarled. "Creeping into my room at night! You could have been shot."

"No I couldn't," I told him, as he stowed the cannon back under his pillow. "A man with a curiosity bump as big as yours will always talk first and shoot later. And besides—none of this pussyfooting around in the dark would be necessary if your screen was open and I could have got a call through."

Inskipp yawned and poured himself a glass of water from the dispenser unit above the bed. "Just because I head the Special Corps, doesn't mean that I *am* the Special Corps," he said moistly while he drained the glass. "I have to sleep sometime. My screen is open only for emergency calls, not for every agent who needs his hand held."

“Meaning I am in the hand-holding category?” I asked with as much sweetness as I could.

“Put yourself in any category you damn well please,” he grumbled as he slumped down in the bed. “And also put yourself out into the hall and see me tomorrow during working hours.”

He was at my mercy, really. He wanted sleep so much. And he was going to be wide awake so very soon.

“Do you know what this is?” I asked him, poking a large glossy pic under his long broken nose. One eye opened slowly.

“Big warship of some kind, looks like Empire lines. Now for the last time—go away!” he said.

“A very good guess for this late at night,” I told him cheerily. “It is a late Empire battleship of the Warlord class. Undoubtedly one of the most truly efficient engines of destruction ever manufactured. Over a half mile of defensive screens and armament that could probably turn any fleet existent today into fine radioactive ash—”

“Except for the fact that the last one was broken up for scrap over a thousand years ago,” he mumbled.

I leaned over and put my lips close to his ear. So there would be no chance of misunderstanding. Speaking softly but clearly.

“True, true,” I said. “But wouldn’t you be just a *little* bit interested if I was to tell you that one is being built today?”

Oh, it was beautiful to watch. The covers went one way and Inskipp went the other. In a single unfolding, concerted motion he left the horizontal and recumbent and stood tensely vertical against the wall. Examining the pic of the battleship under the light. He apparently did not believe in pajama bottoms and it hurt me to see the goose-bumps rising on those thin shanks. But if the legs were thin, the voice was more than full enough to make up for the difference.

“Talk, blast you diGriz—*talk!*” he roared. “What is this nonsense about a battleship? Who’s building it?”

I had my nail file out and was touching up a cuticle, holding it out for inspection before I said anything. From the corner of my eye I could see him getting purple about the face—but he kept quiet. I savored my small moment of power.

“Put diGriz in charge of the record room for a while, you said, that way he can learn the ropes. Burrowing around in century-old, dusty files will be just the thing for a free spirit like Slippery Jim diGriz. Teach him discipline. Show him what the Corps stands for. At the same time it will get the records in shape. They have been needing reorganization for quite a while.”

Inskipp opened his mouth, made a choking noise, then closed it. He undoubtedly realized that any interruption would only lengthen my explanation, not shorten it. I smiled and nodded at his decision, then continued.

“So you thought you had me safely out of the way. Breaking my spirit under the guise of ‘giving me a little background in the Corps’ activities.’ In this sense your plan failed. Something else happened instead. I nosed through the files and found them most interesting. Particularly the C & M setup—the Categorizer and Memory. That

building full of machinery that takes in and digests news and reports from all the planets in the galaxy, indexes it to every category it can possibly relate, then files it. Great machine to work with. I had it digging out spaceship info for me, something I have always been interested in—

“You should be,” Inskipp interrupted rudely. “You’ve stolen enough of them in your time.”

I gave him a hurt look and went on—slowly. “I won’t bore you with all the details, since you seem impatient, but eventually I turned up this plan.” He had it out of my fingers before it cleared my wallet.

“What are you getting at?” he mumbled as he ran his eyes over the blueprints. “This is an ordinary heavy-cargo and passenger job. It’s no more a Warlord battleship than I am.”

It is hard to curl your lips with contempt and talk at the same time, but I succeeded. “Of course. You don’t expect them to file warship plans with the League Registry, do you? But, as I said, I know more than a little bit about ships. It seemed to me this thing was just too big for the use intended. Enough old ships are fuel-wasters, you don’t have to build new ones to do that. This started me thinking and I punched for a complete list of ships that size that had been constructed in the past. You can imagine my surprise when, after three minutes of groaning, the C & M only produced six. One was built for self-sustaining colony attempt at the second galaxy. For all we know she is still on the way. The other five were all D-class colonizers, built during the Expansion when large populations were moved. Too big to be practical now.

“I was still teased, as I had no idea what a ship this large could be used for. So I removed the time interlock on the C & M and let it pick around through the entire history of space to see if it could find a comparison. It sure did. Right at the Golden Age of Empire expansion, the giant Warlord battleship. The machine even found a blueprint for me.”

Inskipp grabbed again and began comparing the two prints. I leaned over his shoulder and pointed out the interesting parts.

“Notice—if the engine room specs are changed slightly to include this cargo hold, there is plenty of room for the brutes needed. This superstructure—obviously just tacked onto the plans—gets thrown away, and turrets take its place. The hulls are identical. A change here, a shift there, and the stodgy freighter becomes the fast battle-wagon. These changes could be made during construction, then plans filed. By the time anyone in the League found out what was being built the ship would be finished and launched. Of course, this could all be coincidence—the plans of a newly built ship agreeing to six places with those of a ship built a thousand years ago. But if you think so, I will give you hundred-to-one odds you are wrong, any size bet you name.”

I wasn’t winning any sucker bets that night. Inskipp had led just as crooked a youth as I had, and needed no help in smelling a fishy deal. While he pulled on his clothes he shot questions at me.

“And the name of the peace-loving planet that is building this bad-memory from the past?”

“Cittanuvo. Second planet of a B star in Corona Borealis. No other colonized planets in the system.”

“Never heard of it,” Inskipp said as we took the private drop chute to his office. “Which may be a good or a bad sign. Wouldn’t be the first time trouble came from some out-of-the-way spot I never even knew existed.”

With the automatic disregard for others of the truly dedicated, he pressed the scramble button on his desk. Very quickly sleepy-eyed clerks and assistants were bringing files and records. We went through them together.

Modesty prevented me from speaking first, but I had a very short wait before Inskipp reached the same conclusion I had. He hurled a folder the length of the room and scowled out at the harsh dawn light.

“The more I look at this thing,” he said, “the fishier it gets. This planet seems to have no possible motive or use for a battleship. But they are building one—*that* I will swear on a stack of one thousand credit notes as high as this building. Yet what will they do with it when they have it built? They have an expanding culture, no unemployment, a surplus of heavy metals and ready markets for all they produce. No hereditary enemies, feuds or the like. If it wasn’t for this battleship thing, I would call them an ideal League planet. I have to know more about them.”

“I’ve already called the spaceport—in your name of course,” I told him. “Ordered a fast courier ship. I’ll leave within the hour.”

“Aren’t you getting a little ahead of yourself, diGriz,” he said. Voice chill as the icecap. “I still give the orders and I’ll tell you when you’re ready for an independent command.”

I was sweetness and light because a lot depended on his decision. “Just trying to help, chief, get things ready in case you wanted more info. And this isn’t really an operation, just a reconnaissance. I can do that as well as any of the experienced operators. And it may give me the experience I need, so that some day, I, too, will be qualified to join the ranks....”

“All right,” he said. “Stop shoveling it on while I can still breathe. Get out there. Find out what is happening. Then get back. Nothing else—and that’s an order.”

By the way he said it, I knew he thought there was little chance of its happening that way. And he was right.

V

A quick stop at supply and record sections gave me everything I needed. The sun was barely clear of the horizon when the silver barb of my ship lifted in the gray field, then blasted into space.

The trip took only a few days, more than enough time to memorize everything I needed to know about Cittanuvo. And the more I knew the less I could understand their need for a battleship. It didn't fit. Cittanuvo was a secondary settlement out of the Cellini system, and I had run into these settlements before. They were all united in a loose alliance and bickered a lot among themselves, but never came to blows. If anything, they shared a universal abhorrence of war.

Yet they were secretly building a battleship.

Since I was only chasing my tail with this line of thought, I put it out of my mind and worked on some tri-di chess problems. This filled the time until Cittanuvo blinked into the bow screen.

One of my most effective mottoes has always been, "Secrecy can be an obviousity." What the magicians call misdirection. Let people very obviously see what you want them to see, then they'll never notice what is hidden. This was why I landed at midday, on the largest field on the planet, after a very showy approach. I was already dressed for my role, and out of the ship before the landing braces stopped vibrating. Buckling the fur cape around my shoulders with the platinum clasp, I stamped down the ramp. The sturdy little M-3 robot rumbled after me with my bags. Heading directly towards the main gate, I ignored the scurry of activity around the customs building. Only when a uniformed under-official of some kind ran over to me, did I give the field any attention.

Before he could talk I did, foot in the door and stay on top.

"Beautiful planet you have here. Delightful climate! Ideal spot for a country home. Friendly people, always willing to help strangers and all that I imagine. That's what I like. Makes me feel grateful. Very pleased to meet you. I am the Grand Duke Sant' Angelo." I shook his hand enthusiastically at this point and let a one hundred credit note slip into his palm.

"Now," I added, "I wonder if you would ask the customs agents to look at my bags here. Don't want to waste time, do we? The ship is open, they can check that whenever they please."

My manner, clothes, jewelry, the easy way I passed money around and the luxurious sheen of my bags, could mean only one thing. There was little that was worth smuggling into or out of Cittanuvo. Certainly nothing a rich man would be interested in. The official murmured something with a smile, spoke a few words into his phone, and the job was done.

A small wave of customs men hung stickers on my luggage, peeked into one or two for conformity's sake, and waved me through. I shook hands all around—a rustling handclasp of course—then was on my way. A cab was summoned, a hotel suggested. I nodded agreement and settled back while the robot loaded the bags about me.

The ship was completely clean. Everything I might need for the job was in my luggage. Some of it quite lethal and explosive, and very embarrassing if it were discovered in my bags. In the safety of my hotel suite I made a change of clothes and personality. After the robot had checked the rooms for bugs.

And very nice gadgets too, these Corps robots. It looked and acted like a moron M-3 all the time. It was anything but. The brain was as good as any other robot brain I have known, plus the fact that the chunky body was crammed with devices and machines of varying use. It chugged slowly around the room, moving my bags and laying out my kit. And all the time following a careful route that covered every inch of the suite. When it had finished it stopped and called the all-clear.

“All rooms checked. Results negative except for one optic bug in that wall.”

“Should you be pointing like that?” I asked the robot. “Might make people suspicious, you know.”

“Impossible,” the robot said with mechanical surety. “I brushed against it and it is now unserviceable.”

With this assurance I pulled off my flashy clothes and slipped into the midnight black dress uniform of an admiral in the League Grand Fleet. It came complete with decorations, gold bullion, and all the necessary documents. I thought it a little showy myself, but it was just the thing to make the right impression on Cittanuvo. Like many other planets, this one was uniform-conscious. Delivery boys, street cleaners, clerks—all had to have characteristic uniforms. Much prestige attached to them, and my black dress outfit should rate as high as any uniform in the galaxy.

A long cloak would conceal the uniform while I left the hotel, but the gold-encrusted helmet and a brief case of papers were a problem. I had never explored all the possibilities of the pseudo M-3 robot, perhaps it could be of help.

“You there, short and chunky,” I called. “Do you have any concealed compartments or drawers built into your steel hide? If so, let’s see.”

For a second I thought the robot had exploded. The thing had more drawers in it than a battery of cash registers. Big, small, flat, thin, they shot out on all sides. One held a gun and two more were stuffed with grenades; the rest were empty. I put the hat in one, the brief case in another and snapped my fingers. The drawers slid shut and its metal hide was as smooth as ever.

I pulled on a fancy sports cap, buckled the cape up tight, and was ready to go. The luggage was all booby-trapped and could defend itself. Guns, gas, poison needles, the usual sort of thing. In the last resort it would blow itself up. The M-3 went down by a freight elevator. I used a back stairs and we met in the street.

Since it was still daylight I didn’t take a heli, but rented a groundcar instead. We had a leisurely drive out into the country and reached President Ferraro’s house after dark.

As befitted the top official of a rich planet, the place was a mansion. But the security precautions were ludicrous to say the least. I took myself and a three hundred fifty kilo robot through the guards and alarms without causing the slightest stir. President Ferraro, a bachelor, was eating his dinner. This gave me enough undisturbed time to search his study.

There was absolutely nothing. Nothing to do with wars or battleships that is. If I had been interested in blackmail I had enough evidence in my hand to support me for life. I was looking for something bigger than political corruption, however.

When Ferraro rolled into his study after dinner the room was dark. I heard him murmur something about the servants and fumble for the switch. Before he found it, the robot closed the door and turned on the lights. I sat behind his desk, all his personal papers before me—weighted down with a pistol—and as fierce a scowl as I could raise smeared across my face. Before he got over the shock I snapped an order at him.

“Come over here and sit down, *quick!*”

The robot hustled him across the room at the same time, so he had no choice except to obey. When he saw the papers on the desk his eyes bulged and he just gurgled a little. Before he could recover I threw a thick folder in front of him.

“I am Admiral Thar, League Grand Fleet. These are my credentials. You had better check them.” Since they were as good as any real admiral’s I didn’t worry in the slightest. Ferraro went through them as carefully as he could in his rattled state, even checking the seals under UV. It gave him time to regain a bit of control and he used it to bluster.

“What do you mean by entering my private quarters and burgling—”

“You’re in very bad trouble,” I said in as gloomy a voice as I could muster.

Ferraro’s tanned face went a dirty gray at my words. I pressed the advantage.

“I am arresting you for conspiracy, extortion, theft, and whatever other charges develop after a careful review of these documents. Seize him.” This last order was directed at the robot who was well briefed in its role. It rumbled forward and locked its hand around Ferraro’s wrist, handcuff style. He barely noticed.

“I can explain,” he said desperately. “Everything can be explained. There is no need to make such charges. I don’t know what papers you have there, so I wouldn’t attempt to say they are all forgeries. I have many enemies you know. If the League knew the difficulties faced on a backward planet like this....”

“That will be entirely enough,” I snapped, cutting him off with a wave of my hand.

“All those questions will be answered by a court at the proper time. There is only one question I want an answer to now. Why are you building that battleship?”

The man was a great actor. His eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped, he sank back into the chair as if he had been tapped lightly with a hammer. When he managed to speak the words were completely unnecessary; he had already registered every evidence of injured innocence.

“What battleship?” he gasped.

“The Warlord class battleship that is being built at the Cenerentola Spaceyards. Disguised behind these blueprints.” I threw them across the desk to him, and pointed to the one corner. “Those are your initials there, authorizing construction.”

Ferraro still had the baffled act going as he fumbled with the papers, examined the initials and such. I gave him plenty of time. He finally put them down, shaking his head.

“I know nothing about any battleship. These are the plans for a new cargo liner. Those are my initials, I recall putting them there.”

I phrased my question carefully, as I had him right where I wanted him now. “You deny any knowledge of the Warlord battleship that is being built from these modified plans.”

“These are the plans for an ordinary passenger-freighter, that is all I know.”

His words had the simple innocence of a young child’s. Was he ever caught. I sat back with a relaxed sigh and lit a cigar.

“Wouldn’t you be interested in knowing something about that robot who is holding you,” I said. He looked down, as if aware for the first time that the robot had been holding him by the wrist during the interview. “That is no ordinary robot. It has a number of interesting devices built into its fingertips. Thermocouples, galvanometers, things like that. While you talked it registered your skin temperature, blood pressure, amount of perspiration and such. In other words it is an efficient and fast working lie detector. We will now hear all about your lies.”

Ferraro pulled away from the robot’s hand as if it had been a poisonous snake. I blew a relaxed smoke ring. “Report,” I said to the robot. “Has this man told any lies?”

“Many,” the robot said. “Exactly seventy-four per cent of all statements he made were false.”

“Very good,” I nodded, throwing the last lock on my trap. “That means he knows all about this battleship.”

“The subject has no knowledge of the battleship,” the robot said coldly. “All of his statements concerning the construction of this ship were true.”

Now it was my turn for the gaping and eye-popping act while Ferraro pulled himself together. He had no idea I wasn’t interested in his other hanky-panky, but could tell I had had a low blow. It took an effort, but I managed to get my mind back into gear and consider the evidence.

If President Ferraro didn’t know about the battleship, he must have been taken in by the cover-up job. But if he wasn’t responsible—who was? Some militaristic clique that meant to overthrow him and take power? I didn’t know enough about the planet, so I enlisted Ferraro on my side.

This was easy—even without the threat of exposure of the documents I had found in his files. Using their disclosure as a prod I could have made him jump through hoops. It wasn’t necessary. As soon as I showed him the different blueprints and explained the possibilities he understood. If anything, he was more eager than I was to find out who was using his administration as a cat’s-paw. By silent agreement the documents were forgotten.

We agreed that the next logical step would be the Cenerentola Spaceyards. He had some idea of sniffing around quietly first, trying to get a line to his political opponents. I gave him to understand that the League, and the League Navy in particular, wanted to stop the construction of the battleship. After that he could play his politics. With this point understood he called his car and squadron of guards and we made a parade to the shipyards. It was a four-hour drive and we made plans on the way down.

The spaceyard manager was named Rocca, and he was happily asleep when we arrived. But not for long. The parade of uniforms and guns in the middle of the night had him frightened into a state where he could hardly walk. I imagine he was as full of petty larceny as Ferraro. No innocent man could have looked so terror-stricken. Taking advantage of the situation, I latched my motorized lie detector onto him and began snapping the questions.

Even before I had all the answers I began to get the drift of things. They were a little frightening, too. The manager of the spaceyard that was building the ship had no idea of its true nature.

Anyone with less self-esteem than myself—or who had led a more honest early life—might have doubted his own reasoning at that moment. I didn't. The ship on the ways *still* resembled a warship to six places. And knowing human nature the way I do, that was too much of a coincidence to expect. Occam's razor always points the way. If there are two choices to take, take the simpler. In this case I chose the natural acquisitive instinct of man as opposed to blind chance and accident. Nevertheless I put the theory to the test.

Looking over the original blueprints again, the big superstructure hit my eye. In order to turn the ship into a warship that would have to be one of the first things to go.

"Rocca!" I barked, in what I hoped was authentic old space-dog manner. "Look at these plans, at this space-going front porch here. Is it still being built onto the ship?"

He shook his head at once and said, "No, the plans were changed. We had to fit in some kind of new meteor-repelling gear for operating in the planetary debris belt."

I flipped through my case and drew out a plan. "Does your new gear look anything like this?" I asked, throwing it across the table to him.

He rubbed his jaw while he looked at it. "Well," he said hesitatingly, "I don't want to say for certain. After all, these details aren't in my department, I'm just responsible for final assembly, not unit work. But this surely looks like the thing they installed. Big thing. Lots of power leads—"

It was a battleship all right, no doubt of that now. I was mentally reaching around to pat myself on the back when the meaning of his words sank in.

"Installed!" I shouted. "Did you say installed?"

Rocca collapsed away from my roar and gnawed his nails. "Yes—" he said, "not too long ago. I remember there was some trouble...."

"And what else?" I interrupted him. Cold moisture was beginning to collect along my spine now. "The drives, controls—are they in, too?"

"Why, yes," he said. "How did you know? The normal scheduling was changed around, causing a great deal of unnecessary trouble."

The cold sweat was now a running river of fear. I was beginning to have the feeling that I had been missing the boat all along the line. The original estimated date of completion was nearly a year away. But there was no real reason why that couldn't be changed, too.

"Cars! Guns!" I bellowed. "To the spaceyard. If that ship is anywhere near completion, we are in big, *big* trouble!"

All the bored guards had a great time with the sirens, lights, accelerators on the floor and that sort of thing. We blasted a screaming hole through the night right to the spaceyard and through the gate.

It didn't make any difference, we were still too late. A uniformed watchman frantically waved to us and the whole convoy jerked to a stop.

The ship was gone.

Rocca couldn't believe it, neither could the president. They wandered up and down the empty ways where it had been built. I just crunched down in the back of the car, chewing my cigar to pieces and cursing myself for being a fool.

I had missed the obvious fact, being carried away by the thought of a planetary government building a warship. The government was involved for sure—but only as a pawn. No little planet-bound political mind could have dreamed up as big a scheme as this. I smelled a rat—a stainless steel one. Someone who operated the way I had done before my conversion.

Now that the rodent was well out of the bag I knew just where to look, and had a pretty good idea of what I would find. Rocca, the spaceyard manager, had staggered back and was pulling at his hair, cursing and crying at the same time. President Ferraro had his gun out and was staring at it grimly. It was hard to tell if he was thinking of murder or suicide. I didn't care which. All he had to worry about was the next election, when the voters and the political competition would carve him up for losing the ship. My troubles were a little bigger.

I had to find the battleship before it blasted its way across the galaxy.

"Rocca!" I shouted. "Get into the car. I want to see your records—*all* of your records—and I want to see them right now."

He climbed wearily in and had directed the driver before he fully realized what was happening. Blinking at the sickly light of dawn brought him slowly back to reality.

"But admiral ... the hour! Everyone will be asleep...."

I just growled, but it was enough. Rocca caught the idea from my expression and grabbed the car phone. The office doors were open when we got there.

Normally I curse the paper tangles of bureaucracy, but this was one time when I blessed them all. These people had it down to a fine science. Not a rivet fell, but that its fall was noted—in quintuplicate. And later followed up with a memo, *rivet*, *wastage*, *query*. The facts I needed were all neatly tucked away in their paper catacombs. All I had to do was sniff them out. I didn't try to look for first causes, this would have taken too long. Instead I concentrated my attention on the recent modifications, like the gun turret, that would quickly give me a trail to the guilty parties.

Once the clerks understood what I had in mind they hurled themselves into their work, urged on by the fires of patriotism and the burning voices of their superiors. All I had to do was suggest a line of search and the relevant documents would begin appearing at once.

Bit by bit a pattern started to emerge. A delicate web-work of forgery, bribery, chicanery and falsehood. It could only have been conceived by a mind as brilliantly crooked as my own. I chewed my lip with jealousy. Like all great ideas, this one was basically simple.

A party or parties unknown had neatly warped the ship construction program to their own ends. Undoubtedly they had started the program for the giant transport, that would have to be checked later. And once the program was underway, it had been guided with a skill that bordered on genius. Orders were originated in many places, passed on, changed and shuffled. I painfully traced each one to its source. Many times the source was a forgery. Some changes seemed to be unexplainable, until I noticed the officers in question had a temporary secretary while their normal assistants were ill. All the girls had had food poisoning, a regular epidemic it seemed. Each of them in turn had been replaced by the same girl. She stayed just long enough in each position to see that the battleship plan moved forward one more notch.

This girl was obviously the assistant to the Mastermind who originated the scheme. He sat in the center of the plot, like a spider on its web, pulling the strings that set things into motion. My first thought that a gang was involved proved wrong. All my secondary suspects turned out to be simple forgeries, not individuals. In the few cases where forgery wasn't adequate, my mysterious X had apparently hired himself to do the job. X himself had the permanent job of Assistant Engineering Designer. One by one the untangled threads ran to this office. He also had a secretary whose "illnesses" coincided with her employment in other offices.

When I straightened up from my desk the ache in my back stabbed like a hot wire. I swallowed a painkiller and looked around at my drooping, sack-eyed assistants who had shared the sleepless seventy-two hour task. They sat or slumped against the furniture, waiting for my conclusions. Even President Ferraro was there, his hair looking scraggly where he had pulled out handfuls.

"You've found them, the criminal ring?" he asked, his fingers groping over his scalp for a fresh hold.

"I have found them, yes," I said hoarsely. "But not a criminal ring. An inspired master criminal—who apparently has more executive ability in one ear lobe than all your bribe-bloated bureaucrats—and his female assistant. They pulled the entire job by themselves. His name, or undoubtedly pseudoname, is Pepe Nero. The girl is called Angelina...."

"Arrest them at once! Guards ... guards—" Ferraro's voice died away as he ran out of the room. I talked to his vanishing back.

"That is just what we intend to do, but it's a little difficult at the moment since they are the ones who not only built the battleship, but undoubtedly stole it as well. It was fully automated so no crew is necessary."

"What do you plan to do?" one of the clerks asked.

"I shall do nothing," I told him, with the snapped precision of an old space veteran. "The League fleet is already closing in on the renegades and you will be informed of the capture. Thank you for your assistance."

VI

I threw them as snappy a salute as I could muster and they filed out. Staring gloomily at their backs I envied for one moment their simple faith in the League Navy. When in reality the vengeful fleet was just as imaginary as my admiral's rating. This was still a job for the Corps. Inskipp would have to be given the latest information at once. I had sent him a psigram about the theft, but there was no answer as yet. Maybe the identity of the thieves would stir some response out of him.

My message was in code, but it could be quickly broken if someone wanted to try hard enough. I took it to the message center myself. The psiman was in his transparent cubicle and I locked myself in with him. His eyes were unfocused as he spoke softly into a mike, pulling in a message from somewhere across the galaxy. Outside the rushing transcribers copied, coded and filed messages, but no sound penetrated the insulated wall. I waited until his attention clicked back into the room, and handed him the sheets of paper.

"League Central 14—rush," I told him.

He raised his eyebrows, but didn't ask any questions. Establishing contact only took a few seconds, as they had an entire battery of psimen for their communications. He read the code words carefully, shaping them with his mouth but not speaking aloud, the power of his thoughts carrying across the light-years of distance. As soon as he was finished I took back the sheet, tore it up and pocketed the pieces.

I had my answer back quickly enough, Inskipp must have been hovering around waiting for my message. The mike was turned off to the transcribers outside, and I took the code groups down in shorthand myself.

"... xybb dfil fdno, and if you don't—don't come back!"

The message broke into clear at the end and the psiman smiled as he spoke the words. I broke the point off my stylus and growled at him not to repeat *any* of this message, as it was classified, and I would personally see him shot if he did. That got rid of the smile, but didn't make me feel any better.

The decoded message turned out not to be as bad as I had imagined. Until further notice I was in charge of tracking and capturing the stolen battleship. I could call on the League for any aid I needed. I would keep my identity as an admiral for the rest of the job. I was to keep him informed of progress. Only those ominous last words in clear kept my happiness from being complete.

I had been handed my long-awaited assignment. But translated into simple terms my orders were to get the battleship, or it would be my neck. Never a word about my efforts in uncovering the plot in the first place. This is a heartless world we live in.

This moment of self-pity relaxed me and I immediately went to bed. Since my main job now was waiting, I could wait just as well asleep.

And waiting was all I could do. Of course there were secondary tasks, such as ordering a Naval cruiser for my own use, and digging for more information on the thieves, but these really were secondary to my main purpose. Which was waiting for bad news. There was no place I could go that would be better situated for the chase

than Cittanuvo. The missing ship could have gone in any direction. With each passing minute the sphere of probable locations grew larger by the power of the squared cube. I kept the on-watch crew of the cruiser at duty stations and confined the rest within a one hundred yard radius of the ship.

There was little more information on Pepe and Angelina, they had covered their tracks well. Their backgrounds were unknown, though the fact they both talked with a slight accent suggested an off-world origin. There was one dim picture of Pepe, chubby but looking too grim to be a happy fat boy. There was no picture of the girl. I shuffled the meager findings, controlled my impatience, and kept the ship's psiman busy pulling in all the reports of any kind of trouble in space. The navigator and I plotted their locations in his tank, comparing the positions in relation to the growing sphere that enclosed all the possible locations of the stolen ship. Some of the disasters and apparent accidents hit inside this area, but further investigation proved them all to have natural causes.

I had left standing orders that all reports falling inside the danger area were to be brought to me at any time. The messenger woke me from a deep sleep, turning on the light and handing me the slip of paper. I blinked myself awake, read the first two lines, and pressed the *action station* alarm over my bunk. I'll say this, the Navy boys know their business. When the sirens screamed, the crew secured ship and blasted off before I had finished reading the report. As soon as my eyeballs unsquashed back into focus I read it through, then once more carefully from the beginning.

It looked like the one we had been waiting for. There were no witnesses to the tragedy, but a number of monitor stations had picked up the discharge static of a large energy weapon being fired. Triangulation had led investigators to the spot where they found a freighter, *Ogget's Dream*, with a hole punched through it as big as a railroad tunnel. The freighter's cargo of plutonium was gone.

I read *Pepe* in every line of the message. Since he was flying an undermanned battleship, he had used it in the most efficient way possible. If he attempted to negotiate or threaten another ship, the element of chance would be introduced. So he had simply roared up to the unsuspecting freighter and blasted her with the monster guns his battleship packed. All eighteen men aboard had been killed instantly. The thieves were also murderers.

I was under pressure now to act. And under a greater pressure not to make any mistakes. Roly-poly Pepe had shown himself to be a ruthless killer. He knew what he wanted—then reached out and took it. Destroying anyone who stood in his way. More people would die before this was over, it was up to me to keep that number as small as possible.

Ideally I should have rushed out the fleet with guns blazing and dragged him to justice. Very nice, and I wished it could be done that way. Except where was he? A battleship may be gigantic on some terms of reference, but in the immensity of the galaxy it is microscopically infinitesimal. As long as it stayed out of the regular lanes of commerce, and clear of detector stations and planets, it would never be found.

Then how *could* I find it—and having found it, catch it? When the infernal thing was more than a match for any ship it might meet. That was my problem. It had kept me awake nights and talking to myself days, since there was no easy answer.

I had to construct a solution, slowly and carefully. Since I couldn't be sure where Pepe was going to be next, I had to make him go where I wanted him to.

There were some things in my favor. The most important was the fact I had forced him to make his play before he was absolutely ready. It wasn't chance that he had left the same day I arrived on Cittanuvo. Any plan as elaborate as his certainly included warning of approaching danger. The drive on the battleship, as well as controls and primary armament had been installed weeks before I showed up. Much of the subsidiary work remained to be done when the ship had left. One witness of the theft had graphically described the power lines and cables dangling from the ship's locks when she lifted.

My arrival had forced Pepe off balance. Now I had to keep pushing until he fell. This meant I had to think as he did, fall into his plan, think ahead—then trap him. Set a thief to catch a thief. A great theory, only I felt uncomfortably on the spot when I tried to put it into practice.

A drink helped, as did a cigar. Puffing on it, staring at the smooth bulkhead, relaxed me a bit. After all—there aren't that many things you can do with a battleship. You can't run a big con, blow safes or make burmedex with it. It is hell-on-jets for space piracy, but that's about all.

"Great, great—but why a battleship?"

I was talking to myself, normally a bad sign, but right now I didn't care. The mood of space piracy had seized me and I had been going along fine. Until this glaring inconsistency jumped out and hit me square in the eye.

Why a battleship? Why all the trouble and years of work to get a ship that two people could just barely manage? With a tenth of the effort Pepe could have had a cruiser that would have suited his purposes just as well.

Just as good for space piracy, that is—but not for *his* purposes. He had wanted a battleship, and he had gotten himself a battleship. Which meant he had more in mind than simple piracy. What? It was obvious that Pepe was a monomaniac, an egomaniac, and as psychotic as a shorted computer. Some day the mystery of how he had slipped through the screen of official testing would have to be investigated. That wasn't my concern now. He still had to be caught.

A plan was beginning to take shape in my head, but I didn't rush it. First I had to be sure that I knew him well. Any man that can con an entire world into building a battleship for him—then steal it from them—is not going to stop there. The ship would need a crew, a base for refueling and a mission.

Fuel had been taken care of first, the gutted hull of *Ogget's Dream* was silent witness to that. There were countless planets that could be used as a base. Getting a crew would be more difficult in these peaceful times, although I could think of a few answers to that one, too. Raid the mental hospitals and jails. Do that often enough and you would have a crew that would make any pirate chief proud. Though piracy was, of course, too mean an ambition to ascribe to this boy. Did he want to rule a whole planet—or maybe an entire system? Or more? I shuddered a bit as the thought hit me. Was there really anything that could stop a plan like this once it got rolling? During the Kingly Wars any number of types with a couple of ships and less brains

than Pepe had set up just this kind of empire. They were all pulled down in the end, since their success depended on one-man rule. But the price that had to be paid first!

This was the plan and I felt in my bones that I was right. I might be wrong on some of the minor details, they weren't important. I knew the general outline of the idea, just as when I bumped into a mark I knew how much he could be taken for, and just how to do it. There are natural laws in crime as in every other field of human endeavor. I *knew* this was it.

"Get the Communications Officer in here at once," I shouted at the intercom. "Also a couple of clerks with transcribers. And fast—this is a matter of life or death!" This last had a hollow ring, and I realized my enthusiasm had carried me out of character. I buttoned my collar, straightened my ribbons and squared my shoulders. By the time they knocked on the door I was all admiral again.

Acting on my orders the ship dropped out of warpdrive so our psiman could get through to the other operators. Captain Steng grumbled as we floated there with the engines silent, wasting precious days, while half his crew was involved in getting out what appeared to be insane instructions. My plan was beyond his understanding. Which is, of course, why he is a captain and I'm an admiral, even a temporary one.

Following my orders, the navigator again constructed a sphere of speculation in his tank. The surface of the sphere contacted all the star systems a day's flight ahead of the maximum flight of the stolen battleship. There weren't too many of these at first and the psiman could handle them all, calling each in turn and sending news releases to the Naval Public Relations officers there. As the sphere kept growing he started to drop behind, steadily losing ground. By this time I had a general release prepared, along with directions for use and follow up, which he sent to Central 14. The battery of psimen there contacted the individual planets and all we had to do was keep adding to the list of planets.

The release and follow-ups all harped on one theme. I expanded on it, waxed enthusiastic, condemned it, and worked it into an interview. I wrote as many variations as I could, so it could be slipped into as many different formats as possible. In one form or another I wanted the basic information in every magazine, newspaper and journal inside that expanding sphere.

"What in the devil does this nonsense *mean*?" Captain Steng asked peevishly. He had long since given up the entire operation as a futile one, and spent most of the time in his cabin worrying about the effect of it on his service record. Boredom or curiosity had driven him out, and he was reading one of my releases with horror.

"Billionaire to found own world ... space yacht filled with luxuries to last a hundred years," the captain's face grew red as he flipped through the stack of notes. "What connection does this tripe have with catching those murderers?"

When we were alone he was anything but courteous to me, having assured himself by not-too-subtle questioning that I was a spurious admiral. There was no doubt I was still in charge, but our relationship was anything but formal.

"This tripe and nonsense," I told him, "is the bait that will snag our fish. A trap for Pepe and his partner in crime."

"Who is this mysterious billionaire?"

“Me,” I said. “I’ve always wanted to be rich.”

“But this ship, the space yacht, where is it?”

“Being built now in the naval shipyard at Udrydde. We’re almost ready to go there now, soon as this batch of instructions goes out.”

Captain Steng dropped the releases onto the table, then carefully wiped his hands off to remove any possible infection. He was trying to be fair and considerate of my views, and not succeeding in the slightest.

“It doesn’t make sense,” he growled. “How can you be sure this killer will ever read one of these things. And if he does—why should he be interested? It looks to me as if you are wasting time while he slips through your fingers. The alarm should be out and every ship notified. The Navy alerted and patrols set on all spacelanes—”

“Which he could easily avoid by going around, or better yet not even bother about, since he can lick any ship we have. That’s not the answer,” I told him. “This Pepe is smart and as tricky as a fixed gambling machine. That’s his strength—and his weakness as well. Characters like that never think it possible for someone else to outthink them. Which is what *I’m* going to do.”

“Modest, aren’t you,” Steng said.

“I try not to be,” I told him. “False modesty is the refuge of the incompetent. I’m going to catch this thug and I’ll tell you how I’ll do it. He’s going to hit again soon, and wherever he hits there will be some kind of a periodical with my plant in it. Whatever else he is after, he is going to take all of the magazines and papers he can find. Partly to satisfy his own ego, but mostly to keep track of the things he is interested in. Such as ship sailings.”

“You’re just guessing—you don’t know all this.”

His automatic assumption of my incompetence was beginning to get me annoyed. I bridled my temper and tried one last time.

“Yes, I’m guessing—an informed guess—but I do know some facts as well. *Ogget’s Dream* was cleaned out of all reading matter, that was one of the first things I checked. We can’t stop the battleship from attacking again, but we can see to it that the time after that she sails into a trap.”

“I don’t know,” the captain said, “it sounds to me like....”

I never heard what it sounded like, which is all right since he was getting under my skin and I might have been tempted to pull my pseudo-rank. The alarm sirens cut his sentence off and we foot-raced to the communications room.

Captain Steng won by a nose, it was his ship and he knew all the shortcuts. The psiman was holding out a transcription, but he summed it up in one sentence. He looked at me while he talked and his face was hard and cold.

“They hit again, knocked out a Navy supply satellite, thirty-four men dead.”

“If your plan doesn’t work, *admiral*,” the captain whispered hoarsely in my ear, “I’ll personally see that you’re flayed alive!”

“If my plan doesn’t work, *captain*—there won’t be enough of my skin left to pick up with a tweezer. Now if you please, I’d like to get to Udrydde and board my ship as soon as possible.”

The easy-going hatred and contempt of all my associates had annoyed me, thrown me off balance. I was thinking with anger now, not with logic. Forcing a bit of control, I ordered my thoughts, checking off a mental list.

“Belay that last command,” I shouted, getting back into my old space-dog mood. “Get a call through first and find out if any of our plants were picked up during the raid.”

While the psiman unfocused his eyes and mumbled under his breath I rifled some papers, relaxed and cool. The ratings and officers waited tensely, and made some slight attempt to conceal their hatred of me. It took about ten minutes to get an answer.

“Affirmative,” the psiman said. “A store ship docked there twenty hours before the attack. Among other things, it left newspapers containing the article.”

“Very good,” I said calmly. “Send a general order to suspend all future activity with the planted releases. Send it by psimen only, no mention on any other Naval signaling equipment, there’s a good chance now it might be ‘overheard.’”

I strolled out slowly, in command of the situation. Keeping my face turned away so they couldn’t see the cold sweat.

It was a fast run to Udrydde where my billionaire’s yacht, the *Eldorado*, was waiting. The dockyard commander showed me the ship, and made a noble effort to control his curiosity. I took a sadistic revenge on the Navy by not telling him a word about my mission. After checking out the controls and special apparatus with the technicians, I cleared the ship. There was a tape in the automatic navigator that would put me on the course mentioned in all the articles, just a press of a button and I would be on my way. I pressed the button.

It was a beautiful ship, and the dockyard had been lavish with their attention to detail. From bow to rear tubes she was plated in pure gold. There are other metals with a higher albedo, but none that give a richer effect. All the fittings, inside and out, were either machine-turned or plated. All this work could not have been done in the time allotted, the Navy must have adapted a luxury yacht to my needs.

Everything was ready. Either Pepe would make his move—or I would sail on to my billionaire’s paradise planet. If that happened, it would be best if I stayed there.

Now that I was in space, past the point of no return, all the doubts that I had dismissed fought for attention. The plan that had seemed so clear and logical now began to look like a patched and crazy makeshift.

“Hold on there, sailor,” I said to myself. Using my best admiral’s voice. “Nothing has changed. It’s still the best and *only* plan possible under the circumstances.”

Was it? Could I be sure that Pepe, flying his mountain of a ship and eating Navy rations, would be interested in some of the comforts and luxuries of life? Or if the luxuries didn’t catch his eye, would he be interested in the planetary homesteading gear? I had loaded the cards with all the things he might want, and planted the information where he could get it. He had the bait now—but would he grab the hook?

I couldn’t tell. And I could work myself into a neurotic state if I kept running through the worry cycle. It took an effort to concentrate on anything else, but it had to be made. The next four days passed very slowly.

VII

When the alarm blew off, all I felt was an intense sensation of relief. I might be dead and blasted to dust in the next few minutes, but that didn't seem to make much difference.

Pepe had swallowed the bait. There was only one ship in the galaxy that could knock back a blip that big at such a distance. It was closing fast, using the raw energy of the battleship engines for a headlong approach. My ship bucked a bit as the tug-beams locked on at maximum distance. The radio bleeped at me for attention at the same time. I waited as long as I dared, then flipped it on. The voice boomed out.

"... That you are under the guns of a warship! Don't attempt to run, signal, take evasive action, or in any other way...."

"Who are you—and what the devil do you want?" I spluttered into the mike. I had my scanner on, so they could see me, but my own screen stayed dark. They weren't sending any picture. In a way it made my act easier, I just played to an unseen audience. They could see the rich cut of my clothes, the luxurious cabin behind me. Of course they couldn't see my hands.

"It doesn't matter who we are," the radio boomed again. "Just obey orders if you care to live. Stay away from the controls until we have tied on, then do exactly as I say."

There were two distant clangs as magnetic grapples hit the hull. A little later the ship lurched, drawn home against the battleship. I let my eyes roll in fear, looking around for a way to escape—and taking a peek at the outside scanners. The yacht was flush against the space-filling bulk of the other ship. I pressed the button that sent the torch-wielding robot on his way.

"Now let me tell you something," I snapped into the mike, wiping away the worried billionaire expression. "First I'll repeat your own warning—obey orders if you want to live. I'll show you why—"

When I threw the big switch a carefully worked out sequence took place. First, of course, the hull was magnetized and the bombs fused. A light blinked as the scanner in the cabin turned off, and the one in the generator room came on. I checked the monitor screen to make sure, then started into the spacesuit. It had to be done fast, at the same time it was necessary to talk naturally. They must still think of me as sitting in the control room.

"That's the ship's generators you're looking at," I said. "Ninety-eight per cent of their output is now feeding into coils that make an electromagnet of this ship's hull. You will find it very hard to separate us. And I would advise you not to try."

The suit was on, and I kept the running chatter up through the mike in the helmet, relaying to the ship's transmitter. The scene in the monitor receiver changed.

"You are now looking at a hydrogen bomb that is primed and aware of the magnetic field holding our ships together. It will, of course, go off if you try to pull away." I grabbed up the monitor receiver and ran toward the air lock.

"This is a different bomb now," I said, keeping one eye on the screen and the other on the slowly opening outer door. "This one has receptors on the hull. If you attempt to destroy any part of this ship, or even gain entry to it, this one will detonate."

I was in space now, leaping across to the gigantic wall of the other ship.

"What do you want?" These were the first words Pepe had spoken since his first threats.

"I want to talk to you, arrange a deal. Something that would be profitable for both of us. But let me first show you the rest of the bombs, so you won't get any strange ideas about co-operating."

Of course I *had* to show him the rest of the bombs, there was no getting out of it. The scanners in the ship were following a planned program. I made light talk about all my massive armament that would carry us both to perdition, while I climbed through the hole in the battleship's hull. There was no armor or warning devices at this spot, it had been chosen carefully from the blueprints.

"Yeah, yeah ... I take your word for it, you're a flying bomb. So stop with this roving reporter bit and tell me what you have in mind."

This time I didn't answer him, because I was running and panting like a dog, and had the mike turned off. Just ahead, if the blueprints were right, was the door to the control room. Pepe should be there.

I stepped through, gun out, and pointed it at the back of his head. Angelina stood next to him, looking at the screen.

"The game's over," I said. "Stand up slowly and keep your hands in sight."

"What do you mean," he said angrily, looking at the screen in front of him. The girl caught wise first. She spun around and pointed.

"He's *here*!"

They both stared, gaped at me, caught off guard and completely unprepared.

"You're under arrest, crime-king," I told him. "And your girl friend."

Angelina rolled her eyes up and slid slowly to the floor. Real or faked, I didn't care. I kept the gun on Pepe's pudgy form while he picked her up and carried her to an acceleration couch against the wall.

"What ... what will happen now?" He quavered the question. His pouchy jaws shook and I swear there were tears in his eyes. I was not impressed by his acting since I could clearly remember the dead men floating in space. He stumbled over to a chair, half dropping into it.

"Will they do anything to me?" Angelina asked. Her eyes were open now.

"I have no idea of what will happen to you." I told her truthfully. "That is up to the courts to decide."

"But he *made* me do all those things," she wailed. She was young, dark and beautiful, the tears did nothing to spoil this.

Pepe dropped his face into his hands and his shoulders shook. I flicked the gun his way and snapped at him.

“Sit up, Pepe. I find it very hard to believe that you are crying. There are some Naval ships on the way now, the automatic alarm was triggered about a minute ago. I’m sure they’ll be glad to see the man who....”

“Don’t let them take me, please!” Angelina was on her feet now, her back pressed to the wall. “They’ll put me in prison, do things to my mind!” She shrunk away as she spoke, stumbling along the wall. I looked back at Pepe, not wanting to have my eyes off him for an instant.

“There’s nothing I can do,” I told her. I glanced her way and a small door was swinging open and she was gone.

“Don’t try to run,” I shouted after her, “it can’t do any good!”

Pepe made a strangling noise and I looked back to him quickly. He was sitting up now and his face was dry of tears. In fact he was laughing, not crying.

“So she caught you, too, Mr. Wise-cop, poor little Angelina with the soft eyes.” He broke down again, shaking with laughter.

“What do you mean,” I growled.

“Don’t you catch yet? The story she told you was true—except she twisted it around a bit. The whole plan, building the battleship, then stealing it, was *hers*. She pulled me into it, played me like an accordion. I fell in love with her, hating myself and happy at the same time. Well—I’m glad now it’s over. At least I gave her a chance to get away, I owe her that much. Though I thought I would explode when she went into that innocence act!”

The cold feeling was now a ball of ice that threatened to paralyze me. “You’re lying,” I said hoarsely, and even I didn’t believe it.

“Sorry. That’s the way it is. Your brain-boys will pick my skull to pieces and find out the truth anyway. There’s no point in lying now.”

“We’ll search the ship, she can’t hide for long.”

“She won’t have to,” Pepe said. “There’s a fast scout we picked up, stowed in one of the holds. That must be it leaving now.” We could feel the vibration, distantly through the floor.

“The Navy will get her,” I told him, with far more conviction than I felt.

“Maybe,” he said, suddenly slumped and tired, no longer laughing. “Maybe they will. But I gave her her chance. It is all over for me now, but she knows that I loved her to the end.” He bared his teeth in sudden pain. “Not that she will care in the slightest.”

I kept the gun on him and neither of us moved while the Navy ships pulled up and their boots stamped outside. I had captured my battleship and the raids were over. And I couldn’t be blamed if the girl had slipped away. If she evaded the Navy ships, that was their fault, not mine.

I had my victory all right.

But I wasn’t too happy about it. I had a premonition that I wasn’t finished with Angelina yet.

VIII

Life would have been much sweeter if my uneasy hunch hadn't proven to be true. You can't blame the Navy for being taken in by Angelina—they were neither the first nor the last to underestimate the mind that lay behind those melting eyes. And I try not to blame myself either. After my first mistake in letting Angelina slip out I tried not to make a second. I wasn't completely convinced yet that Pepe was telling the truth about her. The entire story might be a complicated lie to confuse and throw me off guard. I have a very suspicious mind. Playing it safe, I kept the muzzle of my gun aimed exactly between his eyes with my fingers resting lightly on the trigger. I kept it there until a squad of space marines thundered in and took over. As soon as they put the grab on Pepe I sent out an all-ships alarm about Angelina, with a special take-all-precautions priority. Even before all the ships had acknowledged receipt her scout rocket was sighted on the detector screen.

I sighed with a great deal of relief. If she did turn out to be the brains of the operation I didn't want her slipping away. She, Pepe and the battleship made a nice package to turn over to Inskipp. There was no chance of her escaping now, with ships closing in on her from every direction. They were experienced at this sort of thing and it was only a matter of time before they had her. Turning over the battleship to the navy, I went back to the luxury yacht and tapped the stores for a large glass of Scotch whisky (that had never been within twenty light-years of Earth) and a long cigar. Sitting comfortably in front of the screen I monitored the chase.

Angelina wriggled painfully on the hook, making high-G turns to avoid capture. She'd be black and blue from head to foot after some of those 15-G accelerations. It was all for nothing because in the end they still caught her in a tractor web and closed in. All the thrashing around had just gained her a little time. None of us realized how important this time really was until the boarding party cracked into the ship.

It was empty of course.

Fully ten days went by before we pieced together what had really happened. It was ruthless and ugly, and even if the psych docs hadn't assured me that Pepe had told the truth, I would have recognized the manner in which the escape was carried out. Angelina was one step ahead of us all the way. When she had escaped from the battleship in the scout rocket she had made no attempt to flee. Instead she must have gone at full blast to the nearest navy ship, a twelve-man pocket cruiser. They of course had no idea what had really happened aboard the battleship, as I hadn't put out the general alarm yet. I should have done that as soon as she had escaped. If I had, twelve good men might still be alive. We'll never know what story she told them, but it was obvious they weren't on their guard. Probably something about being a prisoner and escaping during the fighting. In any case she took the ship. Five of the men were dead of gas poisoning, the others shot. We discovered this when the cruiser was later found drifting and inert, parsecs away. After capturing the cruiser she had set the controls on the scout ship for evasion tactics and launched it. While we were all merrily chasing it she simply let her ship drop behind the chase and vanished from the fleet. Her trail blurs there, though it is obvious she must have captured another ship. What this ship was, and where she went in it, was a complete mystery.

Back in Corps headquarters I found myself trying to explain this all to Inskipp. He had a cold eye and hardened manner and I found myself trying to justify my actions.

“You can’t win them all,” I said. “I brought home your battleship and Pepe—may his personality rest in peace now that it has been erased. Angelina tricked me and got away, I’ll admit that. But she did a much better job of fooling the boys in the navy!”

“Why so much venom?” Inskipp asked in an arid voice. “No one’s accusing you of dereliction of duty. You sound like a man with a guilty conscience. You did a good job. A fine job. A great job ... for a first assignment....”

“You’re doing it again!” I howled. “Prodding my conscience to see how soft it is. Like keeping *him* around.” I pointed to Pepe Nero who was sitting near us in the restaurant eating slowly, mumbling to himself with vacant-eyed dullness. His old personality had been stripped from his mind and a new one implanted. Only the body remained of the old Pepe who had loved Angelina and stolen a battleship.

“The psychs are working on a new theory of body-personality,” Inskipp said blandly, “so why not keep him around here under observation? If any of his criminal tendencies should develop in the new personality we’ll be in a wonderful spot to recruit him for the Corps. Does he bother you?”

“Not him,” I snorted. “After the massacres he pulled for his psychotic girlfriend you could grind him into hamburger for all I care. But he does remind me that she is still out there somewhere. Free and planning new mischief. I want to go after her.”

“Well you’re not,” Inskipp said. “You’ve asked me before and I have refused before. The topic is now closed.”

“But I could ...”

“You could *what*?” He gave me a nasty chuckle. “Every law officer in the galaxy has a pic of her and there is a continual search going on. How could you possibly do more than they are already doing?”

“I couldn’t, I guess,” I grumbled. “So the hell with it, as you say.” I pushed my plate away and stood and stretched as naturally as I could. “I’m going to get a large jug of liquid refreshment and go to my quarters and nurse my sorrows.”

“You do that. And forget Angelina. Come to my office at 0900 hours tomorrow and you better be sober.”

“Slavedriver,” I moaned, going out the door and turning down the hall towards the residence wing. As soon as I was out of sight I took a side ramp that led to the spaceport.

That’s one lesson I had already learned from Angelina. When you have a plan put it into action instantly. Don’t let it lie around and get stale and have other people start thinking about it themselves. I was putting myself up against the shrewdest man in the business right now, and the thought alone was enough to make me sweat. I was going against Inskipp’s direct orders, walking out on him and the Corps. Not really walking out, since I only wanted to finish the job I had started for them. But I was obviously the only one who would look at it that way.

There were tools, gadgets and a good deal of money in my quarters that would come in very handy on this job. I would just have to do without them. When Inskipp started to think about my sudden conversion to his point of view I wanted to be well away in space.

A mechanic with a drag-robot was pulling an agent's ship into place on the launching ramp. I stamped over and used my official voice.

"Is that my ship?"

"No, sir—it's for Full Agent Nielsen, there he is coming up now."

"Check with control central, will you? It's going to be rush no matter how we handle it."

"New job, Jimmy?" Ove asked as he came up. I nodded and watched the mechanic until he vanished around the corner.

"Same old business," I said. "And how's your tennis game coming?" I asked, lifting my hand with an imaginary racket.

"Getting better all the time," he said, turning his head to look at his ship.

"I'll teach you a new stroke," I said, bringing my hand down sharply and catching him on the side of the neck with the straightened edge. He folded without a sound and I lowered him gently to the deck and dragged him out of sight behind a row of lubrication drums. I gently pried the box with the course tapes from his limp fingers.

Before the mechanic could return I was in the ship and had the lock sealed. I fed the course tape into the controls and punched the tower combination for clearance. There was a subjective century of waiting, during which eternal period of time I produced a fine beading of sweat all over my head. Then the green light came on.

Step one and still in the clear. As soon as the launching acceleration stopped I was out of the chair and attacking the control panel with the screwdriver ready in my hand. There was always a remote control unit here so that any Corps ship could be flown from a distance. I had discovered it on my first flight in one of these ships since I have always maintained that there is a positive value to being nosy. I disconnected the input and output leads, then dived for the engine room.

Perhaps I am too suspicious or have too low an opinion of mankind. Or of Inskipp, who had his own rules on most subjects. Someone more trusting than I would have ignored the radio controlled suicide bomb built into the engine. This could be used to scuttle the ship in case of capture. I didn't think they would use it on me except as a last resort. Nevertheless I still wanted it disconnected.

The bomb was an integral part of the engine mounting, a solid block of burmedex built into the casing. The lid dropped off easily enough and inside there was a maze of circuits all leading to a fuse screwed into the thick metal. It had a big hex-head on it and I scraped my knuckles trying to get a wrench around it and turn it in the close quarters. With a last grate of bruised flesh and knuckle bones I twisted it free. It hung down from its wire leads, a nerve drawn from a deadly tooth.

Then it exploded with a loud bang and a cloud of black smoke.

With most unnatural calm I looked from the cloud of dispersing smoke back to the black hole in the burmedex charge. This would have turned the ship and its contents into a fine dust.

"Inskipp," I said, but my throat was dry and my voice cracked and I had to start again. "Inskipp, I get your message. You thought you were giving me my discharge. Accept instead my resignation from the Special Corps."

IX

My most overwhelming feeling was one of relief. I was on my own again and responsible to no man. I actually hummed a bit as I dropped the ship out of warpdrive long enough to slip in a course tape chosen at random from the file. There would be no chance of an intercept this way and I could cut a tape for a new course once I was well clear of the headquarters station.

A course to where? I wasn't sure yet. That would require a bit of research, though there was no doubt about what I would be doing. Looking for Angelina. At first thought it seemed a little stupid to be taking on a job the Corps had refused me. It was still their job. On second thought I realized that it had nothing to do with the Corps now. Angy had pulled a fast one on me, pinned on the prize-chump medal. That is something that you just don't do to Slippery Jim diGriz. Call it ego if you like. But ego is the only thing that keeps a man in my profession operating. Remove that and you have removed everything. I had no real idea of what I would do with her when I found her. Probably turn her over to the police, since people like her gave the business a bad name. Better to worry about cooking the fish after I had caught it.

A plan was necessary, so I prepared all the plan producing ingredients. For one terrible moment I thought there were no cigars in the ship. Then the service unit groaned and produced a box from some dark corner of the deep freeze. Not the recommended way to store cigars, but much better than having none at all. Nielsen always favored a rare brand of potent akvavit and I had no objections to drinking it. Feet up, throat lubricated and cigar smoking, I put the thinkbox to work on the project.

To begin with, I had to put myself in Angelina's place at the time of her escape. I would like to have gone back physically to the scene, but I'm not that thick. There was guaranteed to be a trigger-happy navy ship or two sitting there. However this is the kind of problem they build computers to solve, so I fed in the coordinates of the space action where it all had happened. There was no need for notes on this—those figures were scratched inside my forehead in letters of fire. The computer had a large memory store and a high speed scan. It hummed happily when I asked for the stars nearest to the given position. In under thirteen seconds it flipped through its catalogs, counted on its fingers and rang its little computation-finished bell for me. I copied off the numbers of the first dozen stars, then pressed the cancel when I saw the distances were getting too great to be relevant anymore.

Now I must think like Angelina. I had to be hunted, hurried, a murderess with twelve fresh corpses of my own manufacture piled around me. In every direction rode the enemy. She would have the same list, ground out by the computer on the stolen cruiser. Now—where to? Tension and speed. Get going somewhere. Somewhere away from here. A glance at the list and the answer seemed obvious. The two nearest stars were in the same quadrant of the sky, within fifteen degrees of each other. They were roughly equidistant. What was more important was the fact that star number three was in a different sector of the sky and twice as far away.

That was the way to go, toward the first two stars. It was the sort of decision that can be made in a hurry and still be sound. Head toward suns and worlds and the lanes where other ships could be found. The cruiser would have to be gotten rid of before any planets were approached—the faster the better since every ship in the galaxy

would be looking for it. Then meet another ship—ship X—and capture it. Abandon the cruiser and ... do what?

My tenuous line of logic was ready to snap at this point so I strengthened it with some akvavit and a fresh cigar. With my eyes half closed in reverie I tried to rebuild the flight. Capture the new ship and—head for a planet. As long as she was alone in space Angelina was in constant danger. A planetfall and a change of personality were called for. When I looked up those two target stars in the catalog the planetary choice was obvious. A barbaric sounding place named Freibur.

There were a half dozen other settled planets around the two suns, but all eliminated themselves easily. Either too lightly settled, so that a stranger would be easily spotted, or organized and integrated so well that it would be impossible to be around long without some notice being taken. Freibur shared none of these difficulties. It had been in the league for less than two hundred years, and would be in a happily chaotic state. A mixture of the old and new, pre-contact culture and post-contact civilization. The perfect place for her to slip into quietly, and lose herself until she could appear with a fresh identity.

Reaching this conclusion produced a double glow of satisfaction. This was more than a mental exercise in survival since I was now roughly in the same place Angelina had been. The incident with the scuttling charge was a strong indication of the value the Corps put on their ships—and the low value they placed on deserters. Freibur was a place that would suit me perfectly. I retired happily with a slight buzz on and a scorched mouth from the dehydrated cigars.

When I dragged myself back to consciousness it was time to drop out of warp space and plot a new course. Except there was one thing I had to do first. A lot of the little facts I knew had *not* been picked up in the Corps. One fact—normally of interest only to warpdrive technicians—concerns the curious propagation of radiation in warp space. Radio waves in particular. They just don't go anyplace. If you broadcast on one frequency you get a strong return signal on all frequencies, as if the radio waves had been squeezed out thin and bounced right back. Normally of no interest, this exotic phenomena is just the thing to find out if your ship is bugged. I put nothing beyond the Special Corps, and bugging their own ships seemed a logical precaution. A concealed radio, transmitting on a narrow band, would lead them right to me wherever I went. This I had to find out before getting near any planets.

There was a squeal and a growl from the speaker and I cursed my former employers. But before I wasted my time looking for a transmitter I ought to be sure one was there. Whatever was producing the signal seemed too weak to be picked up at any distance. Some quick work with a few sheets of shielding showed that my mysterious signal was nothing more than leaking radiation from the receiver itself. After it was shielded the ether was quiet. I enjoyed a sigh of justified satisfaction and dropped out of warp.

Once I had a course plotted the trip wasn't a long one. I took the opportunity to scrounge through the ship's equipment and put together a kit for future use. The elaborate make-up and appearance-alteration machinery begged to be used, and of course I did. Rebuilding the working-personality of Slippery Jim was a positive pleasure. As the nose plugs and cheek pads slipped into place and the dye seeped into my hair I sighed and relaxed with happiness, an old war horse getting back on the job.

Then I scowled, growled at myself in the mirror and began to remove the disguise as carefully as I had assumed it. It has always been axiomatic with me that there is no relaxation in this line of business, and anything done by rote usually leads to disaster. Inskipp knew my old working-personality only too well and they would surely be looking for me under that description as well as my normal one. The second time around I took a little more care with the disguise and built up an entirely different appearance. A simple one—with facial and hair changes—that would be easily maintained. The more elaborate a job of make-up is the more time it takes to keep it accurate. Freiburg was a big question-mark so far and I didn't want to be loaded with any extra responsibilities like this. I wanted to go in relaxed, sniff around and see if I could pick up Angelina's trail.

There were still two subjective days left in warpdrive and I put these to good use making some simple gadgetry that might come in handy. Pinhead grenades, tie-clasp pistols, ring-drills—the usual thing. I only brushed away the scraps and cleaned the shop up when the ship signaled the end of the trip.

The only city on Freiburg with a ground controlled spaceport was at Freiburbad, which was situated on the shore of an immense lake, the only sizeable body of fresh water on the planet. Looking at the sunlight glinting from it I had the sudden desire for a swim. This urge must have been the genesis of my idea to drown the stolen ship. Leave it at the bottom of a deep spot in the lake and it would always be handy if needed.

I made planetfall over a jagged mountain range and picked up not as much as a beep on the radar. Coming in over the lake after dark I detected navigation radar from the spaceport, but my ship wouldn't get too far inshore. A rainstorm—cut through with hail—shortened visibility and removed my earlier bathing desire. There was a deep underwater channel not too far from shore and I touched down above it while I put my kit together. It would be foolish to carry too much, but some of the Corps gear was too valuable to leave behind. Sealing it in a waterproof cover I strapped it to my spacesuit and opened the air lock. Rain and darkness washed over me as I struck out for the unseen shore. I imagined rather than heard the gurgle behind me as the ship sank gently to the bottom.

Swimming in a spacesuit is about as easy to manage as making love in free fall. I churned my way to shore in a state of near exhaustion. After crawling out of the suit I had a great deal of pleasure watching it burn to a cinder under the heat of three thermite bombs. I particularly enjoyed kicking the resultant hissing slag into the lake. The rain hammered down and washed all traces of the burning away. Apparently even the fierce light of the thermite had gone unobserved in the downpour. Huddling under a waterproof sheet I waited damply and miserably for dawn.

Sometime during the night I dozed off without meaning to because it was already light when I woke up. Something was very wrong, and before I could remember what had woken me the voice called again.

“Going to Freiburbad? Of course, where else is there to go? I'm going there myself. Got a boat. Old boat but a good boat. Beats walking...”

The voice went on and on, but I wasn't listening. I was cursing myself for being caught unaware by this joker with the long-playing voice. He was riding in a small boat just off shore; the thing was low in the water with bales and bundles, and the man's head stuck above the top of everything. While his jaw kept moving I had a

chance to look at him and draw my sleep-sodden wits together. He had a wild and bristly beard that stuck out in all directions, and tiny dark eyes hidden under the most decrepit hat I had ever seen. Some of my startled panic ebbed away. If this oddball wasn't a plant, the accidental meeting might be turned to my benefit.

When mattress-face stopped to drag in a long overdue breath I accepted his offer and reached for the gunwale of the boat and drew it closer. I picked up my bundle—getting my hand on my gunbutt as I did it—and jumped in. There didn't seem to be any need for caution. Zug—that was his name, I plucked it out of the flowing stream of his monologue—bent over an outboard motor clamped to the stern and coaxed it to life. It was a tired looking atomic heat-exchanger, simple but efficient. No moving parts, it simply sucked in cold lake water, heated it to a boil and shot it out through an underwater jet. Made almost no sound while running, which was how the rig had slid up without waking me.

Everything about Zug seemed normal—I still wasn't completely convinced and kept the gun close to my hand—but if it was normal I had hit a piece of luck. His cataract of words washed over me and I began to understand why. Apparently he was a hunter, bringing his pelts to market after months of solitude and silence. The sight of a human face had induced a sort of verbal diarrhea which I made no attempt to stop. He was answering a lot of questions for me.

One thing that had been a worry were my clothes. I had finally decided to wear a one-piece ship suit, done in neutral gray. You see this kind of outfit, with minor variations, on planets right across the galaxy. It had passed unnoticed by Zug, which wasn't really saying much since he was anything but a clothes fancier. He must have made his jacket himself out of the local fur. It was purplish-black and must have been very fine before the grease and twigs had been rubbed in. His pants were made of machine-woven cloth and his boots were the same as mine, of eternene plastic. If he was allowed to walk around loose in this outfit, mine would surely never be noticed.

What I could see of Zug's equipment bore out the impression gained from his clothes. The old and new mixed together. A world like Freiburg, not too long in the League, would be expected to be like that. The electro-static rifle leaning against a bundle of steel bolts for the crossbow made a typical picture. Undoubtedly the Voice of The Wilderness here could use both weapons with equal facility. I settled down on the soft bundles and enjoyed the voyage and the visual pleasures of the misty dawn, bathed continually in a flow of words.

We reached Freiburgbad before noon. Zug had more of an ambition to talk than to be talked to, and a few vague remarks of mine about going to the city satisfied him. He greatly enjoyed the food concentrates from my pack and reciprocated by producing a flask of some noxious home brew he had distilled in his mountain retreat. The taste was indescribably awful and left the mouth feeling as if it had been rasped by steel wool soaked in sulphuric acid. But the first few drinks numbed and after that we enjoyed the trip—until we tied up at a fish-smelling dock outside the city. We almost swamped the boat getting out of it, which we thought hysterically funny, and which will give you some indication of our mental state at the time. I walked into the city proper and sat in a park until my head cleared.

The old and the new pressed shoulders here, plastic fronted buildings wedged in between brick and plaster. Steel, glass, wood and stone all mixed with complete indifference. The people were the same, dressed in a strange mixture of types and styles. I took more notice of them than they did of me. A newsrobot was the only

thing that singled me out for attention. It blatted its dull offerings in my ear and waved a board with the printed headlines until I bought a paper to get rid of it. League currency was in circulation here, as well as local money, and the robot made no protest when I slipped a credit in its chest slot, though it did give me change in Freibur *gilden*—undoubtedly at a ruinous rate of exchange. At least that's the way I would have done it if I were programming the thing.

All of the news was unimportant and trivial—the advertisements were of much more interest. Looking through the big hotels I compared their offered pleasures and prices.

It was this that set me to trembling and sweating with terror. How quickly we lose the ingrained habits of a lifetime. After a month on the side of law and order I was acting like an honest man!

"You're a criminal," I muttered through clenched teeth, and spat on a NO SPITTING sign. "You hate the law and live happily without it. You are a law unto yourself, and the most honest man in the galaxy. You can't break any rules since you make them up yourself and change them whenever you see fit."

All of this was true, and I hated myself for forgetting it. That little period of honesty in the Corps was working like a blight to destroy all of my best anti-social tendencies.

"Think dirty!" I cried aloud, startling a girl who was walking by on the path. I leered to prove that she had heard correctly and she hurried quickly away. That was better. I left myself at the same time, in the opposite direction, looking for an opportunity to do bad. I had to reestablish my identity before I could even consider finding Angelina.

Opportunity was easy to find. Within ten minutes I had spotted my target. I had all the equipment I might need in my sack. What I would use for the job I stowed in my pockets and waist wallet, then checked my bag in a public locker.

Everything about the First Bank of Freibur begged to be cracked. It had three entrances, four guards and was busily crowded. Four human guards! No bank in existence would pay all those salaries if they had electronic protection. It was an effort not to hum with happiness as I stood in line for one of the *human* clerks. Fully automated banks aren't hard to rob, they just require different techniques. This mixture of man and machine was the easiest of all.

"Change a League ten-star for gilden," I said, slapping the shiny coin on the counter before him.

"Yessir," the cashier said, only glancing at the coin and feeding it into the accounting machine next to him. His fingers had already set up the amount for me in gilden, even before the *currency valid* signal blinked on. My money rattled down into the cup before me and I counted it slowly. This was done mechanically, because my mind was really on the ten credit coin now rolling and clinking down inside the machine's innards. When I was sure it had finished its trip and landed in the vault I pressed the button on my wrist transmitter.

It was beautiful, that was the only word for it. The kind of thing that leaves a warm glow lodged in the memory, that produces a twinge of happiness for years after whenever it is nudged. That little ten credit coin had taken hours to construct and every minute was worth it. I had sliced it in half, hollowed it out, loaded it with lead back to its original weight, built in a tiny radio receiver, a fuse and a charge of

burmedex, which now went off with an incredibly satisfactory explosion. A grinding thump deep in the bank's entrails was followed by a tremendous amount of clanking and banging. The rear wall—containing the vault—split open and disgorged a torrent of money and smoke. Some last effort of the expiring accounting machine gave me an unexpected dividend. The money dispensers at every cashier's station burst into frantic life. A torrent of large and small coins poured out on the startled customers who quickly mastered their surprise and began grabbing. Their moment of pleasure was brief because the same radio cue had set off the smoke and gas bombs I had thoughtfully dropped in all the wastebaskets. Unnoticed in the excitement, I threw a few more gas bombs in with the cashiers. This gas is an effective mixture of my own concoction, a sinister brew of regurgitants and lachrymatories. Its effect was instantaneous and powerful. (There were of course no children in the bank, since I don't believe in being cruel to those too young to protect themselves.) Within seconds the clients and employees found themselves unable to see, and too preoccupied to take any notice of me.

As the gas rolled towards me I lowered my head and slipped the goggles over my eyes. When I looked up I was the only person in the bank that was able to see. I was of course careful to breathe through the filter plugs in my nose, so I could enjoy the continued digestion of my last meal. My teller had vanished from sight and I did a neat dive through the opening, sliding across the counter on my stomach.

After this it was just a matter of pick and choose, there was certainly no shortage of money rolling around loose. I ignored the small stuff and went to the source, the riven vault out of which poured a golden torrent. Within two minutes I had filled the bag I had brought and was ready to leave. The smoke near the doors was thinning a bit, but a few more grenades took care of that.

Everything was working perfectly and under control, except for one fool of a guard who was making a nuisance of himself. His tiny brain realized dimly that something wrong was going on, so he was staggering in circles firing his gun. It was a wonder he hadn't hit anyone yet. I took the gun away and hit him on the head with it.

The smoke was densest near the doors, making it impossible to see out. It was just as impossible of course to see in, so no one in the street had any real idea of what had happened. They of course knew *something* was wrong; two policemen had rushed in with guns drawn ... but were now as helpless as the rest. I organized the relief of the sufferers then, and began pulling and guiding them to the door. When I had enough of a crowd collected I joined them and we all crawled out into the street together. I put the goggles in my pocket and kept my eyes closed until I had groped clear of the gas. Some worthy citizens helped me and I thanked them, tears streaming down my face from the fringes of the gas, and went my way.

That's how easy it is. That's how easy it always is if you plan ahead and don't take foolish risks. My morale was high and the blood sang in my veins. Life was deliciously crooked and worth living again. Finding Angelina's trail now would be simplicity itself. There was nothing I couldn't do.

Staying on the crest of this emotional wave, I rented a room in a spacemen's hotel near the port, cleaned up and strode forth to enjoy the pleasures of life. There were many rough-and-ready joints in the area and I made the rounds. I had a steak in one and a drink apiece in each of the others. If Angelina had come to Freiburg she would surely have passed—at least briefly—through this area. The trail would be here, I felt

that in my bones. Crooked bones once again, and sympathetic to her own lawlessness.

“Howsabout buying a girl a drink,” the tart said spiritlessly, and I shook my head no with the same lack of interest. The hostesses, pallid creatures of the night, were coming out as the evening progressed. I was getting a good share of propositions since I had taken care to look like a spaceman on leave, always a good source of revenue for these women. This one was the latest of a number who had approached me. A little better looking than most, at least better constructed. I watched her walking away with interest that bordered on admiration. Her skirt was short, tight and slashed high up on the sides. High heels lent a rotating motion to this producing a most effective result. She reached the bar and turned to survey the room, and I couldn’t help but appreciate the rest of her. Her blouse was made of thin strips of shimmering fabric, joined together only at the tops and bottoms. They separated to reveal enticing slices of creamy skin whenever she moved, and I’m sure had the desired effect on masculine libidos.

My eyes finally reached her face—a long trip since I had started the survey at her ankles—and she was quite attractive. Almost familiar....

Exactly at this instant my heart gave a grinding thud in my chest and I grew rigid in my chair. It seemed impossible—yet it had to be true.

She was Angelina.

X

Her hair had been bleached and there were some simple and obvious changes in her features. They had been altered just enough so it would be impossible to identify her from a photograph or a description. She could never be recognized.

Except by me, that is. I had seen her in the stolen battleship and I had talked to her. And the nice part was I could identify her and she would have no idea of who I was. She had seen me only briefly—in a spacesuit with a tinted faceplate—and I'm sure had plenty of other things to think about at the time.

This was the climax of the most successful day of my life. The fetid air of the dive was like wine in my nostrils. I relaxed and savored every last drop of irony in the situation. You had to give the girl credit, though. She had adopted a perfect cover. I myself had never imagined she would stay here, and I thought I had weighed all of the possibilities. Because she had taken a good bit of the stolen cash with her, I had never considered she would be living like a penniless tramp. The girl had guts, you had to give her credit. She had adopted an almost perfect disguise and blended neatly into the background. If only she wasn't so damned kill-happy—what a team we would make!

My heart gave the second grinding thump of the evening when I realized the dead-end trail down which my emotions were leading me. Angelina was disaster to anyone she came near. Inside that lovely head squatted a highly intelligent but strangely warped brain. For my own sake I would be better off thinking about the corpses she had piled up, not about her figure. There was only one thing to be done. Get her away from here and turn her over to the Corps. I didn't even consider how I felt about the Corps—or how they felt about me. This was an entirely different affair that had to be done neatly and with dispatch before I changed my mind.

I joined her at the bar and ordered two double shots of the local battery acid. Being careful, I deepened my voice and changed my accent and manner of speaking. Angelina had heard enough of my voice to identify it easily—that was the one thing I had to be aware of.

"Drink up, doll," I said, raising my drink and leering at her. "Then we go up to your place. You got a place don't you?"

"I gotta place, you gotta League ten-spot in hard change?"

"Of course," I grumbled, feigning insult. "You think I'm buying this bilge-juice on the arm?"

"I ain't no cafeteria pay-on-your-way-out," she said with a bored lack of interest that was magnificent. "Pay now and then we go."

When I flipped the ten credits her way she speared it neatly out of the air, weighed it, bit it, and vanished it inside her belt. I looked on with frank admiration, which she would mistake for carnal interest, but was in reality appreciation of the faultless manner with which she played her role. Only when she turned away did I make myself remember that this was business not pleasure, and I had a stern duty to perform. My resolution was wavering and I screwed it tight again with a memory of corpses floating in space. Draining my glass I followed her marvelous rotation out of the bar and down a noisome alley.

The dark decrepitude of the narrow passage jarred my reflexes awake. Angelina played her part well, but I doubted if she bedded down with all the space tramps who hit this port. There was a good chance that she had a confederate around who had a strong right arm with a heavy object clutched tightly in his hand. Or perhaps I'm naturally suspicious. My hand was on the gun in my pocket but I didn't need to use it. We treaded across another street and turned into a hallway. She went first and we didn't talk. No one came near us or even bothered to notice us. When she unlocked her room I relaxed a bit. It was small and tawdry, but offered no possible hiding place for an accomplice. Angelina went straight to the bed and I checked the door to see if it really was locked. It was.

When I turned around she was pointing a .75 caliber recoilless automatic at me, so big and ugly that she had to hold it in both tiny hands.

"What the hell is the racket?" I blustered, fighting back the sick sensation that I had missed an important clue someplace along the line. My hand was still on the gun in my pocket but trying to draw it would be instant suicide.

"I'm going to kill you without ever even knowing your name," she said sweetly, with a cute smile that showed even white teeth. "But you have this coming for ruining my battleship operation."

Still she didn't fire, but her grin widened until it was almost a laugh. She was enjoying the uncontrolled expressions on my face as I recognized the fact that I had been out-thought all the way along the line. That the trapper was the trappee. That she had me exactly precisely where she wanted me and there wasn't a single bloody damn thing I could do about it.

Angelina finally had to laugh out loud, a laugh clear and charming as a silver bell, as she watched me reach these sickening conclusions one after another. She was an artist to her fingertips and waited just long enough for me to understand everything. Then, at the exact and ultimate moment of my maximum realization and despair she pulled the trigger.

Not once, but over and over again.

Four tearing, thundering bullets of pain directly into my heart. And a final slug directly between my eyes.

XI

It wasn't really consciousness, but a sort of ruddy, pain-filled blur. A gut-gripping nausea fought with the pain, but the pain won easily. Part of the trouble was that my eyes were closed, yet opening them was incredibly difficult. I finally managed it and could make out a face swimming in a blur above me.

"What happened?" the blur asked.

"I was going to ask you the same thing ..." I said, and stopped, surprised at how weak and bubbly my voice was. Something brushed across my lips and I saw a red-stained pad as it went away.

After I blinked some sight back into my eyes, blur-face turned out to be a youngish man dressed in white. A doctor I suppose, and I was aware of motion; we must be driving in an ambulance.

"Who shot you?" the doctor asked. "Someone reported the shots and you'll be pleased to know we got there just in the old nick of time. You've lost a lot of blood—some of which I've replaced—have multiple fractures of the radius and ulna, an extensive bullet wound in your forearm, a further wound in your right temple, possible fracture of the skull, extremely probable fractures in your ribs and the possibility of internal injuries. Someone got a grudge against you? Who?"

Who? My darling Angelina, that's who. Temptress, sorceress, murderess, that's who tried to kill me. I remembered now. The wide black muzzle of the gun looking big enough to park a spaceship in. The fire blasting out of it, the slugs hammering into me, and the pain as my expensive, guaranteed, bulletproof underwear soaked up the impact of the bullets, spreading it across the entire front of my body. I remembered the hope that this would satisfy her and the despair of hope as the muzzle of that reeking gun lifted to my face.

I remembered the last instant of regret as I put my arms before my face and threw myself sideways in a vain attempt at escape.

The funny thing is that escape attempt had worked. The bullet that had smashed my forearm must have been deflected enough by the bone to carom off my skull, instead of catching it point blank and drilling on through. All this had produced satisfactory quantities of blood and an immobile body on the floor. That had caused Angelina's mistake, her only one. The boom of the gun in that tiny room, my apparent corpse, the blood, it must have all rattled the female side of her, at least a bit. She had to leave fast before the shots were investigated and she had not taken that extra bit of time to make sure.

"Lie down," the doctor said. "I'll give you an injection that will knock you out for a week if you don't lie down!"

Only when he said this did I realize I was half sitting up in the stretcher and chuckling a particularly dirty laugh. I let myself be pushed down easily, since my chest was drenched in pain whenever I moved.

Right at that moment my mind began ticking over plans for making the most of the situation. Ignoring the pain as well as I could I looked around the ambulance, looking

for a way to capitalize on the bit of luck that had kept me still alive while she thought I was dead.

We pulled up at the hospital then, and there was nothing much I could do in the ambulance except steal the stylus and official forms from the rack above my head. My right arm was still good, though it hurt like fire whenever I moved. A robot snapped the wheels down on my stretcher, latched onto it and wheeled it inside. As it went by the doctor he slipped some papers into a holder near my head and waved good-bye to me. I gave him back a gallant smile as I trundled into the butcher shop.

As soon as he was out of sight I pulled out the papers and scanned them quickly. Here lay my opportunity if I had enough time to grab it. There was the doctor's report—in quadruplicate. Until these forms were fed into the machinery I didn't exist. I was in a statistical limbo out of which I would be born into the hospital. Stillborn if I had my way. I pushed my pillow off onto the corridor floor and the robot stopped. He paid no attention to my writing and didn't seem to mind stopping two more times to rescue the pillow, giving me time to finish my forgery.

This Doctor Mcvbkzl—at least that's what his signature reads like—had a lot to learn about signing papers. He had left acres of clear space between the last line of the report and his signature. I filled this with a very passable imitation of his handwriting. *Massive internal hemorrhage, shock ...* I wrote, *died en route*. This sounded official enough. I quickly added *All attempts resuscitation failed*. I had a moment of doubt about spelling this jaw breaker, but since Dr. Mcvbkzl thought there were two P's in *multiple* he could be expected to muffle this one too. This last line made sure there wouldn't be any hanky-panky with needles and electric prods to jazz some life back into the corpse. We turned out of the corridor just as I slipped the forms back into their slot and lay back trying to look dead.

"Here's a D.O.A., Svend," someone called out, rustling the papers behind my head. I heard the robot rolling away, untroubled by the fact that his writing, pillow-shedding patient was suddenly dead. This lack of curiosity is what I like about robots. I tried to think dead thoughts and hoped the right expression was showing on my face. Something jerked at my left foot and my boot and sock were pulled off. A hand grabbed my foot.

"How tragic," this sympathetic soul said, "he's still warm. Maybe we should put him on the table and get the revival team down." What a nosy, mealy-mouthed, interfering sod he was.

"Nah," the voice of a wiser and cooler head said from across the room. "They tried the works in the ambulance. Slide him in the box."

A terrifying pain lanced through my foot and I almost gave the whole show away. Only the fiercest control enabled me to lie unmoving while this clown grimly tightened the wire around my big toe. There was a tag hanging from the wire and I heartily wished the same tag was hung from his ear secured by the same throttling wire. Pain from the toe washed up and joined the ache in my chest, head and arm, and I fought for corpselike rigidity as the stretcher trundled along.

Somewhere behind me a heavy door opened and a wave of frigid air struck my skin. I allowed myself a quick look through my lashes. If the corpses in this chop shop were stashed into individual freezers I was about to be suddenly restored to life. I could think of a lot more pleasant ways of dying than in an ice box with the door handle on the outside. Lady Luck was still galloping along at my shoulder because my toe-

amputator was dragging me, stretcher and all, into a good-sized room. There were slabs on all sides and a number of dearly departed had already arrived before me.

With no attempt at gentleness I was slid onto a freezing surface. Footsteps went away from me across the room, the door closed heavily and the lights went out.

My morale hit bottom at this moment. I had been through a lot for one day, and was thoroughly battered, bruised, contused and concussed. Being locked in a black room full of corpses had an unusually depressing effect on me. In spite of the pain in my chest and the tag trailing from my toe, I managed to slide off the slab and hobble to the door. Panic grew as I lost my direction, easing off only when I walked square into the wall. My fingers found a switch and the lights came back on. And of course my moral fiber stiffened at the same moment.

The door was perfectly designed, I couldn't have done better myself, with no window and a handle on the inside. There was even a bolt so that it could be locked from this side, though for what hideous reason I couldn't possibly imagine. It gave me some needed privacy though, so I slipped it into place.

Although the room was full, no one was paying any attention to me. The first thing I did was unwind the wire and massage some life back into my numb toe. On the yellow tag were the large black letters D.O.A. and a handwritten number, the same one that had been on the form I had altered. This was too good an opportunity to miss. I took the tag off the toe of the most badly battered male corpse and substituted mine. His tag I pocketed, then spent a merry few minutes changing around all the other tags. During this process I took a right shoe from the corpse with the biggest feet and jammed my frozen left foot into it. All the tags were hung from the left big toe and I loudly cursed such needless precision. My chest was bare where my shipsuit and bulletproof cover had been cut away. One of my silent friends had a warm shirt he didn't need, so I borrowed that too.

Don't think for a second that all this was easy. I was staggering and mumbling to myself while I did it. When it was finished I slapped off the light and cracked the door of the freezer. The air from the hall felt like a furnace. There wasn't a soul in sight so I closed the vault and staggered over to the nearest door. It was to a storeroom and the only thing there that I could use was a chair. I sat in this as long as I dared, then went looking again. The next door was locked but the third one opened to a dark room where I could hear someone breathing evenly in his sleep. This was more like it.

Whoever this sacktime artist was, he surely knew his sleeping trade. I rifled the room and fumbled with the clothes I found and put them on clumsily—yet he never heard a sound. Which was probably the best thing for him because I was in a skull-fracturing humor. The novelty of this little affair had worn off and all I could think about was the pain. There was a hat too, so I put this on and checked out. I saw people at a distance, but no one was watching when I pushed open an emergency exit and found myself back on the rain-drenched streets of Freiburg.

XII

That night and the next few days are hazy in the memory for obvious reasons. It was a risk to go back to my room, but a calculated one. The chances were good that Angelina didn't know of its existence or, even if she had found out, that she wouldn't have done anything about it. I was dead and she had no further interest in me. This appeared to be true, because I wasn't bothered after I was in the room. I had the management send up some food and at least two bottles of liquor a day so it would look like I was on an extended and solitary bender. The rotgut went down the drain and I picked a bit at the food while my body slowly recovered. I kept my aching flesh drenched in antibiotics and loaded with pain-killers, and counted myself lucky.

On the third morning I felt weak but almost human. My arm in the cast throbbed when I moved it, the black and blue marks on my chest were turning gorgeous shades of violet and gold, but my headache was almost gone. It was time to plan for the future. I sipped some of the liquor I had been using to flush out the plumbing and called down for the newspapers of the past three days. The ancient delivery tube wheezed and disgorged them onto the table. Going through them carefully, I was pleased to discover that my plan had worked much better than should have been expected.

The day after my murder there had been items in every paper about it, grubbed from the hospital records by the slothful newshounds who hadn't even bothered to glance at the corpse. That was all. Nothing later about Big Hospital Scandal in Missing Corpse or Suit Brought Because That's Not Uncle Frim In The Coffin. If my jiggery-pokery in the frozen meat locker had been uncovered, it was being kept a hospital family secret and heads were rolling in private.

Angelina, my sharpshooting sweetheart, must then think of me as securely dead, a victim of her own murderous trigger finger. Nothing could be better. As soon as I was able to I would be getting back on her trail again, the job of tracking her made immensely simpler by her believing me to be a whisp of greasy smoke in the local crematorium. There was plenty of time now to plan this thing and plan it right. No more funny business about who was hunting whom. I was going to get as much pleasure out of arresting Angelina as she had derived from blasting away at me with her portable artillery.

It was a humiliating but true fact that she had out-maneuvered me all the way down the line. She had stolen the battleship from under my nose, torn a wide swath through galactic shipping, then escaped neatly right under my gun. What made the situation most embarrassing was that she had set a trap for me—when I thought I was hunting her. Hindsight is a great revealer of obviousities and this one was painfully clear now. While escaping from the captured battleship she had not been hysterical in the slightest. That role had been feigned. She had been studying me, every bit of my face that could be seen, every intonation of my voice. Hatred had seared my picture in her memory, and while escaping she must have considered constantly how I would be thinking when I followed her. At the safest and least obvious spot in her flight she had stopped—and waited. Knowing I would come and knowing that she would be more prepared for the encounter than I was. This was all past history. Now it was my turn to deal the cards.

All kinds of schemes and plans trotted through my head to be weighed and sampled. Top priority—before anything else was attempted—would be a complete physical change for me. This would be necessary if I wanted to catch up with Angelina. It was also required if I were to stay out of the long reach of the Corps. The fact had not been mentioned during my training, but I was fairly sure the only way one left the Special Corps was feet first. Though I was physically down and out there was nothing wrong with the old think box and I put it to use. Facts were needed, and I gave a small endowment to the city library in the form of rental fees. Fortunately there were filmcopies of all the local newspapers available, going back for years. I made the acquaintance of an extremely yellowish journal endearingly called “HOT NEWS!!” *Hot News!!* aimed at a popular readership—with a vocabulary I estimated at approximately three hundred words—who relished violence in its multiform aspects. Most of the time these were just copter accidents and such, with full color photos of course. But very often there were juicy muggings, sluggings and such which proved the quieting hand of galactic civilization still hadn’t throttled Freiburg completely. In among these exaggerated tales of violence lay the murky crime I was searching for.

Mankind has always been capricious in its lawmaking, inventing such intriguingly different terms as manslaughter, justified homicide and such, as if dead wasn’t dead. Though fashions in both crime and sentencing come and go, there is one crime that will always bring universal detestation. That is the crime of being a bungling doctor. I have heard tell that certain savage tribes used to slaughter the physician if his patient died, a system that is not without merit. This singleminded loathing of the butchering quack is understandable. When ill, we deliver ourselves completely into the doctor’s hands. We give a complete stranger the opportunity to toy with that which we value most. If this trust is violated there is naturally a hotness of temper among the witnesses or survivors.

Ordinary-citizen Vulff Sifternitz had formerly been the Highly Esteemed Doctor Sifternitz. *Hot News!!* explained in overly lavish detail how he had mixed the life of Playboy and Surgeon until finally the knife in his twitching fingers had cut *that* instead of *this* and the life of a prominent politician had been shortened by a number of no doubt profitable years. We must give Vulff credit for the fact that he had made an attempt to sober up before going to work, so that it was D.T.’s not drunkenness that caused the fatal twitch. His license was removed and he must have been fined most of his savings since there were later references to his having been involved in more sordid medical affairs. Life had treated Vulff hard and dirty; he was just the man I was looking for. On my first rubber-legged trip out of my room I took the liberty of paying him a professional call.

To a person of my abilities tracking down a pseudo-legal stranger in a foreign city on a far planet presents no problems. Just a matter of technique and I am rich in technique. When I hammered on the stained wooden door in the least-wholesome section of town I was ready to take the first step in my new plan.

“I have some business for you, Vulff,” I told the bleary-eyed stewie who opened the door.

“Get the hell lost,” he said and tried to close the door in my face. My carefully placed shoe prevented this and it took almost no effort at all to push in past him.

“I don’t do any medical work,” he mumbled, looking at my bandaged arm. “Not for police stoolies I don’t, so get the hell lost.”

“Your conversation is both dull and repetitious,” I told him, because it was. “I am here to offer you a strictly legitimate business deal with value given for money received. The mere fact that it happens to be illegal should bother neither of us. Least of all you.” I ignored his mumbled protests and looked into the next room.

“According to information of great reliability you live here in unmarried bliss with a girl named Zina. What I have to say is not for her undoubtedly shell-like ears. Where is she?”

“Out!” he shouted, “And you too, out!” He clutched a tall bottle by the neck and raised it threateningly.

“Would you like that?” I asked and dropped a thick wad of fresh bank notes on the table. “And that—and that—” I followed with two more bundles. The bottle slipped from his loose fingers and fell to the floor while his eyes bulged out further and further as if they were on pistons. I added a few more bundles to the pile until I had his undivided attention.

It really didn’t take much discussion. Once he had assured himself that I really meant to go through with the proposition it was just a matter of settling the details. The money had an instantly sobering effect on him, and though he had a tendency to twitch and vibrate there was nothing wrong with his reasoning powers.

“Just one last problem,” I said as I started to leave. “What about the worthy Zina—are you going to tell her about this?”

“You crazy?” Vulff asked with undisguised surprise.

“I suppose that means you won’t tell her. Since only you and I are going to know about this operation, how are you going to explain your absence or where the money has come from?”

This was even more shocking to him. “Explain? To *her*? She isn’t going to see either me or the money once I leave here. Which will be no more than ten minutes from now.”

“I see,” I said, and I did. I also thought it was rather uncharitable of him since the unlucky Zina had been supporting him by practicing a trade that most women shun. I made a mental note to see what could be done to even the score a little. In the future though. Right now I had to see to the dissolution of James Bolivar diGriz.

Sparing no expense I ordered all the surgical and operating room equipment that Vulff could suggest. Whenever possible I bought robot-controlled devices since he would be working alone. Everything was loaded in a heavy carrier rented for the occasion and we drove out to the house in the country together. Neither of us would trust the other out of his sight which was of course understandable. Financial payments were the hardest to arrange since the pure-hearted Dr. Vulff was sure I would bash in his skull and take back all of my money once the job was finished—never realizing of course that as long as there were banks I would never be broke. The safeguards were finally arranged to his satisfaction and we began our solitary and important business.

The house was lonely and self contained, perched on the cliff above a far reach of the lake. What fresh food we needed was delivered once a week, along with the mail which consisted of drugs and other medical supplies. The operations began.

Modern surgical techniques being what they are there was of course no pain or shock. I was confined to bed and at times was loaded with so much sedation that

days passed in a dreamy fog. Between two periods of radical surgery I took the precaution of seeing that a sleeping pill was included in Vulff's evening drink. This drink was of course non-alcoholic since his traveling this entire course mounted on the water wagon was one of the conditions of our agreement. Whenever he found it difficult I restored his resolution with a little more money. All this continence had his nerves on edge and I thought he would appreciate a good night's sleep. I also wanted to do a little investigating. When I was sure he was deeply under I picked the lock of his door and searched his room.

I suppose the gun was there as a matter of insurance, but you can never tell with these nervous types. My days of being a target were over if I had anything to say about it. The gun was a pocket model of a recoilless .50, neat and deadly. The mechanism worked fine and the cartridges still held all their deadly power, but there would be some difficulty in shooting the thing after I filed off the end of the firing pin.

Finding the camera was no shock since I have very little faith left in the basic wholesomeness of mankind. That I was his benefactor and financier wasn't enough for Vulff. He was lining up some blackmail just in case. There was plenty of exposed film, no doubt filled with studies of my unconscious face Before and After. I put all the film, including the unexposed rolls, under the x-ray machine for a nice long treatment and that settled that.

Vulff did a good job in the times when he wasn't moaning about the absence of spirituous beverages or nubile females. Bending and shortening my femurs altered my height and walk. Hands, face, skull, ears—all of these were changed permanently to build a new individual. Skillful use of the correct hormones caused a change in the pigment cells, darkening the natural color of my skin and hair, even altering the hair pattern itself. The last thing done, when Vulff's skill was at its peak, was a delicate touch on my vocal cords that deepened and roughened my speech.

When it was all finished Slippery Jim diGriz was dead and Hans Schmidt was born. Not a very inspired name I admit, but it was just designed to cover the period before I shed Vulff and began my important enterprise.

"Very good, very good indeed," I said, looking into the mirror and watching my fingers press a stranger's face.

"God, I could use a drink," Vulff gasped behind me, sitting on his already-packed bags. He had been hitting the medical alcohol the last few days, until I had spiked it with my favorite regurgitant, and he was nervously anxious to get back to some heavy drinking. "Give me the balance of the money that's due and let's get out of here!"

"Patience, doctor," I murmured and slipped him the packet of bills. He broke the bank wrapper and began to count them with quick, caressing touches of his fingers. "Waste of time doing that," I told him, but he kept right on. "I've taken the liberty of writing 'STOLEN' on each bill, with ink that will fluoresce when the bank puts it under the ultraviolet."

This stopped the counting all right, and drained him white at the same instant. I ought to warn him about the old ticker, that's the way he would pop off if he didn't watch out.

"What do you mean, stolen?" he choked after a bit.

“Well they were, you know. All of the money I paid you with was stolen.” His face went even whiter and I was sure he would never reach fifty, not with circulation like that. “You shouldn’t let it worry you. The other stuff was all in old bills. I’ve passed a lot of it without any trouble.”

“But ... *why?*” he finally squeezed out.

“Sensible question, doctor. I’ve sent the same amount—in untampered bills, of course—to your old friend Zina. I felt you owed her that much at least, after all she has done for you. Fair is fair you know.”

He glared at me while I tossed all the machines, surgical supplies and such off the cliff. I was careful not to have my back to him when he was too close; other than this all the precautions had already been taken. When I glanced up by chance and saw that a covert smile had replaced the earlier expression, I knew it was time to reveal the rest of my arrangements.

“An air cab will be here in a few minutes; we’ll leave together. I regret to inform you that there won’t be enough time after we arrive in Freiburbad for you to seek out Zina and thrash her as planned, and get the money back.” His guilty start proved that he was really an amateur at this sort of thing. I continued, hoping he would be grateful for this complete revelation of how to do things in an efficient criminal manner. “I’ve timed everything rather carefully from here on in. Today is a bit unusual in that there are two starships leaving the port within minutes of each other. I’ve booked a ticket on one for myself—here is your ticket on the other. I’ve paid in advance for it, though I don’t expect you to thank me.” He took the ticket with all the spirited interest of an old maid picking up a dead snake. “The need for speed—if you will pardon the rhyme—is urgent. A few minutes after your ship leaves an envelope will be delivered to the police describing your part in this operation.”

Dear Doctor Vulff digested all this as we waited for the copter to arrive, and from his sickening expression I saw he could find no flaws in the arrangements. During the entire flight he huddled away from me in his chair and never said a word. Without a bon voyage or even a curse he made for his ship upon our arrival and I watched him board it. I of course merely went in the direction of mine and turned off before entering it. I had as much intention of leaving Freibur as I had of informing the police that an illegal operation had taken place. The last thing I wanted was attention. Both little lies had merely been devices to make sure that the alcoholic doctor went away and stayed away before he began his solitary journey to cirrhosis. There was no reason for me to leave, in fact every reason for me to stay.

Angelina was still on this planet, and I wanted no interference while I tracked her down.

Perhaps it was presumptuous of me to be so positive, yet I felt I knew Angelina very well by this time. Our crooked little minds rotated in many of the same cycles of dishonesty. Up to a certain point I felt I could predict her reactions with firm logic. Firstly—she would be very happy about my bloody destruction. She got the same big bang out of corpses that most girls get from new clothes. Thinking me dead would make following her that much easier. I knew she would take normal precautions against the police and other agents of the Corps. But they wouldn’t know she was on Freibur—there was nothing to connect my death with her presence. Therefore she didn’t have to run again, but could stay on this planet under a new cover and changed personality. That she would want to stay here I had very little doubt. Freibur was a planet that seemed designed for illegal operation. In my years of knocking around

the known universe I had never before come up against a piece of fruit so ripe for plucking. A heady mixture of the old and the new. In the old, caste-ridden, feudalistic Freibur a stranger would have been instantly recognized and watched. On the modern League planets computers, mechanization, robots and an ever-vigilant police force left very little room for illegal operations. It was only when these two different cultures are mixed and merged that imaginative operations became really possible.

This planet was peaceful enough; you had to give the League societics experts credit for that much. Before they brought in the first antibiotic pill or punch-card computer, they saw to it that law and order were firmly instituted. Nevertheless the opportunities were still there if you knew where to look. Angelina knew where to look and so did I.

Except—after weeks of futile investigation—I finally faced the brutal fact that we were both looking for different things. I can't deny the time was spent pleasantly since I uncovered countless opportunities for fine jobs and lucrative capers. If it hadn't been for the pressure of finding Angelina I do believe I could have had the time of my life in this crook's paradise. This pleasure was denied me because the pressure to catch up with Angelina nagged at me constantly like an aching tooth.

Finding intuition wanting I tried mechanical means. Hiring the best computer available, I fed entire libraries into its memory circuits and set it countless problems. In the course of this kilowatt-consuming business I became an expert on the economy of Freibur, but in the end was no closer to finding Angelina than I had been when I started. She had a driving urge for power and control, but I had no idea in what way it would find its outlet. There were many economic solutions I turned up for grabbing the reins of Freibur society, but investigation showed that she was involved in none of these. The King—Villem IX—seemed the obvious pressure point for actual physical control of the planet. A complete investigation of Vill, his family and close royal relatives, turned up some juicy scandal but no Angelina. I was stopped dead.

While drowning my sorrows in a bottle of distilled spirits the solution to this dilemma finally struck me. Admittedly I was sodden with drink at the time, yet the paralysis of my neural axons was undoubtedly the source of the idea. Any man that says he thinks better drunk than sober is a fool. But this was a different case altogether. I was feeling, not thinking, and my anger at her escape cracked the lid off my more civilized impulses. I choked a pillow to death imagining it was her neck and finally shouted, "Crazy, crazy, that's her trouble, all the way around the bend and dotty as polka-dots!" When I fell onto the bed everything swooped around and around in sickening circles and I mumbled, "Just plain crazy. I would have to be crazy myself to figure out which way she will jump next." With this my eyes closed and I fell asleep. While the words swam down through the alcohol-saturated layers until they reached a deeper level where a spark of rationality still dwelled.

When they hit bottom I was wide awake and sitting up in bed, struck dumb by the ghastly truth. It would require all the conviction I had—and a little more—to do it.

I would have to follow her down the path of insanity if I wanted to find her.

XIII

In the cold light of morning the idea didn't look any more attractive—or any less true. I could do it, or not do it, as I chose. There could be no doubting the wild tinge of insanity that colored Angelina's life. Every one of our contacts had been marked by a ruthless indifference to human life. She killed with coldness or with pleasure—as when she had shot me—but always with total disregard for people. I doubt if even she had any idea of how many murders she had committed in her lifetime. By her standards I was a rank amateur. I hadn't killed more than—that kind of violence was rarely necessary in my type of operation—surely no more than ... none?

Well, well—old chicken-hearted revealed at last. Rough and tough diGriz the Killer who never killed! It was nothing to be ashamed of, quite the opposite in fact. I placed a value on human life, the one unchanging value in existence. Angelina valued herself and her desires, and nothing else. To follow her down the twisted path of her own making I would have to place myself in the same mental state that she lived in.

This is not as difficult as it sounds—at least in theory. I have had some experience with the psychotomimetic drugs and was well aware of their potency. Centuries of research have produced drugs that can simulate any mental condition in the user. Like to be paranoid for a day? Take a pill. You too can go around the bend, friend. It is a matter of record that people have actually tried these concoctions for kicks, but *that* bored with life I don't want to be. There would have to be a lot stronger reason before I would subject my delicate gray cells to this kind of jarring around. Like finding Angelina, for instance.

About the only good thing about these pixilation producers is the accepted fact that the effects are only temporary. When the drug wears off so do the hallucinations. I hoped. Nowhere in the texts I studied did they mention a devil's brew such as the one I was concocting. It was a laborious task hunting down all of Angelina's fascinating symptoms in the textbooks and trying to fit them to an inclusive psychotic pattern. I even called in some professional help to aid in analyzing her case, not mentioning, of course, to what use I intended to put the information. In the end I had a bottle of slightly smoky liquid and a taped recording of autohypnotic suggestions to play into my ears while the shot was taking effect. All that remained was screwing my courage to the sticking-place as they say in the classics. Not really all that remained—I wanted to take some precautions first. I rented a room in a cheap hotel and left orders not to be disturbed at any time. This was the first time I had ever tried this particular type of nonsense and since I had no idea of how foggy my memory would be I left a few notes around to remind me of the job. After a half day of this kind of preparation I realized I was making excuses.

"Well it's not easy to deliberately go insane," I told my rather pale reflection in the mirror. The reflection agreed but that didn't stop either of us from rolling up our sleeves and filling large hypodermic needles with murky madness.

"Here's looking at you," I said, and slipped the needle gently in the vein and slowly pushed the plunger home.

The results were anticlimactic to say the least. Outside of a ringing in my ears and a twinge of headache that quickly passed I felt nothing. I knew better than to go out though, so I read the newspaper for a while, until I felt tired. The whole thing seemed

a little foolish and pretty much of a letdown. I went to sleep with the tape player whispering softly in my ears such ego-building epigrams as, “You are better than everyone else and you know it, and people who don’t know it had better watch out,” and “They are all fools and if you were in charge things would be different, and why *aren’t* you in charge, it’s easy enough.”

Waking up was uncomfortable because of the pain in my ears where the earphones were still plugged in, my own stupid voice droning away at me. Nothing had changed and the whole futile experiment was a waste and waste makes me angry. The earphones broke in my hands and I felt better, felt much better still when I had stamped the tape player into a tangle of rubble.

My face rasped when I ran my hand over it; I had been days without a shave. Rubbing in the dip cream I looked into the mirror over the sink and an odd fact struck me for the first time. This new face fitted me a lot better than the old one. A fault of birth or the ugliness of my parents—whom I hated deeply, the only right thing they ever did was to produce me—had given me a face that didn’t fit my personality. The new one was better, handsomer for one thing and a lot stronger. I should have thanked that fumble-finger quack Vulff for producing a masterpiece. I should have thanked him with a bullet. That would guarantee that no one would ever be able to trace me through him. It must have been a warm day and I was suffering a fever when I let him get safely away like that.

On the table was a piece of paper with a single word written on it, my own handwriting though I can’t imagine why the hell I left it there. *Angelina* it said. Angelina, how I would love to get that tender white throat between my hands and squeeze until your eyeballs popped. Hah! I had to laugh at the thought, made a funny picture indeed. Yet I shouldn’t be so flippant about it. Angelina was important. I was going to find her and nothing was going to stop me. She had made a fool of me and had tried to kill me. If anyone deserved to die it was her. It was an awful waste in some ways yet it had to be done. I shredded the note into fine pieces.

All at once the room was very oppressive and I wanted out. What made me doubly angry was the fact the key was missing. I remember taking it out, but had no idea where I had put it. The slob at the desk was slow at answering and I was tempted to tell him just what I thought of the service, but I refrained. There is only one permanent cure for these types. A spare key rattled into the basket of the pneumo and I let myself out. I needed some food and I needed some drink and most of all I needed a quiet place for some thought.

A nearby spot provided all three—after I had chased the hookers away. They were all dogs, and Angelina just playing a role had been better than this entire crowd lumped together. Angelina. She was on my mind tonight with a vengeance. The drinks warmed my gut and Angelina warmed my memory. To think that I had actually once considered turning her in or possibly killing her. What a waste! The only intelligent woman I had ever run across. And all woman—I’ll never forget the way she walked in that dress. Once she had been tamed a bit—what a team we could make! This thought was so mentally aphrodisiac that my skin burned and I drained my glass at a single swallow.

Something had to be done; I had to find her. She would never have left a ripe plum of a planet like this one. A girl with her ambition could go right to the top here, nothing could stop her. And that’s of course where she would be—eventually if not now. She must spend her life feeling damned because she was a woman, knowing she was

better than the rest of the cruds around, then proving it to herself and them over and over again. My arrival would be the biggest favor Angelina could have. I didn't have to prove myself better than the hicks on this rubeified planet—just one look did that. When Angelina hooked up with me she could stop fighting, relax and take orders. The contest would be over for all time.

While I sat there something was nagging at me, some vital fact I had to remember—yet couldn't. For a second I fumbled with the memory before I realized what it was. The injection would be wearing off soon! I had to get back to the room, quickly. There had been some fear about the danger of this business, but I realized now that was just my earlier cowardice. This stuff was no more dangerous than aspirin. And at the same time it was the galaxy's greatest pick-up. New worlds of possibilities were opening up to me, my mind was clearer and my thoughts more logical. I wasn't going back to the old muddled-head stuff. At the bar I paid the bartender, my fingers tapping impatiently while he slothfully made change for me.

"A wiseguy?" I asked, loud enough for everyone in the joint to hear. "A customer is in a hurry so that's your chance to shortchange him. This is two gilden short." I held the money out in my palm and when he bent to count it I came up quick with the hand and let him have the whole thing right in the face, bills, coins, thumb and fingers. At the same time I told him—in a low voice so no one else could hear—just what I thought of him. Freibur slang is rich in insult and I used the best on him. I could have done more but I was in a hurry to get back to the hotel room, and teaching him a lesson would take time. When I turned to go I kept an eye behind me in a mirror across the room and it's a good thing I did. He pulled a length of pipe out from under the bar and raised it over my head. Of course I stood still to give him a nice target and not throw off his aim—only stepping aside as the arm came down, just moving enough to let the pipe skin by me.

It was no trick at all to grab the arm, keep it going down, and break the bone across the edge of the bar. The screams were heart-warming to say the least, and I only wish I had the time to stay and really give him something to scream about. There was just no time left.

"You saw him viciously attack me," I told the stunned customers as I headed for the door. Rough-and-tough had slumped down and was moaning out of sight somewhere behind the bar. "I'm going to call the police now—see that he doesn't leave." Of course he had as much intention of leaving as I had of calling the law. I was out the door long before any of them had made their minds up as to just what was going on.

Of course I couldn't run and draw any attention to myself. Getting back to the hotel at a fast walk was the best I could do, but I was sweating all over from the tension. Inside the room the first thing I saw was the container on the table, with the needle wrapped in cloth beside it. My hands didn't shake, but they would have if I had let them. This was a very close thing.

Collapsed in a chair afterwards I held up the jar and saw that there was less than a millimeter of juice left. The very next thing on the agenda was the necessity of laying in a supply of the stuff. I could remember the formula clearly and would have no trouble rebuilding it. Of course there would be no drug suppliers open at this time of night, but that made things a lot easier. There is a law of history that says weapons were invented before money. In my suitcase was a recoilless .75 that could get me more of the galaxy's goods than all of the money in existence.

That was my mistake. Some nagging worry gnawed me then but I ignored it. The tension and then the relief after getting the shot had me all loosened up. On top of that was the need to hurry, the limited time I had to find what I needed and get it back to the hotel room. My thoughts were on the job and how best to do it as I unlocked the suitcase and reached for my gun lying right there on top of the clothes. At this point the thin voice in my memory was screaming inaudibly to me, but this only made me reach faster for the gun. Something was badly wrong and this was the thing that would fix it. As I grabbed the butt the memory broke through ... just a little bit too slow.

Dropping the gun I dived for the door, too late by far. Behind me I heard a pop as the sleep-gas grenade I had put under the gun let go. Even as I fell forward into darkness I wondered how I could ever have possibly done such a stupid thing as that....

XIV

Coming out of the gas, my first feeling was one of regret. It is a truism that the workings of the mind are a source of constant astonishment. The effects of my devil's brew had worn off. There was nothing wrong with my memory, now that the posthypnotic blocks I had put on it had been removed. All too vividly I could recall the details of my interlude of madness. Though I sickened at the things I had thought and done, I simultaneously felt a twinge of regret that could not be abolished. There had been terrible freedom in standing so alone that even the lives of other men meant less than nothing. Undoubtedly a warped sensation, but still a tremendously attractive one. Like taking drugs. Even while detesting the thought I felt the desire for more of the same.

In spite of my twelve hours of forced sleep I was exhausted. It took all of my energy to drag over to the bed and collapse on it. Foresight had provided a bottle of stimulating spirits and I poured a glassful. Sipping at this I tried to put my mental house in order, not a very easy task. I have read many times about the cesspool of dark desires that lies in our subconscious minds, but this was the first time I had ever had mine stirred up. It was quite revealing to examine some of the things that had floated to the surface.

My attitude towards Angelina needed a good looking at. The most important fact I had to face was the strong attraction I felt for her. Love? Put any name to it you want—I suppose love will do as well as any, though this was no throbbing adolescent passion. I wasn't blind to her faults, in fact I rather detested them now that I knew her murderously amoral existence had an echo in my own mind. But logic and convictions have very little to do with emotions. Hating this side of her didn't remove the attraction of a personality so similar to my own. I echoed my psychotic self's attitude—what a team we might have made! This was of course impossible, but that didn't stop me from wanting it. Love and hate are reputed to be very close and in my case they were certainly rubbing shoulders. And the whole confused business wasn't helped in the slightest by the fact that Angelina was so damnably attractive. I took a long drag at my drink.

Finding her should be easy now. The carelessness with which I took this for granted was a little shocking. I had gained no new information while mentally aberrant. Just a great chunk of insight into the tortured grooves that my Angelina's mind trundled along. There could be no doubt that raw power was what she desired. This couldn't be obtained through influencing the king, I saw this now. Violence was the way, a power putsch, perhaps assassination, certainly revolution and turmoil of some kind. This had been the pattern in the bad old days on Freibur when sovereignty had been the prize of battle. Any of the nobility could be crowned, and whenever the old king's grip weakened it was a cue for a power struggle that would produce the new monarch. Of course that sort of thing had stopped as soon as the societics specialists from the League worked their little tricks.

The old days were on the way back—that was clear. Angelina was going to see this world bathed in blood and death to satisfy her own ambition. She was out there now—somewhere—grooming the man for the job. One of the counts, still very important in the semi-feudal economy, was having his ego inflated and guided by a

new power behind the throne. This is the pattern Angelina had used before, and would be sure to use again. There could be no doubt.

Only one small factor was missing. Who was the man?

My dive into the depths of self-analysis had left a definitely unwholesome taste in my mouth that no amount of liquor could wash away. What I needed was a little touch of action to tone up my drooping nerve ends and accelerate my sluggish blood. Tracking down Angelina's front man would be just the charge my battery needed. Merely thinking about it helped, and it was with eagerness that I searched the newspaper for the Court News column. There was a Grand Ball just two days distant, the perfect cover for this operation.

For these two days I was kept busy on the many small tasks that put the polish of perfection on a job like this. Any boob can crash a party, in fact usually does, since that is all one seems to meet at this kind of affair. It takes a unique talent like mine to construct a cover personality that is unshakeable. Research supplied me with a homeland, a distant province poor in everything except a thick dialect that provided the base for most Freibur jokes. Because of these inherent handicaps the populace of Misteldross was noted for its pugnacity and general bull-headedness. There were minor nobility there who no one took much notice of, or kept any records about, enabling me to adopt the cover of Grav Bent Diebstall. The family name meant either bandit or tax-gatherer in the local dialect, which gives you an idea of the kind of economy they had had, as well as the source of the family title. A military tailor cut me a dress uniform and while I was being fitted I memorized great chunks of the family history to bore people with. I saw where I could be the life of any party.

Another thing I did was to send off a thick wad of money to the maimed bartender, who was now working with the handicap of having his arm in a cast. He really had short-changed me, but his suffering was entirely out of proportion to this minor crime. My anonymous gift was strictly conscience money and I felt much better after having done it.

A moonlight visit to the royal printers supplied an invitation to the party. My uniform fitted like a sausage skin, my boots gleamed enthusiastically and I was one of the first guests to arrive since the royal table had a tremendous reputation and work had increased my appetite. I crashed and clattered wonderfully when I bowed to the King—spurs and sword, they go all the way with the archaic nonsense on Freibur—and looked at him closely while he mumbled something inaudible. His eyes were glassy and unfocused and I realized there was some truth in the rumor that he always got stoned on his private bottle before coming to one of these affairs. Apparently he hated crowds and parties and much preferred to putter with his bugs—he was an amateur entomologist of no small talents. I passed on to the queen who was much more receptive. She was twenty years his junior and attractive in a handsomely inflated, bovine way. Rumor also had it that she was bored by his beetles and much preferred homo sapiens to lepidoptera. I tested this calumny by giving her hand an extra little squeeze when I held it and queeny squeezed back with an expression of great interest. I moved on to the buffet.

While I ate, the guests continued to arrive. Watching them as they entered didn't interfere with my demolishing the food or sampling all of the wines. I had finished stoking up by the time the rest were just starting, so I could circulate among them. All of the women were subjected to my very close scrutiny, and most of them enjoyed it because, if I say so myself, with my new face and the fit of the uniform I cut a mean

swath through the local types. I really wasn't expecting to run across Angelina's trail this easily, but there was always the chance. Only a few of the women even remotely resembled her, but it took only a few words each time to settle the fact that they were true-blue blue-blood and not my little interstellar killer. This task was made simpler by the fact that the Freibur beauties ran heavily towards the flesh, and Angelina was a neat and petite package. I went back to the bar.

"You have been given a Royal Command," an adenoidal voice said in my ear while fingers plucked at my sleeve. I turned and gave my best scowl to the character who still clutched the fabric.

"Let go the suit or I push your buck-toothed face the punch bowl in," I growled in my thickest Misteldrossian accent. He let go as if he had grabbed something hot and got all red and excited-looking. "That's better," I added, cutting off his next words.

"Now—who wants to see me—the King?"

"Her majesty, the Queen," he managed to squeeze out between thin lips.

"That's good. I want to see her too. Show the way." I forged a way through the crowd while my new friend clattered behind, trying to pass me. I stopped before I reached the group around Queen Helda and let him get ahead all out of breath and sweating.

"Your majesty, this is the Baron—"

"Grav not Baron," I cut in with my hideously rich accent. "Grav Bent Diebstall from a poor provincial family, cheated centuries ago of our rightful title by thieving and jealous counts." I scowled straight at my guide as if he had been in the plot and he turned the flush on again.

"I don't recognize all of your honors, Grav Bent," the Queen said in her low voice that reminded me of pastures on a misty morn. She pointed to my manly chest, to the row of decorations I had purchased from a curio dealer just that morning.

"Galactic medals, your majesty. A younger son of the provincial nobility, his family impoverished by the greedy and corrupt, can find little opportunity to advance himself here on Freibur. That is why I took service offplanet and served for the best years of my youth in the Stellar Guard. These are for commonplace happenings such as battles, invasions and space boardings. But *this* is the one I can really take pride in—" I fingered through the jingling hardware until I came to an unsightly thing, all comets, novae and sparkling lights. "This is the Stellar Star, the most prized award in the Guards." I took it in my hand and gave it a long look. In fact I think it *was* a Guard decoration, given out for reenlisting or five years of K.P. or some such.

"It's beautiful," the Queen said. Her taste in medals was no better than her taste in clothes, but what can you expect on these backward planets.

"It is that," I agreed. "I don't enjoy describing the medal's history, but if it is a royal command..." It was, and given very coyly indeed. I lied about my exploits for awhile and kept them all interested. There would be plenty of talk about me in the morning and I hoped some of it would trickle down to Angelina's ears, wherever she was hiding. Thinking of her took the edge off my fun, and I managed to excuse myself and go back to the bar.

I spent the rest of the evening talking up the wonders of my imaginary history to everyone I could nail. Most of them seemed to enjoy it, since the court was normally short on laughs. The only one who didn't seem to be getting a charge out of it was myself. Though the plan had seemed good at first, the more I became involved with it

the slower it appeared. I might flutter around the fringe of these fantastically dull court circles for months without finding a lead to Angelina. The process had to be accelerated. There was one idea drifting in and out of my head, but it bordered on madness. If it misfired I would be either dead or barred from these noble circles forever. This last was a fate I could easily stand—but it wouldn't help me find my lovely quarry. However—if the plan did work it would shortcut all the other nonsense. I flipped a coin to decide, and of course won since I had palmed the coin before the toss. It was going to be action.

Before coming I had pocketed a few items that might come in handy during the course of the evening. One of them was a sure-fire introduction to the King in case I felt that getting nearer to him might be of some importance. I slipped this into an outer pocket, filled the largest glass I could find with sweet wine, and trundled through the cavernous rooms in search of my prey.

If King Vilelm had been crocked when he arrived, he was now almost paralyzed. He must have had a steel bar sewn into the back of his white uniform jacket because I swear his own spine shouldn't have held him up. But he was still drinking and swaying back and forth, his head bobbing as though it were loosely attached. He had a crowd of old boys around him and they must have been swapping off-color stories because they gave me varying degrees of get-lost looks when I trundled up and snapped to attention. I was bigger than most of them and must have made a nice blob of color because I caught Villy's eye and the head slowly slewed around in my direction. One of his octogenarian cronies had met me earlier in the evening and was forced to make the introduction.

"A very great pleasure to meet your majesty," I droned with a bit of a drunken blur to my voice. Not that the King noticed, but some of the others did and scowled. "I am by way of being a bit of an entomologist myself, if you will pardon the expression, hoping to follow in your royal footsteps. I am keen on this and feel that greater attention should be paid on Freibur, more respect given I should say, and more opportunity taken to utilize the advantageous aspects of the forminifera, lepidoptera and all the others. Heraldry, for instance, the flags might utilize the more visual aspects of insects...."

I babbled on like this for a while, the crowd getting impatient with the unwanted interruption. The King—who wasn't getting in more than one word in ten—got tired of nodding after a while and his attention began to wander. My voice thickened and blurred and I could see them wondering how to get rid of the drunk. When the first tentative hand reached out for my elbow I played my trump card.

"Because of your majesty's interest," I said, fumbling in my pocket, "I carefully kept this specimen, carrying it across countless light years to reach its logical resting place, your highness's collection." Pulling out the flat plastic case, I held it under his nose. With an effort he blinked his watery eyes back into focus and let out a little gasp. The others crowded around and I gave them a few seconds to enjoy the thing.

Well it was a beautiful bug, I can't deny that. However it had not traveled across countless light-years because I had just made it myself that morning. Most of the parts were assembled from other insects, with a few pieces of plastic thrown in where nature had let me down. Its body was as long as my hand, and it had three sets of wings, each set in a different color. There were a lot of legs underneath, pretty mismatched I'm afraid since they came from a dozen other insects and a lot of them got mashed or misplaced during construction. Some other nice touches like a

massive stinger, three eyes, a corkscrew tail and such-like were not lost on my rapt audience. I had had the foresight to make the case of tinted plastic which blurred the contents nicely and hinted at rather than revealed them.

“But you must see it more closely, your highness,” I said, snapping open the case while both of us swayed back and forth. This was a difficult juggling act as I had to hold the case in the same hand as my wine glass, leaving my other hand free to grasp the monstrosity. I plucked it out between thumb and forefinger and the king leaned close, the drink in his own glass slopping back and forth in his eagerness. I squeezed just a bit with my thumb and the bug popped forward in lively fashion and dived into the King’s glass.

“Save it! Save it!” I cried. “A valuable specimen!” I plunged my fingers in after it and chased it around and around. Some of the drink slopped out staining Villelm’s gilt-edged cuff. A gasp went up and angry voices sounded. Someone pulled hard at my shoulder.

“Leave off you title-stealing clots!” I shouted, and pulled away roughly from the grasp. The drowned insect flew out of my fingers and landed on the King’s chest, from where it fell slowly to the floor, shedding wings, legs and other parts on the way. I must have used a very inferior glue. When I leaped to grab the dropping corpse the forgotten drink in my other hand splashed red and sticky onto the King’s jacket. A howl of anger went up from the crowd.

I’ll say this much for the King, he took it well. Stood there swaying like a tree in the storm, but offering no protest outside of mumbling, “I say ... I say ...” a few times. Not even when I rubbed the wine in with my handkerchief, treading on his toes by accident as the crowd behind pushed too close. One of them pulled hard at my arm, then let go when I shrugged. My arm struck against Villelm IX’s noble chest and his royal upper plate popped out on the floor to add to the fun.

Fun it was too, once the old boys got cleared away. The younger nobility leaped to their majesty’s defense and I showed them a thing or two about mix-it-up fighting that I had learned on a number of planets. They made up in energy what they lacked in technique and we had a really good go-around. Women screamed, strong men cursed and the King was half carried out of the fracas. After that things got dirty and I did too. I couldn’t blame them, but that didn’t stop me from giving just as good as I received.

My last memory is of a number of them holding me while another one hit me. I got him in the face with the shoe on my free leg, but they grabbed that too and his replacement turned off all the lights.

XV

Uncivilized as my behavior had been, the jailers persisted in treating me in a most civilized fashion. I grumbled about this and made their job as hard as possible. I hadn't voluntarily entered prison in order to win a popularity contest. Pulling all those gags on the poor old King had been a risk. *Lèse-majesté* is the sort of crime that is usually punishable by death. Happily the civilizing influences of the League had penetrated darkest Freibur, and the locals now fell over backwards to show me how law-abiding they were. I would have none of it. When they brought me a meal I ate it, then destroyed the dishes to show my contempt for this unlawful detention.

This was the bait. The bruises I had suffered would be a small enough price to pay if my attempt at publicity paid off in the right quarters. Without a doubt I was being discussed. A figure of shame, a traitor to my class. A violent man in a peaceful world, and a pugnacious, combative uncompromising one at that. In short I was all the things a good Freiburian detested, and the sort of a man Angelina should have a great deal of interest in.

In spite of its recent bloody past, Freibur was woefully short of roughneck manpower. Not at the very lowest levels of course; the portside drinkeries were stuffed with musclebound apes with pinhead brains. Angelina would be able to recruit all of those she needed. But strongarm squads alone wouldn't win her a victory. She needed allies and aid from the nobility, and from what I had seen this sort of talent was greatly lacking. In my indirect manner I had displayed all the traits she would be interested in, doing it in such a way that she wouldn't know the show had been arranged only for her. The trap was open, all she had to do was step into it.

Metal boomed as the turnkey rapped on the door. "You have visitors, Grav Diebstall," he said, opening the inner grill.

"Tell them to go to hell!" I shouted. "There's no one on this poxy planet I want to see."

Paying no attention to my request, he bowed in the governor of the prison and a pair of ancient types wearing black clothes and severe looks. I did the best I could to ignore them. They waited grimly until the guard had gone, then the skinniest opened a folder he was carrying and slowly drew out a sheet of paper with his fingertips.

"I will not sign a suicide note so you can butcher me in my sleep," I snarled at him. This rattled him a bit, but he tried to ignore it.

"That is an unfair suggestion," he intoned solemnly. "I am the Royal Attorney and would never condone such an action." All three of them nodded together as though they were pulled by one string, and the effect was so compulsive that I almost nodded myself.

"I will not commit suicide voluntarily," I said harshly to break the spell of agreement. "That is the last word that will be said on the subject."

The Royal Attorney had been around the courts long enough not to be thrown off his mark by this kind of obliquity. He coughed, rattled the paper, and got back to basics.

"There are a number of crimes you could be charged with young man," he droned, with an intensely gloomy expression draped on his face. I yawned, unimpressed. "I

hope this will not have to be done,” he went on, “since it would only cause harm to all concerned. The King himself does not wish to see this happen, and in fact has pressed upon me his earnest desire to have this affair ended quietly now. His desire for peace has prevailed upon us all, and I am here now to put his wish into action. If you will sign this apology, you will be placed aboard a starship leaving tonight. The matter will be ended.”

“Trying to get rid of me to cover up your drunken brawls at the palace, hey?” I sneered. The Attorney’s face purpled but he controlled his temper with a magnificent effort. If they threw me off the planet now everything was wasted.

“You are being insulting, sir!” he snorted. “You are not without blame in this matter, remember. I heartily recommend that you accept the King’s leniency in this tragic affair and sign the apology.” He handed the paper to me and I tore it to pieces.

“Apologize? Never!” I shouted at them. “I was merely defending my honor against your drunken louts and larcenous nobility, all descended from thieves who stole the titles rightly belonging to my family!”

They left then, and the prison governor was the only one young and sturdy enough for me to help on the way with the toe of my shoe in the appropriate spot. Everything was as it should be. The door clanged shut behind them—on a rebellious, cantankerous, belligerent son of the Freibur soil. I had arranged things perfectly to bring me to the attention of Angelina. But unless she became interested in me soon I stood a good chance of spending the rest of my days behind these grim walls.

Waiting has always been bad for my nerves. I am a thinker during moments of peace, but a man of action most of the time. It is one thing to prepare a plan and leap boldly into it. It is another thing altogether to sit around a grubby prison cell wondering if the plan has worked or if there is a weak link in the chain of logic.

Should I crack out of this pokey? That shouldn’t be hard to do, but it had better be saved for a last resort. Once out I would have to stay undercover and there would be no chance of her contacting me. That was why I was gnawing my way through all my fingernails. The next move was up to Angelina; all I could do was wait. I only hoped that she would gather the right conclusions from all the violent evidence I had supplied.

After a week I was stir-crazy. The Royal Attorney never came back and there was no talk of a trial or sentencing. I had presented them with an annoying problem, and they must have been scratching their heads feebly over it and hoping I would go away. I almost did. Getting out of this backwoods jail would have been simplicity itself. But I was waiting for a message from my deadly love. I toyed with the possibilities of the things she might do. Perhaps arrange pressure through the court to have me freed? Or smuggle in a file and a note to see if I could break out on my own? This second possibility appealed to me most and I shredded my bread every time it arrived to see if anything had been baked into it. There was nothing.

On the eighth day Angelina made her play, in the most forthright manner of her own. It was night, but something unaccustomed woke me up. Listening produced no answers, so I slipped over to the barred opening in the door and saw a most attractive sight at the end of the hall. The night guard was sprawled on the floor and a burly masked figure dressed completely in black stood over him with a cosh in one meaty hand. Another stranger, dressed like the first, came up and they dragged the guard further along the hall towards me. One of them rummaged in his waist wallet

and produced a scrap of red cloth that he put between the guard's limp fingers. Then they turned towards my cell and I moved back out of sight, climbing noiselessly into bed.

A key grated in the lock and the lights came on. I sat up blinking, giving a fine imitation of a man waking up.

"Who's there? What do you want?" I asked.

"Up quickly, and get dressed, Diebstall. You're getting out of here." This was the first thug I had seen, the black-jack still hanging from his hand. I sagged my jaw a bit, then leaped out of bed with my back to the wall.

"Assassins!" I hissed. "So that's vile King Villy's bright idea, is it? Going to put a rope around my neck and swear I hung myself? Well come on—but don't think it will be easy!"

"Don't be an idiot!" the man whispered. "And shut the big mouth. We're here to get you out. We're friends." Two more men, dressed the same way, pushed in behind him, and I had a glimpse of a fourth one in the hall.

"Friends!" I shouted, "Murderers is more like it! You'll pay dearly for this crime."

The fourth man, still in the hall, whispered something and they charged me. I wanted a better glimpse of the boss. He was a small man—if he *was* a man. His clothes were loose and bulky, and there was a stocking mask over his entire head. Angelina would be just about that tall. But before I could get a better look the thugs were on me. I kicked one in the stomach and ducked away. This was fighting barroom style and they had all the advantages. Without shoes or a weapon I didn't stand a chance, and they weren't afraid to use their coshes. I tried hard not to smile with victory as they worked me over.

Only reluctantly did I allow myself to be dragged to the place where I wanted to go.

XVI

Because the pounding on the head had only made me groggy, one of them broke a sleep capsule under my nose and that was that for a while. So of course I had no idea of how far we had traveled or where on Freibur I was. They must have given me the antidote because the next thing I saw was a scrawny type with a hypodermic injector in his hand. He was peeling back my eyelid to look and I slapped his hand away.

“Going to torture me before you kill me, swine!” I said, remembering the role I had to play.

“Don’t worry about that,” a deep voice said behind me, “you are among friends. People who can understand your irritation with the present régime.”

This voice wasn’t much like Angelina’s. Neither was the burly, sour-faced owner. The medic slid out and left us alone, and I wondered if the plan had slipped up somewhere. Iron-jaw with the beady eyes had a familiar look—I recognized him as one of the Freiburian nobility. I had memorized the lot and looking at his ugly face I dredged up a mnemonic. A midget painted bright red.

“Rdenrundt—The Count of Rdenrundt,” I said, trying to remember what else I had read about him. “I might believe you were telling me the truth if you weren’t his Highness’s first cousin. I find it hard to consider that you would steal a man from the royal jail for your own purposes....”

“It’s not important what you believe,” he snapped angrily. He had a short fuse and it took him a moment to get his temper back under control. “Villelm may be my cousin—that doesn’t mean I think he is the perfect ruler for our planet. You talked a lot about your claims to higher rank and the fact that you had been cheated. Did you mean that? Or are you just another parlor wind-bag? Think well before you answer—you may be committing yourself. There may be other people who feel as you do, that there is change in the wind.”

Impulsive, enthusiastic, that was me. Loyal friend and deadly enemy and just solid guts when it came to a fight. Jumping forward I grabbed his hand and pumped it.

“If you are telling me the truth, then you have a man at your side who will go the whole course. If you are lying to me and this is some trick of the King’s—well then, Count, be ready to fight!”

“No need to fight,” he said, extracting his hand with some difficulty from my clutch.

“Not between us at least. We have a difficult course ahead of us, and we must learn to rely upon each other.” He cracked his knuckles and looked glumly out the window. “I sincerely hope that I will be able to rely on you. Freibur is a far different world from the one our ancestors ruled. The League has sapped the fight from our people. There are none I can really rely on.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the bunch who took me out of my cell. They seemed to do the job well enough.”

“Muscle!” he spat, and pressed a button on the arm of his chair. “Thugs with heads of solid stone. I can hire all of those I need. What I need are men who can lead—help me to lead Freibur into its rightful future.”

I didn't mention the man who led the muscle the previous night, the one who had stayed in the corridor. If Rdenrundt wasn't going to talk about Angelina I certainly couldn't bring up the topic. Since he wanted brain not brawn, I decided to give him a little.

"Did you dream up the torn piece of uniform left in the guard's hand in the prison? That was a good touch."

His eyes narrowed a bit when he turned to look at me. "You're quite observant, Bent," he said.

"A matter of training," I told him, trying to be both unassuming and positive at the same time. "There was this piece of red cloth with a button in the guard's hand, like something he had grabbed in a struggle. Yet all of the men I saw were dressed only in black. Perhaps a bit of misdirection...."

"With each passing moment I'm getting happier that you have joined me," he said, and showed me all of his ragged teeth in an expression he must have thought was a grin. "The Old Duke's men wear red livery, as you undoubtedly know...."

"And the Old Duke is the strongest supporter of Villelm IX," I finished for him. "It wouldn't hurt in the slightest if he had a falling out with the King."

"Not the slightest," Rdenrundt echoed, and showed me all of his teeth again. I was beginning to dislike him intensely. If this was the front man Angelina had picked for her operation, then he was undoubtedly the best one for the job on the planet. But he was such a puffed-up crumb, with barely enough imagination to appreciate the ideas Angelina was feeding him. Yet I imagine he had the money and the title—and the ambition—which combination she had to have. Once more I wondered where she was.

Something came in through the door and I recoiled, thinking the war was on. It was only a robot, but it made such a hideous amount of hissing and clanking that I wondered what was wrong with it. The Count ordered the ghastly thing to wheel over the bar, as it turned away I saw what could only have been a *chimney* projecting behind one shoulder. There was the distinct odor of coal smoke in the air.

"Does that robot burn *coal*—?" I gurgled.

"It does," the Count said, pouring us out a pair of drinks. "It is a perfect example of what is wrong with the Freiburian economy under the gracious rule of Villelm the Incompetent. You don't see any robots like this in the capital!"

"I should hope not," I gasped, staring bug-eyed at the trickle of steam escaping from the thing, and the stains of rust and coal dust on its plates. "Of course I've been away a long time ... things change...."

"They don't change fast enough! And don't act galactic-wise with me, Diebstall. I've been to Misteldross and seen how the rubes live. You have no robots at all—much less a contraption like this." He kicked at the thing in sullen anger and it staggered back a bit, valves clicking open as steam pumped into the leg pistons to straighten it up. "Two hundred years come next Grundlovsday we will have been in the League, milked dry and pacified by them—and for what? To provide luxuries for the King in Freiburbad. While out here we get a miserable consignment of a few robot brains and some control circuitry. We have to build the rest of the inefficient monsters ourselves. And out in the real sticks where you come from they think robot is a misspelling of a boat that goes with oars!"

He drained his glass and I made no attempt to explain to him the economics of galactic commerce, planetary prestige, or the multifold levels of intercommunication. This lost planet had been cut off from the mainstream of galactic culture for maybe a thousand years, until contact had been reestablished after the Breakdown. They were being eased back into the culture gradually, without any violent repercussions that might upset the process. Sure, a billion robots could be dumped here tomorrow. What good would that do the economy? It was certainly much better to bring in the control units and let the locals build the things for themselves. If they didn't like the final product they could improve the design instead of complaining.

The Count of course didn't see it this way. Angelina had done a nice job of playing upon his prejudices and desires. He was still glaring at the robot when he leaned forward and suddenly tapped a dial on the thing's side.

"Look at that!" he shouted. "Down to eighty pounds pressure! Next thing you know the thing will be falling on its face and burning the place down. Stoke, you idiot—*stoke!!*"

A couple of relays closed inside the contraption and the robot clanked and put the tray of glasses down. I took a very long drag on my drink and enjoyed the scene. Trundling over to the fireplace—at a slower pace now I'll admit—it opened a door in its stomach and flame belched out. Using the coal scoop in the pail it shoveled in a good portion of anthracite and banged the firedoor shut again. Rich black smoke boiled from its chimney. At least it was housebroken and didn't shake out its grate here.

"Outside, dammit, outside!" the Count shouted, coughing at the same time. The smoke was a little thick. I poured another drink and decided right then that I was going to like Rdenrundt.

I would have liked it a lot better if I could have found Angelina. This whole affair bore every sign of her light touch, yet she was nowhere in sight. I was shown to a room and met some of the officers on the Count's staff. One of them, Kurt, a youth of noble lineage but no money, showed me around the grounds. The place was a cross between a feudal keep and a small town, with a high wall cutting it off from the city proper. There appeared to be no obvious signs of the Count's plans, outside of the number of armed retainers who lounged about and practiced uninterestedly in the shooting ranges. It all looked too peaceful to be true—yet I had been brought here. That was no accident. I tried a little delicate questioning and Kurt was frank with his answers. Like a lot of the far-country gentry he bore a grudge against the central authorities, although he would of course never have gotten around to doing anything about it on his own. Somehow he had been recruited and was ready to go along with the plans, all of which were very vague to him. I doubt if he had ever seen a corpse. That he was telling me the truth about everything was obvious when I caught him in his first lie.

We had passed some women and bent a knee, and Kurt had volunteered the advice that they were the wives of two of the other officers.

"And you're married too?" I asked.

"No. Never had the time, I guess. Now I suppose it's too late, at least for awhile. When this whole business is over and life is a little more peaceful there'll be plenty of time to settle down."

“How right,” I agreed. “What about the Count? Is he married? I’ve been away so many years that it’s hard to keep track of that kind of thing. Wives, children and such.” Without being obvious I was watching him when I asked this, and he gave a little start.

“Well ... yes, you might say. I mean the Count was married, but there was an accident, he’s not married now....” His voice tapered away and he drew my attention to something else, happy to leave the topic.

Now if there is one thing that always marks Angelina’s trail it is a corpse or two. It took no great amount of inspiration to connect her with the “accidental” death of the Count’s wife. If the death had been natural Kurt would not have been afraid to talk about it. He didn’t mention the topic again and I made no attempt to pump him. I had my lead. Angelina may not have been in sight—but her spoor was around me on all sides. It was just a matter of time now. As soon as I was able to, I would shake Kurt and hunt up the bully-boys who had spirited me out of the jail. Buy them a few drinks to assure them that there were no hard feelings about the beating they had given me. Then pump them adroitly about the man who had led them.

Angelina made her move first. One of the coal-burning robots came hissing and clanking around with a message. The Count would like to see me. I slicked my hair, tucked in my shirt and reported for duty.

I was pleased to see that the Count was a steady and solitary daytime drinker. In addition, there was very little tobacco in his cigarette; the sweet smoke filled the room. All this meant he was due for early dissolution, and I would not be numbered among his mourners. None of this showed in my expression or attitude of course. I was all flashing eye and hell-cracking attention.

“Is it action, sir? Is that why you sent for me?” I asked.

“Sit down, sit down,” he mumbled, waving me towards a chair. “Relax. Want a cigarette?” He pushed the box towards me and I eyed the thin brown cylinders with distaste.

“Not today, sir. I’m laying off smoking for awhile. Sharpening up the old eye. Keeping the old trigger finger limber and ready for action.”

The Count’s mind was occupied elsewhere and I doubt if he heard a word I said. He chewed abstractedly at the inside of his cheek while he looked me up and down. A decision finally struggled up through his half-clotted brain.

“What do you know about the Radebrechen family?” he asked, which is about as exotic a question as I have ever had thrown at me.

“Absolutely nothing,” I answered truthfully. “Should I?”

“No ... no....” he answered vaguely, and went back to chewing his cheek. I was getting high just from breathing the air in the room and I wondered how he was feeling.

“Come with me,” he said, pushing over his chair and almost falling on top of it. We plodded through a number of halls deeper into the building, until we came to a door, no different from the ones we had passed, except this one had a guard in front of it—a rough-looking brawny type with his arms casually crossed. Just casual enough to let his fingers hang over his pistol grip. He didn’t budge when we came up.

“It’s all right,” the Duke of Rdenrundt said, with what I swear was a peevish tone. “He’s with me.”

“Gotta search him anyway,” the guard said. “Orders.”

More and more interesting. Who issued orders the Count couldn’t change—in his own castle? As if I didn’t know. And I recognized the guard’s voice, he was one of the men who had taken me from my prison cell. He searched me quickly and efficiently, then stepped aside. The Count opened the door and I followed him in, trying not to tread on his heels.

One thing about reality—it is always so much superior to theory. I had every reason to believe that Angelina would be here, yet it was still a healthy shock to see her sitting at the table. A kind of electric charge in my spine tingled right up to the roots of my hair. This was a moment I had waited for for a very long time. It took a positive effort to relax and appear indifferent. At least as indifferent as any healthy young male is in front of an attractive package of femininity.

Of course this girl didn’t resemble Angelina very much. Yet I still had no doubt. The face was changed as was the color of the hair. And though the face was a new one it still held the same sweet, angelic quality as the old. Her figure was much the way I remembered it, with perhaps a few slight improvements. Hers was a surface transformation, with no attempt at being as complete as the one I had had done to me.

“This is Grav Bent Diebstall,” the Count said, fixing his hot and smoky little eyes on her. “The man you wanted to see, Engela.” So she was still an angel, though under a different name. That was a bad habit she should watch, only I wasn’t going to tell her. A lot of people have been caught by taking an alias too similar to their old one.

“Why thank you, Cassitor,” she said. Cassitor indeed! I’d look unhappy too if I had to go through life with a handle like Cassitor Rdenrundt. “It was very nice of you to bring Grav Bent here,” she added in the same light and empty voice.

Cassi must have been expecting a warmer welcome because he stood first on one foot and then another and mumbled something which neither of us heard. But Angelina-Engela’s welcome stayed at the same temperature, or perhaps dropped a degree or two as she shuffled some papers on the table in front of her. Even through his fog the Count caught on and went out mumbling something else under his breath that I was pretty sure was one of the shorter and more unwholesome words in the local dialect. We were alone.

“Why did you tell all those lies about being in the Stellar Guard,” she asked in a quiet voice, apparently still busy at the papers. This was my cue to smile sardonically, and flick some imaginary dust from my sleeve.

“Well I certainly couldn’t tell all those nice people what I’ve really been doing all these years I have been away, could I?” I responded with wide-eyed simplicity.

“What were you doing, Bent?” she asked and there wasn’t a trace of any emotion in her voice.

“That’s really my business, isn’t it,” I told her, matching toneless tone for tone. “And while we’re asking questions, I would like to know who you are, and how come you seem to throw more weight around than the great Count Cassitor?” I’m good at playing this kind of guessing game. But Angy was just as good and dragged the conversation back to her own grounds.

“Since I am in the stronger position here, I think you’ll find it wise to answer my questions. Don’t be afraid of shocking me. You would be surprised at the things I know about.”

No, Angelica love, I wouldn’t be surprised at all. But I couldn’t just tell all without a little resistance. “You’re the one behind this revolution idea, aren’t you,” I said as a statement, not a question.

“Yes,” she said, laying her cards on the table so she could see mine.

“Well if you must know then,” I said, “I was smuggling. It is a very interesting occupation if you happen to know what to take where. For a number of years I found it was a most lucrative business. Finally though, a number of governments felt I was giving them unfair competition, since they were the only ones allowed to cheat the public. With the pressure on I returned to my sluggish native land for a period of rest.”

Angel-mine was buying no sealed packages and gave me an exhaustive cross-examination into my smuggling career that showed she had more than a passing knowledge of the field herself. I had of course no trouble answering her questions, since in my day I have turned many a megacredit in this illegal fashion. The only thing I was afraid of was making it too good, so I described a career of a successful but still young and not too professional operator. All the time I was talking I tried to live the role and believe everything I said. This was a crucial time when I must let drop no hints or mannerisms that might bring Slippery Jim diGriz to her mind. I had to be the local punk who had made good and was still on my way up in the universe.

Mind you—our talk was of course all most casual, and carried on in an atmosphere of passing drinks and lighting cigarettes all designed to relax me enough to make a few slips. I did of course, slipping in a lie or two about my successes that she would catch and credit to boyish enthusiasm. When the chit-chat slowed I tried a question of my own.

“Would you mind telling me what a local family named Radebrechen has to do with you?”

“What makes you ask?” she said so calm and coolly.

“Your smiling friend Cassitor Rdenrundt asked me about them before we came here. I told him I knew nothing. What’s their connection with you?”

“They want to kill me,” she said.

“That would be a shame—and a waste,” I told her with my best come-hither grin. She ignored it. “What can I do about it?” I asked, going back to business, since she didn’t seem interested in my masculine attractions.

“I want you to be my bodyguard,” she said, and when I smiled and opened my mouth to speak she went on, “and please spare me any remarks about how it is a body you would like to guard. I get enough of that from Cassitor.”

“All I wanted to say was that I accepted the position,” which was a big lie because I had had some such phrase in mind. It was hard to stay ahead of Angelina and I mustn’t relax for an instant I reminded myself again. “Just tell me more about the people who are out to kill you.”

“It seems that Count Rdenrundt was married,” Angelicious said, toying with her glass in a simple, girlish way. “His wife committed suicide in a very stupid and

compromising manner. Her family—who are of course the Radebrechen—think I killed her, and want to revenge her supposed murder by killing me in turn. Apparently in this lost corner of Freibur the vendetta still has meaning, and this family of rich morons still subscribe to it.”

All at once the picture was getting clearer. Count Rdenrundt—a born opportunist—aided his noble fortunes by marrying the daughter of this family. This must have worked well enough until Angelina came along. Then the extra wife was in the way, and ignorant of this charming local custom of revenge-killing, Angelina had removed a stumbling stone. Something had gone wrong—probably the Count had bungled, from the look of the man—and now the vendetta was on. And my Angel wanted me to interpose my frail flesh between her and the killers. Apparently she was finding this retarded planet more than she had bargained for. Now was the time for me to be bold.

“Was it suicide?” I asked, “Or did you kill her?”

“Yes, I killed her,” she said. The sparring was over and all our cards were on the table. The decision was up to me.

XVII

Well what else was there to do? I hadn't come this far, getting myself shot, bashed on the head and well-stomped, just to arrest her. I mean I was going to arrest her, of course, but it was next to impossible in the center of the Count's stronghold. Besides that, I wanted to find out a bit more about the Count's proposed uprising, since this would certainly come within the jurisdiction of the Special Corps. If I was going to reenlist I had better bring along a few prizes to show my good intentions.

Anyway—I wasn't so sure I wanted to reenlist. It was a little hard to forget that scuttling charge they had tried to blow up under me. The whole thing wasn't so simple. There were a lot of things mixed up in this. One fact being that I enjoyed Angelina and most of the time I was with her I forgot about those bodies floating in space. They returned at night all right and chopped at my conscience, but I was always tired and went to sleep quickly before they could get through and bother me.

Life was a bed of roses, and I might as well enjoy it before the blossoms withered. Watching Angelady at work was a distinct pleasure, and if you stood my back to the wall and made me swear, I would be forced to admit that I learned a thing or two from her. Singlehandedly she was organizing a revolution on a peaceful planet—and it stood every chance of succeeding. In my small way I helped. The few times she mentioned a problem to me I had a ready answer and in all the cases she went along with my suggestions. Of course I had never toppled governments before, but there are basic laws in crime as in everything else, and it is just a matter of application. This didn't happen often. Most of the time during those first few weeks I was a plain bodyguard, keeping a wary eye out for assassins. This position had a certain ironical angle that appealed to me greatly.

However there was a serpent in our little Eden of Insurrection, and his name was Rdenrundt. I never heard much, but from a word caught here and there I began to see that the Count wasn't really cut out to be a revolutionary. The closer we came to the day the more pallid he became. His little physical vices began to add up, and one day the whole thing came to a head.

Angelegant and the Count were in a business session and I sat in the anteroom outside. I shamelessly eavesdropped whenever I could, and this time I had managed to leave the door open a crack after I had checked her into the room. Careful manipulation with my toe opened it a bit more until I could hear the murmur of their voices. An argument was progressing nicely—there were a lot of them at this time—and I could catch a word here and there. The Count was shouting and it was obvious that he wouldn't give in on some simple and necessary piece of blackmail to advance the cause. Then his tone changed and his voice dropped so I couldn't hear his words, strain as I might. There was a saccharine wheedle and whine in his voice, and Angelina's answer was clear enough. A loud and positive *no*. His bellow brought me to my feet.

"Why not? It's always *no* now and I've had enough of it!"

There was the sound of tearing cloth and something fell to the floor and broke. I was through the door in a single bound. For a brief instant I had a glimpse of a struggling tableau as he pulled at her. Angelina's clothing was torn from one shoulder and his fingers were sunk into her arms like claws. Clubbing my pistol I ran forward.

Angelina was a bit faster. She pulled a bottle from the table and banged it into the side of his head with neat efficiency. The Count dropped as if he had been shot. She was pulling up her torn blouse when I came roaring to a halt.

“Put the gun away, Bent—it’s all over,” she said in a calm voice. I did, but only after making sure the Count was really out, hoping an extra slam might be needed. But she had done a good job. When I stood up Angelina was already halfway out of the room and I had to run to catch up with her. The only other thing she said was “Wait here,” when she steamed into her room.

It took no great power of divination to see that there was trouble coming—if it hadn’t already arrived. When the Count came to with a busted head he would undoubtedly have some second thoughts about Angelina and revolutions. I thought on these and related subjects while I matched coins with the guards. A few minutes later Angelina called me in.

A long robe covered her arms so the bruises he had made weren’t visible. Though outwardly composed there was a telltale glint in her eyes that meant she was doing a slow burn. I spoke what was undoubtedly the uppermost thought in her mind.

“Want me to fix it so the Count joins his noble ancestors in the family crypt?”

She shook her head no. “He still has his uses. I managed to control my temper—so you had better hold yours.”

“Mine’s in great shape. But what makes you think you can still get work on cooperation out of him? He’s going to have an awful sore head when he comes to.”

Minor factors like this didn’t bother her; she dismissed the thought with a wave of her hand. “I can still handle him and make him do whatever I want—within limits. The limitations are his own natural abilities, which I didn’t realize were so slight when I picked him to head this revolt. I’m afraid his cowardice is slowly destroying any large hopes I might have had for him. He will still have value as a figurehead and we must use him for that. But the power and decisions must be ours.”

I wasn’t being slow, just wary. I chewed around her statements from all sides before I answered. “Just what is this *we* and *ours* business? Where do I fit in?”

Angelilith leaned back in her chair and tossed a lock of her lovely golden hair to one side. Her smile had about a two thousand volt charge and was aimed at me.

“I want you to come in with me on this thing,” she said with a voice rich as warm honey. “A partnership. We’ll keep the Count of Rdenrundt out in front until the plan succeeds. Then eliminate him and go the rest of the way ourselves. Do you agree?”

“Well,” I said. Then with brilliant inspiration, “Well....” again. For the first time in a lifetime of verbal pyrotechnics I found the flow shut off. I paced the room and pulled my scattered wits together.

“I hate to look a gift rocket in the tubes,” I told her, “nevertheless—why *me*? A simple but hard working bodyguard, who will guard your person, labor for the cause and look forward to the restoration of his stolen lands and title. How come the big jump from office boy to board chairman?”

“You know better than to ask that,” she said and smiled, and the temperature of the room rose ten degrees. “I think you can handle this job as well as I can, and enjoy doing it. Working together, you and I will make this the cleanest revolt that ever took over a planet. What do you say?”

I was pacing behind her as she talked. She stood up and took me by the arm, stilling my restless walking. I could feel the warmth of her fingers burning through my thin shirt. Her face was in front of me, smiling, and her voice pitched so low that I barely heard it.

“It would be something, wouldn’t it. You and I ... together.”

Wouldn’t it! There are occasions when words can’t say it all and your body speaks for you. This was a time like that. Without physical deliberation my arms were around her, pulling her to me, my mouth pushing down on hers.

For the briefest of instants she was the same, her arms tight on my shoulders, her lips alive. Just for a sliver of time so brief that afterwards I couldn’t be sure that I hadn’t imagined it. Then the warmth was suddenly drained away and everything was wrong.

She didn’t fight me or attempt to push back. But her lips were lifeless under mine and her eyes open, looking at me with a sterile emptiness. She did nothing until I had dropped my arms and stepped away, then she seated herself stiffly in the chair again.

“What’s wrong?” I asked not trusting myself to say more.

“A pretty face—is that all you think of?” she asked, and the words seemed pulled from her in sobs. Expressing real emotions didn’t come easily with her. “Are you men all alike—all the same—?”

“Nonsense!” I shouted, angered in spite of myself. “You wanted me to kiss you—don’t deny it! What changed your mind?”

“Would you want to kiss *her*?” Angelina screamed, torn by emotions I couldn’t understand. She pulled at a thin chain around her neck. It snapped and she half threw it at me. There was a tiny locket on the chain, still warm from her body. It had an image-enlarger in it, and when held at the right angle the picture inside could be seen clearly. I had the chance for only a single glimpse at the girl in the photograph, then Angelina changed her mind and pulled it away, pushing me towards the door at the same time. It slammed behind me and I heard the heavy safety bolts thud home.

Ignoring the guard’s raised eyebrows I stamped down the hall to my own room. My emotions had triumphed nicely over my powers of reason, and apparently Angelina’s had too—for just an instant. Yet I couldn’t understand her cold withdrawal or the significance of the picture. Why did she wear it?

I had only had a single glimpse of the contents but that was enough. It was the photo of a young girl, a sister perhaps? A tragic thing, one of those horrible proofs of the law of chance that an almost infinite number of combinations are possible. This girl was cursed with ugliness, that is the only way to describe it. It was no single factor of a bent back, adenoidal jaw or protruding nose. Instead it was the damning combination of traits that combined to form a single, repellent whole. I didn’t like it. But what did it matter....

I sat down suddenly with the clear realization that I was being incredibly stupid. Angelina had given me a simple brief glimpse into the dark motivations that had made her, shaped her life.

Of course. The girl in the picture was Angelina herself.

With this realization so many other things became clear. Many times when looking at her I had wondered why that deadly mind should be housed in such an attractive

package. The answer was clearly that I wasn't looking at the original package that had shaped the mind. To be a man and to be ugly is bad enough. What must it feel like to a woman? How do you live when mirrors are your enemies and people turn away rather than look at you? How do you bear life when at the same time you are blessed—or cursed—with a keen and intelligent mind that sees and is aware of everything, makes the inescapable conclusions and misses not the slightest hint of repulsion.

Some girls might commit suicide, but not Angelina. I could guess what she had done. Hating herself, loathing and detesting her world and the people on it, she would have had no compunction about committing a crime to gain the money she wanted. Money for an operation to correct one of those imperfections. Then more money for more operations. Then someone who dared to stop her in this task, and the ease and perhaps pleasure with which she killed him. The slow upward climb through crime and murder—to beauty. And during the climb the wonderful brain that had been housed in the illformed flesh had been warped and changed.

Poor Angelina. I could be sorry for her without forgetting the ones she had killed. Poor, tragic, alone girl who in winning half the battle had lost the other half. Purchased skill had shaped the body into a lovely—truthfully an angelic—form. Yet in succeeding, the strength of the mind that had accomplished all this had been deformed until it had been made as ugly as the body had been in the beginning.

Yet if you could change a body—couldn't you change a mind? Could something be done for her?

The very pressure and magnitude of my thoughts drove me out of the small room and into the air. It was nearing midnight and the guards would be stationed below and all the doors locked. Rather than face the explanations and simple mechanical difficulties, I climbed upwards instead. There would be no one in the roofgardens and walkways this time of night; I could be alone.

Freibur has no moon, but it was a clear night and the stars cast enough light to see by. The roof guard saluted when I went by, and I could see the red spark of a cigarette in his hand. I should have said something about it, but my mind was too occupied. Passing on I turned a corner and stood leaning on the parapet, looking out unseeingly at the black bulk of the mountains.

Something kept gnawing for attention and after a few minutes I recognized what it was. The guard. He was there for a purpose, and smoking on duty wasn't considered the best behavior for a sentry. Perhaps I was being finicky, but it is a failing of mine. Take care of all the small factors and the big ones take care of themselves. In any case, simply thinking about it was bothering me, so I might as well go around and say a word to him.

He wasn't at his usual post, which was optimistic; at least he was making the rounds and keeping an eye on things. I started to walk back when I noticed the broken flowers hanging from the edge of the garden. This was most unusual because the roofgardens were the Count's special pleasure and were practically manicured daily. Then I saw the dark patch in among the flowers and had the first intimation that something was very, very wrong.

It was the guard, and he was either dead or deeply unconscious. I didn't bother to find out which. There was only one reason I could think of for someone to be here at night like this. Angelina. Her room was on the top floor, almost below this spot.

Silently I ran to the decorative railing and looked over. Five meters below was the white patch of the balcony outside her window. Something black and formless was crouched there.

My gun was in my room. For one of the few times in my life I had been so disturbed that my normal precautions were forgotten. My concern over Angelina was going to cost her her life.

All of this I realized in a fraction of a second as my fingers ran along the balustrade. A shiny blob was fixed there, anchoring a strand so thin that it was invisible, yet I knew was as strong as a cable. The assassin had lowered himself with a web-spinner, a tiny device that spun a thin strand like a spider. Only the strand's substance was formed of a single long-chain molecule that could support a man's weight. It would slice my hands like the sharpest blade if I tried to slide down it.

There was only one way I could reach that balcony, a tiny square above the two kilometer drop into the valley below. I made the decision even as I was leaping up onto the rail. It had a wide flat top and I sat for an instant to catch my balance. Below me the window swung open noiselessly and I dropped, my heels extended, aiming for the man below.

I turned in the air and instead of hitting him squarely I caromed off his shoulder and we both sprawled onto the balcony. It shivered under the impact, but the ancient stone held. The fall had half-stunned me, and with pain-blurred reasoning I hoped that his shoulder felt as bad as my leg. For a few moments I could do nothing but gasp for breath and try to scramble towards him. A long, thin-bladed knife had been knocked from his hand by the impact and I could see it glittering where he reached for it. His fingers clutched it just as I attacked. He grunted and made a vicious stab at me that brushed my sleeve. Before he could draw back I had his knife wrist in my hand and clamped on.

It was a silent, nightmare battle. Both of us were half-dazed from my drop, yet we knew it was life we were battling for. I couldn't stand because of my bruised leg and he was instantly on top of me, heavier and stronger. He couldn't use the arm I had landed on, but it took all the strength of both my arms to hold away the menacing blade. There was no sound other than our hoarse panting.

This assassin was going to win as weight and remorseless strength brought the knife down. Sweat almost blinded me, but I could still see well enough to notice the twisted way his other arm hung. I had broken a bone when I hit—yet he had never made a sound.

There is no such thing as fair fighting when you are struggling for your life. I squirmed my leg out from under him and managed to bend it enough to dig the knee into his broken arm. His whole body shuddered. I did it again. Harder. He twisted, trying to pull away from the pain. I heaved sideways, throwing him off balance. His elbow bent as he tried to save himself from falling and I put all my strength in both hands turning that sinewy wrist and driving the hand backwards.

It almost worked, but he was still stronger than I was and the point of the blade merely scratched his chest. Even as I was fighting to turn the hand again he shuddered and died.

A ruse would not have tricked me—but this was no ruse. I felt every muscle in his body tighten rock-hard in a spasm as he fell sideways. My grip on his wrist didn't lessen until the light came on in the room behind me. Only then did I see the ugly

yellow stain halfway up the blade of the knife. A quick-acting nerve poison, silent and deadly. There, on the sleeve of my shirt, was a thin yellow mark where the blade had brushed me. I knew these poisons didn't need a puncture, they could work just as well on the naked skin.

With infinite caution, struggling against the fatigue that wanted my hands to shake, I peeled my shirt slowly off. Only when it had been hurled on top of the corpse did I let myself drop backwards, gasping for air.

My leg could work now, though it hurt hideously. It must have been bruised but not broken since it supported my weight. Turning, I stumbled to the high window and threw it open. Light streamed out on the body behind me. Angelina was sitting up in bed, her face smooth and her hands folded on the covers in front of her. Only her eyes showing any awareness of what had happened.

"Dead," I said with a dry throat, and spat to clear it. "Killed by his own poison." I stumped into the room, testing my leg.

"I was sleeping, I didn't hear him open the window," she said. "Thank you."

Actress, liar, cheat, murderess. She had played a hundred roles in countless voices. Yet when she said those final words there was a ring of unforged feeling to them. This murder attempt had come too soon after the earlier traumatic scene. Her defenses were still down, her real emotions showing.

Her hair hung to her shoulders, brushing the single ribbons of her nightgown which was made of some thin and soft fabric; intimate. This sight, on top of the events of the evening, removed any reserve I might have had. I was kneeling by the bed, holding her shoulders and staring deep into her eyes, trying to reach what lay behind them. The locket with the broken chain lay on the bed-side table. I grabbed it in my fist.

"Don't you realize this girl doesn't exist except in your own memory," I said, and Angelina didn't move. "It's past like everything else. You were a baby—now you're a woman. You were a little girl—now you're a woman. You may have been this girl—but you are not any more!"

With a convulsive movement I turned and hurled the thing out of the window into the darkness.

"You're none of those things of the past, Angelina!" I said with an intensity louder than a shout. "You are yourself ... just yourself!"

I kissed her then and there was no trace of the pushing away or rejection there had been before. As I needed her, she needed me.

XVIII

Dawn was just touching the sky when I brought the assassin's body in to the Count. I was deprived of the pleasure of waking him since the sergeant of the guard had already done this when the roof sentry had been discovered. The guard was dead too, from a tiny puncture of the same poison-tipped blade. The guardsmen and the Count were all gathered around the body on the floor of the Count's sitting room and chattering away about this mystery, the inexplicable death of the sentry. They didn't see me until I dropped my corpse down by the other one, and they all jumped back.

"Here's the killer," I told them, not without a certain amount of pride. Count Cassitor must have recognized the thug because he gave a shuddering start and popped his eyes. No doubt an ex-relative, brother-in-law or something. I imagined he hadn't believed that the Radebrechen family would really go through with their threats of revenge.

A certain uneasiness about the guard sergeant gave me my first cue that I was imagining wrong. The sergeant glanced back and forth from the corpse to the Count and I wondered what thoughts were going through his shaven and thick-skulled military head. There were wheels within wheels here and I would like to have known what was going on. I made a mental note to have a buddy-to-buddy talk with sarge at the first opportunity. The Count chewed his cheek and cracked his knuckles over the bodies, and finally ordered them dragged out.

"Stay here, Bent," he said as I started to leave with the others. I dropped into a chair while he locked the rest out. Then he made a rush for the bar and choked down about a waterglass full of the local spirits. Only when he was working on his second glass did he remember to offer me some of this potable aqua regia. I wasn't saying no, and while I sipped at it I wondered what he was so upset about.

First the Count checked the locks on all the doors and sealed the single window. His ring key unlocked the bottom drawer of his desk and he took out a small electronic device with controls and an extendible aerial on top.

"Well look at that!" I said when he pulled out the aerial. He didn't answer me, just shot a long look at me from under his eyebrows, and went back to adjusting the thing. Only when it was turned on and the green light glowed on the top did he relax a bit.

"You know what this is?" he asked, pointing at the gadget.

"Of course," I said. "But not from seeing them on Freibur. They aren't that common."

"They aren't common at all," he mumbled, staring at the green light which glowed steadily. "As far as I know this is the only one on the planet—so I wish you wouldn't mention it to anybody. *Anybody*," he repeated with emphasis.

"Not my business," I told him with disarming lack of interest. "I think a man's entitled to his privacy."

I liked privacy myself and had used snoopers-detectors like this one plenty of times. They could sense electronic or radiation snoopers and gave instant warning. There were ways of fooling them, but it wasn't easy to do. As long as no one knew about the thing the Count could be sure he wasn't being eavesdropped on. But who would want

to do that? He was in the middle of his own building—and even he must know that snoopers couldn't be worked from a distance. There was distinct smell of rat in the air, and I was beginning to get an idea of what was going on. The Count didn't leave me any doubt as to who the rat was.

"You're not a stupid man, Grav Diebstall," he said, which means he thought I was a lot stupider than he was. "You've been offplanet and seen other worlds. You know how backward and suppressed we are here, or you wouldn't have joined with me to help throw off the yoke around our planet's neck. No sacrifice is too great if it will bring closer this day of liberation." For some reason he was sweating now and had resumed his unpleasant habit of cracking the knuckles. The side of his head—where Angela had landed the bottle—was covered with plasti-skin and dry of sweat. I hoped it hurt.

"This foreign woman you have been guarding—" the Count said, turning sideways but still watching me from the corners of his eyes. "She had been of some help in organizing things, but is now putting us in an embarrassing position. There has been one attempt on her life and there will probably be others. The Radebrechen are an old and loyal family—her presence is a continued insult to them." Then he pulled at his drink and delivered the punch line.

"I think that *you* can do the job she is doing. Just as well, and perhaps better. How would you like that?"

Without a doubt I was just brimming over with talent—or there was a shortage of revolutionaries on this planet. This was the second time within twelve hours that I had been offered a partnership in the new order. One thing I was sure of though—Angelovely's offer had been sincere. Cassi Duke of Rdenrundt's proposition had a distinctly bad odor to it. I played along to see what he was leading up to.

"I am honored, noble Count," I oozed. "But what will happen to the foreign woman? I don't imagine she will think much of the idea."

"What she thinks is not important," he snarled and touched his fingers lightly to the side of his head. He swallowed and got his temper back under control. "We cannot be cruel to her," he said with one of the most insincere smiles I have ever seen on a human being's face. "We'll just hold her in custody. She has some guards who I imagine will be loyal, but my men will take care of them. You will be with her and arrest her at the proper time. Just turn her over to the jailers who will keep her safe. Safe for herself, and out of sight where she can cause no more trouble for us."

"It's a good plan," I agreed with winning insincerity. "I don't enjoy the thought of putting this poor woman in jail, but if it is necessary to the cause it must be done. The ends justify the means."

"You're right. I only wish I was able to state it so clearly. You have a remarkable ability to turn a phrase, Bent. I'm going to write that down so I can remember it. The ends justify...."

He scratched away industriously on a note plate. What a knowledge of history he had—just the man to plan a revolution! I searched my memory for a few more old saws to supply him with, until my brain was flooded with a sudden anger. I jumped to my feet.

"If we are going to do this we should not waste any time, Count Rdenrundt," I said. "I suggest 1800 hours tonight for the action. That will give you enough time to arrange

for the capture of her guards. I will be in her rooms and will arrest her as soon as I have a message from you that the first move has succeeded.”

“You’re correct. A man of action as always, Bent. It will be as you say.” We shook hands then and it took all the will power I possessed to stop from crushing to a pulp his limp, moist, serpentine paw. I went straight to Angelina.

“Can we be overheard here?” I asked her.

“No, the room is completely shielded.”

“Your former boy-friend, Count Cassi, has a snooper-detector. He may have other equipment for listening to what goes on here.”

This thought didn’t bother Angelic in the slightest. She sat by the mirror, brushing her hair. The scene was lovely but distracting. There were strong winds blowing through the revolution that threatened to knock everything down.

“I know about the detector,” she said calmly, brushing. “I arranged for him to get it—without his knowledge of course—and made sure it was useless on the best frequencies. I keep a close watch on his affairs that way.”

“Were you listening in a few minutes ago when he was making arrangements with me to kill your guards and throw you into the dungeons downstairs?”

“No, I wasn’t listening,” she said with that amazing self-possession and calm that marked all her actions. She smiled in the mirror at me. “I was busy just remembering last night.”

Women! They insist on mixing everything up together. Perhaps they operate better that way, but it is very hard on those of us who find that keeping emotion and logic separate produces sounder thinking. I had to make her understand the seriousness of this situation.

“Well, if that little bit of news doesn’t interest you,” I said as calmly as I could, “Perhaps this does. The rough Radebrechens didn’t send that killer last night—the Count did.”

Success at last. Angelina actually stopped combing her hair and her eyes widened a bit at the import of what I said. She didn’t ask any stupid questions, but waited for me to finish.

“I think you have underestimated the desperation of that rat upstairs. When you dropped him with that bottle yesterday, you pushed him just as far as he could be pushed. He must have had his plans already made and you made his mind up for him. The sergeant of the guard recognized the assassin and connected him with the Count. That also explains how the killer got access to the roof and knew just where to find you. It’s also the best explanation I can imagine for the suddenness of this attack. There’s too much coincidence here with the thing happening right after your battle with Cassitor the Cantankerous.”

Angelina had gone back to combing her hair while I talked, fluffing up the curls. She made no response. Her apparent lack of interest was beginning to try my nerves.

“Well—what are you going to do about it?” I asked, with more than a little note of peevishness in my voice.

“Don’t you think it’s more important to ask what *you* are going to do about it?” She delivered this line very lightly, but there was a lot behind it. I saw she was watching

me in the mirror, so I turned and went over to the window, looking out over the fatal balcony at the snow-summitted mountain peaks beyond. What was I going to do about it? Of course that was the question here—much bigger than she realized.

What was I going to do about the whole thing? Everyone was offering me half-interests in a revolution I hadn't the slightest interest in. Or did I? What *was* I doing here? Had I come to arrest Angelina for the Special Corps? That assignment seemed to have been forgotten a while back. A decision had to be reached soon. My body disguise was good—but not that good. It wasn't intended to stand up to long inspection. Only the fact that Angelina was undoubtedly sure that she had killed me had prevented her from recognizing my real identity so far. I had certainly recognized her easily enough, facial changes and all.

Just at this point the bottom dropped out of everything. There is a little process called selective forgetting whereby we suppress and distort memories we find distasteful. My disguise hadn't been meant to stand inspection this long. Originally I had been sure she would have penetrated it by now. With this realization came the memory of what I had said the night before. A wickedly revealing statement that I had pushed back and forgotten until now.

You're none of these things out of the past, I had shouted. *None of these things ... Angelina*. I had bellowed this and there had been no protest from her.

Except that she no longer used the name Angelina, she used the alias Engela here.

When I turned to face her my guilty thoughts must have been scrawled all over my face, but she only gave me that enigmatic smile and said nothing. At least she had stopped combing her hair.

"You know I'm not Grav Bent Diebstall," I said with an effort. "How long have you known?"

"For quite a while; since soon after you came here, in fact."

"Do you know who I am—?"

"I have no idea what your real name is, if that's what you mean. But I do remember how angry I was when you tricked me out of the battleships, after all my work. And I recall the intense satisfaction with which I shot you in Freiburbad. Can you tell me your name now?"

"Jim," I said through the haze I was rooted in. "James diGriz, known as Slippery Jim to the trade."

"How nice. My name *is* really Angela. I think it was done as a horrid joke by my father, which is one of the reasons I enjoyed seeing him die."

"Why haven't you killed me?" I asked, having a fairly good idea of how father had passed on.

"Why should I, darling?" she asked, and her light, empty tone was gone. "We've both made mistakes in the past and it has taken us a dreadfully long time to find out that we are just alike. I might as well ask you why you haven't arrested me—that's what you started out to do isn't it?"

"It was—but...."

"But, what? You must have come here with that idea in mind, but you were fighting an awful battle with yourself. That's why I hid the fact that I knew who you really

were. You were growing up, getting over whatever idiotic notions ever involved you with the police in the first place. I had no idea how the whole thing would come out, though I did hope. You see I didn't want to kill you, not unless I had to. I knew you loved me, that was obvious from the beginning. It was different from the feeble animal passion of all those male brutes who have told me that they love me. They loved a malleable case of flesh. You love me for everything that I am, because we are both the same."

"We are not the same," I insisted, but there was no conviction in my voice. She only smiled. "You kill—and enjoy killing—that's our basic difference. Don't you see that?"

"Nonsense!" She dismissed the idea with an airy wave. "You killed last night—rather a good job too—and I didn't notice any reluctance on your part. In fact, wasn't there a certain amount of enthusiasm?"

I don't know why, but I felt as if a noose was tightening around my neck. Everything she said was wrong—but I couldn't see where it was wrong. Where was the way out, the solution that would solve everything?

"Let's leave Freiburg," I said at last. "Get away from this monstrous and unnecessary rebellion. There will be deaths and killing and no need for them."

"We'll go—if we go someplace where we can do just as well," Angela said, and there was a hardness back in her voice. "That's not the major point though. There's something you are going to have to settle in your own mind before you will be happy. This stupid importance you attach to death. Don't you realize how completely trivial it is? Two hundred years from now you, I and every person now living in the galaxy will be dead. What does it matter if a few of them are helped along and reach their destination a bit quicker? They'd do the same to you if they had the chance."

"You're wrong," I insisted, knowing that there is more to living and dying than just this pessimistic philosophy, but unable in this moment of stress to clarify and speak my ideas. Angela was a powerful drug and my tiny remaining shard of compassionate reserve didn't stand a chance, washed under by the flood of stronger emotions. I pulled her to me, kissing her, knowing that this solved most of the problems although it made the final solution that much more difficult.

A thin and irritating buzz scratched at my ears, and Angela heard it too. Separating was difficult for both of us. I sat and watched unseeingly while she went to the vidiphone. She blanked the video circuits and snapped a query into it. I couldn't hear the answer because she had the speaker off and listened through the earpiece. Once or twice she said *yes*, and looked up suddenly at me. There was no indication of whom she was talking to, and I hadn't the slightest interest. There were problems enough around.

After hanging up she just stood quietly for a moment and I waited for her to speak. Instead she walked to her dressing table and opened the drawer. There were a lot of things that could have been concealed there, but she took out the one thing I was least suspecting.

A gun. Big barreled and deadly, pointing at me.

"Why did you do it, Jim?" she asked, tears in the corners of her eyes. "Why did you want to do it?"

She didn't even hear my baffled answer. Her thoughts were on herself—though the recoilless never wavered from a point aimed midway in my skull. With alarming suddenness she straightened up and angrily brushed at her eyes.

"You didn't do anything," she said with the old hard chill on her words. "I did it myself because I let myself believe that one man could be any different from the others. You have taught me a valuable lesson, and out of gratitude I will kill you quickly, instead of in the way I would much prefer."

"What the hell are you talking about," I roared, completely baffled.

"Don't play the innocent to the very end," she said, as she reached carefully behind her and drew a small heavy bag from under the bed. "That was the radar post. I installed the equipment myself and have the operators bribed to give me first notice. A ring of ships—as you well know—has dropped from space and surrounded this area. Your job was to keep me occupied so I wouldn't notice this. The plan came perilously close to succeeding." She put a coat over her arm and backed across the room.

"If I told you I was innocent—gave you my most sincere word of honor—would you believe me?" I asked. "I have nothing to do with this and know nothing about it."

"Hooray for the Boy Space Scout," Angela said with bitter mockery. "Why don't you admit the truth, since you will be dead in twenty seconds no matter what you say."

"I've told you the truth." I wondered if I could reach her before she fired, but knew it was impossible.

"Good-bye, James diGriz. It was nice knowing you—for a while. Let me leave you with a last pleasant thought. All this was in vain. There is a door and an exit behind me that no one knows about. Before your police get here I shall be safely gone. And if the thought tortures you a bit, I intend to go on killing and killing and killing and you will never be able to stop me."

My Angela raised the gun for a surer aim as she touched a switch in the molding. A panel rolled back revealing a square of blackness in the wall.

"Spare me the histrionics, Jim," she said disgustedly, her eyes looking into mine over the sight of the gun. Her finger tightened. "I wouldn't expect that kind of juvenile trick from you, staring over my shoulder and widening your eyes as if there were someone behind me. I'm not going to turn and look. You're not getting out of this one alive."

"Famous last words," I said as I jumped sideways. The gun boomed but the bullet plowed into the ceiling. Inskipp stood behind her, twisting the gun into the air, pulling it out of her hand. Angela just stared at me in horror and made no move to resist. There were handcuffs locked on her tiny wrists and she still didn't struggle or cry out. I jumped forward, shouting her name.

There were two burly types in Patrol uniforms behind Inskipp, and they took her. Before I could reach the door he stepped through and closed it behind him. I stumbled to a halt before it, as unable to fight as Angela had been a minute ago.

XIX

“Have a drink,” Inskipp said, dropping into Angela’s chair and pulling out a hip flask. “Ersatz terran brandy, not this local brand of plastic solvent.” He offered me a cupful.

“Drop dead, you....” I followed with some of the choicer selections from my interstellar vocabulary, and tried to knock the cup out of his hand. He fooled me by raising it and drinking it himself, not in the least annoyed.

“Is that any kind of language to use on your superior officer in the Special Corps?” He asked and refilled the cup. “It’s a good thing we’re a relaxed organization without too many rules. Still—there are limits.” He held out the cup again and this time I grabbed it and drained it.

“Why did you do it?” I asked, still wracked by conflicting emotions.

“Because you didn’t, that’s why. The operation is over, you are a success. Before you were merely on probation, but now you are a full agent.”

He grubbed in one pocket and pulled out a little gold star made of paper. After licking it carefully and solemnly he reached out and stuck it to the front of my shirt.

“I hereby appoint you a Full Agent of the Special Corps,” he intoned, “by authority of the power vested in me.”

Cursing, I reached to pick the damn thing off—and laughed instead. It was absurd. It was also a fine commentary on the honors that went with the job.

“I thought I was no longer a member of the crew,” I told him.

“I never received your resignation,” Inskipp said. “Not that it would have meant anything. You can’t resign from the Corps.”

“Yeah—but I got your message when you gave me a discharge. Or did you forget that I stole a ship and you set off the scuttling charge by remote to blow me up? As you see I managed to pull the fuse just before it let go.”

“Nothing of the sort, my boy,” he said, settling back to sip his second drink. “You were so insistent about looking for the fair Angelina that I thought you might want to borrow a ship before we had a chance to assign you one. The one you took had the fuse rigged as it always is on these occasions. The fuse—not the charge—is set to explode five seconds *after* it is removed. I find this gives a certain independence of mind to prospective agents who regret their manner of departure.”

“You mean—the whole thing was a frame-up?” I gurgled.

“You might say that. I prefer the term ‘graduating-exercise’. This is the time when we find out if our crooked novices really will devote the rest of their lives to the pursuit of law and order. When they find out, too. We don’t want there to be any regrets in later years. You found out, didn’t you Jim?”

“I found out something ... I’m not quite sure what yet,” I said, still not able to talk about the one thing closest to me.

“It was a fine operation. I must say you showed a lot of imagination in the way you carried it out.” Then he frowned. “But that business with the bank, I can’t say I approve of it. The Corps has all the funds you will need....”

“Same money,” I snapped. “Where does the Corps get it? From planetary governments. And where do they get it from? Taxes of course. So I take it directly from the bank. The insurance company pays the bank for the loss, then declares a smaller income that year, pays less taxes to the government—and the result is exactly the same as your way!”

Inskipp was well acquainted with this brand of logic so didn’t even bother to answer. I still didn’t want to talk about Angela.

“How did you find me?” I asked. “There was no bug on the ship.”

“Simple child of nature that you are,” Inskipp said, raising his hands in feigned horror. “Do you really think that any of our ships *aren’t* bugged? And the job done so well it cannot be detected if you don’t know where to look. For your information the apparently solid outer door of the spacelock contains quite a complex transmitter, strong enough for us to detect at quite a distance.”

“Then why didn’t I hear it?”

“For the simple reason that it wasn’t broadcasting. I should add that the door also contains a receiver. The device only transmits when it receives the proper signal. We gave you time to reach your destination and then followed you. We lost you for a while in Freiburbad, but picked up your trail again in the hospital, right after you played musical chairs with the corpses. We lent you a hand there, the hospital was justifiably annoyed but we managed to keep them quiet. After that it was just a matter of keeping an eye on doctors and surgical equipment since your next move was obvious. I hope you’ll be pleased to know that you are carrying a very compact little transmitter in your sternum.”

I looked at my chest but of course saw nothing.

“It was too good an opportunity to miss,” Inskipp went on. There was no stopping the man. “One night when you were under sedation the good doctor found the alcohol we had seen fit to include in one of your supply packages. He of course took advantage of this shipping error and a Corps surgeon made a little operation of his own.”

“Then you have been following me and watching ever since?”

“That’s right. But this was your case, just as much as it would have been if you knew we were there.”

“Then why did you move in for the kill like this?” I snapped. “I didn’t blow the whistle for the marines.”

This was the big question of the hour and the only one that mattered to me. Inskipp took his time about answering.

“It’s like this,” he drawled, and took a sip of his drink. “I like a new man to have enough rope. But not so much that he will hang himself. You were here for what might be called a goodly long time, and I wasn’t receiving any reports about revolutions or arrests you had made.”

What could I say?

His voice was quieter, more sympathetic. “Would *you* have arrested her if we hadn’t moved in?” That was the question.

“I don’t know,” was all I could say.

“Well I damn well knew what I was going to do,” he said with the old venom. “So I did it. The plot is well nipped before it could bud and our multiple murderess is offplanet by now.”

“Let her go!” I shouted as I grabbed him by the front of the jacket and swung him free of the ground and shook him. “Let her go I tell you!”

“Would you turn her loose again—the way she is?” was all he answered.

Would I? I suppose I wouldn’t. I dropped him while I was thinking about it and he straightened out the wrinkles in the front of his suit.

“This has been a rough assignment for you,” he said as he started to put the flask away. “At times there can be a very thin line between right and wrong. If you are emotionally involved the line is almost impossible to see.”

“What will happen to her?” I asked.

He hesitated before he answered. “The truth—for a change,” I told him.

“All right, the truth. No promises—but the psych boys might be able to do something with her. If they can find the cause of the basic aberration. But that can be impossible to find at times.”

“Not in this case—I can tell them.”

He looked surprised at that, giving me some small satisfaction.

“In that case there might be a chance. I’ll give positive orders that everything is to be tried before they even consider anything like personality removal. If that is done she is just another body, of which there are plenty in the galaxy. Sentenced to death she’s just another corpse—of which there is an equal multitude.”

I grabbed the flask away from him before it reached his pocket, and opened it. “I know you Inskipp,” I said as I poured. “You’re a born recruiting sergeant. When you lick them—make them join.”

“What else,” he said. “She’d make a great agent.”

“We’d make a great team,” I told him and we raised our cups.

“Here’s to crime.”

THE END

I'm Julie, the woman who runs [Global Grey](#) - the website where this ebook was published. These are my own formatted editions, and I hope you enjoyed reading this particular one.

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