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EARTHMAN, GO HOME!

POUL ANDERSON

Complete Novel



BAR THE SKIES FROM THIS WORLD

When Captain Sir Dominic Flandry heard of Unan Besar, he thought carefully of the possibilities the planet might offer. It had been a Terran settlement, but in the vast confusion of galactic colonization, it had been lost in the shuffle.

Lost? Well, perhaps not so much lost as kidnaped. For a civilization can develop in strange ways over three hundred years—and it looked as if this one had deliberately withdrawn from the rest of the universe.

It was the kind of situation that Flandry liked. And because he knew there was profit in intrigue, he decided to invade the planet—alone. But as soon as he had landed he found himself playing a game for his very life—with all the rules made by his world-wide opponents!

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second complete novel**

POUL ANDERSON was born in Bristol, Pennsylvania, and was graduated as a physics major from the University of Minnesota. Writing was a hobby of his, and he sold a few stories while in college. With jobs hard to find after graduation, he continued to write and found to his surprise that he was not a scientist at all, but a born writer. Best known for his science-fiction, he has also written mysteries, non-fiction, and historical novels.

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EARTHMAN, GO HOME!

by

P O U L A N D E R S O N

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TO THE TOMBAUGH STATION

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FIRST he was aware of rain. Its noise filled the opened air-lock chamber, a great slow roar that reverberated through the spaceship's metal. Light struck outward, glinted off big raindrops crowded together in their falling. Each globule shone as quicksilver. But just beyond that curtain was total night. Here and there in blackness a lamp could be seen, and a watery glimmer reflected off the concrete under its pole. The air that gusted into the lock chamber was warm, wet, and full of strange smells; Flandry thought some were like jasmine and some like rotting ferns, but couldn't be sure.

All his careful elegance had gone for naught: from the peaked cap with the sunburst of Empire, down past flowing silkite blouse and embroidered blue doublet, red sash with the fringed ends hanging just so, to sleek white trousers tucked in soft but shiny leather halfboots. He pressed a control button and descended from the lock. He felt very much alone.

The rain seemed even louder here in the open. It was striking on foliage crowding every side of the field. Flandry heard water gurgle in gutters and drains. He could make out several buildings now, across the width of concrete, and started toward them. He hadn't gone far when half a dozen men approached from that direction. *Receiving committee*, he thought, and halted so that they might be the ones coming to him. *Imperial prestige and so forth, what?*

As they neared, he saw they were not an especially tall race. He, who was about three-fourth Caucasoid, topped the biggest by half a head. But they were wide-shouldered and well-muscled, walking lithely. A nearby lamp showed them to be tawny brown of skin, with black hair banded across the forehead and falling past the ears, a tendency to-

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ward almond eyes and flattish noses. They wore a simple uniform: green pocketed kilt of waterproof synthetic, sandals on their feet, a medallion around each neck. They moved with a confident semimilitary stride, and haughtiness marked the beardless faces. Yet they were armed only with truncheon and dagger.

Odd. Flandry noted the comforting weight of the blaster at his own hip.

The squad reached him and deployed. There had been another man with them. One of the squad continued to hold a gracefully shaped umbrella over this one's head. It was a head shaven smooth, with a symbol tattooed on the brow in fluorescent gold. The man was short and slender, but seemed athletic. Hard to judge his age; the face was unlined, but sharper and with more profile than the others, a sensitive mouth and disconcertingly steady eyes. He wore a robe which flared outward from the shoulders and fell in simple white folds to the ankles. On its breast was the image of a star.

He regarded Flandry for several seconds before speaking, in archaic and thickly accented Anglic: "Welcome to Unan Besar. It is long since an . . . outsider . . . has been on this planet."

The newcomer sketched a bow and answered in Pulaoic, "On behalf of His Majesty and all the peoples of the Terran Empire, greetings to your world and yourself. I am Captain Sir Dominic Flandry of the Imperial Navy." *Intelligence Corps, field division*, he did not add.

"Ah. Yes." The other man seemed glad to slip back into his own language. "The dispatcher did mention to me that you spoke our tongue. You honor us by taking the trouble to learn."

Flandry shrugged. "No trouble. Neural educator, don't y' know. Doesn't take long. I got the implantation from a Betelgeusean trader on Orma, before I came here."

The language was musical, descended from Malayan but influenced by many others in the past. The ancestors of these people had left Terra to colonize New Djawa a long

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time ago. After the disastrous war with Gorrazan, three centuries back, some of those colonists had gone on to Unan Besar, and had been isolated from the rest of the human race ever since. Their speech had evolved along its own track.

Flandry was more interested in the reaction of the robed man. His beautifully curved lips drew taut, for just an instant, and a hand curved its fingers to claws before withdrawing into the wide sleeve. The others stood impassive, rain running off their shoulders, but their eyes never left Flandry.

The robed man exclaimed, "What were you doing on Orma? It's no planet of the Empire. We're beyond the borders of any empire!"

"More or less." Flandry made his tone careless. "Terra is a couple of hundred light years away. But you must be aware how indefinite interstellar boundaries are—how entire hegemonomies can interpenetrate. As for Orma, well, why shouldn't I be there? It has a Betelgeusean trading base, and Betelgeuse is friendly to Terra."

"The real question," said the other, hardly audible above the rainfall, "is why you should be here."

And then, relaxing, donning a smile: "But no matter. You are most welcome, Captain. Permit self-introduction. I am Nias Warouw, Director of the Guard Corps of the Planetary Biocontrol."

Chief of detectives, translated Flandry. Or . . . chief of military intelligence? Why else should the Emperor's representative—as they must figure I am—be met by a policeman rather than the head of government?

Unless the police are the government.

Warouw startled him by switching briefly to Anglic: "You might call me a physician."

Flandry decided to take things as they came. A folk out of touch for three hundred years could be expected to develop some strange customs.

"Do you always get these rains?" He drew his cloak tighter. Not that it could prevent his collar from wilting. He thought of Terra, music, perfumed air, cocktails at the Everest House with some bit of blonde fluff, and wondered dismally why he

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had ever come to this sinkhole planet. It wasn't as if he had orders.

"Yes—normally, about nightfall, in these latitudes," said Warouw.

Unan Besar has a mere ten-hour rotation period, thought Flandry. They could easily have waited another five of those hours, till their one and only spaceport came around into daylight again. I'd have been glad to stay in orbit. They kept stalling me long enough as it was; and then suddenly their damn dispatcher ordered me down on the instant. Five extra hours—why, I could have spent them cooking myself a really decent dinner, and eating it at a decent speed, instead of gobbling a sandwich. What kind of manners are these, anyhow?

I think they wanted me to land in darkness and rain.

Why?

Warouw reached beneath his robe and took out a vial. It held some large blue pills. "Are you aware of the biochemical situation here?" he asked.

"The Betelgeuseans mentioned something about it, but they weren't too clear."

"They wouldn't be. Having a nonhuman immunochemistry, they are not affected, and thus are not very interested. But to us, Captain, the very air of this planet is toxic. You have already absorbed enough to cause death in a few days."

Warouw smiled sleepily. "Of course, we have an anti-toxin," he went on. "You will need one of these pills every thirty or so of our days while remaining here, and a final dose before you leave."

Flandry gulped and reached for the vial. Warouw's movement of withdrawal was snake-smooth. "Please, Captain," he murmured. "I shall be happy to give you one now. But only one at a time. It is the law, you understand."

The Terran stood motionless for what seemed a long while. At last he grinned, without much jollity. "Yes," he said, "I believe I do understand."

THE SPACEPORT was built on a hill, a hundred jungled kilometers from the planet's chief city, for the benefit of the Betelgeuseans. A few ancient Pulaoic ships were also kept at that place, but never used.

"A hermit kingdom," the blue-faced skipper had growled to Flandry in the tavern on Orma. "We don't visit them very often. Once or twice a standard year a trading craft of ours stops by." The Betelgeuseans were ubiquitous throughout this sector of space. Flandry had engaged passage on one of their tramp ships, as the quickest way to get from his completed assignment on Altai to the big Imperial port at Spica VI. There he would catch the *Empress Maia*, which touched on the homeward leg of her regular cruise. He felt he deserved to ride back to Terra on a luxury liner, and he was an accomplished padder of expense accounts.

"What do you trade for?" he asked. It was idle curiosity, filling in time until the merchant ship departed this planet.

"Hides, natural fibers, and fruits, mostly. You've never eaten *modjo* fruit? Humans in this sector think it's quite a delicacy; me, I wouldn't know."

Flandry sipped raw local brandy and said, "There are still scattered independent colonies left over from the early days. I've just come from one, in fact. But I've never heard of this Unan Besar."

"Why should you? Doubtless the astronomical archives at sector HQ, even at Terra, contain mention of it. But it keeps to itself. And it's of no real importance, even to us. We sell a little machinery and stuff there; we pick up the goods I mentioned. But it amounts to very little. It could amount to more, I think, but whoever controls the planet doesn't want that."

"Are you sure?"

"It's obvious. They have one wretched little spaceport for the whole globe. Antiquated facilities, a few warehouses, all stuck way to chaos out in the woods—as if spaceships were

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still spewing radiation! Traders aren't permitted to go anywhere else. They aren't even furnished a bunkhouse. So naturally, they only stay long enough to discharge a consignment and load the exchange cargo. They never meet anyone except a few officials. They're not supposed to speak with the native longshoremen. Once or twice I've tried that, in private, just to see what would happen. Nothing did. The poor devil was so frightened that he ran. *He* knew the law!"

"Hm." Flandry rubbed his chin. Its scratchiness reminded him he was due for his bimonthly dose of antibeard enzyme, and he shifted to stroking his mustache. "I wonder they even let you learn their language."

"That happened several generations ago, when our traders first made contact. Anglic was inconvenient for both parties—oh, yes, a few of their aristocrats know Anglic. We sell them books, newspapers, anything to keep their ruling class up to date on what's happening in the rest of the known galaxy. Maybe the common people on Unan Besar are rusticating. But the overlords are not."

"What are they doing, then?"

"I don't know. From space, you can see it's a rich world. Backward agricultural methods, odd-looking towns, but crammed with natural resources."

"What sort of planet is it? What type?"

"Terrestroid. What else?"

Flandry grimaced and puffed a cigaret to life. "You know how much that means!"

"Well, then, it's about one A.U. from its sun. But that's an F2 star, a little more massive than Sol, so the planet's sidereal period is only nine months and its average temperature is higher than Terra or Alfzar. No satellites. Very little axial tilt. About a ten-hour rotation. A trifle smaller than Terra, surface gravity 0.8 G. As a consequence, fewer uplands, smaller continents, lots of islands, most areas rather low and swampy. Because of the weaker gravity and higher irradiation, it actually has less hydrosphere than Terra. But you'd never know that, what with shallow seas and heavy clouds everywhere you look. . . . Uh, yes, there's something the

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matter with its ecology also. I forget what, because it doesn't affect my species, but humans need to take precautions. Can't be too serious, though, or the place wouldn't have such a population. I estimate a hundred million inhabitants—and it was only colonized three centuries ago."

"Well," said Flandry, "people have to do something in their spare time."

He smoked slowly, thinking. The self-isolation of Unan Besar might mean nothing, except to its dwellers. On the other hand, he knew of places where hell's own kettle had simmered unnoticed for a long time. It was hard enough—impossible, actually—to keep watch on those four million suns estimated to lie within the Imperial sphere itself. Out here on the marches, where barbarism faded into unknownness, and the agents of a hostile Merseia prowled and probed, any hope of controlling all situations grew cold indeed.

Wherefore the thumb-witted guardians of a fat and fun-seeking Terra had stopped even trying, thought Flandry. They should make periodic reviews of the archives, sift every intelligence report, investigate each of a billion mysteries. But that would require a bigger Navy, he thought, which would require higher taxes, which would deprive too many Terran lordlings of a new skycar and too many of their mistresses of a new synthagem bracelet. It might even turn up certain alarming facts on which the Navy would have to act, which might even (horrors!) lead to full-scale fighting somewhere. . . .

Ah, the devil with it, he thought. I've just come from a mission the accounts of which, delicately exaggerated, will make me a celebrity at home. I have several months' unspent pay waiting. And speaking of mistresses—

But it is not natural for a human planet to cut itself off from humanity. When I get back, I'd better file a recommendation that this be checked up on.

Though I'm hardly naive enough to think anyone will act on my bare suspicion.

"Well, what the hell," said Captain Flandry. "Where can I rent a space flitter?"

THE AIRCAR was big, modern, and luxuriously outfitted. A custom job from Betelgeuse, no doubt. Flandry sat among deadpan Guard Corpsmen who said never a word, beside Warouw who was almost as quiet. Rain and wind were noisy as the car got under way, but when it slanted toward Kompong Timur, the weather had cleared. Flandry looked down upon a sprawling constellation of lights. He could see that the city borders faded into a broad lake, and that it was everywhere threaded with canals, which shimmered under mercury and neon glare. An experienced eye recognized certain other signs, such as the clustering of radiance near the central and tallest buildings, the surrounding zones of low roofs and infrequent lamps. That usually meant slums, which in turn suggested a concentration of wealth and power among the few.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To an interview. The governing board of Biocontrol is most anxious to meet you, Captain." Warouw lifted one eyebrow. It gave his smooth oval face a sardonic flicker. "You are not weary, I trust? What with the short day and night here, our people have gotten into the habit of taking several naps throughout the rotation period, rather than one long rest. Perhaps you feel ready for bed?"

Flandry tapped a cigaret on one thumbnail. "Would it do me much good to say yes?"

Warouw smiled. The aircar glided down to a landing terrace, high on one of the biggest buildings. As Flandry stepped out, the Guards closed in around him. "Call off the happiness boys, will you?" he snapped. "I want a quiet smoke." Warouw jerked his head. The silent men withdrew, but not very far. Flandry walked across the terrace to its rail, and looked at the sky—somewhat wistfully. God knew if he'd ever drink beer again on any planet of either. He had stumbled into something unmerciful.

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This building must be a hundred meters square. It rose in many tiers, pagoda-fashion, the curved roofs ending in elephant heads whose tusks were lamps. The walls were gilt, dazzling even at night. From this terrace it was a fifty-meter drop to the oily waters of a major canal. On the other side rose a line of palaces. They were airy, colonnaded structures, their roofs leaping gaily upward, their walls painted with multi-armed figures at play.

Even here, in the city's heart, he thought he could smell the surrounding jungle.

"If you please," Warouw bowed at him.

They went through an archway shaped like the gaping mouth of a monster and down a long red hall beyond. Several doors stood open to offices, where kilted men sat tailorwise on cushions and worked at low desks. Flandry read a few legends: Interisland Water Traffic Bureau, Syncretic Arbitration Board, Seismic Energy Commission—yes, this was the seat of government. Then he was in an elevator, purring downward. The corridor into which he was finally guided stretched black between white fluorescent pillars.

At its end, a doorway opened on a great blue room. In the center was a table, black wood inlaid with native ivory. Behind it sat the overlords of Unan Besar.

Flandry stepped closer, studying them from the camouflage of a nonchalant grin. Cross-legged on a padded bench, all twenty had shaven heads and white robes like Warouw, the same tattooed mark on their brows. It was a gold circle with a cross beneath and an arrow slanting upward. The breast insignia varied—a cogwheel, a triode circuit diagram, an integral DX, conventionalized waves and grain sheafs and thunderbolts—the heraldry of a government which at least nominally emphasized technology.

Mostly, these men were older than Nias Warouw, and not in such good physical shape. The one who sat in the middle must be the grand panjandrum, Flandry thought: a petulant fat face, and the vulture-claw sign of mastery on his robe.

Warouw had been purringly urbane, but there was no mistaking the hostility of the others. Here and there a

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cheek gleamed with sweat, eyes narrowed, fingers drummed the tabletop. Flandry made the muscles around his shoulder-blades relax.

The silence stretched.

"A formula of greeting, your prominence," bowed Flandry.

"Address me as Tuan Solu Bandang." The fat man switched his eyes toward Warouw. "Is this the, ah, the Terran agent?"

"Yes, Tuan." Warouw inclined his head briefly above folded hands.

They continued to stare. Flandry beamed and pirouetted for them. He was worth looking at, he assured himself smugly, being of athletic build and high-boned, straight nosed, aristocratic features. His eyes were gray, his brown hair cut close about the ears in Imperial style but sleek on top.

Bandang pointed uneasily. "Take that, ah, gun from him," he ordered.

"Please, Tuan," said Flandry. "It was bequeathed me by my dear old grandmother. It still smells of lavender. If anyone demanded it from me, my heart would be so broken I'd blow his guts out."

Someone else turned purple and said shrilly, "You foreigner, do you realize where you are?"

"Let him keep it if he insists, Tuan," said Warouw indifferently. He met Flandry's gaze with the faintest of smiles and added, "We should not disfigure this reunion moment with quarrels."

Flandry studied them. Warouw seemed the most intelligent and formidable of the lot, but after their initial surprise, they had all settled back into a disquieting habitual scornfulness. Surely the only firearm in the whole room didn't count for that little!

Bandang leaned forward, assuming unctuousness. "See here, ah, Captain. You'll understand, I trust, how, how—delicate?—yes, how delicate a matter this is. I'm, ah, sure your discretion . . ." His voice trailed off in a smirk.

"If I'm causing any trouble, Tuan, I apologize," said Flandry. "I'll be glad to depart at once." *And how!*

"Ah, no. No, I fear that isn't, er, practicable. Not for the

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nonce. My implication is quite simple, actually. I, ah, have no doubt that a man of your obvious sophistication can, er—grasp?—yes, can grasp the situation.” Bandang drew a long breath. His colleagues looked resigned. “Consider this planet, Captain: its people, its culture, isolated and autonomous for hundreds of years. The, ah, distinctive civilization which has inevitably developed cannot lightly be upset. Not without, er, great suffering. And loss. Irreparable loss.”

Having an inside view of the Empire, and unprejudiced eyes, Flandry could understand the reluctance of some worlds to have anything to do with same. But there was more here than a simple desire to preserve independence and dignity. If these characters had any knowledge at all of what was going on elsewhere in the universe—and certainly they did—then they would know that Terra wasn’t a menace to them. The Empire was old and sated. Except when driven by military necessity, it didn’t want any more real estate. Something big and ugly was being kept hidden on Unan Besar.

“What we, ah, wish to know,” continued Bandang, “is, if you come here with official standing? And if so, what message do you convey from your, um, respected superiors?”

Flandry weighed his answer, thinking of knives at his back and night beyond the windows. “I have no message, Tuan, other than friendly greetings,” he said.

“But you *have* come here under orders, Captain? Not by chance?”

“My credentials are in my spaceship, Tuan.” Flandry hoped his commission, his field agent’s open warrant, and similiar flashy documents might impress them. For an unofficial visitor could end up in a canal with his throat cut, and no one in all the galactic vastness would care.

“Credentials for what?” It was a nervous croak from the end of the table.

Warouw scowled. Flandry could sympathize with the Guard chief’s annoyance. This was no way to conduct an interrogation. Biocontrol was falling all over its own flat feet. The lowest-echelon politician in the Empire would have

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had more understanding of men, and made a better attempt at questioning such a quasi-prisoner.

"If the Tuan pleases," Warouw interposed, "we seem to be giving Captain Flandry an unfortunate impression of ourselves. May my unworthy self be permitted to discuss the situation with him privately?"

"No!" Bandang stuck his head forward, like a flabby bull. "Let's have none of your shilly-shally. I'm a man of few words, yes, few words and—Captain, I, ah, trust you'll realize we bear responsibility for an entire planet and—Well, as a man of sophistication, you will not object to narcosynthesis?"

Flandry stiffened. "What?"

"After all," Bandang wet his lips, "you come unheralded, ah, without the expected, er, preliminary fanfare or—Conceivably you are a mere impostor. Please! Please do not resent my, um, necessary entertaining of the possibility. If you actually are an official, ah, delegate, or agent, naturally, we will wish to ascertain—"

"Sorry, Tuan," said Flandry. "I've been immunized to truth drugs."

"Oh? Oh, yes. Well, then, we do have a hypnoprobe—Yes, Colleague Warouw's department is not altogether behind times. Ah, I realize that a hypnoprobing is an uncomfortable experience—"

To put it mildly, thought the Terran. His spine crawled. *I see. They really are amateurs. Nobody who understood politics and war would be so reckless. Mind-probing an Imperial officer! As if the Empire could let anyone live who heard me spill half of what I know!*

He stared into the eyes of Warouw, the only man who might realize what this meant. And he met no pity; only a hunter's wariness. He could guess Warouw's calculations:

If Flandry has chanced by unofficially, on his own, it's simple. We kill him. If he's here as an advance scout, it becomes more complicated. His "accidental" death must be very carefully faked. But at least we'll know that Terra is

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interested in us, and can start taking measures to protect our great secret.

The worst of it was, they would learn that this visit had indeed been Flandry's own idea, and that if he died on Unan Besar a preoccupied Service wouldn't make any serious investigation.

Flandry thought of wines and women and adventures yet to be undertaken. Death was the ultimate dullness.

He dropped a hand to his blaster. "I wouldn't try that, sonny boy," he said.

From the corner of an eye, he saw one of the Guards glide forward with a raised truncheon. He sidestepped, hooked a foot before the man's ankles, shoved, and clipped behind the ear with his free hand as the body fell. The Guard hit the floor and stayed there.

His comrades growled. Knives flashed clear. "Stop!" yelled an appalled Bandang. "Stop this instant!" But it was Warouw's sharp whistle, like a man calling a dog to heel, which brought the Guards crouching in their tracks.

"Enough," said Warouw. "Put that toy away, Flandry."

"But it's a useful toy." The Terran skinned teeth in a grin. "I can kill things with it."

"What good would that do you? You would never get off this planet. And in thirty days—two terrestrial weeks, more or less—Watch."

Ignoring stunned governors and angry Guards, Warouw crossed the floor to a telecom screen. He twirled the dials.

"It so happens that a condemned criminal is on public exhibition in the Square of the Four Gods." Warouw flicked a switch. "Understand, we are not inhuman. Ordinary crime is punished less drastically. But this man is guilty of assault on on a Biocontrol technician. He reached the state of readiness for display a-few hours ago."

The screen lit up. Flandry saw an image of a plaza surrounded by canal water. In the middle stood a cage. A placard on it described the offense. A naked man lay within.

His back arched, he clawed the air and screamed. It was as if his ribs must break with the violence of breath and

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heartbeat. Blood trickled out of his nose. His jaw had dislocated itself. His eyes were blind balls starting from the sockets.

"It will progress," said Warouw dispassionately. "Death in a few more hours."

From the middle of nightmare, Flandry said, "You took his pills away."

Warouw turned down the dreadful shrieking and corrected: "No, we merely condemned him not to receive any more. Of course, an occasional criminal under the ban prefers to commit suicide. This man gave himself up, hoping to be sentenced to enslavement. But his offense was too great. Human life on Unan Besar depends on Biocontrol, which must therefore be inviolable."

Flandry took his eyes from the screen. He had thought he was tough, but this was impossible to watch. "What's the cause of death?" he asked without tone.

"Well, fundamentally the life which evolved on Unan Besar is terrestroid, and nourishing to man. But there is one phylum of airborne bacteria that occurs everywhere on the planet. The germs enter the human bloodstream, where they react with certain enzymes normal and necessary to us and start excreting acetylcholine. You know what an overly high concentration of acetylcholine does to the nervous system."

"Yes."

"Unan Besar could not be colonized until scientists from the mother planet, New Djawa, had developed an antitoxin. The manufacture and distribution of this antitoxin is the responsibility of Biocontrol."

Flandry looked at the faces behind the table. "What happens to me in thirty days," he said, "would not give you gentlemen much satisfaction."

Warouw switched off the telecom. "You might kill a few of us before the Guards overcame you," he said. "But no member of Biocontrol fears death."

Bandang's sweating countenance belied him. But others looked grim, and a fanatic's voice whispered from age-withered lips: "No, not as long as the holy mission exists."

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Warouw extended his hand. "So give me that gun," he finished.

Flandry fired.

Bandang squealed and dove under the table. But the blaster bolt had gone by him anyway. It smote the window. Thunder crackled behind it.

"You *fool*!" shouted Warouw.

Flandry plunged across the floor. A Guard ran to intercept him. Flandry stiff-armed the man and sprang to the tabletop. An overlord grabbed at him. Teeth crunched under Flandry's boot. He leapfrogged a bald head and hit the floor beyond.

A thrown dagger went past his cheek. The broken window gaped before him. He sprang through the hole and hit the roof underneath. It slanted steeply downward. He rolled all the way, tumbled from the edge, and straightened out as he fell toward the canal.

4

THE WATER was dirty. As he broke its surface, alien smells filled his nostrils, and he struck out in search of darkness.

Dreamlike in this hunted moment, a boat glided past. Its stem and stern curved upward, extravagantly shaped, and the sides were gay with tiny electric lamps. A boy and girl snuggled in the waist under a transparent canopy. Their kilts and Dutch-boy bob seemed the universal style here for both sexes, but they had added bangles and had painted intricate designs on their skins. Music caterwauled from a radio. Rich kids, no doubt. Flandry sank back under water as the boat came near. He felt its propeller vibrations in ears and flesh.

When his head came up again, he heard a new sound. It was like a monstrous gong, crashing from some loudspeaker on the golden pagoda. An alarm! Warouw's corps would be after him in minutes. Solu Bandang might be content to wait, expecting the Terran to die in two weeks, but Nias Warouw

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wanted to quiz him. Flandry kicked off his boots and began swimming faster.

Lights blazed overhead at the intersection of the next canal. Everyone seemed focused on him. There was a thick traffic of boats, not only pleasure craft but water buses and freight carriers. Pedestrians crowded the narrow walks that ran along the housefronts, and the high bridges crossing the waterways. The air was full of city babble. Flandry eased up against the weed-grown brick of an embankment.

Four young men stood on the walk opposite. They were muscular, with the look of illiterate commoners in their mannerisms and the coarse material of their kilts. But they talked with animation, gesturing, possibly a little drunk. Another man approached. He was a small fellow, distinguished only by robe and shaven pate. But the four big ones grew still the moment they saw him. They backed against the wall to let him go by and bent their heads over folded hands. He paid no attention. When he was gone, it took them a few minutes to regain their good humor.

So, thought Flandry.

The chance he had been waiting for came. A freightboat putt-putting close to the canal bank in the direction he wanted. Flandry seized a rope bumper hung from the rail, and snuggled close to the hull. Water streamed silkily around his body and trailing legs. He caught smells of tar and spice.

Within two kilometers, the boat reached an invisible boundary common to most cities. On one side of a cross-canal, an upper-class apartment house lifted tiers of delicate red columns toward a gilt roof. On the other side there was no solid land, only endless pilings to hold structures above the water. There the lamps were few, with darkneses between, and the buildings crouched low. Flandry could just see that those warehouses and tenements and small factories were not plastifaced like the rich part of town. This was all sheet metal and rough timber, thatch roofs, dim light glowing through little dirty-paned windows. He saw two men pad by with knives in their hands.

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The truckboat continued, deeper into slum. Now that the great gong was stilled and the heavy traffic left behind, it was very quiet around Flandry. But if the canals had been dirty before, they were now disgusting. Once something brushed him in the night; with skin and nose he recognized it as a corpse. Once, far off, a woman screamed.

Suddenly the stillness and desertion were broken. It began as a faint irregular hooting, which drew closer. Flandry didn't know what warned him, but his nerves tingled and he knew: *School's out.*

He let go the bumper. The boat chugged on in haste, rounded a corner and was gone. Flandry swam through warm, slimy water till he grasped a ladder. It led up to a boardwalk, which fronted a line of sleazy houses with tin sides and peaked grass roofs and lightless windows. The night was thick and hot and stinking around him, full of shadows. No other human stirred. But the animal hooting came nearer.

After a moment, their hides agleam in the light of one lamp twenty meters away, the pack swam into sight. There were a dozen, about the size and build of terrestrial sea lions. They had glabrous reptile skins, long necks and snaky heads. Tongues vibrated between rows of teeth. Tasting the water? Flandry didn't know how they had traced him. He crouched on the ladder, the canal lapping about his ankles, and drew his gun.

The swimmers saw him, or smelled him, and veered. Their high blasts of sound became a shrill ululation.

As the nearest of them surged close, Flandry's blaster fired. Blue lightning spat in the dark, and a headless body rolled over. He scrambled up onto the walk.

The beasts kept pace as he ran, reaching up to snap at his feet. The planks resounded. He fired again and missed. Once he stumbled, hit a corrugated metal wall, and heard it boom.

Far down the canal, engines whined and the fierce sun of a searchlight waxed in his eyes. He didn't need to be told it was a police boat, tracking him with the help of the swimmers. He stopped before a doorway. The animals churned

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the water below the pier. Their splashing and whistling filled his skull.

He turned a primitive doorknob. Locked, of course. He thumbed his blaster to narrow beam and used it as a cutting torch, with his body between the flame and the approaching speedboat. The door opened under his pressure. He slipped through, closed it, and stood in the dark.

Got to get out of here, he thought. The cops won't know offhand precisely where I went, but they'll check every door in this row and find the cut lock.

He could just make out a gray square of window across the room and groped toward it. Canal water dripped off his clothes.

Feet pattered on bare boards. "Who goes?" A moment later, Flandry swore at himself for having spoken. But there was no answer. Whoever else was in this room—probably asleep till he came—was reacting to his intrusion with feline presence of mind.

He barked his shins on a low bedstead. He heard a creak and saw an oblong of dull shimmering light appear. A trapdoor in the floor had been opened. "Stop!" he called. The trapdoor was darkened with a shadow. Then Flandry heard a splash below.

It had all taken a bare few seconds. He grew aware of the animals, hooting and plunging outside. The unknown had nerve, to dive into the same water as that hell-pack! And now engine-roar slowed to a whine, a sputter. The boat had arrived. A voice called something, harsh and authoritative.

Flandry's eyes were adapting. He could see that this house-cabin, rather—comprised a single big room. It was sparsely furnished: a few stools and cushions, the bed, a brazier and some cooking utensils, a small chest of drawers. But he sensed good taste. There were a couple of exquisitely arabesqued wooden screens, and a fine drawing on a scroll which decorated one wall.

He stepped to the window on the side through which he had come. Several Guards crouched in the boat, flashing its searchlight around. A needle gun was mounted on its prow,

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but otherwise the men were armed only with their knives and nightsticks.

Flandry set his blaster to full power, narrow beam, and opened the door a crack. *I couldn't get more than one or two men at this range, he calculated, and the others would radio HQ that they'd found me. But could be I can forestall that with some accurate shooting. Fortunately, I count marksmanship among my many superiorities.*

The weapon blazed.

He chopped the ion beam down, first across cockpit and dashboard to knock out the radio, then into the hull itself. The Guards bellowed. Their searchlight swung blindingly toward him and he heard needles thunk into the door panels. Then the boat was pierced. It filled and sank like a diving whale.

The Guards had already sprung overboard. They could come up the ladder, dash at their quarry, and be shot down. Wherefore they would not come very fast. They'd most likely swim around waiting for reinforcements. Flandry closed the door with a polite "*Auf Wiedersehen*" and hurried across the room. There was no door on that side, but he opened a window, vaulted to the boardwalk beneath, and loped off fast and quietly. With any luck, he'd leave men and seal-hounds milling about until he was safely elsewhere.

At the end of the pier, a bridge arched across to another row of shacks. It wasn't one of the beautiful metallic affairs in the center part of town. This bridge was of planks suspended from vine cables. But it had a grace of its own. It swayed under Flandry's tread. He passed the big pillars anchoring the suspension at the other end—

One brawny arm closed around his neck. The other hand clamped numbingly on his gun wrist. A bass voice told him, very low, "Don't move, outlander. Not till Kemul says you can."

Flandry, who didn't wish a fractured larynx, stood death-still. The blaster was plucked from his hand. "Always wanted one of these," the mugger chuckled. "Now, who in the name

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of fifty million devils are you, and what d' you mean breaking into Luang's crib that way?"

The pressure tightened around his throat. Flandry thought in bitterness: *Sure, Luang escaped down the trap and fetched help. They figured I'd have to come in this direction, if I escaped at all. I seemed worth catching. This ape simply lurked behind the pillar.*

"Come, now." The arm cut off all breath. "Be good and tell Kemul." Pressure eased a trifle.

"Guards—Biocontrol agents—back there," rattled Flandry.

"Kemul knows. Kemul isn't blind or deaf. A good citizen should hail them and turn you over to them. Perhaps Kemul will. But he is curious. No one like you has ever been seen on all Unan Besar. Kemul would like to hear your side of the tale before he decides what to do."

Flandry relaxed against a bare chest solid as a wall. "This is hardly the place for long stories," he whispered. "If we could go somewhere and talk—"

"Aye. If you will behave." Having tucked the blaster in his kilt, Kemul patted Flandry in search of other goods. He removed watch and wallet, released the Terran and stepped back, tigerishly fast, ready for counterattack.

Vague greasy light fell across him. Flandry saw a giant by the standards of any planet, an ogre among these folk. He was 220 centimeters high, with shoulders to match. Kemul's face had from time to time been slashed with knives and beaten with blunt instruments; his hair was grizzled; but still he moved as if made of rubber. He wore body paint that wove a dozen clashing colors together. A kris was thrust in the garish batik of his kilt.

He grinned. It made his ruined countenance almost human. "Kemul knows a private spot," he offered. "We can go there if you really want to talk. But so private is it, even the house god wears a blindfold. Kemul must blindfold you too."

Flandry massaged his aching neck. "As you will." He studied the other man a moment. "I had hoped to find someone like you."

Which was true enough. But he hadn't expected to meet

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Kompong Timur's underworld at such a severe disadvantage. If he couldn't think of something to bribe them with—his blaster had been the best possibility, and it was gone now—they'd quite likely slit his weasand. Or turn him over to Warouw. Or just leave him to die screaming, a couple of weeks hence.

5

BOATS clustered around a long two-story building which stood by itself in the Canal of the Fiery Snake. Everywhere else lay darkness, the tenements of the poor, a few sweatshop factories, old warehouses abandoned to rats and robbers. But there was life enough on the first floor of the Tavern Called Swampman's Ease. Its air was thick with smoke, through which grinned jack-o'-lantern lights, and with the smells of cheap arrack and cheaper narcotics. Freightboat crewmen, fishers, dock wallopers, machine tenders, hunters and loggers from the jungle, bandits, cutpurses, gamblers, and less identifiable persons lounged about on the floor mats—drinking, smoking, quarreling, plotting, rattling dice, watching a dancer swing her hips to plang of gamelan and squeal of flute and thump-thump of a small drum. Occasionally, behind a beaded curtain, one of the joy girls giggled.

Flandry could hear enough of the racket to know he was in some such place. But there were probably a hundred like it, and his eyes had only been uncovered when he reached this second-floor room. Which was *not* the sort of layout he would have expected. It was clean, and much like the one he'd blundered onto earlier: simple furnishings, a decorative scroll, a couple of screens, a shallow bowl holding one stone and two white flowers. A glowlamp in the hand of a small, blindfolded wooden idol on a shelf showed that every article was of exquisite simplicity. One window stood open to warm breezes, but incense drowned the garbage smell of the canal.

Kemul tossed Flandry a kilt, which the Terran was glad

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enough to belt around his middle. "Well," said the giant, "what are his things worth after they've been cleaned, Luang?"

The girl studied the clothes Flandry had been forced to take off. "All synthetic fiber . . . but never have color and fineness like this been seen on Unan Besar." Her voice was husky. "I should say they are worth death in the cage, Kemul."

"What?"

Luang threw the garments to the floor and laughed. She sat on top of the dresser, swinging bare feet against its drawers. Her kilt was dazzling white, her only ornament the ivory inlay on her dagger hilt. Not that she needed more. She wasn't tall, and her face had never been sculpted into the monotonous beauty of all rich Terran women. But it was a vivid face; high cheekbones, full mouth, delicately shaped nose, eyes long and dark under arched brows. Her bobbed hair was crow's-wing color, her complexion dull gold, and her figure reminded Flandry acutely that he had been celibate for months.

"Reason it out, mugger," she said with a note of affectionate teasing. She took a cigaret case from her pocket and offered it to the Terran. Flandry accepted a yellow cylinder and inhaled. Nothing happened. Luang laughed again and snapped a lighter for him and herself. She trickled smoke from her nostrils, as if veiling her expression. Flandry tried it and choked.

"Well, Captain—as you style yourself—what do you suggest we do with you?" asked Luang.

Flandry regarded her closely, wishing the local costume weren't quite so brief. Dammit, his life depended on cool thinking. "You might try listening to me," he said.

"I am. Though anyone who breaks in on my rest as you did—"

"I couldn't help that!"

"Oh, the trouble you caused isn't held against you." Luang raised her feet to the dresser top, hugged her legs and watched him across rounded knees. "On the contrary, I

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haven't had so much fun since One-Eyed Rawi went amok down on Joy Canal. It ended unhappily, though, when poor old Rawi was killed. I hope this adventure doesn't end likewise."

"I hope so too," Flandry agreed.

Kemul, who was hunkered on the floor, snapped his fingers. "Ah! Kemul understands!"

She smiled. "What do you mean?"

"About his clothes and other valuables. They would be noticed, Luang, and Biocontrol would ask questions, and might even trace them back to us. And if it turned out we had failed to give Biocontrol this man they were hunting, it would be the cage for both of us."

"Congratulations," said Flandry.

"Best we surrender him at once." Kemul shifted uneasily on his haunches. "There might even be a reward."

"We shall see." Luang inhaled thoughtfully—and, to the Terran, most distractingly. "Of course," she mused, "I had best go back to my other place soon. The Guard Corps must be swarming all over it. They'll establish my identity from fingerprints." She looked at Flandry through drooping lashes. "I could tell them that when you broke in, I was frightened and escaped through the trap and don't know anything about the affair."

He leaned against the wall near the window. It was very dark outside. "But I have to make it worth your while to take the risk they won't believe you, eh?" he said.

She made a face. "Pool! That's no risk. Whoever heard of a Guard able to think past the end of his own snout? The real danger would come later, in keeping you hidden, out-world man. Swamp Town is full of eyes. It would be expensive, too."

"Let's discuss the matter." Flandry took another puff of his cigaret. It wasn't so bad the second time; probably his taste buds were stunned. "Let's get acquainted, at least. I've told you I'm an Imperial officer, and explained a little of what and where the Empire is nowadays. So let me learn something

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about your own planet. Check my deductions against the facts for me, will you?

"Biocontrol manufactures the antitoxin pills and distributes them through local centers, right?" She nodded. "Every citizen gets one every thirty days, and has to swallow it there on the spot." Again she nodded. "Obviously, even infants must have a ration in their milk. So every person on this world can be fingerprinted at birth. The prints are kept in a central file, and automatically checked every time anyone comes in for his pill. Thus no one gets more than his ration. And anybody in trouble with the law had better surrender very meekly to the Guards, or he won't get the next dose." This time her nod included a faint, derisive smile.

"No system ever worked so well that there wasn't some equivalent of an underworld," Flandry continued. "When the authorities began to get nasty, I struck out for the slums, where I figured your criminal class must center. Evidently I was right about that. What I don't yet know, though, is why as much freedom as this is allowed. Kemul, for example, seems to be a full-time bandit. And you, m'lady, appear to be a, ahem, private entrepreneur. The government could control your people more tightly than it does."

Kemul laughed, a gusty noise overriding that mumble and tinkle which seeped through the floorboards. "What does Biocontrol care?" he said. "You pay for your medicine. You pay plenty, each time. Oh, they make some allowance for hardship cases, where such can be proven, but that puts you right under the Guard's nosy eye. Or a slave owner gets a reduction on the pills he buys for his folk. Bah! Kemul would rather slash his own belly like a free man. So he pays full price. How that money is earned in the first place, Biocontrol doesn't care."

"Ah." Flandry stroked his mustache. "A single tax system."

The socio-economics of it became obvious enough now. If every person, with insignificant exceptions, had to pay the same price for life every two weeks, certain classes were placed at a severe disadvantage. Men with large families, for example, would tend to put the kids to work as young as

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possible, to help meet the bills. This would mean an ill-educated younger generation, still less able to maintain its place on the economic ladder. Poor people generally would suffer; any run of hard luck would land them in the grip of the loan sharks for life. The incentive toward crime was enormous, especially when there was no real policing.

Over lifetimes, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. At last a small class of billionaires—merchants, big manufacturers and landholders—lorded it over a beaten-down peasantry and a turbulent city proletariat. These distinctions became hereditary, simply because no one ever got far enough ahead to rise above his father's status. . . . If there had been contact with other planets, the necessities of interstellar competition would have forced Unan Besar into a more efficient pattern. But except for the occasional unimportant visit of a strictly segregated Betelgeusean trader, Unan Besar had been isolated these past three centuries.

Flandry realized he was oversimplifying. Luang, for instance; he didn't know quite what to make of her. But no matter for now. He was in Kompong Timur, where life was approximately as he had deduced.

"I take it, then, that failure to respect Biocontrol personnel is the only serious crime here," he said.

"Not quite." Kemul's fist clenched. "Biocontrol is chummy with the rich. Burgle a rich man's house and see what happens. Ten years in the quarries, if you're lucky. Enslavement, more likely."

"I see why Guards don't bother carrying firearms," said Flandry.

"They do in this section of town," Kemul looked still grimmer. "And they go in teams. And still they're apt to end up floating in the canal, with none to say who did it to them. So many people might, you see."

"He speaks of people he knows," said Luang. "He hasn't imagination enough to invent examples." Her tone remained bantering.

"But most times," Kemul finished doggedly, "the Guards don't come into Swamp Town. No reason for it. We buy our

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pills and stay out of the palace section. What we do to each other, nobody cares."

"Have you never thought of—" Flandry groped in his Pulaoic vocabulary, but couldn't find any word for revolution. "You commoners and paupers outnumber the ruling class. You have weapons, here and there. You could take over, you know."

Kemul blinked. Finally he spat. "Ah, what use has Kemul for fancy eats and a fancy harem? Kemul does well enough."

Luang caught Flandry's real meaning. He saw that she was a little shocked; not that she found any sacredness in the existing order of things, but the idea of complete social change was too radical.

"I realize Biocontrol has the sole knowledge of how to manufacture the antitoxin," Flandry said. "But once you stood over their technicians with a gun—"

"Listen to me," said Luang. "When Unan Besar was first colonized, Biocontrol was merely one arm of the government. Troubles came that I don't quite know about, foolishness and corruption. Biocontrol was staffed by men who were very clever and—what word?—saintly? They wanted the best for this planet, so they issued a proclamation calling for a certain program of reform. The rest of the government didn't like this. But Biocontrol was standing by the great vats where the antitoxin is made. The process must be watched all the time, you understand, or it goes bad. One man, pulling the wrong switch, can ruin an entire batch. Biocontrol could not be attacked without danger of wrecking those vats. The people were afraid they would get no more medicine. They forced the government men to lift the siege of Biocontrol, and yield."

"Then Biocontrol was the whole government. They said they would not rule forever, only long enough to establish the best social order for Unan Besar. One that was carefully planned and would endure."

"I see." Flandry spoke with a coyote grin. "They were scientists, and wanted a rationalized civilization. Probably they subscribed to some version of psychotechnocracy. It

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was a popular theory in those days. When will the intellectuals learn that scientific government is a contradiction in terms? Since people didn't fit into this perfect scheme—and the scheme being perfect by definition, this must be the fault of the people—Biocontrol never did find an occasion to give up its power. After a few generations, it evolved into an old-fashioned oligarchy. Such governments always do."

"Not quite." He wasn't sure how closely the girl had followed him. But her gaze was steady on him and she spoke with almost a scholar's detachment. "Biocontrol was forever Biocontrol. I mean, they have always recruited promising boys and trained them to tend the vats. Only after a long period of service, rising from grade to grade, can a member hope to get on the governing board."

"So . . . it is still a rule by technicians," he said. "Odd. The scientific mentality isn't well suited to governing. I'd expect Biocontrol would hire administrators, who would eventually make all the real decisions."

"That did happen once, about two hundred years ago," she said. "But a dispute arose. The corps of hireling experts started giving orders independently. Several Biocontrol people realized that Biocontrol had become a mere figurehead. One of them, Weda Tawar—there are statues to him all over the planet—waited until his turn to go on watch. Then he threatened to destroy the vats, unless the hireling corps surrendered itself to him. His fellow conspirators had already seized the few spaceships and were prepared to blow them up. Every human on Unan Besar would have died. The hirelings capitulated."

"Since then, Biocontrol has done its own governing. And during his novitiate, every member is trained and sworn to destroy the vats—and, thus, all the people—if the power of his fellowship is threatened."

That explains the general sloppiness, Flandry thought. There's no bureaucracy to control things like slums and crime rates. By the same token, Biocontrol itself no longer exists for any reason except to maintain the brewery and perpetuate its own meaningless power.

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"Do you think they actually would carry out their threat, if it came to that?" he asked.

"Many of them, at least," said Luang. "They are very harshly trained as boys." She shivered. "It's not a risk to take, outworld man."

Kemul stirred on the floor. "Enough of this butter-tonguing!" he grumbled. "We've still not learned what you really came here for."

"Or why the Guards want you," said Luang.

"They want me," said Flandry, "because I can destroy them."

Kemul half rose. "Don't joke Kemul" he gasped. Even Luang's cool eyes widened, and she lowered her feet to the floor.

"How would you like to be free men?" Flandry asked. His gaze returned to Luang. "And women," he added. "Obviously."

"Free of what?" snorted Kemul.

"Most obviously. . . . Oh. Yes. How would you like to be done with Biocontrol? To get your antitoxin free, or for a very low price that anyone can afford? It's possible, you know. You're being outrageously overcharged for the stuff, as a form of taxation which, I'm sure, has been screwed higher each decade."

"It has," said Luang. "But Biocontrol possesses the vats, and the only knowledge of their use."

"When Unan Besar was colonized," Flandry said, "this whole sector was backward and anarchic. The pioneers seem to have developed some elaborate process, probably biosynthetic, for preparing the antitoxin. Any decent laboratory—on Spica VI, for instance—can now duplicate any organic molecule. The apparatus is simple and foolproof, the quantity that can be manufactured is unlimited."

Luang's lips parted to show small white teeth. "You want to go there," she whispered, "and—"

"Yes. At least, that's what Brothers Bandang and Warouw are afraid I want to do. Not a bad idea, either. Mitsuko Laboratories on Spica VI would pay me a handsome com-

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mission for calling as juicy a market as Unan Besar to their attention. Hm, yes-s-s," said Flandry dreamily.

Kemul shook his head till the gray hair swirled. "No! Kemul doesn't have it badly, the way things are. Not badly enough to risk the cage for helping you. Kemul says turn him in, Luang."

The girl studied Flandry for a long minute. Her face was not readable. "How would you get off this planet?" she asked. "Well—" Flandry flexed his arms, trying to work out some of the tension that stiffened them and made his voice come out not quite natural. "Well, we can discuss that later."

She blew smoke. "For you," she said, "will there be a later?"

He donned the smile which had bowled over female hearts from Scotha to Antares. "If you wish it, my lady."

She shrugged. "I might. If you make it worth the risk and trouble. But Kemul already took everything you were carrying. What can you buy your next thirty days with?"

6

THE PART of Swamp Town between Lotus Flower Canal, the great spice warehouse of Barati & Sons, the Canal of the Drowned Drunkard, and those miserable tenement rafts where Kompong Timur faded into unreclaimed watery wastes, was ruled by Sumu the Fat. Which is to say, every resident with a noticeable income—artisan, rentier, joy girl, bazaar keeper, freight hauler, priest, wizard, coiner, et multifarious cetera—paid regular tribute to him. It was shrewdly calculated according to ability to pay, so no one resented it dangerously. Sumu even made some return. His bully boys kept rival gangs out of the district; sometimes they caught lone-wolf robbers and made examples of them. He was an excellent fence for goods stolen from other parts of town. With his connections, he could even help a legitimate merchant make an extra profit, or find a buyer for the daughter of

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some impoverished man who didn't know where his next pill was coming from. In such cases, Sumu didn't charge an exorbitant commission. He offered rough-and-ready justice to those who wanted to lay their quarrels before him. Every year at the Feast of Lanterns, he bore the whole expense of decorating the quarter and went about giving candy to small children.

In short, he was hated no more than any other overlord would have been.

Wherefore, Sumu's man Pradjung, making his regular rounds to collect the tribute, was distressed to hear that a new storyteller had been operating on Indramadju Square for two whole days without so much as a by-your-leave.

Pradjung, who was of ordinary size but notoriously good with a knife, went thither. He crossed a suspension bridge to the hummock where Indramadju Square had been constructed. The fountain was dry, its plumbing had been stolen generations back, but fruit and vegetable vendors from the outlying paddy-farms still brought their produce here to sell. Their booths surrounded the square with thatch and tiny red flags. Because it was cooler here than many other places, and the chance of stealing an occasional *modjo* not too bad, children and idlers could always be found by the score. It was a good location for storytellers.

The new one sat under the basin. He had the usual fan in one hand and the usual bowl set out for contributions. But nothing else about him was normal. Pradjung had to push through a crowd six deep before he could even see the man.

Then he gaped. He had never known anyone like this. The fellow was tall, reasonably young, and very well-muscled. But his skin was pale, his face long, his nose a jutting beak, his eyes deepset and of altogether the wrong shape. He had hair on his upper lip, which was uncommon but not unknown; however, this mustache was brown, like the close-cropped hair peeping from beneath his turban. He spoke with a strong, unidentifiable accent, and had none of the traditional storyteller mannerisms. Yet he was outrageously at ease.

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Which well he might be, for he spoke not of the Silver Bird or Polesotechnarch Van Rijn or any ancient themes known everywhere by heart. He told new stories, most of them indecent and all impudently funny. The crowd shrieked laughter.

"—Now after this long and mighty career, warring in the air for his country, Pierre the Fortunate was granted leave to come home and rest. No honor, no reward was considered too great for this prince among pilots." The storyteller glanced modestly downward. "But I am a poor man, O gentle and generous people. Weariness overwhelms me."

Money tinkled into his bowl. After pouring it into a bulging purse, the storyteller leaned back, lit a cigaret, swigged from a wineskin, and resumed.

"The home of Pierre the Fortunate was called Paris and was the richest, most beautiful of cities. There—"

"Hold!"

Pradjung muscled past the inner circle and confronted the newcomer. "What is your name, stranger, and where are you from?" snapped Pradjung.

The storyteller looked up. His eyes were an eerie gray color. "That's no way to begin a friendship," he reproved.

Pradjung flushed. "Do you know where you are? This is Sumu's territory, may his progeny people the universe. Who told an outland wretch like you to set up shop?"

"None told me not to."

The answer was soft enough for Pradjung to concede. After all, the story teller was earning at a rate which promised a good rakeoff. "New arrivals of good will are never unwelcome. But my master Sumu must decide. He will surely fine you for not coming to him at once. But if you are courteous to him and—ahem!—his faithful men, I do not think he will have you beaten."

"Dear me, I hope not." The storyteller rose to his feet. "Come, then, take me to your leader."

Sumu lolled in a silkite campaign chair, riffling through some papers with one hand and scratching his belly with the

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other. A pot of sweet black herb tea and a bowl of cookies stood in easy reach. Two daggermen squatted behind him, and he personally packed a gun.

"Well?" Sumu raised his bulldog face and blinked nearsightedly.

Pradjung shoved the storyteller forward with a rough hand. "This outland *sarwin* has been narrating on Indramadju for two days, Tuan. See how plump his purse has grown! But when I asked him to come pay his respects to my noblest of masters, he refused with vile oaths until I compelled him at dagger point."

Sumu peered at the stranger and inquired mildly, "What is your name, and where are you from?"

"Dominic is my name." The tall man shifted in Pradjung's grip, as if uneasy.

"A harsh sound. But I asked where you were from."

"Pergunungan Gradjugang. It lies beyond the Tindjil Ocean."

"Ah. So." Sumu nodded wisely. "Why did you not seek me out as soon as you arrived? Anyone could have told you where I live."

"I did not know the rule," said Dominic pettishly. "I thought I was free to earn a few honest coins."

"More than a few, I see," Sumu corrected. "And is it honest to deny me my right? Well, ignorance may pass for an excuse this time. Let us count what you have gotten thus far today. Then we can decide on a proper weekly sum for you to contribute, as well as the fine for not reporting immediately."

Pradjung grinned and snatched after Dominic's purse. The tall man stepped back and cast it himself into Sumu's lap. "Here, tuan," he exclaimed. "Don't trust this ugly man. He has reptile eyes. Count the coins yourself. But this is not one day's take. It's two days, yes, and a good part of one night. Ask in the square."

"Will they tell how much else you have hidden about you, begetter of worms?" sneered Pradjung. "Off with your garments! A fortune could lie in that turban."

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There proved to be nothing in his kilt except himself, but wound into the turban was a package. Pradjung unfolded it before Sumu's eyes. An awed silence fell on the room.

The wrapping was a blouse; some fabric hitherto unheard of, colored like the palest dawn, fine enough to fold into cubic centimeters but utterly wrinkleproof. Inside the package lay a multiple-dialed watch of incredibly fine workmanship, and a wallet not made from leather or any recognized plastic. The wallet held cards and money, whose papery substance was equally strange, whose engraving was beautiful but whose legends were in a peculiar form of the alphabet and an altogether foreign language.

7

SUMU MADE a sign against evil. "Nine sticks of incense to the gods at Ratu Temple!" He swung on Dominic, who had been released and knelt shuddering. "Well?"

"Tuan!" Dominic flopped on his face. "Tuan, take all my cash!" he wailed. "I am a poor man and the humblest of your slaves. Give me back those valueless trinkets bequeathed me by my poor old mother!"

"Valueless, I think *not*," Sumu mopped the sweat of excitement from his forehead. "We shall have a little truth out of you, storyteller."

"Before the Three-Headed One himself, I have told nothing but truth!"

"Come, now," said Sumu in his kindest tone. "I am not cruel. I should not like to have you questioned. Especially since I would have to entrust the questioning to Pradjung, who seems to have taken a dislike to you."

Dominic beat his brow against the floor. "It is a family secret, nothing but a family secret," he begged. "Your nobleness could not profit by hearing it."

"If that is so, rest assured I shall keep your secret inviolate," promised Sumu magnanimously. "Anyone here who cannot keep a secret goes straight into the canal."

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Eventually the story came out.

"My brother George found the ship," Dominic said between gulps for air and gulps of drink. His hands trembled. "He was a timber cruiser, and often went far into the mountains. In one deep, misty ravine, he found a spaceship."

"A ship from the stars?" Sumu made violent signs and promised another dozen joss sticks. He had heard of the Betelgeuseans, of course, in a vague way, and even seen a few of their goods. But nonetheless he bore a childhood of myth about the Ancestors, the Stars, and the Monsters, which a sketchy education had not removed.

"Just so, tuan. I do not know if the vessel came from the Red Star, whence they say Biocontrol receives visitors on certain nights, or from some other. It might even have been Mother Terra, for this shirt fits me. It must have crashed out of control long ago, long ago. Jungle had covered it, but could not destroy the metal. Wild animals laired within. Doubtless they had eaten the bones of the crew, but they could not open the hatches to the holds. These were not locked, however, only dogged shut. So my brother George went down and saw wonders beyond reckoning—"

It took half an hour to elaborate on the wonders.

"Of course, he could not carry such things on his back," said Dominic. "He took only these articles, for proof, and returned home. It was his thought that he and I should raise enough money somehow for vehicles to get the cargo out. How, I knew not, for we were poor. But surely we would never tell our overlord, who would take all the treasure for himself! Long we discussed the matter in secret. George never told me where the ship lay." Dominic sighed. "He knew me well. I am not a resolute man. The secret was safest with him."

"Well?" Sumu dithered in his chair. "Well? What happened?"

"Ah, what happens all too often to poor folk. I was a tenant farmer of Proprietor Kepuluk. George, as I told you, was a timber cruiser for the master's lumbering operations. Because of our scheming to get money, we neglected our

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work. Frequently our overseers reproved us with a touch of the electrostick. But the dream we had would not let us rest in peace. George was at last dismissed. He brought his family to live with me. But my plot of ground was so small it would barely support my own wife and children. We went swiftly into debt to Proprietor Kepuluk. George had a young and beautiful wife, whom Kepuluk seized for the debt. Then George went amok and fell upon Kepuluk. It took six men to drag him off the master."

"So Djordju is dead?" cried an appalled Sumu.

"No. He was sentenced to enslavement. Now he toils as a field hand on one of Kepuluk's plantations. Of course, my farm was taken from me, and I had to make my way as best I could. I found places for the women and children, then set out alone."

"Why?"

"What was there for me in Pegunungan Gradjugang, except a life-time's toil for barely enough wage to buy my pills? I had always had a talent for storytelling, so I yarned my way to the ocean. There I got a scullery job on the water-ship bound for this continent. From Tandjung Port I came afoot to Kompong Timur. Here, I thought I could make a living—even save a little money—and inquire with great discretion, until at last . . ."

"Yes? Yes? Speak up!"

Dominic sighed heartbreakingly. "My tale is ended, tuan."

"But your plan! What is it?"

"Ah, the gods hate me. It seemed easy enough, once. I would find a patron, a kind man who would not begrudge me a good payment and a position in his household, in exchange for what I could tell him. He must be rich, of course. Rich enough to buy George from Kepuluk and outfit an expedition under George's guidance. Oh, my lord—"

"Be still," commanded Sumu.

He lay back in his chair, thinking furiously. In the end: "Perhaps your luck has turned, Dominic. I have some small savings of my own, and am always ready to venture what I can afford in the hope of an honest profit."

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"Oh, my lord!"

"You need not kiss my feet yet. I have made no promises. But let us take our ease and share a midday meal. Afterward we can talk further."

The talk stretched on. Sumu had learned caution. But Dominic had answers for all questions: "I have had two years now, largest of masters, to think this out."

An expedition into the mountains would be costly. It should not be outfitted here in Kompong Timur. That would not only add the expense of transporting equipment across the ocean, but would attract far too much notice. (Sumu agreed. Some palace-dwelling *sarwin* like Nias Warouw would hear about it, investigate, and claim a major share of the loot.) Nor was it a good idea to use the primitive banking facilities of Unan Besar: too traceable. No, the cash itself must be smuggled out of town, across the lake and down the Ukong River to Tandjung, where Sumu's trusty men would take it across the ocean in their baggage. Once arrived in Pegunungan Gradjugang, they would pose as entrepreneurs hoping to establish a hardwood trade with the Selatan Islands, a market which the local bigwigs had neglected. They would buy a few experienced slaves as assistants, who would just happen to include Djordju. Then in secret, Djordju would guide Sumu's representatives to the ship.

The new hardwood company would buy some thousands of hectares from the immense Kepuluk holdings, and also acquire the flyers, junglecats, and similar machinery needed to exploit a forest. That would be expensive, but it couldn't be helped; any other way, Kepuluk would smell a rat. But thereafter, under cover of their logging operations, the expedition could plunder the ship at leisure. Doubtless its cargo should be sold very gradually, over a period of years, so as to avoid undue attention and to keep up the price of such exotic stuffs.

That night Dominic stayed in the house of Sumu. He was, in fact, a guest for several days. His chamber was pleasant, though it lacked windows, and he had enough company, for it opened directly on a barrackroom where the bachelor

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daggersmen lived. No one got past that room without a key to the automatic lock, which Dominic didn't ask for. He messed with the daggersmen, traded jokes, told them stories, and gambled. Cards on Unan Besar had changed faces, but were still essentially the same old pack of fifty-two. Dominic taught the boys a game called poker. They seized on it avidly, even though he won large amounts from them. Not that he cheated—that would have been fatal, under so many experienced eyes. He simply understood the game better. The daggersmen accepted the fact, and were willing to pay for instruction. It would take man-years to get back from neophytes elsewhere all that Dominic eventually won, but the Pulaoic mentality was patient.

Sumu shared that patience. He did not rush into Dominic's project, but made inquiries. A thornfruit dealer was located who had bought occasional shipments originating on Proprietor Kepuluk's holdings in Pegunungan Gradgjugang. Hm, yes, they were mountaineers and forest dwellers there mostly, weren't they? The climate made them pale-skinned, if that hadn't simply been genetic drift. Sumu had no idea what genetic drift might be; the term impressed him enough that he didn't stop to ask exactly how light a complexion was meant. He was shrewd, but no intellectual heavyweight.

He was convinced.

The investment was considerable, a hundred thousand silvers to start with. Two men were needed to lift the chest holding it. Those were Pradjung and a butcher boy named Mandau, both tough and strong and utterly reliable, especially since Pradjung still spat at Dominic's name. They would accompany the chest and the storyteller to Tandjung, where several others traveling by more open routes would meet them on the ship *Sekaju*.

Dominic left the house after sunset. Rain sluiced from a hidden sky, roaring on the canal surface and drowning distant lamps. A speedboat waited with Pradjung, Mandau, and the chest of silvers. Dominic kissed Sumu's unclipped toenails and embarked. The boat slipped into darkness.

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Several days previously, Dominic had proposed a route of his own as the least dangerous way out of town. Sumu had grinned and told him to stick to his storytelling. Dominic became so insistent that Sumu was forced to explain in detail precisely why a route down Burning Torch Canal and so out into the lake would attract less notice.

Now, when the boat planed close to the Bridge Where Amahai Wept, Dominic said a polite, "Excuse me." He reached across the cockpit and switched off motor and headlights.

"What in all hells—!" Pradjung leaped to his feet. Dominic slid back the canopy. Rain cataracted hot and heavy upon them. The boat slid toward a halt.

Pradjung snatched for the revolver Sumu had lent him. Dominic, timid spinner of yarns, failed to cower as expected. The chopping motion of his hand was instantaneous. A hard edge smacked on Pradjung's wrist. The gun clattered free.

The boat went slowly under the Bridge Where Amahai Wept. Someone leaped from the span. The deck thundered beneath that gorilla impact. Mandau snarled and tried to grapple. Kemul the mugger brushed his arms aside, put Mandau across one knee, broke his back, and threw him overboard.

Pradjung had drawn a knife. He stabbed underhand at Dominic's belly. But Dominic wasn't there any more. He was a few centimeters to one side. His left wrist struck out, deflecting the blade. His right hand took Pradjung's free arm and spun the daggerman around. They fell together, but Dominic had the choking hold. After a few seconds, Pradjung turned blue and lay quietly.

Dominic got off. Kemul picked up the bravo and threw him into the canal.

Half an hour later, he stood in Luang's quarters above the Tavern Called Swampman's Ease and gestured at the open chest. "A hundred thousand silvers," he said grandly. "Plus a good bit extra I made gambling. And a firearm, which I understand is hard for commoners to come by." It was thrust firmly into his own belt.

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The girl lit a cigaret. "Well," she said, "the usual black market price for a pill is two thousand." She put a vial on the table. "Here are ten capsules. You have credit with me for forty more."

The lamp in the hooded god's hands threw soft coppery light across her. She wore a little paint on the amber skin, which was not her custom. Luminous blue outlined eyes and breasts. There was a red blossom in her hair. For all its coolness, he thought her voice was not entirely firm.

"You have more than common luck, I think." Luang frowned at her cigaret, avoiding Flandry's look. "In the past two or three days, there have been public announcements in the name of Nias Warouw. A reward is offered for you dead and a bigger one for you alive."

"I made the swindle move as fast as possible," Flandry said. The air was so hot and damp that he hoped they wouldn't notice the sweat on him was suddenly rather cold. "I'm an experienced con man. It's half my profession, one way or another—" He broke off. "What do I owe you for my shirt and watch and wallet? It was good of you to give them back to me for a stake."

The girl bit her lip. "I hated for you to go out like that,—all alone—" She put the cigaret to her mouth and inhaled so hard that her cheeks filled with shadow. Abruptly and roughly: "You are very clever, Terra man. I never had allies, except Kemul. They always betray you. But I think you could be a profitable associate."

Kemul rose, stretching. "Time for Kemul's nap," he said. "Around sunrise we can talk of what's to be done. The Captain is wily, Luang, but Kemul thinks best he be gotten out of Kompong Timur and used elsewhere for a time. Till Warouw and Sumu forget him."

"Yes. We will talk about it tomorrow."

"Good rest, Luang," said Kemul. "Are you coming, Captain? Kemul has an extra bed."

"Good rest, Kemul," said Luang.

The giant stared at her.

"Good rest," she repeated.

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Kemul turned to the door. Flandry couldn't see his face—not that Flandry particularly cared to, just then. "Good rest," said Kemul, barely audible, and went out.

8

TWO THOUSAND kilometers north of Kompong Timur, a mountain range heaved itself skyward. It was dominated by Gunung Utara, which was also a city.

The morning after he arrived, Flandry stepped out on the ledge fronting his hostel. Behind him, a tunnel ran into black basalt, looping and twisting and branching, for it was an ancient fumarole. Rooms had been excavated along that corridor; airblowers and fluorescent tubes had been installed; plastisurfacing and tapestries softened bare rock. Most of the city was built into such natural burrows, supplemented with artificial caves—up and down the slopes of Gunung Utara.

Flandry could just see the cliff behind him, and about ten meters downward where the ledge tumbled below his feet. Otherwise his world was thick white mist. It distorted sounds. He heard machines and voices as if from far away and from impossible directions. The air was thin and cool, his breath smoked. He shivered and drew tighter about him the hooded cloak which local people added to kilt, stockings, and shirt. After all, they lived a good 2500 meters above sea level.

There was a rumbling underfoot, deeper than any engine, and the ground quivered a little. Gunung Utara dreamed.

Flandry lit an atrocious native cigaret. Luang had promptly sold all his Terran supply. Presently he would go look for some breakfast. Food in the lowlands had been heavy on rice and fish, but Luang said meat was cheaper in the mountains. Bacon and eggs? No that would be too much to hope for. Flandry sighed.

It had been a pleasant trip here, though. Extremely pleasant, on admirably frequent occasions. The girl had not merely

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sent him off to hide, but come along herself, with Kemul at heel. They had been ferried across the lake at night by someone who would keep his mouth shut. At the depot on the far side, she engaged a private cabin on one of the motorized rafts which plied the Ukong River. He stayed inside that, and she spent most of her time with him, while the raft chugged them slowly northeast to Muarabeliti. (Kemul slept outside the door, and said little in waking hours, spending most of his time with a marijuana pipe.) There they could have gotten an airliner, but since that was only for the wealthy, it seemed safer to go by monorail. Not that they jammed themselves into a third-class car like ordinary peasants; they got a compartment, suitable conveyance for petty bourgeoisie. Across a continent of jungle, plantation, and drowned lowland, Flandry had once more paid less attention to the scenery than a dutiful tourist should. And now they were holed up in Gunung Utara until the heat went off, with Biocontrol certain that Flandry must be dead.

And then?

He heard the lightest clack of shoes on stone and turned around. Luang emerged from the tunnel. She had yielded to this climate with a flame-red tunic and purple tights, but the effect was still remarkable, even before breakfast. "You should have called me, Dominic," she said.

"I'd rather have done something else to you," he answered, "but you looked so very asleep."

"I rapped on Kemul's door, but he is still snoring." She yawned, curving her back and raising small fists into the fog. "This is no town for long naps. Here men work hard and wealth flows quickly. It has grown much since I visited it last, and that was only a few years ago. Let me get well established, and I can hope to earn—"

"Oh, no, you don't!" Somewhat to his own astonishment, Flandry discovered that he retained a few absurd prejudices. "Not while we're partners."

She laughed, deep in her throat, and took his arm. It was not a very gentle gesture, though. She was curt and fierce

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with him, and would never say much about herself. "As you wish. But what then shall we do?"

"Live quietly. We've more than enough funds."

She let him go and snatched a cigaret out of a pocket. "Bah! Gunung Utara is rich, I tell you! Lead, silver, gems, I know not what else. Even a common miner may go prospecting and gain a fortune. It's soon taken from him. I want to do some of the taking."

"Is it quite safe for me to show myself?" he asked cautiously.

She looked at him. With his beard still inhibited, he needed only to shave his upper lip each day. Dye had blackened his hair, whose shortness he explained to the curious as due to a bout of jungle fungus, and contact lenses made his eyes brown. The harsh sunlight had already done the same for his skin. There remained his height and the un-Pulaoic cast of his face, but enough Caucasoid genes floated around in the population that such features, though rare, were not freakish. "Yes," she said, "if you remember that you are from across the ocean."

"Well, the chance must be taken, I suppose, if you insist on improving the shining hour with racketeering." Flandry sneezed. "But why did we have to come here, of all drizzly places?"

"I told you a dozen times, fool. This is a mining town. New men arrive each day from all over the planet. No one notices a stranger." Luang drew smoke into her lungs, as if to force out the mist. "I like not the god-hated climate myself, but it can't be helped."

"Oh, right-o." Flandry glanced up. A light spot showed in the east, where sun and wind were breaking the mists. A warm planet like Unan Besar could expect strong moist up-drafts, which would condense into heavy clouds at some fairly constant altitude. Hereabouts, that was the altitude at which the mines happened to lie. The area was as foggy as a politician's brain.

It seemed reckless to build a town right into a volcano. But Luang said Gunung Utara was nearly extinct. Smoldering moltenness deep underneath it provided a good energy

source, and thus another reason for this settlement; but the crater rarely did more than growl and fume. It was unusually active at the present time. There was even a lava flow. But the same engineers whose geophysical studies proved there would never again be a serious eruption, had built channels for such outpourings.

As the fog lightened, Flandry could see the ledge below this one, and the head of a crazily steep trail which wound down past tunnel mouths. He caught a sulfurous whiff.

"We should find it interesting for a while," he said. "But what do we do afterward?"

"Go back to Kompong Timur, I suppose. Or anywhere else in the world that you think there may be a profit. Between us we will always do well."

"That's just it." He dropped his cigaret butt and ground it under his sandal. "Here I am, the man who can free your whole people from Biocontrol—I don't believe in false modesty, or even in true modesty—"

"Biocontrol never troubled me very much." Her tone grew sharp. "Under a new arrangement—oh, yes, I can easily foresee what an upheaval your cheap antitoxin would bring—would I survive?"

"You could prosper in any situation, my dear." Flandry's grin died away. "Until you get old."

"I don't expect to reach old age," she snapped, "but if I do. I'll have money hoarded to live on."

The clouds rifted, and one sunbeam dashed itself blindingly along the mountainside. Far down the slope, among ledges and crags and boulders, a rolling road was being installed to carry ore from a minehead to a refinery. Antlike at this distance, men crawled about moving rock by hand. Flandry had no binoculars, but he knew very well how gaunt those men were, how often they lost footing and went over a cliff, how their overseers walked among them with electric prods. But still the sunbeam raced downward, splitting the fog like a burning lance, until it touched the valley under the mountain. Impossibly green that valley was, green fire streaked with mist and streams, against the bare red and

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black rock which surrounded it. Down there, Flandry knew, lay rice paddies, where the wives and children of the construction gang stooped in the mud as wives and children had since the Stone Age. *Yet once upon a time, for a few generations, it wasn't done this way.*

He said, "The hand labor of illiterates is so cheap, thanks to your precious social system, that you're sliding back from the machine era. In another several centuries, left to yourselves, you'll propel your rafts with sweeps and pull your wagons with animals."

"You and I will be soundly asleep in our graves then, Dominic," said Luang. "Come, let's find a tea house and get some food."

"Given literacy," he persisted, "machines can work still cheaper. Faster, too. If Unan Besar was exposed to the outside universe, labor such as those poor devils are doing would be driven off the market in one lifetime."

She stamped her foot and flared: "I tell you, I don't care about them!"

"Please don't accuse me of altruism! I just want to get home. These aren't my people or my way of life. Good God, I'd never find out who won this year's meteor ball pennant!" Flandry gave her a shrewd glance. "You know, you'd find a visit to some of the more advanced planets interesting. And profitable. D'you realize what a novelty you'd be, to a hundred jaded Terran nobles, any of whom could buy all Unan Besar for a yo-yo?"

Her eyes lit up momentarily. Then she laughed and shook her head. "Oh, no, Dominic! I see your bait and I won't take your hook. Remember, there is no way off this planet."

"Come, now. My own spaceship is probably still at the port, plus several left over from pioneering days, plus the occasional Betelgeusean visitor. A raid on the place or, more elegantly, the theft of a ship—"

"And how long until you returned with a cargo of capsules?"

Flandry didn't answer. They had been through this argument before. She continued, jetting smoke between phrases

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like a slender dragon. "You told me it would take several days to reach Spica. Then you must get the ear of someone important, who must come investigate and satisfy himself you are right, and go back, and report to his superiors, who will wrangle a long time before authorizing the project. And you admitted it will take time, perhaps many days, to discover exactly what the antitoxin is and how to duplicate it. Then it must be produced in quantity, and loaded aboard ships, and brought here, and—Oh, by every howling hell, you idiot, what do you think Biocontrol will do meanwhile? They will destroy the vats the moment they know you have escaped. There is no reserve supply worth mentioning. No one here could hope to live more than a hundred of our days, unless he barricaded himself in a dispensary. Your precious Spicans would find a planetful of bones!"

"You could escape with me," he said, chiefly to test her reaction.

It was as he had hoped: "I don't care what happens to all these stupid people, but I won't be a party to murdering them!"

"I understand all that," he said hastily. "We've been over this ground often enough. But can't you see, Luang, I was only talking in general terms. I didn't mean anything as crude as an open breakaway. I'm sure I can find a way to slip off without Biocontrol suspecting a thing. Smuggle myself aboard a Betelgeusean ship, for instance."

"I've known Guards, some of whom have been on spaceport duty. They told me how carefully the Red Star folk are watched."

"Are you *sure* Biocontrol will pull the switch?"

"Sure enough. They can take a final dose of medicine and flee in the other ships."

"If those were sabotaged, though—?"

"Oh, not every man of them would ruin the world for sheer spite. Perhaps not even most. Especially if it meant their own deaths. But they all stand watches at the vats. All it needs is one fanatic, and there is more than one. No!" Luang discarded her cigaret and took his arm again, digging

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sharp nails into his flesh. "If ever I find you scheming any such lunacy, I will tell Kemul to break your neck. Now I am starving, and this is also the day when I should get my pill."

Flandry sighed.

He let her go first down the ladder to the trail. They walked precariously, unused to such steepness, and entered the crowds at lower levels. An engineer, in gaily embroidered tunic and the arrogance of a well-paid position, had a way cleared for him by two brawny miners. A yellow-robed priest walked slowly, counting his beads and droning a charm. From a cave mouth several meters above the path, a wrinkled wizard in astrological cloak made faces at him.

A vendor cried his wares of fruit and rice, carried up from the valley at the ends of a yoke. A mother screamed and snatched her child from the unfenced edge of a precipice. Another woman squatted in a tunnel entrance and cooked over a tiny brazier. A third stood outside a jabbering joy cave and propositioned a gaping yokel from some jungle village. A smith sang invocations as he thrust a knife blade into the tempering solenoid. A rug seller sat in a booth and called his bargains to every passerby. High overhead, a bird of prey soared among the last ragged mists. Sunlight struck its wings and made them gold.

From a vantage point, Flandry could see how the city came to an end and the raw mountain slope stretched, northward: cinders, pinnacles, and congealed lava flows. Across a few kilometers of wasteland he spied a concrete dyke, banking the magma channel. Smoke hazed it, as the liquid rock oozed downward and froze. Above all tiers of city and all naked scaurs lifted the volcanic cone. The wind was blowing its vapors away, which was one thing to thank the lean cold wind for.

"Oh. This is the dispensary. I may as well get my medicine now."

Flandry stopped under the Biocontrol sign. Actually, he knew, Luang had a couple of days' grace yet, but the law permitted that much overlap. He also knew she had illicit pills and didn't really need to buy her ration. But only a dead

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man could fail to do so without drawing the instant notice of the authorities. He accompanied her through the rock-hewn entrance.

The office beyond was small, luxuriously furnished in the low-legged cushions-and-matting style of Unan Besar. A door led to the living quarters which went along with this job; another door was built like a treasury vault's. Behind a desk sat a middle-aged man. He wore a white robe with an open hand pictured on the breast. His pate was shaven, but the golden brand was not on his brow, for employees like him were not ordained members of Biocontrol.

"Ah." He smiled at Luang. Most men did. "*Good* day. I have not seen you before, gracious lady."

"My friend and I are newly arrived." With her to look at, Flandry didn't think the dispenser would notice him much. She counted ten silver, the standard price, down on the table. The dispenser didn't check them for genuineness, as anyone else would have. If you passed bad money to Biocontrol, you'd be in trouble enough the next time! He activated a small electronic machine. Luang put her hands flat on a plate. The machine blinked and hummed, scanning them.

Flandry could imagine the system for himself. Her print pattern was flashed by radio to a central electronic file in Kompong Timur. In seconds the file identified her, confirmed that she was indeed ready for her ration, established that she was not wanted by the Guards, made the appropriate addition to her tape, and sent back its okay. As the machine buzzed, Luang removed her hands from it. The dispenser took her money and went to the vault, which scanned his own fingers and opened for him. He came back without the coins, the door closed again, and he gave Luang a blue capsule.

"One moment, my dear, one moment. Allow me." He bustled over to fill a beaker with water. "There, now it will go down easier. Eh-h-h?" Flandry doubted if he was as attentive to the average citizen. At least, not judging from the way he used the opportunity to do a little pinching.

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"Where are you staying in our city, gracious lady?" he beamed.

"For now, noble sir, at the Inn of the Nine Serpents." Luang was plainly unhappy at having to linger, but, equally plainly, you were never impolite to a dispenser. In law he had no rights over you. In practice, it was not unknown for a dispenser to block the signaler, so that GHQ never recorded a given visit, and then hand his personal enemy a capsule without contents.

"Ah, so. Not the best. Not the best. Not suitable at all for a damsel like yourself. I must think about recommending a better place for you. Perhaps we could talk it over sometime?"

Luang fluttered her lashes. "You honor me, sir. Alas, business compels me to hurry off. But—perhaps, indeed, later . . .?"

She left while he was still catching his breath.

Once outdoors, she spat. "Ugh! I'll want some arrack in my tea, to get the taste out!"

"I should think you would be used to that sort of thing," said Flandry.

He meant it in all thoughtless innocence, but she hissed like an angry snake and jerked free of him. "What the blue deuce?" he exclaimed. She slipped into the crowd. In half a minute, he had lost sight of her.

9

HE CHECKED his stride. Chattering brown people thronged by, forcing him off the trailstreet and onto a detritus slope. After some while, he realized he was staring past the stone wall which kept these rocks off terraces below, downward to an ore processing plant. Its stack drooled yellow smoke, as if ambitious to be a volcano too. Nothing about it merited Flandry's unbroken attention.

Well, he thought in a dull and remote fashion, I still haven't had my breakfast.

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He began trudging over the scree, paralleling the trail but in no mood to go back and jostle his way along it. The downslope on the other side of the low wall became steeper as he went, until it was a cliff dropping fifty meters to the next level of dwellings. Stones scrunched underfoot. The mountain filled half his world with black massiveness, the other half was sky.

His first dismay—and, yes, he might as well admit it, his shock of pity for Luang and loneliness for himself—had receded enough for him to start calculating. Trouble was, he lacked data. If the girl had simply blown a gasket when he touched some unsuspected nerve, that was one thing. He might even use the reconciliation to advance his argument again, about escaping from Unan Besar. But if she had dropped him for good and all, he was in a bad situation. He couldn't guess if she had or not. A man thought he understood women, more or less, and then somebody like Luang showed up.

Of course, if the worst comes to the worst—but that's just what it's likely to do!

Hoy! What's this?

Flandry stopped. Another man had left the trail and was walking across the slope. A boy, rather, for he couldn't have been more than sixteen, with so round a face and slender a body. He looked as if he hadn't eaten lately and had hocked everything but his kilt. Yet that was of shimmery velvety cloth, not cheap at all. *Odd.*

Something about his blind purposefulness jabbed understanding into Flandry. The Terran began to run. The boy sprang up on the wall. He stood there a moment, gazing into the wan sky of Unan Besar. Sunlight flooded across him. Then he jumped.

Flandry did a belly whopper across the wall and caught an ankle. He almost went over too. "Oof!" he said, and lay draped with the boy squirming and swinging at the end of his arm. When his breath returned, he hauled his burden back over and dumped it on the ground. The boy gave one enormous shudder and passed out.

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A crowd was gathering, quite agog. "All right," panted Flandry, "all right, the show's over. I thank you for your kind attention. Anyone who wishes to pass the hat is free to do so." A Guard shoved through. No mistaking that green kilt and medallion, the knife and club, or the built-in swagger.

"What's this?" he said, in the manner of policemen the universe over.

"Nothing," said Flandry. "The boy got a little reckless and nearly had an accident."

"So? Looked to me as if he jumped."

"Only a game. Boys," said Flandry with sparkling wit, "will be boys."

"If he's contracted or enslaved, suicide would be an evasion of obligations and attempted suicide would rate a flogging."

"No, he's free. I know him, Guardsman."

"Even a free man has no right to jump within city limits. He might have hit somebody underneath him. He'd have made a mess for someone to clean up, that's certain. Both of you come with me now, and we'll look into this."

Flandry's spine tingled. If he got himself arrested on so much as a malicious moper charge, that was the end of the party. He smiled and reached inside his kilt pocket. "I swear it was only a near accident, Guardsman," he said. "And I'm a busy man." He extracted one of his purses. "I haven't time to argue this officially. Why don't you, ah, take ten silvers and go settle any claims there may be? It would be so much easier all around."

"What? Do you mean—"

"Quite right. The aggrieved parties ought to have at least two goldens between them. You know this city, Guardsman, and I'm a newcomer. You can find who deserves the payment. I beg you, do not burden my soul with debts I cannot settle." Flandry beamed and thrust the coins into the other man's hand.

"Ah. Ah, yes." The Guard nodded. "Yes, it would be best that way, wouldn't it? Seeing that no actual damage was done."

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"I am always pleased to meet a man of discretion." Flandry knelt beside the boy, who was coming to, and cradled the dark head in his arms.

"Take it easy, son," he advised.

"Oa-he, tuan, why did you stop me?" A shaken whisper. "Now I must nerve myself all over again."

"Ridiculous project," snorted Flandry. "Here, can you get up? Lean on me."

The boy staggered to his feet. Flandry supported him. "When was your last meal?" he inquired.

"I don't remember." The boy knuckled his eyes, like a small child.

"Well, I was on my way to breakfast, which by now is more like luncheon. Come join me."

The thin body stiffened. "A man of Ranau takes no beggar's wage."

"I'm not offering charity, you gruntbrain. I want to feed you so you can talk rationally, which is the only way I can learn whether you're the person I want to hire for a certain job."

Flandry looked away from the sudden, bitterly resisted tears. "Come!" he snapped. His guess had been right, the youngster was out of work and starving. A stranger to this area; obviously so, from the intricate foreign pattern of his batik and from his dialect. Well, an outlander might prove of some use to a stranded Imperialist. In any case, Flandry couldn't leave him to die.

Or, strictly speaking, I could if I had to. But it isn't necessary. I might as well kill a few hours playing good Samaritan, till I find out how I stand with Luang.

A teahouse wasn't far off. At this sunny time of day, most of its customers sat on a ledge outside, beneath giant red parasols, and looked down on a ravine full of clouds. Flandry and the boy took cushions at one table. "Tea, with a jug of arrack to lace it," Flandry told the waiter. "And two of your best *rijstaffels*."

"Two, sir?"

"To begin with, anyhow." Flandry offered the boy a cigaret. It was refused. "What's your name, younker?"

"Djuanda, son of Tembesi, who is chief ecologist on the Tree Where the Ketjils Nest, which is in Ranau." The head bowed above folded hands. "You are kind to a stranger, tuan."

"I'm one myself." Flandry lit his own tobacco and reached for his teacup as it arrived. "From, ah, Pegunungan Gradjugang, across the Tindjil Ocean. Name's Dominic. I came here in hopes of my fortune."

"Half the world does, I think." Djuanda slurped his tea in the approved Pulaoic manner. His voice had strengthened already, which underlined the anger in it. "So half the world are fools."

"Commoners have become rich men here, I am told."

"One in a million, perhaps . . . for a while, until he loses it to a cheat. But the rest? They rot their lungs in the mines, and their wives and children cough like amphibians in the rice paddies, and at the end they are so far in debt they must become slaves. Oh, tuan, the sun hates Gunung Utaral!"

"What brought you, then?"

Djuanda sighed. "I thought the Trees of Ranau were not high enough."

"Eh?"

"I mean—it is a saying of my folk. A tree which grows too high will topple at last. Surulangun Ridge is the earth-buried bole of such a tree. It fell a thousand years ago, three hundred meters tall, and the forest still bears the scars of its falling, and the Ridge is still hot from its slow decay. The old people made a parable of it, and told us not to strive beyond reason. But I always thought of how splendid the great tree must have been while it lived!"

"So you ran away from home?"

Djuanda looked at the fists clenched in his lap. "Yes. I had a little money, from my share of our trade with outland merchants. It got me passage here. Tuan, believe I never scorned my folk. I only thought they were too stiff in their ways. Surely modern engineering skills could be of value to us. We might build better houses, for example. And we

ought to start industries which would bring more cash money to Ranau, so we could buy more of what the merchants offered. Not merely toys and baubles, but better tools. This I told my father, but he would not hear of it, and at last I departed without his blessing."

Djuanda glanced up again, anxious to justify himself. "Oh, I was not altogether foolish, tuan. I had written to the mine chiefs here, offering myself as an engineer apprentice. One of them had written back, agreeing to give me a position. I knew it would be humble, but I could learn in it. So I thought."

"Have a drink," said Flandry, sloshing arrack into his guest's cup. "What happened?"

Djuanda demurred. It took several minutes and numerous sips of the now high-octane tea before he broke down and admitted he'd been played for a sucker. The job was as advertised, but he had to buy equipment like respirators out of the company slop chest, at a staggering markup. Before long he was in debt. Someone took him out on a bender to forget his troubles, and steered him into a clip joint. What with one thing and another, Djuanda lost what he had, borrowed from a loan shark to recoup, lost that too, and finally faced the prospect of crawling back to the loan shark to borrow ten silvers for his next pill.

"Couldn't you write home for help?" Flandry asked.

The immature face grew stiff with pride. "I had defied my father's will, tuan. In the hearing of all our Tree, I said I was now a man able to look after myself. Did I not at least make my own way home again, his dignity would suffer as much as mine. No. I found another eager young man, the gods be pitiful toward him, who wanted my position and could pay me somewhat for it. I sold all I owned. It was still not enough. I went to the dispenser and told him he could keep my last pill, recording it as issued to me, for fifty goldens. He would only give me five." (*Black market resale value, one hundred goldens*, Flandry remembered. The poor rube from Ranau had had no concept of haggling.)

"So I could not buy passage home," Djuanda continued.

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"But at least I now had enough to clear my name from debt. I flung the coins in the moneylender's face. They for days I tried to find other work, any work, but it was only offered to me if I would become a slave. No man of Ranau has ever been a slave. I went forth at last to die honorably. But you came by, tuan. So I suppose the gods do not want me yet," finished Djuanda naively.

"I see." To cover his own need for a thinking space, as well as the boy's, Flandry raised his cup. "Confusion to money-lenders!"

"Damnation to Biocontrol," said Djuanda, with a slight hiccup.

"What?" Flandry set down his own cup and stared.

"Nothing!" Fear rose in the dark liquid eyes. "Nothing, tuan! I said not a word!"

This might bear further investigation, Flandry thought with excitement. I was wondering what the hell to do about this lad. Couldn't have him tagging along with his big wet ears a-flap in the breeze, not when my scalp is still wanted. But this makes him, perhaps, a lucky find. The first I've heard who's said anything against Biocontrol itself. He's too young to have thought of it on his own. So, somewhere in his home town, at least one older person—probably more—has daydreamed about a revolution. . . .

The soup arrived. Djuanda forgot his terrors in attacking it. Flandry poured more liquor and ate at a calmer pace. While they waited for the main course, he said conversationally, "I've never heard of Ranau. Tell me about it."

A *rijstaffel*, properly made, is a noble dish requiring a couple of hours to eat. Then there was sherbet, with more tea and arrack. And a pair of strolling dancers came up to earn a few coppers by entertaining the wealthy man. And another jug of arrack seemed indicated. And there were toasts to drink: "To beautiful Ranau. To beautiful Pegunungan Gradjugang. To beautiful me. Down with Gunung Utara. Death to mine owners. Diseases to clip joint keepers. Down with arrack. Straight down. Health to all honest cardsharps.

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Health to their assistants. Health to the gods. *Proost. Salud. Gambai. Skaal. Zivio*— (About this time they lost track.)

The white sun climbed to the zenith and toppled. Shadows rose under the mountain. When the sun went behind the crater, the sky was still blue, but it darkened rapidly and the evening star was kindled over eastern ridges. A low cold wind piped along ashen slopes, whipping the first streamers of cloud before it.

Flandry stood up, relieving cramped muscles in a giant yawn. "We'll go back to my room," he suggested. Djuanda, unhardened to drinking, gave him a blurry look. Flandry laughed and tossed the boy his cloak. "Here, better put this on. You look as if you can stand an overnight nap. We'll talk further after sunrise."

It seemed as good a way as any of putting Djuanda on the shelf while he assessed his own situation with respect to Luang. *And to Kemul. Never forget those enormous strangler's hands.* Alcohol glowed along Flandry's veins, but his new confidence could also be justified logically. If Luang had indeed decided to hate him, or even if she remained too stubborn about an escape attempt, Djuanda offered a ready-made entree to Ranau. What hints he had gotten suggested to Flandry that Ranau could prove useful. Very useful, perhaps.

Below the retaining wall, where shadows had already engulfed the slopes, lamps were twinkling to life. But fog rose up, to blur and finally smother those tiny strewn stars. Flandry guided a somewhat wobbly Djuanda, who sang songs, up the sharp trail toward the Inn of the Nine Serpents. Having negotiated the last ladder and crossed the terrace, he went down the fumarole to his door. It had an ancient type of lock, he must grope for his key. *No, wait, it wasn't locked after all, so his companions must be in there expecting his return.* . . . With a split second's hesitation, Flandry opened the door and stepped through.

Two green-kilted men snatched at his arms. Across the chamber, Flandry saw a dozen more. Kemul and Luang sat with ankles lashed together. Flandry got one look at the girl's face turned toward his. "GET OUT!" he heard her scream.

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A Guard smacked his stick against her temple. She sagged into Kemul's lap. The mugger roared.

Nias Warouw leaned against the farther wall, smoking an outplanet cigaret and smiling.

Flandry had barely glimpsed the men closing in on either side. His reaction was too fast for thought. Spinning on his heel, he drove stiff-held fingers into the throat before him. It was one way to break your hand, unless you struck your enemy with a vector precisely normal to the skin. Flandry opened the throat and tore the windpipe across.

The other man was upon his back. Arms closed around the Terran's neck. Flandry's head was already down, chin protecting larynx. He dropped straight through the hug, hit the floor and rolled over.

The Guard backed into the doorway. His knife gleamed forth. The rest of Warouw's troop stalked closer, their own blades drawn.

Flandry bounced to his feet, reached in his shirt, and yanked out the pistol he had captured.

He didn't waste his breath crowing. Not when knives and clubs could be hurled from every side. He shot.

Four men went down in as many explosions. The others milled back. Flandry's eyes searched through a reeking haze of cordite. *Where was their chief now?* Warouw looked out from behind one of the rough pillars upholding the ceiling. Still he smiled. Flandry fired and missed. Warouw's right hand emerged, with a modern Betelgeusean blaster.

Flandry didn't stop for heroics. He didn't even stop to make a conscious decision. His chance of hitting Warouw with his own clumsy weapon was negligible. A single wide-beam low-energy blaster shot couldn't possibly miss. It would roll him screaming on the floor. Later, if he wanted to take the trouble, Warouw could have his seared prisoner treated in some hospital.

The Guard at the door was down with a slug in his chest. The door stood open. Flandry went through it.

As he burst out on the terrace again, Warouw was close behind. The rest of the Guards swarmed shouting in their

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wake. The dusk was cool and blue, almost palpable, surrounding all things and drowning them. Mist and smoke hung on it. Flandry bounded down the ladder to the trail street.

There went a rumbling through air and earth. Briefly, flame gushed in the sky. From an open doorway came the sound of crockery falling and smashing; a woman ran out with a scream. Flandry glimpsed several men halted in their tracks, looking up toward the crater. Their bodies were shadows in this vague twilight, but the gleam of a lamp touched white eyeballs. Further down the trail, the barely visible mass of the crowds had stopped seething. Their mutter lifted between black walls.

Gunung Utara was angry.

Warouw paused only an instant at the foot of the ladder. Then a flashbeam sprang from his left hand and speared Flandry. The Terran whirled, dashed from the light, over the pebbles to the retaining wall. He heard footfalls rattle behind him.

At this point, he remembered, the downslope beyond the wall was steep and rugged. He made out a boulder, and leaped from the wall to its top. Another shock went through the ground. The boulder stirred beneath him and he heard lesser stones grind valleyward. Warouw's flash darted from the wall, here, there, hunting him. *Where to go?* He could see naught but darkness and thickening fogs. *No, wiat . . . was that another jut of rock, two meters away? No time to wonder.* He sprang. He almost missed, and heard below him the shifting of debris which would cut his feet to rags if he landed in it. He grasped at invisible roughnesses, pulled himself up on top of the crag, spied another mass below him, and jumped to that.

Warouw's light bobbed in pursuit.

Flandry realized he was cutting across town. He didn't know how long he sprang from coign to coign. It was all mist and darkness. Somehow he crossed another safety wall, landed on a terrace, scrambled to the trail beneath, and sped among emptied caves.

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Panther to his mountain goat, Warouw followed. Once in a while, for a fractional second, his light picked out the Terran.

Then Flandry was beyond the city. The trail petered out. He ran across a bare slope, over black cinders and among crags like tall ghosts.

He could just see how sharply the ground rose on his left, almost a cliff, up to the crater rim. Gunung Utara thundered. Flandry felt the noise in his teeth and marrow. Cinders shifted, dust filled his nostrils. Somewhere a boulder went hurtling and bouncing down toward the valley. Smoke boiled from the crater, a solid column three kilometers high, lit from beneath with dull flickering red.

Flandry looked back. The flashbeam jiggled in a gloom where streamers of mist seemed to glow white. He lurched onward. A few times he stumbled, teetered on the uneasy slope, and heard a roar as the scree slid downward. No use heading that way, unless he wanted to die in chunks. He sobbed for air, his lungs were twin deserts and his gullet afire.

A sheer wall rose before him. He ran into it and stared stupidly for seconds before he comprehended. *The magma dyke. Yes. Yes, that was it. Must be some way up . . . here, a ladder, iron rungs set into the concrete. . . .*

He stood on a railed platform and looked down into the channel. The molten rock threw gusts of heat and poison gas at him. It growled and glowed, ember-colored, but he thought he could see tiny flames shoot back and forth across its current. *If he wasn't crazy. If he wasn't dreaming.*

There was no way to go from here. No bridge, no catwalk to the other side. Not even a flat top on the levee itself. Only the platform, where the engineers could stand to check the stone river. Why should there be more? Flandry leaned on the rail and fought to breathe.

A voice from below, hardly discernible through racing blood and the snarl of Gunung Utara, but cool, almost amused: "If you wish to immolate yourself in the lava, Captain, you still have time. Or you can stay there, holding

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us off, till the fumes have overcome you. Or, of course, you can surrender now. In that case, the persons who assisted you will not be put in the cage."

Flandry croaked, "Will you let them go?"

"Come, come," chided Warouw. "Let us be sensible. I promise nothing except to spare them the ultimate punishment."

Somewhere in the pounding weariness of his brain, Flandry thought that he should at least make an epigram. But it was too much like work. He threw his gun into the lava. "I'll be down in a minute," he sighed.

10

AWAKENING was slow, almost luxurious until he realized the aches and dullnesses in him. He sat up with a groan which turned into an obscenity.

But the chamber was large and cool. Its view of gardens, pools, and small arched bridges was very little spoiled by a wrought-iron grille set in the windowframe. A clean outfit of kilt and sandals lay waiting next to the low bedstead. An alcove behind a screen held a bathroom, complete with shower.

"Well," murmured Flandry to himself, as he let hot needles of water wash some of the stiffness out, "it's the minimum decent thing they can do for me, after last night." That memory brought a shiver, and he hurriedly continued his graveyard whistling: "So let's hope they do the most. Breakfast, dancing girls, and a first-class one-way ticket to Terra."

Not that they had tortured him. Warouw wasn't that crude—Flandry hoped. Most of the physical suffering had been due to his own exhaustion. They didn't let him sleep, but hustled him straight to a highspeed aircar and questioned him all the way to wherever-this-was. Thereafter they continued the grilling, established that he was indeed immune to any drug in their inquisitorial pharmacopeia, but did their

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best to break his will with his own sheer grogginess. Flandry was on to that method, having applied it himself from time to time; he'd been able to cushion the worst effects by relaxation techniques.

Still, it had been no fun. He didn't even remember being conducted to this room when the party broke up.

He examined himself in the mirror. His dyed hair was showing its natural hue at the roots, his mustache was noticeable again, and the high cheekbones stood forth under a skin stretched tight. Without their lenses, his eyes revealed their own color, but more washed out than normal. *I was interrogated a long time, he thought. And then, of course, I may easily have slept for twenty or thirty hours.*

He was scarcely dressed when the door opened. A pair of Guards glowered at him. There were truncheons in their hands. "Come," snapped one. Flandry came. He felt inwardly lepidopteral. Any why not? For a captain's lousy pay, did the Imperium expect courage too?

He seemed to be in a residential section—rather luxurious, its hallways graciously decorated, servants scurrying obsequiously about—within a much larger building. *Or . . . not exactly residential.* The apartments he glimpsed didn't look very lived in. *Transient, yes, that must be it. A hostel for Biocontrol personnel whose business brought them here.* He began to realize precisely where he must be, and his scalp prickled.

At the end of the walk, he was shown into a suite bigger than most. It was fitted in austere taste: black pillars against silvery walls, black tables, one lotus beneath a scroll which was a calligraphic masterpiece. An archway opened on a balcony overlooking gardens, a metal stockade, jungled hills rolling into blue distances. Sunlight and birdsong came through.

Nias Warouw sat on a cushion before a table set for breakfast. He gestured at the Guards, who bowed very low and departed. Flandry took a place opposite their master. Warouw's short supple body was draped in a loose robe

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which showed the blaster at his hip. He smiled and poured Flandry's tea with his own hands.

"Good day, Captain," he said. "I trust you are feeling better?"

"Slightly better than a toad with glanders," Flandry admitted.

A servant pattered in, knelt, and put a covered dish on the table. "May I recommend this?" said Warouw. "Filet of *badjung* fish, lightly fried in spiced oil. It is eaten with slices of chilled cocout—so."

Flandry didn't feel hungry till he began. Then he became suddenly sharkish. Warouw crinkled his face in the still wider smile and heaped the Terran's plate with rice, in which meat and baked fruits were shredded. By the time a platter of tiny omelets arrived, Flandry's animal needs were satisfied enough that he could stop to ask for the recipe.

Warouw gave it to him. "Possibly the aspect of your wide-ranging career most to be envied by a planet-bound individual such as myself, Captain," he added, "is the gastronomical. To be sure, certain crops of Terran origin must be common to a great many human-colonized planets. But soil, climate, and mutation doubtless vary the flavors enormously. And then there are the native foods. Not to mention the sociological aspect: the local philosophy and practice of cuisine. I am happy that our own developments apparently find favor with you."

"Ummm, grmff, chmp," said Flandry, reaching for seconds.

"I myself could wish for more intercourse between Unan Besar and the rest of the galaxy," said Warouw. "Unfortunately, that is impracticable." He poured himself a cup of tea and sipped it, watching the other man with eyes as alert as a squirrel's. He had not eaten heavily.

The Terran finished in half an hour or so. Not being accustomed from babyhood to sit cross-legged, he sprawled on the floor in his relaxation. Warouw offered him Spican cigarillos, which he accepted like his soul's salvation.

Inwardly, he thought: *This is an old gimmick. Make things tough for your victim, then quickly ease off the pressure and*

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Speak kindly to him. It's broken down a lot of men. As for me . . . I'd better enjoy it while it lasts.

Because it wasn't going to.

He drew blessedly mild smoke into his throat and let it tickle his nose on the way out. "Tell me, Captain, if you will," said Warouw, "what is your opinion of the Terran poet L. de le Roi? I have gotten a few of his tapes from the Betelgeuseans, and while of course a great many nuances must escape me—"

Flandry sighed. "Fun is fun," he said, "but business is business."

"I don't quite understand, Captain."

"Yes, you do. You set an excellent table, and I'm sure your conversation is almost as cultural as you believe. But it's hard for me to expand like a little flowerbud when I don't know what's happening to my friends."

Warouw stiffened, it was barely perceptible, and the first syllable or two of his answer was ever so faintly off key. However, it came smoothly enough, with an amiable chuckle: "You must allow me a few items in reserve, Captain. Accept my word that they are not at the moment suffering at the hands of my department, and let us discuss other things."

Flandry didn't press his point. It would only chill the atmosphere. And he wanted to do as much probing as he could while Warouw was still trying the benevolent uncle act.

Not that anything he learned would help him much. He was thoroughly trapped, and in a while he might be thoroughly destroyed. But action, any action, even this verbal shadow-boxing, was one way to avoid thinking about such impolite details.

"Professionally speaking," he said, "I'm interested to know how you trapped me."

"Ah." Warouw gestured with his own cigarillo, not at all loath to expound his cleverness. "Well, when you made your, eh, departure in Kompong Timur, it might have been the hysterical act of a fool who had simply blundered onto us. If so, you were not to be worried about. But I dared not as-

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sume it. Your whole manner indicated otherwise, not to mention the documents, official and personal, which I later studied on your ship. Accordingly, my working hypothesis was that you had some plan for surviving beyond the period in which your first antitoxin dose would be effective. Was there already an underground organization of extraplanetary agents, whom you would seek out? I admit the search for such a group took most of my time for numerous days."

Warouw grimaced. "I pray your sympathy for my plight," he said. "The Guards have faced no serious task for generations. No one resists Biocontrol! The Guards, the entire organization, are escorts and watchdogs at best, idiots at worst. Ignoring the proletariat as they do, they have no experience of the criminal subtleties developed by the proletariat. With such incompetents must I chase a crafty up-to-date profession like yourself."

Flandry nodded. He'd gotten the same impression. Modern police and intelligence methodology—even military science—didn't exist on Unan Besar. Poor, damned Nias Warouw, a born detective forced to re-invent the whole art of detection!

But he had done a disquietingly good job of it.

"My first break came when a district boss name Sumu—ah, you remember?" Warouw grinned. "My congratulations, Captain. He was unwilling to admit how you had taken him, but afraid not to report that he had unwittingly entertained a man of your description. I forced the whole tale from him. Delicious! But then I began to think over the datum it presented. It took me days more; I am not used to such problems. In the end, however, I decided that you would not have carried out so risky an exploit except for money, which you doubtless needed to buy illegal antitoxin. (Oh, yes, I know there is some. I have been trying to tighten up controls on production and distribution. But the inefficiency of centuries must be overcome.) Well, if you had to operate in such fashion, you were *not* in touch with a secret organization. Probably no such organization existed! However, you must have made some contacts in Swamp Town."

Warouw blew smoke rings, cocked his head at the trill of a

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songbird, and resumed. "I called for the original reports on the case. It was established that in fleeing us you had broken into the establishment of a certain courtesan. She had told the Guards that she fled in terror and knew nothing else. There had been no reason to doubt her. Nor was there now, *a priori*, but I had no other lead. I ordered her brought in for questioning. My squad was told she had left several days before, destination unknown. I ordered that a watch be kept on her antitoxin record. When she appeared at Gunung Utara, I was informed. I flew there within the hour.

"The local dispenser remembered her vividly, and had a recollection of a tall man with her. She had told him where she was staying, so we checked the inn. Yes, she had been careless enough to tell the truth. The innkeeper described her companions, one of whom was almost certainly you. We arrested her and the other man in their rooms and settled back to await your return."

Flandry sighed. He might have known it. How often had he told cubs in the Service never to underestimate an opponent?

"You almost escaped us again, Captain," said Warouw. "A dazzling exhibition, though not one that I recommend you repeat. Even if, somehow, you broke loose once more, all aircars here are locked. The only other way to depart is on foot, with 400 kilometers of dense rain forest to the nearest village. You would never get there before your antitoxin wore off."

Flandry finished his cigarillo and crushed it with regret. "Your only reason for isolating this place that much," he said, "is that you make the pills here."

Warouw nodded. "This is Biocontrol Central. If you think you can steal a few capsules for your jungle trip, I suppose you can try. Pending distribution, they are kept in an underground vault protected by identification doors, automatic guns, and, as the initial barrier, a hundred trusted Guards."

"I don't plan to try," said Flandry.

Warouw stretched; muscles flowed under his hairless

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brown skin. "There is no harm in showing you some of the other sections, though," he said. "If you are interested."

I'm interested in anything which will postpone the next round of unfriendliness, acknowledged Flandry. Aloud: "Of course. I might even talk you into dropping your isolationist policy."

Warouw's smile turned bleak. "On the contrary, Captain," he said. "I hope to prove to you that there is no chance of its being dropped, and that anyone who tries to force the issue is choosing a needlessly lingering form of suicide. Come, please."

11

TWO GUARDS padded silently behind, but they were no more needed than Warouw's blaster. The chief took Flandry's arm with a delicate, almost feminine gesture and led him down a hall and a curving ramp to the garden. Here it was cool and full of green odors. Immense purple blooms drooped overhead, scarlet and yellow flowerbeds lined the gravel walks like a formal fire, water plashed high out of carved basins and went rilling under playfully shaped bridges, ketjils were little gold songsparks darting in and out of willow groves. Flandry paid more attention to the building. He was being led across from one wing to the center. It reared huge, the changing styles of centuries discernible in its various parts. Warouw's goal was obviously the oldest section: a sheer black mountain of fused stone, Guards at the doors and robot guns on the battlements.

An attendant in an anteroom bowed low and issued four suits. They were coveralls, masked and hooded, of a transparent flexiplast which fitted comfortably enough, though Warouw had to leave off his robe. Gloves, boots, and snouted respirators completed the ensemble.

"Germs in there?" asked Flandry.

"Germs on us." For a moment, the nightmare of a dozen

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generations looked out of Warouw's eyes. He made a sign against evil. "We dare not risk contaminating the vats."

"Of course," suggested Flandry, "you could produce a big enough reserve supply of antitoxin to carry you through any such emergency."

Warouw's worldliness returned. "Now, Captain," he laughed, "would that be practical politics?"

"No," admitted Flandry. "It could easily lead to Bio-control having to work for a living."

"You never gave the impression of possessing any such peasantish ideal."

"Fate forbid! My chromosomes always intended me for a butterfly, useful primarily as an inspiration to others. However, you must admit a distinction between butterflies and leeches."

Since Flandry had used the name of equivalent native insects, Warouw scowled. "Please, Captain!"

The Terran swept eyes across one horrified attendant and two indignant Guards. "Ah, yes," he said, "Little Eva and the Sunshine Twins. Sorry, I forgot about them. Far be it from me to do away with anyone's intellectual maidenhead."

Warouw put his hands to a scanner. The inner door opened for his party and they entered a sterilizing chamber. Beyond its UV and ultrasonics, another door led them into a sort of lobby. A few earnest young shavepates hurried here and there with technical apparatus. They gave the sense of a task forever plagued by clumsy equipment and clumsier organization. Which was to be expected, of course. Biocontrol was not about to modernize its plant. And, like all hierarchies not pruned by incessant competition, Biocontrol had proliferated its departments, regulations, chains of command, protocols, office rivalries, and every other fungus Flandry knew so well on Terra.

A creaky old slideramp bore Warouw's group up several floors. Two purely ornamental Guards lounged on blast rifles outside a gilded door of vast proportions. Several men cooled their heels in the room beyond, waiting for admission to the main office. Warouw brushed past them, through a small auxiliary sterilizing chamber and so into the sanctum.

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Solu Bandang himself sat among many cushions. He had removed his flexisuit but not donned a robe again. His belly sagged majestically over his kilt. He looked up, heavy-lidded, and whined, "Now what is the meaning of this? What do you mean? I gave no appointment to— Oh. You."

"Greeting, Tuan," said Warouw casually. "I had not expected to find you on duty."

"Yes, it is my turn, my turn again. Even the highest office, ah, in the . . . the world, this world . . . does not excuse a man from a tour of— Necessary to keep one's finger on the pulse, Captain Flandry," said Bandang. "Very essential. Oh, yes, indeed."

The desk didn't look much used. Flandry supposed that the constant presence of some member of the governing board was a survival of earlier days when Biocontrol's stranglehold wasn't quite so firm.

"I trust, ah, you have been made to . . . see the error of your ways, Captain?" Bandang reached for a piece of candied ginger. "Your attitude has, I hope, become realistic?"

"I am still arguing with our guest, Tuan," said Warouw.

"Oh, come now!" said Bandang. "Come now! Really, Colleague, this is deplorable, ah, dilatoriness on your part. Explain to the Captain, Warouw, that we have methods to persuade recalcitrants. Yes, methods. If necessary, apply those methods. But don't come in here disturbing me! He's not in my department. Not my department at all."

"In that case, tuan," said Warouw, his exasperation hardly curbed, "I beg you to let me proceed with my work in my own fashion. I should like to show the Captain one of our vats. I think it might prove convincing. But of course, we need your presence to get into that section."

"What? What? See here, Warouw, I am a busy man. Busy, do you hear? I have, er, obligations. It is not my duty to—"

"Perhaps," snapped Warouw, "the Tuan feels he can take care of the situation single-handed, when the outworlders arrive?"

"What?" Bandang sat up straight, so fast that his jowls

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quivered. The color drained from them. "What's that? Do you mean there *are* outworlders? Other, ah, that is, than the Betelgeuseans. Uncontrolled outworlders, is that, ah, is that—"

"That is what I have to find out, Tuan. I beg you for your kind assistance."

"Oh. Oh, yes. Yes, at once. Immediately!" Bandang rolled to his feet and fumbled at his hung-up flexisuit. The two Guards hastened to assist him in donning it.

Warouw checked an electronic bulletin board. "I see Genseng is on watch at Vat Four," he said. "We'll go there. You must meet Colleague Genseng. Flandry."

The Terran made no answer. He was considering what he had seen. Bandang was a fat fool, but without too many illusions. His horror at the idea of outplanet visitors proved he knew very well what Flandry had already deduced:

God, what an overripe plum! If only the pills could come from somewhere else, this Biocontrol boobocracy and its comic opera Guards wouldn't last a week.

If any adventurers do learn the truth, they'll swarm here from a score of planets. Unan Besar is rich. I don't know how much of that wealth is locked in Biocontrol vaults, but it must be plenty. Enough to make the fortune of an experienced fighting man (like me) who'd serve as a revolutionary officer for a share in the loot.

Unless the revolution happens too fast to import filibusters. I suspect that would be the actual case. The people of Unan Besar would rip their overlords apart barehanded. And, of course, the real money to be made here is not from plundering, but from selling cheap antitoxin without restrictions. That is less my line of work than a spot of piracy would be. But I'd still like to get that juicy commission from Mitsuko Laboratories.

The lightness faded in him, less because he remembered his immediate problems than because of certain other recollections: The man who screamed and died in a cage where the stone gods danced. Swamp Town, and humans turned wolf to survive. Hungry men chipping a mountainside by hand, women and children in rice paddies. Djuanda, with nothing

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left him but pride, leaping off the wall. Luang's eyes, seen across the room where she sat bound. The Guard who struck her with a club.

Flandry had no patience with crusaders, but there are limits to any man's endurance.

"Come, then," puffed Bandang. "Yes, Captain, you really must see our production facilities. A, Ah, an achievement. A most glorious achievement, as I am sure you will agree, of our, ah, pioneering ancestors. May their, their work . . . ever remain sacred and undefiled, their blood remain, er, pure."

Behind the plump back, Waouw winked at Flandry.

Passing through the office sterilizer, and the waiting technicians who bowed to Bandang, the conducted tour took a slideway down corridors where faded murals depicted the heroic founders of Biocontrol in action. At the slideway's end, a glassed-in catwalk ran above a series of chambers.

They were immense. Up here near the ceilings, Flandry saw technicians down on the floor scuttle like bugs. Each room centered on a gleaming alloy vat, ten meters high and thirty in diameter. With the pipes that ran from it like stiff tentacles, with the pumps and stirrers and testers and control units and meters clustered around, it could have been some heathen god squatting amidst attendant demons. And on more than one face, among the men who went up and down the catwalk, Flandry thought he recognized adoration.

Warouw said in a detached tone, "As you may know, the process of antitoxin manufacture is biological. A yeastlike native organism was mutated to produce, during fermentation, that inhibitor which prevents the bacterial formation of acetylcholine. The bacteria themselves are destroyed within a few days by normal human antibodies. So, if you left this planet, you would need one final pill to flush out the infection. Thereafter you would be free of it. But as long as you are on Unan Besar, each breath you take, each bite you eat or drop you drink, maintains an equilibrium concentration of germs in your system.

"Unfortunately, these omnipresent germs kill the yeast itself. So it is critically important to keep this place sterile.

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Even a slight contamination would spread like fire in dry grass. The room where it occurred would have to be sealed off, everything dismantled and individually sterilized. It would take a year to get back in operation. And we would be lucky to have only one vat idled."

"A molecular synthesizing plant could turn out a year's biological production in a day, and sneer at germs," said Flandry.

"No doubt. No doubt, Captain," said Bandang. "You are very clever in the Empire. But cleverness isn't all, you know. Not by any means. There are other virtues, Ah, Warouw, I think you should not have called the circumstance of, um, easy contamination unfortunate. On the contrary, I would call it most fortunate. A, ah, a divine dispensation, bringing about and protecting the, er, social order most suitable for this world."

"A social order which recognizes that worthiness is heritable, and allows every blood line to find its natural status under the benevolent guardianship of a truly scientific organization whose primary mission has always been to preserve the genetic and cultural heritage of Unan Besar from degradation and exploitation by basically inferior outsiders," droned Flandry.

Bandang looked surprised. "Why, Captain, have you come to so good an understanding already?"

"Here is Vat Four," said Warouw.

In each chamber, a stairway, also glassed in, led down from the catwalk. Flandry was taken along this one. It ended at a platform several meters above the floor, where a semicircular board flashed with lights and quivered with dials. Flandry realized the instruments must report on every aspect of the vat's functioning. Underneath them was a bank of master controls for emergency use. At the far left projected a long double-pole switch, painted dead black. A light at its end glowed like a red eye.

The man who stood motionless before the board would have been impressive in his white robe. Seen kilted through a flexisuit, he was much too thin. Every rib and vertebra

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could be counted. When he turned around, his face was a skull in sagging skin. But the eyes lived; and, in an eerie way, the glowing golden brand.

"You dare—" he whispered. Recognizing Bandang: "Oh. Your pardon, Tuan." His scorn was hardly veiled. "I thought it must be some fool of a novice who dared interrupt a duty officer."

Bandang stepped back. "Ah, really, Genseng," he huffed. "You go too far. Indeed you do. I, ah, I demand respect. Yes."

The eyes smoldered at them. "I am duty officer here until my relief arrives." The murmur of pumps came more loudly through the glass cage than Genseng's voice. "You know the Law."

"Yes. Yes, indeed. Of course. But—"

"The duty officer is supreme at his station, Tuan. My decisions may not be questioned. I could kill you for a whim, and the Law would uphold me. Holy is the Law."

"Indeed. Indeed." Bandang wiped his countenance. "I too, after all, I too have my watches to stand—"

"In an office," sneered Genseng.

Warouw trod cockily to the fore. "Do you remember our guest, Colleague?" he asked.

"Yes." Genseng brooded at Flandry. "The one who came from the stars and leaped out the window. When does he go in the cage?"

"Perhaps never," said Warouw. "I think he might be induced to co-operate with us."

"He is unclean," mumbled Genseng. The hairless skull turned back toward the dance of instruments, as if beauty dwelt there alone.

"I thought you might wish to demonstrate the controls to him."

"S-s-s-so." Genseng's eyes filmed over. He stood a long while, moving his lips without sound. At last: "Yes. I see."

Suddenly his gaze flamed at the Terran. "Look out there," the parchment voice ordered. "Watch those men serving the vat. If any of them makes an error—if any of a hundred possible errors are made, or a thousand possible misfunctions

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of equipment occur—the batch now brewing will spoil and a million people will die. Could you bear such a burden?”

“No,” said Flandry, as softly as if he walked on fulminate.

Genseng swept one chalky hand at the panel. “It is for me to see the error or the failure on these dials, and correct it in time with these master controls. I have kept track. Three hundred and twenty-seven times since I first became a duty officer, I have saved a batch from spoiling. Three hundred and twenty-seven million lives are owed me. Can you claim as much, outworlder?”

“No.”

“They owe more than their lives, though,” said Genseng somberly. “What use is life, if all that life is for should be lost? Better returned the borrowed force at once, unstained, to the most high gods, than dirty it with wretchedness like your own, outworlder. Unan Besar owes its purity to me and those like me. The lives we have given, we can take again, to save that purity.”

Flandry pointed to the black switch and asked very low, “What does that connect to?”

“There is a nuclear bomb buried in the foundations of this castle,” Genseng breathed. “Any duty officer can detonate it from his station. All are sworn to do so if the holy mission should ever fail.”

Flandry risked cynicism: “Though of course a reserve stock of medicine, and enough spaceships for Biocontrol to escape in, are kept available.”

“There are those who would do such a thing,” sighed Genseng. “Even here the soul-infection lingers, but let them desert, then, to their own damnation. I can at least save most of my people.”

He turned back to his panel with a harsh movement. “Go!” he yelled.

Bandang actually ran back up the stairs.

Warouw came last, smiling. Bandang mopped his face, which poured sweat. “Really!” puffed the governor. “Really! I do think . . . honorable retirement. Colleague Genseng does appear to, ah, feel his years—”

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"You know the Law, Tuan," said Warouw unctuously. "No one who wears the Brand may be deposed except by vote of his peers. You couldn't get enough votes to do it, and you would anger the whole extremist faction." He turned to Flandry. "Genseng is a somewhat violent case, I admit. But there are enough others who feel like him to guarantee that this building would go sky-high if Biocontrol ever seemed seriously threatened."

Flandry nodded. He'd been a bit skeptical of such claims before. Now he wasn't.

"I don't know what good this has done," said Bandang softly.

"Perhaps the Captain and I might best discuss that," bowed Warouw.

"Perhaps. Good day, then, Captain." Bandang raised one fat hand in a patronizing gesture. "I trust we shall meet again . . . ah, elsewhere than the cage? Of course, of course! Good day!" He wobbled quickly down the catwalk.

Warouw conducted Flandry at a slower pace. They didn't speak for minutes, until they had turned back their flexisuits and were again in the garden and the blessed sane sunlight.

"What do you actually want to convince me of, Warouw?" asked the Terran then.

"Of the truth," said the other man. Banter had dropped from him; he looked straight ahead, and his mouth was drawn downward.

"Which is short-sighted self-interest utilizing fanaticism to perpetuate itself—and fanaticism running away with self-interest," said Flandry in a sharp tone.

Warouw shrugged. "You take the viewpoint of a different culture."

"And of most of your own people. You know that as well as I. Warouw, what have you to gain by the *status quo*? Are your money, your fancy lodging, your servants, that important to you? You're an able chap. You could gain all you now have, and a lot more besides, in the modern galactic society."

Warouw glanced back at the two Guards and answered softly. "What would I be there, another little politician

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making dirty little compromises—or Nias Warouw whom all men fear?”

He jumped at once to a discourse on willow cultivation, pointing out with expert knowledge the local evolution of the original imported stock, until they were again at Flandry's room.

The door opened. “Go in and rest for a while,” said Warouw. “Then think whether to co-operate freely or not.”

“You've been harping for some time on the need for my co-operation,” said Flandry. “But you've not made it clear what you want of me.”

“First, I want to know for certain why you came here.” Warouw met his eyes unblinkingly. “If you do not resist it, a light hypnoprobing will get that out of you quite easily. Then you must help me prepare false evidence of your own accidental death, and head off any Terran investigation. Thereafter you will be appointed my special assistant—for life. You will advise me on how to modernize the Guard Corps and perpetuate this world's isolation.” He smiled with something like shyness. “I think we might both enjoy working together. We are not so unlike, you and I.”

“Suppose I don't co-operate,” said Flandry.

Warouw flushed and snapped: “Then I must undertake a deep hypnoprobing and drag your information out of you. I confess I have had very little practice with the instrument since acquiring it. Even in skilled hands, you know, the hypnoprobe at full strength is apt to destroy large areas of cerebral cortex. In unskilled hands— But I will at least get *some* information out of you before your mind evaporates!”

He bowed. “I shall expect your decision tomorrow. Good rest.”

The door closed behind him.

Flandry paced in silence. He would have traded a year of life for a pack of Terran cigarettes, but he hadn't even been supplied with locals. It was like a final nail driven into his coffin.

What to do?

Co-operate? Yield to the probe? But that meant allowing

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his mind to ramble in free association, under the stimulus of the machine. Warouw would hear everything Flandry knew about the Empire in general and Naval Intelligence in particular. Which was one devil of a lot.

In itself, that would be harmless if the knowledge stayed on this planet. But it was worth too much. A bold man like Warouw was certain to exploit it. The Merseians, for instance, would gladly establish a non-interfering protectorate over Unan Besar—it would only tie down a cruiser or two—in exchange for the information about Terran defenses which Warouw could feed them in shrewd dribblets. Or better, perhaps, Warouw could take a ship himself and search out those barbarians with spacecraft which Flandry knew of. And they would stuff the vessel of Warouw with loot from Terran planets which he could tell them how to raid.

Either way, the Long Night was brought that much closer.

Of course, Dominic Flandry would still be alive, as a sort of domesticated animal. He couldn't decide if it was worth it.

Thunder rolled in the hills. The sun sank behind clouds which boiled up to cover the sky. A few fat raindrops smote a darkening garden.

I wonder if I get anything more to eat today, thought Flandry in his weariness.

He hadn't turned on the lights. His room was nearly black. When the door opened he was briefly dazzled. The figure that stepped through was etched against corridor illumination like a troll.

Flandry retreated, fists clenched. After a moment he realized it was only a Biocontrol uniform, long robe with flaring shoulders. But did they want him already? His heart thuttered.

"Easy, there," said a voice.

Lightning split heaven. In an instant's white glare, Flandry made out shaven head, glowing brand, and the broken face of Kemul the mugger.

HE SAT down. His legs wouldn't hold him.

"Where in the nine foul hells is your light switch?" grumbled the basso above him. "We've little enough time. They may spare you if we are caught, but it's the cage for Kemul. Quick!"

The Terran got shakily back on his feet. "Stay away from the window," he said. A dim amazement was in him that he could speak without stuttering. "I'd hate for some passerby to see us alone together. He might misunderstand the purity of our motives. Ah." Light burst from the ceiling.

Kemul took a rich man's garments from under his robe and tossed them on the bed: sarong, curly-toed slippers, blouse, vest, turban with an enormous plume. "Best we can do," he said. "Biocontrol disguise and a painted brand would not go for you. Your scalp would be paler than your face, and your face itself sticking out for all to see. But some great merchant or landowner, come here to talk of some policy matter— Also, speaking earnestly with you as we go, Kemul will not have to observe so many fine points of politeness and rule which he never learned."

Flandry tumbled into the clothes. "How'd you get in here at all?" he demanded.

Kemul's thick lips writhed upward. "That is another reason we must hurry, you. Two dead Guards outside." He opened the door, stooped, and yanked the corpses in. Their necks were broken with one karate chop apiece. A firearm would have made too much noise, Flandry thought in a daze. Even a cyanide needler with a compressed air cartridge would have to be drawn and fired, which might give time for a warning to be yelled. But a seeming Biocontrol man could walk right past the sentries, deep in meditation, and kill them in one second as they saluted him. That ability of Kemul's must have counted for enough that his cohorts—*Who were they?*—sent him in rather than somebody of less noticeable appearance.

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"But how'd you get this far, I mean?" Flandry persisted a trifle wildly.

"Landed outside the hangar, as they all do. Said to the attendant, Kemul was here from Pegunungan Gradjugang on urgent business and might have to depart again in minutes. Walked into the building, cornered a Guard alone in a hall, wrung from him where you were being kept, threw the body out a window into some bushes. Once or twice a white-robe hailed Kemul, but he said he was in great haste and went on."

Flandry whistled. It would have been a totally impossible exploit on any other world he had ever seen. The decadence of Biocontrol and its Guard Corps was shown naked by this fact of an enemy walking into their ultimate stronghold without so much as being questioned. To be sure, no one in all the history of Unan Besar had ever dreamed of such a raid. But still—

But still it was a fantastic gamble, with the odds against it mounting for each second of delay.

"I sometimes think we overwork Pegunungan Gradjugang." Flandry completed his ensemble. "Have a weapon for me?"

"Here." Kemul drew out of his robe a revolver as antiquated as the one liberated—*how many eons ago?*—from Pradjung. The same gesture showed his Terran blaster in an arm sheath. "Hide it. No needless fighting."

"Absolutely! You wouldn't believe how meek my intentions are. Let's go."

The hall was empty. Flandry and Kemul went down it, not too fast, mumbling at each other as if deep in discourse. At a cross-corridor they met a technician, who bowed his head to Kemul's insignia but couldn't entirely hide astonishment. The technician continued the way they had come. If he passed Flandry's closed door and happened to know that two Guards were supposed to be outside . . .

The hall debouched in a spacious common room. Between its pillars and gilded screens, a dozen or so off-duty Biocontrol people sat smoking, reading, playing games, watching a taped dance program. Flandry and Kemul started across

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toward the main entrance. A middle-aged man with a Purity Control symbol on his robe intercepted them.

"I beg your pardon, Colleague," he bowed. "I have not had the pleasure of meeting you before, though I thought I knew all full initiates." His eyes were lively with interest. A tour of duty here must be a drab chore for most personnel, any novelty welcomed. "And I had no idea we were entertaining a civilian of such obvious importance."

Flandry bent his own head above respectfully folded hands, hoping the plume would shadow his face enough. A couple of men, cross-legged above a chessboard, looked up in curiosity and kept on looking.

"Ameti Namang from beyond the Tinjil Ocean," growled Kemul. "I just came with Proprietor Tasik here. Been on special duty for years."

"Er, your accent . . . and I am sure I would remember your face from anywhere—"

Having sidled around to Kemul's other side, so that the giant cut off view of him, Flandry exclaimed in a shocked stage whisper: "I beg you desist! Can't you tell when a man's been in an accidental explosion?" He took his companion's elbow. "Come, we mustn't keep Tuan Bandang waiting."

The stares which followed him were like darts in his back.

Rain beat heavily on the roof of the verandah beyond. Lamplight glowed along garden paths, but even on this round-the-clock planet they weren't frequented in such weather. Flandry glanced behind, at the slowly closing main doors. "In about thirty seconds," he muttered, "our friend will either shrug off his puzzlement with a remark about the inscrutable ways of his superiors, or will start seriously adding two and two. Come on."

They went down the staircase. "Damn!" said Flandry. "You forgot to bring rain capes. Think a pair of drowned rats can reclaim your aircar?"

"With a blaster, if need be," snapped Kemul. "Stop complaining. You've at least been given a chance to die cleanly. It was bought for you at the hazard of two other lives."

"Two?"

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"It wasn't Kemul's idea, this, or his wish."

Flandry fell silent. Rain struck his face and turned his clothes sodden. The path was like a treadmill, down which he walked endlessly between wet hedges, under goblin lamps. He heard thunder again, somewhere over the jungle.

Sudden as a blow, the garden ended. Concrete glimmered in front of a long hemicylindrical building. "Here's where everybody lands," grunted Kemul. He led the way to the office door. A kilted civilian emerged and bobbed the head to him. "Where's my car?" said Kemul.

"So soon, tuan? You were only gone a short while—"

"I told you I would be. And you garaged my car anyhow? You officious dolt!" Kemul shoved with a brutal hand. The attendant picked himself up and hurried to the hangar doors.

Whistles skirled through the rain-rushing. Flandry looked back. Mountainous over all bowers and pools, the Central blinked windows to life like opening eyes. The attendant paused to gape. "Get moving!" roared Kemul.

"Yes, tuan. Yes, tuan." A switch was pulled, the doors slid open, "But what is happening?"

I don't know, Flandry thought. Maybe my absence was discovered. Or else somebody found a dead Guard. Or our friend in the common room got suspicious and called for a checkup. Or any of a dozen other possibilities. The end result is much the same, though.

He slipped a hand inside his blouse and rested it on the butt of his gun.

Lights went on in the hangar. It was crowded with aircars belonging to men serving their turns here. The attendant stared idiotically around, distracted by whistles and yells and sound of running feet. "Now, let's see, tuan, which one is yours? I don't rightly recall, I don't—"

Four or five Guards emerged from the garden path into the lamplight of the field. "Get the car, Kemul," rapped Flandry. He drew his revolver and slipped behind the shelter of a door. The attendant's jaw dropped. He let out a squeak and tried to run. Kemul's fist smote at the base of his skull. The

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attendant flew in an arc, hit, skidded across concrete, and lay without breathing.

"That was unnecessary," said Flandry. It wrenched within him: *Always the innocent get hurt worst.*

The mugger was already among the cars. The squad of Guards broke into a run. Flandry stepped from behind his door long enough to fire several times. One man spun around on his heel, went over backward, and raised himself on all fours with blood smeared over his chest. The others scattered. And they bawled for help.

Flandry took another peek. The opposite side of the landing field was coming alive with Guards. Through their shouts and the breaking of branches under their feet, through the rain, boomed Warouw's voice: "Surround the hangar. Squads Four, Five, Six, prepare to storm the entrance. Seven, Eight, Nine, prepare to fire on emerging vehicles." He was using a portable amplifier, but it was still like hearing the voice of an angered god.

Kemul grunted behind Flandry, shoving parked craft aside to clear a straight path for his own. As the three assault squads started to run across the concrete, Flandry heard him call: "Get in, quick!"

The Terran sent a dozen shots into the nearing troop, whirled, and jumped. Kemul was at the controls of one vehicle, gunning the motor. He had left the door to the pilot section open. Flandry got a foot in it as the car spurted forward. Then they struck the Guards entering the hangar.

Somebody shrieked. Somebody else crunched beneath the wheels, horribly. One man seized Flandry's ankle. The Terran was almost pulled loose. He shot, missed, and felt his antique weapon jam. He threw it at the man's contorted brown face. The car jetted antigrav force and sprang upward. Flandry clung to the doorframe with two hands and one foot. He kicked with the captured leg. His enemy hung on, screaming. Somehow Flandry found strength to raise the leg until it pointed almost straight out, then bring it down again to bash his dangling burden against the side.

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The Guard let go and fell a hundred meters. Flandry toppled back into the control section.

"They'll have an armed flyer after us in sixty seconds," he gasped. "Gimme your place!"

Kemul glared at him. "What do you know about steering?"

"More than any planet hugger. Get out! Or d'you want us to be overhauled and shot down?"

Kemul locked eyes with Flandry. The wrath in his gaze was shocking. A panel cut off the rear section; this was a rich man's limousine, though awkward and underpowered compared to the Guard ships Flandry had ridden. The panel slid back. Luang leaned into the pilot compartment and said, "Let him have the wheel, Kemul. Now!"

The mugger spat an oath, but gave up his seat. Flandry vaulted into it. "I don't imagine this horse cart has acceleration compensators," he said. "So get astern and buckle down tight!"

He concentrated for a moment on the controls. It was an old-fashioned, unfamiliar make of car, doubtless unloaded by some wily Betelgeusean trader. But having handled many less recognizable craft before, and being in peril of his life, Flandry identified all instruments in a few seconds.

Outside was darkness. Rain whipped the windshield. He saw lightning far off to the left. Making a spiral, he searched with his radar for pursuit. Biocontrol Central glittered beneath him. His detector beeped and registered another vessel on a collision path. The autopilot tried to take over. Flandry cut it out of the circuit and began to climb.

His track was a long slant bearing toward the storm center. The radar on this medieval galley wouldn't show what was behind him, but doubtless the Guard car had him spotted and was catching up fast. A whistling scream reminded Flandry that he hadn't slid the door shut. He did so, catching a few raindrops on his face. They tasted of wind.

Up and up. Now the lightning flashes were picking out detail for him, cumulus masses that rolled and reared against heaven and dissolved into a cataract at their base. Gusts

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thrummed the metal of the car. Its controls bucked. Thunder filled the cabin.

With maximum speed attained, Flandry cut the drive beams, flipped 180° around with a lateral thrust, and went back on full power. An instant he hung, killing velocity. Then he got going downward.

At a kilometer's distance, the other vehicle came into view; a lean shark shape with twice his speed. It swelled monstrously to his eye. There were about ten seconds for its pilot to react. As Flandry had expected, the fellow crammed all he had into a sidewise leap, getting out of the way. Even so, Flandry shot past with about one meter to spare.

Gauging the last possible instant of deceleration was a matter of trained reflex. When he applied the brake force, Flandry heard abused frames groan, and he was almost thrown into his own windshield. He came to a halt just above the tossing jungle crowns. At once he shifted to a horizontal course. Faster than any man not trained in space would have dared—or been able—he flew, his landing gear centimeters from the uppermost leaves. Now and then he must veer, barely missing a higher than average tree. He plunged into the wild waterfall of the storm center, and saw lightning rive one such tree not ten meters away.

But up in the sky, his pursuer, having lost speed and course and object, must be casting about in an ever more desperate search for him.

Flandry continued skimming till he was on the other side of the rain. Only then, a good fifty kilometers from Biocontrol Central, did he venture to rise a little and use his own radar again. It registered nothing. Tropical stars bloomed in the violet night haze. The air alone had voice, as he slipped through it.

"We're the one that got away," he said.

He regained altitude and looked back into the main section. Kemul sagged in his chair. "You could have crashed us, you drunken amokker!" choked the big man. Luang unstrapped herself and took out a cigaret with fingers not quite

steady. "I think Dominic knew what he was doing," she answered.

Flandry locked the controls and went back to join them, flexing sore muscles. "I think so too," he said. He flopped down beside Luang. "Hi, there."

She gave him an unwavering look. The cabin light was lustrous on her dark hair and in the long eyes. He saw developing bruises where the violence of his maneuvers had thrown her against the safety belt. But still she regarded him, until at last he shifted uneasily and bummed a cigaret, merely to break that silence.

"Best you pilot us now, Kemul," she said.

The mugger snorted, but moved forward as she desired. "Where are we going?" Flandry asked.

"Ranau," said Luang. She took her eyes from him and drew hard on her cigaret. "Where your friend Djuanda is."

"Oh, I believe I see what happened. But tell me."

"When you escaped from the inn, all those imbecilic Guards went whooping after you," she said, unemotional as a history lesson. "Djuanda had been behind you when you entered, and had stayed in the corridor during the fight. No one noticed him. He was intelligent enough to come in as soon as they were all gone, and release us."

"No wonder Warouw despises his own men," said Flandry. "Must have been disconcerting, returning to find the cupboard bare like that. Though he coolly led me to believe you were still his prisoners. Go on, what did you do next?"

"We fled, of course. Kemul hot-wired a parked aircar. Djuanda begged us to save you. Kemul scoffed at the idea. It looked impossible to me too, at first. It was bad enough being fugitives, who would live only as long as we could contrive to get illicit pills. But three people, against the masters of a planet—"

"You took them on, though." Flandry brought his lips close enough to her ear that they brushed her cheek. "I've no way to thank you for that, ever."

Still she gazed straight before her, and the full red mouth shaped words like a robot. "Chiefly you should thank

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Djuanda. His life was a good investment of yours. He insisted we would not be three alone. He swore many of his own people would help, if there was any hope at all of getting rid of Biocontrol. So we went to Ranau. We spoke to the boy's father and others. In the end, they provided this car, with plans and information and disguises such as we would need. Now we are bound back to them, to see what can be done next."

Flandry looked hard at her in his turn. "You made the final decision to rescue me, Luang," he said. "Didn't you?"

She stirred on the seat. "What of it?" Her voice was no longer under absolute control.

"I'd like to know why. It can't be simple self-preservation. On the contrary. You got black market antitoxin before; you could have kept on doing so. When my knowledge was wrung out of me, Warouw would understand you were no danger to him. He wouldn't have pressed the hunt for you. You could probably even snare some influential man and tease him into getting you pardoned. So—if we're going to work together, Luang—I want to know why you chose it."

She stubbed out her cigaret. "Not for any of your damned causes!" she snarled. "I don't care about a hundred million clods, any more than I ever did. It was only that to rescue you, we needed help in Ranau, and those oafs would only help as part of a plot to overthrow Biocontrol. That's all!"

Kemul hunched his great shoulders, turned around and rumbled, "If you don't stop baiting her, Terran, Kemul will feed you your own guts."

"Close your panel," said Luang.

The giant averted his face again, sucked in a long breath, and slid shut the barrier between him and the others.

Wind lulled around the flyer. Flandry turned off the lights and saw stars on either side. It was almost as if he could reach out and pluck them.

"I'll answer no more impertinent questions," said Luang. "Is it not enough that you have gotten your own way?"

He caught her to him and her own question was never answered.

RANAU LAY on a northeastern jut of the continent, with Kompong Timur a good thousand kilometers to the southwest. Intervening swamp and mountain, lack of navigable rivers, the standoffishness of its people, made it little frequented. A few traders flew in during the year, otherwise the airstrip was hardly used. It was still dark when Flandry's car set down. Several impassive men with phosphorescent globes to light their way met him, and he was horrified to learn it was ten kilometers' walk to the nearest dwelling.

"We make no roads under the Trees," said Tembesi, Djuanda's father. And that was that.

Dawn came while they were still afoot. As the spectacle grew before him, Flandry's life added one more occasion of awe.

The ground was low, wet, thickly covered with a soft and intensely green mosslike turf. It sparkled with a million water drops. Fog rolled and streamed, slowly breaking up as the sun climbed. The air was cool, and filled the nostrils with dampness. His tread muffled and upborne by the springy growth, his companions unspeaking and half blurred in the mist, Flandry moved through silence like a dream.

Ahead of him, rising out of a fog bank into clear sky, were the Trees of Ranau.

There were over a thousand, but only a few could be seen at one time. They grew too far apart, a kilometer or more between boles. And they were too big.

Hearing Djuanda tell of them, mentioning an average height of two hundred meters and an estimated average age of ten thousand terrestrial years, Flandry had imagined the redwoods he knew from home. But this was not Terra. The great Trees were several times as thick in proportion—incredibly massive, organic mountains with roots like foothills. They shot straight up for fifty meters or so, then began to

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branch, broadest at the bottom, tapering to a spire. The slim higher boughs would each have made a Terran oak; the lowest were forests in themselves, forking again and yet again, the five-pointed leaves (small, delicately serrated, green in top but with a golden underside of nearly mirror brightness) outnumbering the visible stars. Even given the lower gravity of Unan Besar, it was hard to imagine how branches so huge could support their own weight. But they had cores with a strength approximating steel, surrounded by a principal thickness of wood as light as balsa, the whole armored in tough gray bark. Tossing in the gentle winds which prevailed here, the upper leaves reflected sunlight downward off their shiny sides, so that the lower foliage was not shadowed to death.

No matter explanations. When Flandry saw the grove itself, filling the sky, sunlight winking and shivering and running like flame in the crowns, he merely stood and looked. The others respected his heed. For long, the whole party remained silent where it was.

When they resumed, passing through a stand of tall frond-trees without even noticing, the Terran found tongue once more. "I understand your people are freeholders. That's rare, isn't it?"

Tembesi, who was a big stern-faced man, replied slowly. "We are not quite what you think. Early in the history of this planet, it became clear that the free yeoman was doomed. The large plantations were underselling him, so he was driven to subsistence farming, with the price of antitoxin too high for him to afford improvements. Let him have one bad year, and he must sell land to the plantation owner, just to pay for survival. Presently his farm became too small to support him, he fell into the grip of the moneylenders, in the end he was fortunate if he became a tenant rather than a slave.

"Our own ancestors were peasants whose leaders foresaw the loss of land. They sold what they had and moved here. There were certain necessities of survival as free men. First, some means of getting cash for antitoxin and tools. Yet,

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second, not enough wealth to excite the greed of the great lords, who could always find a pretext to dispossess their inferiors. Third, remoteness from the corruption and violence of the cities, the countryside's ignorance and poverty. Fourth, mutual helpfulness, so that individual misfortunes would not nibble away the new community as the old had been destroyed.

"These things were found among the Trees."

And now they left the minor forest and approached the holy grove. It was not as dark under one of the giants as Flandry had expected. The overshadowing roof of leaves twinkled, flashed, glittered, so that sunspecks went dancing among the shades. Small animals scurried out of the way, around the nearest root which heaved its gray wall up from the pseudomoss. Red-breasted fluter birds and golden ketjils darted in and out of the foliage overhead; their song drifted down through a distant, eternal rustle, that was like some huge waterfall heard across many leagues of stillness. Close to a Tree, you had no real sense of its height. It was too enormous. Looking ahead, down the clear shadowy, sward, you got a total effect, arched and whispering vaults full of sun, upheld by columns that soared. The forest floor was strewn with tiny white blossoms.

Djuanda turned worshipful eyes from Flandry and said, reddening, "My father, I am ashamed that ever I wished to change this."

"It was not an ill-meant desire," said Tembesi. "You were too young to appreciate that three hundred years of tradition must hold more wisdom than any single man." His gray head inclined to the Terran. "I have yet to offer my thanks for the rescuing of my son, Captain."

"Oh, forget it," muttered Flandry. "You helped rescue me, didn't you?"

"For a selfish purpose. Djuanda, your elders are not quite such doddering old women as you believed. We also want to change the life of the Trees, more than you ever dreamed."

"By bringing the Terrans!" The boy's voice cracked loud and exultant across the quiet.

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"Well, not exactly," demurred Flandry. He glanced about at the rest. Eager Djuanda, firm Tembesi, sullen Kemul, unreadable Luang holding his arm—he supposed they could be relied on. The others, though, soft-spoken men with lithe gait and bold gaze, he didn't know about. "Uh, we can't proceed too openly, or word will get back to Biocontrol."

"That has been thought of," said Tembesi. "All whom you see here are of my own Tree, or clan, if you prefer, since each Tree is the home of a single bloodline. I have talked freedom with them for a long time. Most of our folk can be trusted equally well. Timidity, treachery or indiscretion might make a few dangerous, but they are very few."

"It only takes one," humphed Kemul.

"How could a traitor get word to the outside?" replied Tembesi. "The next regular trade caravan is not due for many weeks. I have taken good care that no one will depart this area meanwhile. Our few aircraft are all under guard. To go on foot would require more than thirty days to the next communication center, hence, it would be impossible."

"Unless the local dispenser advanced a few pills, given a reasonable-sounding pretext," said Flandry. "Or wait, the dispenser is in radio touch with Biocontrol all the time!"

Tembesi's chuckle was grim. "Hereabouts," he said, "unpopular dispensers have long tended to meet with accidents. They fall off high branches, or an *adderkop* bites them, or they go for a walk and are never seen again. The present appointee is my own nephew, and one of our inner-circle conspirators."

Flandry nodded, unsurprised. Even the most villainous governments are bound to have a certain percentage of decent people in them, who, given a chance, often become the most effective enemies of the regime.

"We're safe for a while, I suppose," he decided. "Doubtless Warouw will check the entire planet, hoping to pick up my trail. But he's not likely to think of trying here until a lot of other possibilities have failed."

Djuanda's enthusiasm broke loose again. "And you will free our people!"

Flandry would have preferred a less melodramatic phrasing, but hadn't the heart to say so. He addressed Tembesi. "I gather you aren't too badly off here. And that you're conservative. If Unan Besar is opened to free trade, a lot of things are going to change overnight, including your own ways of life. Is it worth that much to you to be rid of Bio-control?"

"I asked him the same question," said Luang. "In vain. He had already answered it for himself."

"It is worth it," Tembesi said. "We have kept a degree of independence, but at a cruel cost of narrowing our lives. For we seldom, if ever, have money to undertake new things, or even to travel outside our own land. A Tree will not support many hundred persons, so we must limit the children a family may have. A man is free to choose his life work, but the choice is very small. He is free to speak his mind, but there is little to speak about. And always we must pay our hard-won silvers for pills which cost about half a copper to produce; and always we must dread that some overlord will covet our country and find ways to take it from us; and always our sons must look at the stars, and wonder what is there, and grow old and die without having known."

Flandry nodded again. It was another common phenomenon: revolutions don't originate with slaves or starveling proletarians, but with men who have enough liberty and material well-being to realize how much more they ought to have.

"The trouble is," he said, "a mere uprising won't help. If the whole planet rose against Biocontrol, it would only die. What we need is finesse."

The brown faces around him hardened, as Tembesi spoke for all: "We do not wish to die uselessly. But we have discussed this for years, it was a dream of our fathers before us, and we know our own will. The People of the Trees will hazard death if they must. If we fail, we shall not wait for the sickness to destroy us, but take out children in our arms and leap from the uppermost boughs. Then the Trees can take

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us back into their own substance, and we will be leaves in the sunlight."

It wasn't really very cold here, but Flandry shivered.

They had now reached a certain bole. Tembesi stopped. "This we call the Tree Where the Ketjils Nest," he said, "the home of my clan. Welcome, liberator."

Flandry looked up. And up. Plastic rungs had been set into the ancient rough bark. At intervals a platform, ornamented with flowering creepers, offered a breathing spell. But the climb would be long. He sighed and followed his guide.

When he reached the lowest branch, he saw it stretch like a road, outward and curving gradually up. There were no rails. Looking down, he spied earth dizzily far beneath him, and gulped. This close to the leaves, he heard their rustling loud and clear, everywhere around; they made a green gloom, unrestful with a thousand flickering candle-flames of reflection. He saw buildings along the branch, nestled into its forks or perched on swaying ancillary limbs. They were living houses, woven together of parasitic grasses like enormous reeds rooted in the bark; graceful domes and hemicylinders, with wind flapping dyed straw curtains in their doorways. Against the trunk itself stood a long peak-roofed structure of blossoming sod.

"What's that?" asked Flandry.

Djuanda said in an awed whisper, almost lost under the leaf-voices: "The shrine. The gods are there, and a tunnel cut deep into the wood. When a boy is grown, he enters that tunnel for a night. I may not say more."

"The rest are public buildings, storehouses and processing plants and so on," said Tembesi with an obvious desire to turn the conversation elsewhere, "Let us climb further, to where people dwell."

The higher they ascended, the more light and airy it became. There the buildings were smaller, often gaily patterned. They stood in clusters where boughs forked; a few were attached to the main trunk. The dwellers were about, running barefoot along even the thin and quivering outermost parts as if this were solid ground. Only very young

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children were restricted, by leash or wattle fence. Physically, this tribe was no different from any other on Unan Besar. Their costume varied in mere details of batik. Even most of the homely household tasks their women carried out, or the simple furniture glimpsed through uncurtained doorways, was familiar. Their uniqueness was at once more subtle and more striking. It lay in dignified courtesy, which glanced at the newcomers with frank interest but did not nudge or stare, which softened speech and made way for a neighbor coming down a narrow limb. It lay in the attitude toward leaders like Tembesi, respectful but not subservient; in laughter more frequent and less shrill than elsewhere; in the plunk of a samesan, as a boy sat vine-crowned, swinging his feet over windy nothingness and serenading his girl.

"I see flats of vegetables here and there," Flandry remarked. "Where are the big crops you spoke of, Djuanda?"

"You can see one of our harvesting crews a few more boughs up, Captain."

Flandry groaned.

The sight was picturesque, though. From the outer twigs hung lichenous beards, not unlike Spanish moss. Groups of men went precariously near, using hooks and nets to gather it in. Flandry felt queasy just watching them, but they seemed merry enough at their appalling work. The stuff was carried down by other men to a processing shed, where it would yield the antipyretic drug (Unan Besar had more than one disease!) which was the chief local cash crop.

There were other sources of food, fiber, and income. Entire species of lesser trees and bushes grew on the big ones; mutation and selection had made them useful to man. Semi-domesticated fowl nested where a share of eggs could be taken. Eventually, branches turned sick; pruning them, cutting them up, treating the residues, amounted to an entire lumber and plastics industry. Bark worms and burrowing insects were a good source of protein, Flandry was assured—though admittedly hunting and fishing down on the ground was more popular.

It was obvious why the planet had only this one stand

of titans. The species was moribund, succumbing to a hundred parasitic forms which evolved faster than its own defenses. Now man had established a kind of symbiosis, preserving these last few: one of the rare cases where man had actually helped out nature. *And so, thought Flandry, even if I'm not much for bucolic surroundings myself, I've that reason also to like the people of Ranua.*

Near the very top, where branches were more sparse and even the bole swayed a little, Tembesi halted. A plank platform supported a reed hut overgrown with purple-blooming creepers. "This is for the use of newly wed couples, who need some days' privacy," he said. "But I trust you and your wife will consider it your own, Captain, for as long as you honor our clan with your presence."

"Wife?" Flandry blinked. Luang suppressed a grin. *Well, solid citizens like these doubtless had equally well-timbered family lives. No reason to disillusion them.* "I thank you," he bowed. "Will you not enter with me?"

Tembesi smiled and shook his head. "You are tired and wish to rest, Captain. There is food and drink within for your use. Later we will pester you with formal invitations. Shall we say tonight, an hour after sunset—you will dine at my house? Anyone can guide you there."

"And we'll hear your plans!" cried Djuanda.

Tembesi remained calm, but it flamed in his eyes. "If the Captain so desires."

He bowed. "Good rest, then. Ah, friend Kemul, you are invited to stay with me."

The mugger looked around. "Why not here?" he said belligerently.

"This cabin only has one room."

Kemul stood hunched, legs planted wide apart, arms dangling. He swung his hideous face back and forth, as if watching for an attack. "Luang," he said, "why did we ever snag the Terran?"

The girl struck a light to her cigaret. "I thought it would be interesting," she shrugged. "Now do-run along."

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A moment more Kemul stood, then shuffled to the platform's edge and down the ladder.

Flandry entered the cabin with Luang. It was cheerfully furnished. The floorboards rocked and vibrated. Leaves filled it with an ocean noise. "Cosmos, how I can sleep!" he said.

"Aren't you hungry?" asked Luang. She approached an electric brazier next to a pantry. "I could make you some dinner." With a curiously shy smile: "We wives have to learn cooking."

"I suspect I'm a better cook than you are," he laughed, and went to wash up. Running water was available, though at this height it had to be pumped from a cistern thirty meters below. There was even a hot tap. Djuanda had mentioned an extensive use of solar cells in this community as its prime energy source. The Terran stripped off his bedraggled finery, scrubbed, flopped on the bed, and tumbled into sleep.

Luang shook him awake hours later. "Get up, we'll be late for supper." He yawned and slipped on a kilt laid out for him. To hell with anything else. She was equally informal, except for a blossom in her hair. They walked out on the platform.

A moment they paused, then, to look. There weren't many more branches above them; they could see through the now faintly shining leaves to a deep blue-black sky and the earliest stars. The Tree foamed with foliage on either hand and below. It was like standing above a lake and hearing the waters move. Once in a while Flandry glimpsed phosphor globes, hung on twigs far underfoot. But such lighting was more visible on the next Tree, whose vast shadowy mass twinkled with a hundred firefly lanterns. Beyond was the night.

Luang slipped close to him. He felt her shoulder as a silken touch along his arm. "Give me a smoke, will you?" she said. "I am out."

"Fraid I am too."

"Damn!" Her curse was fervent.

"Want one that bad?"

"Yes. I do not like this place."

"Why, I think it's pleasant."

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"Too much sky. Not enough people. None of them my kind of people. Gods! Why *did* I ever tell Kemul to intercept you?"

"Sorry now?"

"Oh, no, I suppose not. In a way. Dominic—" She caught his hand. Her own fingers were cold. He wished he could make out her expression in the dusk. "Dominic, have you any plans at all? Any hopes?"

"As a matter of fact," he said, "yes."

"You must be crazy. We can't fight a planet. Not even with this ape-folk to help. I know a city, in the opposite hemisphere—or even old Swamp Town, I can hide you there forever, I swear I can—"

"No," he said. "It's good of you, kid, but I'm going ahead with my project. We won't need you, though, so feel free to take off."

Fear edged her tone, for the first time since he had met her: "I do not want to die of the sickness."

"You won't. I'll get clean away, with no suspicion of the fact—"

"Impossible! Every spaceship on this planet is watched!"

"—or else I'll be recaptured. Or, more likely, killed. I'd prefer being killed, I think. But either way, Luang, you've done your share and there's no reason for you to take further risks. I'll speak to Tembesi. You can get a car out of here tomorrow morning."

"And leave you?" she said. "No."

They stood unspeaking a while. The Tree soughed and thrummed.

Finally she asked, "Must you act tomorrow already, Dominic?"

"Soon," he replied. "I dare not give Warouw much time. He's almost as intelligent as I am."

"But tomorrow?" she insisted.

"Well . . . no. No, I suppose it could wait another day or two. Why?"

"Then wait. Tell Tembesi you have to work out details of your scheme. But not with him. Let's be alone up here. This

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wretched planet can spare an extra few hours till it is free—without any idea how to use freedom—can it not?”

“I reckon so.”

Flandry dared not be too eager about it, or he might never get up courage for the final hazard. But he couldn't help agreeing with the girl. One more short day and night? Why not? Wasn't a man entitled to a few hours entirely his own, out of the niggardly total granted him?

14

AMONG OTHER measures, Nias Warouw had had a confidential alarm sent all dispensers, to watch for a fugitive of such and such a description and listen, with judicious pumping of the clientele, for any rumors about him. Despite a considerable reward offered, the chief was in no hopes of netting his bird with anything so elementary.

When the personal call arrived for him, he had trouble believing it. “Are you certain?”

“Yes, tuan, quite,” answered the young man in the telecom screen. He had identified himself by radio-scanned fingerprints and secret number as well as by name, for in the past, hijacker gangs seeking pills for the black market had sometimes used false dispensers. This was absolutely Siak, stationed in Ranau. “He is right in this community. Being as isolated as we are, the average person here knows him only as a visitor from across the sea. So he walks about freely.”

“How did he happen to come, do you know?” asked Warouw, elaborately casual.

“Yes, tuan, I have been told. He befriended a youth of our clan in Gunung Utara. The boy released some prisoners of yours; then, with the help of certain local people, they contrived Flandry's escape from Biocontrol Central.”

Warouw suppressed a wince at being thus reminded of two successive contretemps. He went on the offensive with a snap; “How do you know all this, dispenser?”

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Siak wet his lips before answering nervously, "It seems Flandry hypnotized the boy with gaudy daydreams of seeing Mother Terra. Through the boy, then, Flandry's criminal friends met several other youths of Ranau—restless and reckless—and organized them into a sort of band for the purpose of liberating Flandry and getting him off this planet. Of course, it would be immensely helpful to have me as part of their conspiracy. The first boy, who is a kinsman of mine, sounded me out. I realized something was amiss and responded as he hoped to his hints, in order to draw him out. As soon as I appeared to be of one mind with them, they produced Flandry from the woods and established him in a house here. They claim he is an overseas trader scouting for new markets.

"Tuan, we must hurry. They have something afoot already. I do not know what. Neither do most of the conspirators. Flandry says that no man can reveal, by accident or treachery, what he has not been told. I only know they do have some means, which they expect to prepare within a very short time. Hurry!"

Warouw controlled a shudder. He had never heard of any interstellar equivalent of radio. But Terra might have her military secrets. Was that Flandry's trump card? He forced himself to speak softly: "I shall."

"But tuan, you must arrive unobserved. Flandry is alert to the chance of being betrayed. With the help of his rebel friends, he must have established a dozen boltholes. If something goes wrong, they will blast down the vault, take a large stock of antitoxin, and escape through the wilderness to complete their apparatus elsewhere. In that case, I am overpowered. But it would make no difference if I resisted, would it, tuan?"

"I suppose not." Warouw stared out a window, unheeding of the bright gardens. "Judging from your account, a few well-armed men could take him. Can you invite him to your house at a given time, where we will be in ambush?"

"I can do better than that, tuan. I can lead your men to his own house, to await his return. He has been working con-

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stantly at the Tree of the Gnarly Boughs, which has a little electronic shop. But in his guise as a trader, he had been asked to dine at noon with my Uncle Tembesi. So he will come back to his guest house shortly before, to bathe and change clothes."

"Hm. The problem is to get my people in secretly." Warouw considered the planetary map which filled one wall of his office. "Suppose I land a car in the woods this very day, far enough out from your settlement not to be seen. My men and I will march in afoot, reaching your dispensary at night. Can you then smuggle us by byways to his house?"

"I—I think so, tuan, if there are only a few of you. Certain paths, directly from limb to limb rather than along the trunk, are poorly lighted and little frequented after dark. The cabin he uses is high up on the Tree Where the Ketjils Nest, isolated from any others. But, tuan, if there can merely be three or four men with you . . . it seems dangerous."

"Bah! Not when each man has a blaster. I do not want a pitched battle with your local rebels, though; the more quietly this affair is handled, the better. So I will leave most of my crew with the aircar. When we have Flandry secured, I will call the pilot to come get us. The rest of the conspiracy can await my leisure. I doubt if anyone but the Terran himself represents any real danger."

"Oh, no, tuan!" exclaimed Siak. "I was hoping you would understand that and spare the boys. They are only hotheaded, there is no real harm in them—"

"We shall see about that when all the facts become known," said Warouw bleakly. "You may expect reward and promotion, dispenser, unless you bungle something so he escapes again, in which case there will be no sparing of you."

Siak gulped. Sweat glistened on his forehead.

"I wish to all the gods there were time to think out a decent plan," said Warouw. He smiled in wryness. "But as it is, I have not even time to complain about the shortness of time." Leaning forward, like a cat at a mousehole: "Now, there are certain details I must know, the layout of your community and"

As THEY neared the heights, the sun, low above gleaming crowns, struck through an opening in those leaves which surrounded her and turned Luang's body to molten gold. Flandry stopped.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Just admiring, my sweet." He drew a lungful of dawn air and savored the sad trilling of a ketjil. *There may not be another chance.*

"Enough," grumbled Kemul. "On your way, Terran."

"Be still!" The girl stamped her foot.

Kemul dropped a hand to his blaster and glared out of red eyes. "You have had plenty of time with her, Terran," he said. "Any more stalling now, and Kemul will know for a fact you are afraid."

"O, I am," said Flandry, lightly but quite honestly. His pulse hammered; he saw the great branch, the leaves that flickered around it, the score of men who stood close by, with an unnatural sharpness.

Luang snarled at the mugger. "You do not have to go up there and face blaster fire!"

Seeing the ugly face, as if she had struck it and broken something within, Flandry knew a moment's pain for Kemul. He said in haste, "That's my own order, darling. I thought you knew. Since you insisted on waiting this close to the scene of action, I told him to stand by and protect you in case things got nasty. I won't hear otherwise, either."

She bridled. "Look here, I have always taken care of myself and—"

He stopped her words with a kiss. After a moment's rigidity, she melted against him.

Letting her go, he swung on his heel, grabbed a rung, and went up the bole as fast as he could. Her eyes pursued him until the leaves curtailed her off. Then he climbed alone, among murmurous mysterious grottos.

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Not quite alone, he told his fears. Tembesi, Siak, young Djuanda, and their comrades came behind. They were lifetime hunters, today on a tiger hunt. But their number and their archaic chemical rifles were of small account against ion flames.

Well, a man could only die once.

Unfortunately.

The taste of Luang lingered on his mouth. Flandry mounted a final ladder to the platform, which swayed in morning wind. Before him was the cabin. It looked like one arbor of purple flowers. He stepped to the doorway, twitched the drape aside, and entered.

Because the truncheons whacking from either side were not unexpected, he dodged them. His movement threw him to the floor. He rolled over, sat up, and looked into the nozzles of energy guns.

"Be still," hissed Warouw, "or I will boil your eyes with a low beam."

A disgruntled club wielder peered out a vine-screened window. "Nobody else," he said.

"Yeul!" Another Guard kicked Flandry in the ribs. "Was there not a woman with you?"

"No, no—" The Terran picked himself up very carefully, keeping hands folded atop his head. His gray eyes traded around the hut. Siak had given him a report on the situation, after leaving Warouw here to wait, but Flandry required precise detail.

Two surly Guards posted at the door, sticks still in hand and blasters holstered. Two more, one in each corner, out of jump range, their own guns drawn and converging on him. Warouw close to the center of the room, and to Flandry: a small, deft, compact man with a smile flickering on his lips, wearing only the green kilt and medallion, a blaster in his clutch. The brand of Biocontrol smoldered on his brow like yellow fire.

It was now necessary to hold all their attention for a few seconds. Tembesi's men could climb over the supporting branches rather than up the ladder, and so attain this plat-

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form unobserved from the front of the cabin. But it had a rear window too.

"No," said Flandry, "there isn't anyone with me. Not just now. I left her at— Never mind. How in the name of all devils and tax collectors did you locate me so fast? Who tipped you?"

"I think I shall ask the questions," said Warouw. His free hand reached into a pocket and drew forth the flat case of a short-range radiocom. "The girl does not matter, though. If she arrives in the next several minutes, before the car does, we can pick her up too. Otherwise she can wait. Which will not be for long, Captain. A carful of well-armed men is out in the jungle. When they arrive, I will leave them in charge of the local airstrip—and dispensary, in case your noble young morons retail any ideas about raiding it. Then she can give herself up, or wait for a search party to flush her out of hiding, or run into the jungle and die. That last would be a cruel waste of so much beauty, but I do not care immensely."

He was about to thumb the radiocom switch and put the instrument to his lips. Flandry said with great clearness and expression—rather proud of rendering it so well in Pulaoic—"Pillicock sat on Pillicock-hill: Halloo, halloo, loo loo!"

"What?" Warouw stared at him.

"Take heed o' the foul fiend," cried Flandry. "Obey thy parents; keep thy word justly; swear not; commit not with man's sworn spouse; set not thy sweet heart on proud array. Tom's a-cold."

He twirled once around, laughing and saw that he had all their eyes. A Guard made signs against evil. Another whispered, "He is going amok, tuan!"

The Terran flapped his arms. "This is the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet," he crowed. "He begins at curfew, and walks till the first cock; he gives the web and the pin, squints the eye, and makes the harelip; mildews the white wheat, and hurts the poor creature of earth." He burst into song:

"Swithold footed thrice the old;

He met the nightmare and her nine-fold—"

"Be still!" Warouw stuck the radiocom back in his pocket,

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advanced and thrust expert fingers at Flandry's solar plexus.

Flandry didn't remain in the path of that blow. He tumbled on his back, just in front of the chief. His feet came up, hard, into the groin. As Warouw lurched forward on top of him, driven by the kick as much as the pain, Flandry got the man's gun wrist between two arms and broke the blaster loose. No chance to use it—the effort sent it across the floor, out of reach. Damn!

He clutched Warouw against him, shouted, and wondered icily if the Guards would incinerate their own boss to get him.

The four sprang toward the grappling pair.

A rifle cracked at the rear window. A Guard fell backward, brains splashed from his skull. Tembesi fired again. One of the other Guards managed to shoot. Flame engulfed Tembesi. The whole rear wall went up in smoke and thunder. But even as the ecologist died, the room was exposed to outside view. Guns barked from a dozen surrounding boughs.

Flandry saw the last Guard crash to the boards. Fire sheeted up in the flimsy roof. He relaxed his hold on Warouw, preparatory to hustling the man out of the burning hut.

Warouw yanked his left arm free. His fist struck the angle of Flandry's jaw.

For a moment, the Terran sagged among whirling ringing darknesses. Warouw scrambled clear of him, snatched up his blaster, and bounded to the doorway.

As he emerged, a voice from the leaves cried, "Halt where you are!" Warouw showed his teeth and fired full power into that foliage. The Tree man screamed and fell, dead, off the branch.

Warouw yanked the radiocom from his pocket. A gun spoke. The instrument shattered in his hand. He looked at his bleeding palm, wiped it, fired a thunderbolt in return, and sped for the ladder. Bullets smote the planks near his feet. The hunters hoped for a disabling shot. But they dared not risk killing him. The whole object had been to lure him here and take him alive.

As he reeled from the cabin, Flandry saw Warouw go over

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the platform edge. The Terran hefted the blaster he himself had picked up, drew a long breath, and forced clarity back into his head. *Someone has to get him*, he thought in an odd unemotional fashion. *And as I'm the only one on my side who knows much about the care and feeding of spitguns, I seem elected.*

He swarmed down the ladder. "Back!" he called, as supple bodies slipped along the branches on either side of him. "Follow me at a distance. Kill him if he kills me, but hold your fire otherwise."

He set his weapon to full-power needle beam, gaining extreme range at the cost of narrowing his radius of destruction to a centimeter or so. If Warouw wasn't quite as handy with pencil shots, there might be a chance to cripple him without suffering much harm from his own diffuse fire. Or there might not.

Down the holy Tree!

Flandry burst into view of the bough where Luang waited. Warouw confronted her and Kemul. Their hands were in the air; he had taken them by surprise. Warouw backed toward the next set of rungs. "Just keep your places and do not follow me," he panted.

Flandry broke through the leaf cover overhead. Warouw saw him, whipped around and raised gun.

"*Get him, Kemul!*" shouted Luang.

The giant shoved her behind him and pounced. Warouw glimpsed the motion, turned back, saw the mugger's gun not quite out of its holster, and fired. Red flame enveloped Kemul. He roared, once, and fell burning from the limb.

Having thus been given an extra few seconds, Flandry leaped off the bole rungs onto the bough. Warouw's muzzle whirled back to meet him. Flandry's blazed first. Warouw shrieked, lost his gun, and gaped at the hole drilled through his hand.

Flandry whistled. The riflemen of Ranau came and seized Nias Warouw.

DUSK ONCE more. Flandry emerged from the house of Tembesi. Weariness lay heavy upon.

Phosphor globes were kindling up and down the Tree Where the Ketjils Nest, and its sister Trees. Through the cool blue air, he could hear mothers call their children home. Men hailed each other, from branch to branch, until the voices of men and leaves and wind became one. The first stars quivered mistily in the east.

Flandry wanted silence for a while. He walked the length of the bough, and of lesser ones forking from it, until he stood on a narrow bifurcation. Leaves still closed his view on either hand, but he could look straight down to the ground, where night rose like a tide, and straight up to the stars.

He stood a time, not thinking of much. When a light foot-fall shivered the limb beneath him, it was something long expected.

"Hullo, Luang," he said tonelessly.

She came to stand beside him, another slim shadow. "Well," she said, "Kemul is buried now."

"I wish I could have helped you," said Flandry, "but—"

She sighed. "It was better this way. He always swore he would be content to end in a Swamp Town canal. If he must lie under a blossoming bush, I do not think he would want anyone but me there to wish him good rest."

"I wonder why he came to my help."

"I told him to."

"And why did you do that?"

"I don't know. We all do things without thinking, now and then. The thinking comes afterward. I will *not* let it hurt me." She took his arm. Her hands were tense and unsteady. "Never mind Kemul. Since you have stopped working on him, I take it you have succeeded with Warouw?"

"Yes," said Flandry.

"How did you do it? Torture?" she asked casually.

"Oh, no," he said. "I didn't even withhold medical care

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for his injuries, which are minor, anyhow. I simply explained that we had a cage for him if he didn't cooperate. It took a few hours' argument to convince him we meant it. Then he yielded. After all, he's an able man. He can leave this planet—he'd better!—and start again elsewhere, and do rather well, I should think."

"Do you mean to let him go?" she protested.

Flandry shrugged. "I had to make the choice as clear-cut as possible—between dying of the sickness, and starting afresh with a substantial cash stake. Though I wonder if the adventurous aspect of it didn't appeal to him most, once I'd dangled a few exotic worlds before his imagination."

"What of that carful of men out in the forest?"

"Warouw's just called them on the dispenser's radiocom, to come and get me. They're to land on the airstrip—change of plan, he said. Djuanda, Siak, and some others are waiting there, with blasters in their hands and revenge in their hearts. It won't be any problem."

"And then what is to happen?"

"Tomorrow Warouw will call Biocontrol. He'll explain that he has me secure, and that some of my co-conspirators spilled enough of what I'd told them for him to understand the situation pretty well. He and some Guards will take me in my own flitter to Spica, accompanied by another ship. En route he'll hypnoprobe me and get the full details. Tentatively, his idea will be to sabotage the flitter, transfer to the other craft, and let mine crash with me aboard. Somewhat later, he and the Guards will land. They'll tell the Imperial officials a carefully doctored story of my visit, say they're returning what they believe was a courtesy call, and be duly shocked to learn of my 'accidental' death. In the course of all this, they'll drop enough false information to convince everyone that Unan Besar is a dreary place with no trade possibilities worth mentioning."

"I see," nodded the girl. "You only sketched the idea to me before. Of course, the 'Guards' will be Ranau men, in uniforms lifted from the car crew. And they will actually be

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watching Warouw every second, rather than you. But do you really think it can be done without rousing suspicion?"

"I know damn well it can," said Flandry. "Because Warouw has been promised the cage if Biocontrol does sabotage the Central prematurely. He'll cooperate! Also, remember what slob the Guard Corps are. A half-witted horse could cheat them at pinochle. Bandang and the other governors shouldn't be hard to diddle either, with their own trusted Nias Warouw assuring them everything is lovely."

"When will you come back?" she asked.

"I don't know. Not for a good many days. We'll take along enough scientific material for the antitoxin to be synthesized, of course, and enough other stuff to convince the Imperial entrepreneurs that Unan Besar is worth their attention. A large supply of pills will have to be made ready, ships and ships full of them. Because naturally Biocontrol Central will be destroyed when they arrive, by some idiot like Genseng. But the merchant fleet will know where all the dispensaries are, and be ready to supply each one instantly. It will all take a while to prepare, though."

Flandry sought yellow Spica in the sky, which was now quickening with stars. Here they called Spica the Golden Lotus, doubtless very poetic and so on. But he felt his own depression and tiredness slide away as he thought of its colony planet, bright lights, smooth powerful machines, sky-high towers—his kind of world! And afterward there would be home. . . .

Luang sensed it in him. She gripped his arm and said almost in terror, "You will come back, will you not? You will not just leave everything to those merchants?"

"What?" He came startled out of his reverie. "Oh. I see. Well, honestly, darling, you've nothing to be afraid of. The transition may be a little violent here and there. But you're welcome to remain at Ranau, where things will stay peaceful, until you feel like a triumphal return to Kompong Timur. Or like getting passage to the Imperial planets—"

"I don't care about that!" she cried. "I want your oath you will return with the fleet."

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"Well—" He capitulated. "All right. I'll come back for a while."

"And afterward?"

"Look here," he said, alarmed. "I'm as mossless a stone as you'll find in a universe of rolling. I mean, well if I tried to stay put anywhere, I'd be eating my fingernails in thirty days and eating the carpet in half a year. And, uh, my work isn't such that any, well, any untrained person could—"

"O, never mind." She let his arm go. Her voice was flat among the leaves. "It doesn't matter. You need not return at all, Dominic."

"I said I'd do that much," he protested rather feebly.

"It doesn't matter," she repeated. "I never asked for more than a man could give."

She left him. He stared after her. It was hard to tell in the dimness, but he thought she bore her head high. He almost followed, but as she vanished among leaves and shadows he decided it was best not to. He stood for a time under the stars, breathing the night wind. Then faintly across ten kilometers, he heard the crash and saw the flare of guns.