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He could be stilled, but not
killed; killed, but not stilled.

UN-MAN AND OTHER NOVELLAS

POUL ANDERSON



First Book Publication

FOR HIM, DEATH WAS NOT FINAL

When the agents of evil murdered Martin Donner, they thought that the un-man was no more, that they had deprived the world organization of its greatest chance to achieve peace. Now their world-wide conspiracy could take over the entire planet, still recovering from a nuclear war.

But if the un-man was dead, who was this man who looked identically like him, who fought the conspirators with the same fantastic skill and wit which Donner had possessed?

Suddenly this new un-man (or was he really new?) became the object of a planetary search, the outcome of which would determine the future of the world.

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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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UN - M A N
And Other Novellas

by
POUL ANDERSON

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UN-MAN AND OTHER NOVELLAS

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THE MAKESHIFT ROCKET

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UN-MAN

by Poul Anderson

I

THEY WERE gone, their boat whispering into the sky with all six of them aboard. Donner had watched them from his balcony—he had chosen the apartment carefully with a view to such features—as they walked out on the landing flange and entered the shell. Now their place was vacant and it was time for him to get busy.

For a moment hesitation was in him. He had waited many days for this chance, but a man does not willingly enter a potential trap. His eyes strayed to the picture on his desk. The darkly beautiful young woman and the child in her arms seemed to be looking at him, her lips were parted as if she were about to speak. He wanted to press the button that animated the film, but didn't quite dare. Gently, his finger stroked the glass over her cheek.

"Jeanne," he whispered. "Jeanne, honey."

He got to work. His colorful lounging pajamas were exchanged for a gray outfit that would be inconspicuous against the walls of the building. An ordinary featureless mask, its sheen carefully dulled to non-reflection, covered his face. He clipped a flat box of tools to his belt and painted his fingertips with collodion. Picking up a reel of cord in one hand, he returned to the balcony.

From here, two hundred and thirty-four stories up, he had a wide view of the Illinois plain. As far as he could see, the land rolled green with corn, hazing into a far horizon out of which the great sky lifted. Here and there, a clump of trees had been planted, and the white streak of an old

highway crossed the field, but otherwise it was one immensity of growth. The holdings of Midwest Agricultural reached beyond sight.

On either hand, the apartment building lifted sheer from the trees and gardens of its park. Two miles long, a city in its own right, a mountain of walls and windows, the unit dominated the plain, sweeping heavenward in a magnificent arrogance that ended sixty-six stories above Donner's flat. Through the light prairie wind that fluttered his garments, the man could hear a low unending hum, muted pulsing of machines and life—the building—itsself like a giant organism.

There were no other humans in sight. The balconies were so designed as to screen the users from view of neighbors on the same level, and anyone in the park would find his upward glance blocked by trees. A few brilliant points of light in the sky were airboats, but that didn't matter.

Donner fastened his reel to the edge of the balcony and took the end of the cord in his fingers. For still another moment he stood, letting the sunlight and wind pour over him, filling his eyes with the reaching plains and the high, white-clouded heaven.

He was a tall man, his apparent height reduced by the width of shoulders and chest, a curious rippling grace in his movements. His naturally yellow hair had been dyed brown, and contact lenses made his blue eyes dark, but otherwise there hadn't been much done to his face—the broad forehead, high cheekbones, square jaw, and jutting nose were the same. He smiled wryly behind the blank mask, took a deep breath, and swung himself over the balcony rail.

The cord unwound noiselessly, bearing him down past level after level. There was a risk involved in this daylight burglary—someone might happen to glance around the side wall of a balcony and spot him, and even the custom of privacy would hardly keep them from notifying the unit police. But the six he was after didn't time their simultaneous departures for his convenience.

The looming facade slid past, blurred a little by the speed of his descent. One, two, three— He counted as he went by,

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and at the eighth story down tugged the cord with his free hand. The reel braked and he hung in midair.

A long and empty way down— He grinned and began to swing himself back and forth, increasing the amplitude of each arc until his soles were touching the unit face. On the way back, he grasped the balcony rail, just beyond the screening side wall, with his free hand. His body jerked to a stop, the impact like a blow in his muscles.

Still clinging to the cord, he pulled himself one-armed past the screen, over the rail, and onto the balcony floor. Under the gray tunic and the sweating skin, his sinews felt as if they were about to crack. He grunted with relief when he stood freely, tied the cord to the rail, and unclipped his tool case.

The needle of his electronic detector flickered. So there was an alarm hooked to the door leading in from the balcony. Donner traced it with care, located a wire, and cut it. Pulling a small torch from his kit, he approached the door. Beyond its transparent plastic, the rooms lay quiet: a conventional arrangement of furniture, but with a waiting quality over it.

Imagination, thought Donner impatiently, and cut the lock from the door. As he entered, the autocleaner sensed his presence and its dust-sucking wind whined to silence.

The man forced the lock of a desk and riffled through the papers within. One or two in code he slipped into his pocket, the rest were uninteresting. There must be more, though. Curse it, this was their regional headquarters!

His metal detector helped him about the apartment, looking for hidden safes. When he found a large mass buried in a wall, he didn't trouble with searching for the button to open it, but cut the plastic facing away. The gang would know their place had been raided, and would want to move. If they took another flat in the same building, Donner's arrangement with the superintendent would come into effect; they'd get a vacancy which had been thoughtfully provided with all the spy apparatus he could install. The man grinned again.

Steel gleamed at him through the scorched and melted

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wall. It was a good safe, and he hadn't time to diddle with it. He plugged in his electric drill, and the diamond head gnawed a small hole in the lock. With a hypodermic he inserted a few cubic centimeters of levinite, and touched it off by a UHF beam. The lock jangled to ruin, and Donner opened the door.

He had only time to see the stet-gun within, and grasp the terrible fact of its existence. Then it spat three needles into his chest, and he whirled down into darkness.

II

ONCE OR TWICE he had begun to waken, stirring dimly toward light, and the jab of a needle had thrust him back. Now, as his head slowly cleared, they let him alone. And that was worse.

Donner retched and tried to move. His body sagged against straps that held him fast in his chair. Vision blurred in a huge nauseous ache; the six who stood watching him were a ripple of fever-dream against an unquiet shadow.

"He's coming around," said the thin man unnecessarily.

The heavy-set, gray-haired man in the conservative blue tunic glanced at his timepiece. "Pretty fast, considering how he was dosed. Healthy specimen."

Donner mumbled. The taste of vomit was bitter in his mouth. "Give him some water," said the bearded man.

"Like hell!" The thin man's voice was a snarl. His face was dead white against the shifting, blurring murk of the room, and there was a fever in his eyes. "He doesn't rate it, the—Un-man!"

"Get him some water," said the gray-haired one quietly. The skeletal younger man slouched sulkily over to a chipped basin with an old-fashioned tap and drew a glassful.

Donner swallowed it greedily, letting it quench some of the dry fire in his throat and belly. The bearded man approached with a hypo.

"Stimulant," he explained. "Bring you around faster." It bit into Donner's arm and he felt his heartbeat quicken. His head was still a keen pulsing pain, but his eyes steadied and he looked at the others with returning clarity.

"We weren't altogether careless," said the heavy-set man. "That stet-gun was set to needle anybody who opened the safe without pressing the right button first. And, of course, a radio signal was emitted which brought us back in a hurry. We've kept you unconscious till now."

Donner looked around him. The room was bare, thick with the dust and cobwebs of many years, a few pieces of old-style wooden furniture crouched in ugliness against the cracked plaster walls. There was a single window, its broken glass panes stuffed with rags, dirt so thick on it that he could not be sure if there was daylight outside. But the hour was probably after dark. The only illumination within was from a single fluoro in a stand on the table.

He must be in Chicago, Donner decided through a wave of sickness. One of the vast moldering regions that encompassed the inhabited parts of the dying city—deserted, not worth destroying as yet, the lair of rats and decay. Sooner or later, some agricultural outfit would buy up the nominal title from the government which had condemned the place and raze what had been spared by fire and rot. But it hadn't happened yet, and the empty slum was a good hide-away for anybody.

Donner thought of those miles of ruinous buildings, wrapped in night, looming hollow against a vacant sky—dulled echoes in the cracked and grass-grown streets, the weary creak of a joist, the swift patter of feet and glare of eyes from the thick dark, menace and loneliness for further than he could run.

Alone, alone. He was more alone here than in the outermost reaches of space. He knew starkly that he was going to die.

Jeanne. O Jeanne, my darling.

"You were registered at the unit as Mark Roberts," said the woman crisply. She was thin, almost as thin as the bitter-eyed young man beside her. The face was sharp and hungry, the hair close cropped, the voice harsh with purpose. "But your ID tattoo is a fake—it's a dye that comes off with acid. We got your thumbprint and that number on a check and called the bank central like in an ordinary verification, and the robofile said yes, that was Mark Roberts and the account was all right." She leaned forward, her face straining against the blur of night, and spat it at him. "Who are you really? Only a secret service man could get by with that kind of fake. Whose service are you in?"

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"It's obvious, isn't it?" snapped the thin man. "He's not American Security. We know that. So he must be an Un-man."

The way he said the last word made it an ugly, inhuman sound. "*The Un-man!*" he repeated.

"Our great enemy," said the heavy-set one thoughtfully. "*The Un-man*—not just an ordinary operative, with human limitations, but the great and secret one who's made so much trouble for us."

He cocked his gray head and stared at Donner. "It fits what fragmentary descriptions we have," he went on. "But then, the U.N. boys can do a lot with surgery and cosmetics, can't they? And *the Un-man* has been killed several times. An operator was bagged in Hong Kong only last month which the killer swore must be our enemy—he said nobody else could have led them such a chase."

That was most likely Weinberger, thought Donner. An immense weariness settled on him. They were so few, so desperately few, and one by one the Brothers went down into darkness. He was next, and after him—

"What I can't understand," said a fifth man—Donner recognized him as Colonel Samsey of the American Guard—"is why, if the U. N. Secret Services does have a corps of—uh—supermen, it should bother to disguise them to look all alike. So that we'll think we're dealing with an immortal?" He chuckled grimly. "Surely they don't expect us to be rattled by that!"

"Not supermen," said the gray-haired one. "Enormously able, yes, but the Un-men aren't infallible. As witness this one." He stood before Donner, his legs spread and his hands on his hips. "Suppose you start talking. Tell us about yourself."

"I can tell you about your own selves," answered Donner. His tongue felt thick and dry, but the acceptance of death made him, all at once, immensely steady. "You are Roger Wade, president of Brain Tools, Incorporated, and a prominent supporter of the Americanist Party." To the woman: "You are Marta Jennings, worker for the Party on a full-time basis. Your secretary, Mr. Wade—" his eyes roved to the gaunt young man—"is Rodney Borrow, Exogene Number—"

"Don't call me that!" Cursing, Borrow lunged at Donner. He clawed like a woman. When Samsey and the bearded man dragged him away, his face was death-white and he dribbled at the mouth.

"And the experiment was a failure," taunted Donner cruelly.

"Enough!" Wade slapped the prisoner, a ringing open-handed buffet. "We want to know something new, and there isn't much time. You are, of course, immunized against truth drugs—Dr. Lewin's tests have already confirmed that—but I assume you can still feel pain."

After a moment, he added quietly: "We aren't fiends. You know that we're patriots." *Working with the nationalists of a dozen other countries!* thought Donner. "We don't want to hurt or kill unnecessarily."

"But first we want your real identity," said the bearded man, Lewin. "Then your background of information about us, the future plans of your chief, and so on. However, it will be sufficient for now if you answer a few questions pertaining to yourself, residence and so on."

Oh, yes, thought Donner, the weariness like a weight on his soul. That'll do. Because then they'll find Jeanne and Jimmy, and bring them here, and—

Lewin wheeled forth a lie detector. "Naturally, we don't want our time wasted by false leads," he said.

"It won't be," replied Donner. "I'm not going to say anything."

Lewin nodded, unsurprised, and brought out another machine. "This one generates low-frequency, low-voltage current," he remarked. "Quite painful. I don't think your will can hold out very long. If it does, we can always try prefrontal lobotomy; you won't have inhibitions then. But we'll give you a chance with this first."

He adjusted the electrodes on Donner's skin. Borrow locked his lips with a dreadful hunger.

Donner tried to smile, but his mouth felt stiff. The sixth man, who looked like a foreigner somehow, went out of the room.

There was a tiny receiver in Donner's skull, behind the

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right mastoid. It could only pick up messages of a special wave form, but it had its silencing uses too. After all, electric torture is a common form of inquisition, and very hard to bear.

He thought of Jeanne, and of Jimmy, and of the Brotherhood. He wished that the last air he was to breathe weren't stale and dusty.

The current tore him with a convulsive anguish. His muscles jerked against the straps and he cried out. Then the sensitized communicator blew up, releasing a small puff of fluorine.

The image Donner carried into death was that of Jeanne, smiling and bidding him welcome home.

III

BARNEY ROSENBERG drove along a dim, rutted trail toward the sheer loom of the escarpment. Around its corner lay Dry-gulch. But he wasn't hurrying. As he got closer, he eased the throttle of his sandcat and the engine's purr became almost inaudible.

Leaning back in his seat, he looked through the tiny plastiglass cab at the Martian landscape. It was hard to understand that he would never see it again.

Even here, five miles or so from the colony, there was no trace of man save himself and his engine and the blurred track through sand and bush. Men had come to Mars on wings of fire, they had hammered out their cities with a clangorous brawl of life, mined and smelted and begun their ranches, trekked in sandcats and airsuits from the polar bogs to the equatorial scrubwoods—and still they had left no real sign of their passing. Not yet. Here a tin can or a broken tool, there a mummified corpse in the wreck of a burst seal-tent, but sand and loneliness drifted over them, night and cold and forgetfulness. Mars was too old and strange for thirty years of man to matter.

The desert stretched away to Rosenberg's left, tumbling in steep drifts of sand from the naked painted hills. Off to the sharply curving horizon the desert marched, an iron barrenness of red and brown and tawny yellow, knife-edged shadows and a weird vicious shimmer of pale sunlight. Here and there a crag lifted, harsh with mineral color, worn by the passing of ages and thin wind to a fluted fantasy. A sandstorm was blowing a few miles off, a scud of dust hissing over stone, stirring the low gray-green brush to a sibilant murmur. On his right the hills rose bare and steep, streaked with blue and green of copper ores, gashed and scored and murmurous with wind. He saw life, the dusty thorn-bushes

and the high gaunt cactoids and a flicker of movement as a tiny leaper fled. In one of the precipices, a series of carved, time-blurred steps went up to the ruin of a cliff dwelling abandoned—how long ago?

Overhead the sky was enormous, a reaching immensity of deep greenish blue-violet, incredibly high and cold and remote. The stars glittered faintly in its abyss, the tiny hurtling speck of a moon less bright than they. A shrunken sun stood in a living glory of corona and zodiacal light, the winged disc of royal Egypt lifting over Mars. Near the horizon a thin layer of ice crystals caught the luminescence in a chilly sparkle. There was wind, Rosenberg knew, a whimpering ghost of wind blowing through the bitter remnant of atmosphere, but he couldn't hear it through the heavy plastiglass and somehow he felt that fact as a deeper isolation.

It was a cruel world, this Mars, a world of cold and ruin and soaring scornful emptiness, a world that broke men's hearts and drained their lives from them—rainless, oceanless, heatless, kindless, where the great wheel of the stars swung through a desert of millennia, where the days cried with wind and the nights rang and groaned with frost. It was a world of waste and mystery, a niggard world where a man ate starvation and drank thirst and finally went down in darkness. Men trudged through unending miles, toil and loneliness and quiet creeping fear, sweated and gasped, cursed the planet and wept for the dead and snatched at warmth and life in the drab colony towns. *It's all right when you find yourself talking to the sandbuggers—but when they start talking back, it's time to go home.*

And yet—and yet— The sweep of the polar moors, thin faint skirl of wind, sunlight shattered to a million diamond shards on the hoarfrost cap; the cloven tremendousness of Rasmussen Gorge, a tumbling sculptured wilderness of fairy stone, uncounted shifting hues of color and fleeting shadow; the high cold night of stars, fantastically brilliant constellations marching over a crystal heaven, a silence so great you thought you could hear God speaking over the universe; the delicate dayflowers of the Syrtis forests, loveliness blooming with the bitter dawn and dying in the swift

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sunset; traveling and searching, rare triumph and much defeat, but always the quest and the comradeship. Oh, yes, Mars was savage to her lovers, but she gave them of her strange beauty and they would not forget her while they lived.

Maybe Stef was the lucky one, thought Rosenberg. *He died here.*

He guided the sandcat over a razorback ridge. For a moment he paused, looking at the broad valley beyond. He hadn't been to Drygulch for a couple of years; that'd be almost four Earth years, he remembered.

The town, half underground below its doomed roof, hadn't changed much outwardly, but the plantations had doubled their area. The genetic engineers were doing good work, adapting terrestrial food plants to Mars and Martian plants to the needs of humans. The colonies were already self-supporting with regard to essentials, as they had to be considering the expense of freight from Earth. But they still hadn't developed a decent meat animal; that part of the diet had to come from yeast-culture factories in the towns and nobody saw a beefsteak on Mars. *But we'll have that too, one of these years.*

A worn-out world, stern and bitter and grudging, but it was being tamed. Already the new generation was being born. There wasn't much fresh immigration from Earth these days, but man was unshakably rooted here. Someday he'd get around to modifying the atmosphere and weather till humans could walk free and unclothed over the rusty hills—but that wouldn't happen till he, Rosenberg, was dead, and in an obscure way he was glad of it.

The cat's supercharging pumps roared, supplementing tanked oxygen with Martian air for the hungry Diesel as the man steered it along the precarious trail. It was terribly thin, that air, but its oxygen was mostly ozone and that helped. Passing a thorium mine, Rosenberg scowled. The existence of fissionables was the main reason for planting colonies here in the first place, but they should be saved for Mars.

Well, I'm not really a Martian any longer. I'll be an Earth-

man again soon. You have to die on Mars, like Stef, and give your body back to the Martian land, before you altogether belong here.

The trail from the mine became broad and hard-packed enough to be called a road. There was other traffic now, streaming from all corners—a loaded ore-car, a farmer coming in with a truckful of harvested crops, a survey expedition returning with maps and specimens. Rosenberg waved to the drivers. They were of many nationalities, but except for the Pilgrims that didn't matter. Here they were simply humans. He hoped the U.N. would get around to internationalizing the planets soon.

There was a flag on a tall staff outside the town, the Stars and Stripes stiff against an alien sky. It was of metal—it had to be, in that murderous corroding atmosphere—and Rosenberg imagined that they had to repaint it pretty often. He steered past it, down a long ramp leading under the dome. He had to wait his turn at the airlock, and wondered when somebody would invent a better system of oxygen conservation. These new experiments in submolar mechanics offered a promising lead.

He left his cat in the underground garage, with word to the attendant that another man, its purchaser, would pick it up later. There was an odd stinging in his eyes as he patted its scarred flanks. Then he took an elevator and a slideway to the housing office and arranged for a room; he had a couple of days before the *Phobos* left. A shower and a change of clothes were sheer luxury and he reveled in them. He didn't feel much desire for the cooperative taverns and pleasure joints, so he called up Doc Fieri instead.

The physician's round face beamed at him in the plate. "Barney, you old sandbugger! When'd you get in?"

"Just now. Can I come up?"

"Yeah, sure. Nothing doing at the office—that is, I've got company, but he won't stay long. Come right on over."

Rosenberg took a remembered route through crowded hallways and elevators till he reached the door he wanted. He knocked: Drygulch's imports and its own manufacturies

needed other things more urgently than call and recorder circuits. "Come in!" bawled the voice.

Rosenberg entered the cluttered room, a small leathery man with gray-sprinkled hair and a beaky nose, and Fieri pumped his hand enthusiastically. The guest stood rigid in the background, a lean ascetic figure in black—a Pilgrim. Rosenberg stiffened inwardly. He didn't like that sort, Puritan fanatics from the Years of Madness who'd gone to Mars so they could be unhappy in freedom. Rosenberg didn't care what a man's religion was, but nobody on Mars had a right to be so clannish and to deny cooperation as much as New Jerusalem. However, he shook hands politely, relishing the Pilgrim's ill-concealed distaste—they were anti-Semitic too.

"This is Dr. Morton," explained Fieri. "He heard of my research and came around to inquire about it."

"Most interesting," said the stranger. "And most promising, too. It will mean a great deal to Martian colonization."

"And surgery and biological research everywhere," put in Fieri. Pride was bursting from him.

"What is it, Doc?" asked Rosenberg, as expected.

"Suspended animation," said Fieri.

"Hm?"

"Uh-huh. You see, in what little spare time I have, I've puttered around with Martian biochemistry. Fascinating subject, and unearthly in two meanings of the word. We've nothing like it at home—don't need it. Hibernation and estivation approximate it, of course."

"Ummm . . . yes." Rosenberg rubbed his chin. "I know what you mean. Everybody does. The way so many plants and animals needing heat for their metabolisms can curl up and 'sleep' through the nights, or even through the whole winter. Or they can survive prolonged droughts that way, too." He chuckled. "Comparative matter, of course. Mars is in a state of permanent drought, by Earthly standards."

"And you say, Dr. Fieri, that the natives can do it also?" asked Morton.

"Yes. Even they, with a quite highly developed nervous system, can apparently 'sleep' through such spells of cold or famine. I had to rely on explorers' fragmentary reports for

that datum. There are so few natives left, and they're so shy and secretive. But last year I did finally get a look at one in such a condition. It was incredible—respiration was undetectable, the heartbeat almost so, the encephalograph showed only a very slow, steady pulse. But I got blood and tissue samples, and was able to analyze and compare them with secretions from other life forms in suspension."

"I thought even Martians' blood would freeze in a winter night," said Rosenberg.

"It does. The freezing point is much lower than with human blood, but not so low that it can't freeze at all. However, in suspension there's a whole series of enzymes released. One of them, dissolved in the bloodstream, changes the characteristics of the plasma. When ice crystals form, they're *more* dense than the liquid, therefore cell walls aren't ruptured and the organism survives. Moreover, a slow circulation of oxygen-bearing radicals and nutrient solutions takes place even through the ice, apparently by some process analogous to ion exchange. Not much, but enough to keep the organism alive and undamaged. Heat, a sufficient temperature, causes the breakdown of these secretions and the animal or plant revives. In the case of suspension to escape thirst or famine, the process is somewhat different, of course, though the same basic enzymes are involved."

Fieri laughed triumphantly and slapped a heap of papers on his desk. "Here are my notes. The work isn't complete yet. I'm not quite ready to publish, but it's more or less a matter of detail now." A Nobel Prize glittered in his eye.

Morton skimmed through the manuscript. "*Very* interesting," he murmured. His lean, close-cropped head bent over a structural formula. "The physical chemistry of this material must be weird."

"It is, Morton, it is." Fieri grinned.

"Hmmm—do you mind if I borrow this to read? As I mentioned earlier, I believe my lab at New Jerusalem could carry out some of these analyses for you."

"That'll be fine. Tell you what, I'll make up a stat of this whole mess for you. I'll have it ready by tomorrow."

"Thank you." Morton smiled, though it seemed to hurt his

face. "This will be quite a surprise, I'll warrant. You haven't told anyone else?"

"Oh, I've mentioned it around, of course, but you're the first person who's asked for the technical details. Everybody's too busy with their own work on Mars. But it'll knock their eye out back on Earth. They've been looking for something like this ever since—since the Sleeping Beauty story—and here's the first way to achieve it."

"I'd like to read this too, Doc," said Rosenberg.

"Are you a biochemist?" asked Morton.

"Well, I know enough biology and chemistry to get by, and I'll have leisure to wade through this before my ships blasts."

"Sure, Barney," said Fieri. "And do me a favor, will you? When you get home, tell old Summers at Cambridge—England, that is—about it. He's their big biochemist, and he always said I was one of his brighter pupils and shouldn't have switched over to medicine. I'm a hell of a modest cuss, huh? But damn it all, it's not everybody who grabs onto something as big as this!"

Morton's pale eyes lifted to Rosenberg's. "So you are returning to Earth?" he asked.

"Yeah. The *Phobos*." He felt he had to explain, that he didn't want the Pilgrim to think he was running out. "More or less doctor's orders, you understand. My helmet cracked open in-a fall last year, and before I could slap a patch on I had a beautiful case of the bends, plus the low pressure and the cold and the ozone raising the very devil with my lungs." Rosenberg shrugged, and his smile was bitter. "I suppose I'm fortunate to be alive. At least I have enough credit saved to retire. But I'm just not strong enough to continue working on Mars, and it's not the sort of place where you can loaf and remain sane."

"I see. It is a shame. When will you be on Earth, then?"

"Couple of months. The *Phobos* goes orbital most of the way—do I look like I could afford an acceleration passage?" Rosenberg turned to Fieri. "Doc, will there be any other old sanders coming home this trip?"

"Fraid not. You know there are darn few who retire from Mars to Earth. They die first. You're one of the lucky ones."

"A lonesome trip, then. Well, I suppose I'll survive it."

Morton made his excuses and left. Fieri stared after him. "Odd fellow. But then, all these Pilgrims are. They're anti almost everything. He's competent, though, and I'm glad he can tackle some of those analyses for me." He slapped Rosenberg's shoulder. "But forget it, old man! Cheer up and come along with me for a beer. Once you're stretched out on those warm white Florida sands, with blue sky and blue sea and luscious blondes walking by, I guarantee you won't miss Mars."

"Maybe not." Rosenberg looked unhappily at the floor. "It's never been the same since Stef died. I didn't realize how much he'd meant to me till I'd buried him and gone on by myself."

"He meant a lot to everyone, Barney. He was one of those people who seem to fill the world with life, wherever they are. Let's see—he was about sixty when he died, wasn't he? I saw him shortly before, and he could still drink any two men under the table, and all the girls were still adoring him."

"Yeah. He was my best friend, I suppose. We tramped Earth and the planets together for fifteen years." Rosenberg smiled. "Funny thing, friendship. It has nothing to do with the love of women—which is why they never understand it. Stef and I didn't even talk much. It wasn't needed. The last five years have been pretty empty without him."

"He died in a cave-in, didn't he?"

"Yes. We were exploring up near the Sawtooths, hunting a uranium lode. Our diggings collapsed, he held that toppling roof up with his shoulders and yelled at me to scramble out—then before he could get clear, it came down and burst his helmet open. I buried him on a hill, under a cairn, looking out over the desert. He was always a friend of high places."

"Mmmmm—yes— Well, thinking about Stefan Rostomily won't help him or us now. Let's go get that beer, shall we?"

IV

THE SHRILLING within his head brought Robert Naysmith to full awareness with a savage force. His arm jerked, and the brush streaked a yellow line across his canvas.

"Naysmith!" The voice rattled harshly in his skull. "Report to Prior at Frisco Unit. Urgent. Martin Donner has disappeared, presumed dead. You're on his job now. Hop to it, boy."

For a moment Naysmith didn't grasp the name. He'd never met anyone called Donner. Then—yes, that was on the list, Donner was one of the Brotherhood. And dead now.

Dead— He had never seen Martin Donner, and yet he knew the man with an intimacy no two humans had realized before the Brothers came. Sharp in his mind rose the picture of the dead man, smiling a characteristic slow smile, sprawled back in a relaxer with a glass of Scotch in one strong blun-fingered hand. The Brothers were all partial to Scotch, thought Naysmith with a twisting sadness. And Donner had been a mech-volley fan, and had played good chess, read a lot and sometimes quoted Shakespeare, tinkered with machinery, probably had a small collection of guns—

Dead. Sprawled sightlessly somewhere on the turning planet, his muscles stiff, his body already devouring itself in proteolysis, his brain darkened, withdrawn into the great night, and leaving an irreparable gap in the tight-drawn line of the Brotherhood.

"You might pick up a newscast on your way," said the voice in his head conversationally. "It's hot stuff."

Naysmith's eyes focused on his painting. It was shaping up to be a good one. He had been experimenting with techniques, and this latest caught the wide sunlit dazzle of California beach, the long creaming swell of waves, the hot cloudless sky and the thin harsh grass and the tawny-

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skinned woman who sprawled on the sand. Why did they have to call him just now?

"Okay, Sofie," he said with resignation. "That's all. I've got to get back."

The sun-browned woman rolled over on one elbow and looked at him. "What the devil?" she asked. "We've only been here three hours. The day's hardly begun."

"It's gone far enough, I'm afraid," Naysmith began putting away his brushes. "Home to civilization."

"But I don't want to!"

"What has that got to do with it?" snorted the man. *Treat 'em rough and tell 'em nothing, and they'll come running. These modern women aren't as emancipated as they think.* He folded his easel.

"But why?" she cried, half getting up.

"I have an appointment this afternoon." Naysmith strode down the beach toward the trail. After a moment, Sofie followed.

"You didn't tell me that," she protested.

"You didn't ask me," he said. He added a "Sorry" that was no apology at all.

There weren't many others on the beach, and the parking lot was relatively uncluttered. Naysmith palmed the door of his boat and it opened for him. He slipped on tunic, slacks, and sandals, put a beret rakishly atop his sun-bleached yellow hair, and entered the boat. Sofie followed, not bothering to don her own clothes.

The ovoid shell slipped skyward on murmuring jets. "I'll drop you off at your place," said Naysmith. "Some other time, huh?"

She remained sulkily silent. They had met accidentally a week before, in a bar. Naysmith was officially a cybernetic epistemologist on vacation, Sofie an engineer on the Pacific Colony project, off for a holiday from her job and her free-marriage group. It had been a pleasant interlude, and Naysmith regretted it mildly.

Still—the rising urgent pulse of excitement tensed his body and cleared the last mists of artistic preoccupation from his brain. You lived on a knife edge in the Service, you drew

breath and looked at the sun and grasped after the real world with a desperate awareness of little time. None of the Brotherhood were members of the Hedonists, they were all too well-balanced for that, but inevitably they were epicureans.

When you were trained from—well, from birth, even the sharpness of nearing death could be a kind of pleasure. Besides, thought Naysmith, *I might be one of the survivors.*

"You are a rat, you know," said Sofie.

"Squeak," said Naysmith. His face—the strange strong face of level fair brows and wide-set blue eyes, broad across the high cheekbones and in the mouth, square-jawed and crag-nosed—split in a grin that laughed with her while it laughed at her. He looked older than his twenty-five years. And she, thought Sofie with sudden tiredness, looked younger than her forty. Her people had been well off even during the Years of Hunger; she'd always been exposed to the best available biomedical techniques, and if she claimed thirty few would call her a liar. But—

Naysmith fiddled with the radio. Presently a voice came out of it; he didn't bother to focus the TV.

"—the thorough investigation demanded by finance minister Arnold Besser has been promised by President Lopez. In a prepared statement, the President said: 'The rest of the ministry, like myself, are frankly inclined to discredit this accusation and believe that the Chinese government is mistaken. However, its serious nature—'"

"Lopez, eh? The U.N. President himself," murmured Naysmith. "That means the accusation has been made officially now."

"What accusation?" asked the woman. "I haven't heard a 'cast for a week."

"The Chinese government was going to lodge charges that the assassination of Kwang-ti was done by U.N. secret agents," said Naysmith.

"Why, that's ridiculous!" she gasped. "The U.N.?" She shook her dark head. "They haven't the—right. The U.N. agents, I mean. Kwang-ti was a menace, yes, but assassination! I don't believe it."

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"Just think what the anti-U.N. factions all over the Solar System, including our own Americanists, are going to make of this," said Naysmith. "Right on top of charges of corruption comes one of murder!"

"Turn it off," she said. "It's too horrible."

"These are horrible times, Sofie."

"I thought they were getting better." She shuddered. "I remember the tail-end of the Years of Hunger, and then the Years of Madness, and the Socialist Depression—people in rags, starving; you could see their bones—and a riot once, and the marching uniforms, and the great craters—No! The U.N.'s like a dam against all that hell. It *can't* break!"

Naysmith put the boat on automatic and comforted her. After all, anyone loyal to the U.N. deserved a little consideration.

Especially in view of the suppressed fact that the Chinese charge was absolutely true.

He dropped the woman off at her house, a small prefab in one of the colonies, and made vague promises about looking her up again. Then he opened the jets fully and streaked north toward Frisco Unit.

V

THERE WAS a lot of traffic around the great building, and his autopilot was kept busy bringing him in. Naysmith slipped a mantle over his tunic and a conventional half-mask over his face, the latter less from politeness than as a disguise. He didn't think he was being watched, but you were never sure. American Security was damnably efficient.

If ever wheels turned within wheels, he thought sardonically, modern American politics did the spinning. The government was officially Labor and pro-U.N., and was gradually being taken over by its sociodynamicists, who were even more in favor of world federation. However, the conservatives of all stripes, from the mildly socialist Republicans to the extreme Americanists, had enough seats in Congress and enough power generally to exert a potent influence. Among other things, the conservative coalition had prevented the abrogation of the Department of Security, and Hessling, its chief, was known to have Americanist leanings. So there were at least a goodly number of S-men out after "foreign agents"—which included Un-men.

Fourre had his own agents in American Security, of course. It was largely due to their efforts that the American Brothers had false IDs and that the whole tremendous fact of the Brotherhood had remained secret. But some day, thought Naysmith, the story would come out—and then the heavens would fall.

So thin a knife edge, so deep an abyss of chaos and ruin—Society was mad, humanity was a race of insane, and the few who strove to build stability were working against shattering odds. *Sofie was right. The U.N. is a dike, holding back a sea of radioactive blood from the lands of men. And I, thought Naysmith wryly, seem to be the little boy with his finger in the dike.*

His boat landed on the downward ramp and rolled into the echoing vastness of the unit garage. He didn't quite dare land on Prior's flange. A mechanic tagged the vehicle, gave Naysmith a receipt, and guided him toward an elevator. It was an express, bearing him swiftly past the lower levels of shops, offices, service establishments, and places of education and entertainment, up to the residential stories. Naysmith stood in a crowd of humans, most of them masked, and waited for his stop. No one spoke to anyone else, the custom of privacy had become too ingrained. He was just as glad of that.

On Prior's level, the hundred and seventh, he stepped onto the slideway going east, transferred to a northbound strip at the second corner, and rode half a mile before he came to the alcove he wanted. He got off, the rubbery floor absorbing the very slight shock, and entered the recess. When he pressed the door button, the recorded voice said: "I am sorry, Mr. Prior is not at home. Do you wish to record a message?"

"Shut up and let me in," said Naysmith.

The code sentence activated the door, which opened for him. He stepped into a simply furnished vestibule as the door chimed. Prior's voice came over the intercom: "Naysmith?"

"The same."

"Come on in, then. Living room."

Naysmith hung up his mask and mantle, slipped off his sandals, and went down the hall. The floor was warm and resilient under his bare feet, like living flesh. Beyond another door that swung aside was the living room, also furnished with a bachelor austerity. Prior was a lone wolf by nature, belonging to no clubs and not even the loosest free-marriage group. His official job was semantic analyst for a large trading outfit; it gave him a lot of free time for his U.N. activities, plus a good excuse for traveling anywhere in the Solar System.

Naysmith's eyes flickered over the dark negroid face of his co-worker—Prior was not a Brother, though he knew of the band—and rested on the man who lay in the adjoining

relaxer. "Are *you* here, chief?" He whistled. "Then it must be really big."

"Take off your clothes and get some sun-lamp," invited Prior, waving his eternal cigaret at a relaxer. "I'll try to scare up some Scotch for you."

"Why the devil does the Brotherhood always have to drink Scotch?" grumbled Etienne Fourre. "Your padded expense accounts eat up half my budget. Or drink it up, I should say."

He was squat and square and powerful, and at eighty was still more alive than most boys. Small black eyes glistened in a face that seemed carved from scarred and pitted brown rock; his voice was a bass rumble from the shaggy chest, its English hardly accented. Geriatrics could only account for some of the vitality that lay like a coiled spring in him, for the entire battery of diet, exercise, and chemistry has to be applied almost from birth to give maximum effect and his youth antedated the science. *But he'll probably outlive us all*, thought Naysmith.

There was something of the fanatic about Etienne Fourre. He was a child of war whose most relentless battle had become one against war itself. As a young man he had been in the French Resistance of World War II. Later he had been high in the Western liaison with the European undergrounds of World War III, entering the occupied and devastated lands himself on his dark missions. He had fought with the liberals against the neofascists in the Years of Hunger and with the gendarmerie against the atomists in the Years of Madness and with U.N. troops in the Near East where his spy system had been a major factor in suppressing the Great Jihad. He had accepted the head of the secret service division of the U.N. Inspectorate after the Conference of Rio revised the charter and had proceeded quietly to engineer the coup which overthrew the anti-U.N. government of Argentina. Later his men had put the finger on Kwang-ti's faked revolution in the Republic of Mongolia, thus ending that conquest-from-within scheme; and he was ultimately the one responsible for the Chinese

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dictator's assassination. The Brotherhood was his idea from the beginning, his child and his instrument.

Such a man, thought Naysmith, would in earlier days have stood behind the stake and lash of an Inquisition, would have marched at Cromwell's side and carried out the Irish massacres, would have helped set up world-wide Communism—a sternly religious man, for all his mordant atheism, a living sword which needed a war. *Thank God he's on our side!*

"All right, what's the story?" asked the Un-man aloud.

"How long since you were on a Service job?" countered Fourre.

"About a year. Schumacher and I were investigating the *Arbeitspartei* in Germany. The other German Brothers were tied up in that Austrian business, you remember, and I speak the language well enough to pass for a Rhinelander when I'm in Prussia."

"Yes, I recall. You have been loafing long enough, my friend." Fourre took the glass of wine offered him by Prior, sipped it, and grimaced. "*Merdel* Won't these Californians ever give up trying?" Swinging back to Naysmith: "I am calling in the whole Brotherhood on this. I shall have to get back to Rio fast, the devil is running loose down there with those Chinese charges and I will be lucky to save our collective necks. But I have slipped up to North America to get you people organized and under way. I am pretty damn sure that the leadership of our great unknown enemy is down in Rio—probably with Besser, who is at least involved in it but has taken some very excellent precautions against assassination—and it would do no good to kill him only to have someone else take over. At any rate, the United States is still a most important focus of anti-U.N. activity, and Donner's capture means a rapid deterioration of things here. Prior, who was Donner's contact man tells me that he was apparently closer to spying out the enemy headquarters for this continent than any other operative. Now that Donner is gone, Prior has recommended you to succeed in his assignment."

"Which was what?"

"I will come to that. Donner was an engineer by training. You are a cybernetic analyst, *hein?*"

"Yes, officially," said Naysmith. "My degrees are in epistemology and communications theory, and my supposed job is basic-theoretical consultant. Troubleshooter in the realm of ideas." He grinned. "When I get stuck, I can always refer the problem to Prior here."

"Ah, so. You are then necessarily something of a linguist too, eh? Good. Understand, I am not choosing you for your specialty, but rather for your un-specialty. You are too old to have had the benefit of Synthesis training. Some of the younger Brothers are getting it, of course—there is a lad in Mexico, Peter Christian, whose call numbers you had better get from Prior in case you need such help.

"Meanwhile, an epistemologist or semanticist is the closest available thing to an integrating synthesist. By your knowledge of language, psychology, and the general sciences, you should be well equipped to fit together whatever information you can obtain and derive a large picture from them. I don't know." Fourre lit a cigar and puffed ferociously.

"Well, I can start anytime. I'm on extended leave of absence from my nominal job already," said Naysmith. "But what about this Donner? How far had he gotten, what happened to him, and so on?"

"I'll give you the background, because you'll need it," said Prior. "Martin Donner was officially adopted in Canada and, as I said, received a mechanical engineering degree there. About four years ago we had reason to think the enemy was learning that he wasn't all he seemed, so we transferred him to the States, flanged up an American ID for him and so on. Recently he was put to work investigating the Americanists. His leads were simple: he got a job with Brain Tools, Inc., which is known to be lousy with Party members. He didn't try to infiltrate the Party—we already have men in it, of course, though they haven't gotten very high—but he did snoop around, gather data, and finally put the snatch on a certain man and pumped him full of truth drug." Naysmith didn't ask what had happened to the

victim; the struggle was utterly ruthless, with all history at stake. "That gave him news about the midwestern headquarters of the conspiracy, so he went there. It was one of the big units in Illinois. He got himself an apartment and—disappeared. That was almost two weeks ago." Prior shrugged. "He's quite certainly dead by now. If they didn't kill him themselves, he'll have found a way to suicide."

"You can give me the dossier on what Donner learned and communicated to you?" asked Naysmith.

"Yes, of course, though I don't think it'll help you much." Prior looked moodily at his glass. "You'll be pretty much on your own. I needn't add that anything goes, from privacy violation to murder, but that with the Service in such bad odor right now you'd better not leave any evidence. Your first job, though, is to approach Donner's family. You see, he was married."

"Oh?"

"I don't mean free-married, or group-married, or trial-married, or any other version," snapped Prior impatiently. "I mean *married*. Old style. One kid."

"Hmmm—that's not so good, is it?"

"No. Un-men really have no business marrying that way, and most especially the Brothers don't. However—You see the difficulties, don't you? *If* Donner is still alive, somehow, and the gang traces his ID and grabs the wife and kid, they've got a hold on him that may make him spill all he knows. No sane man is infinitely loyal to a cause."

"Well, I suppose you provided Donner with a midwestern ID."

"Sure. Or rather, he used the one we already had set up—name, fingerprints, number, the data registered at Midwest Central. Praise Allah, we've got friends in the registry bureau! But Donner's case is bad. In previous instances where we lost a Brother, we've been able to recover the corpse or were at least sure that it was safely destroyed. Now the enemy has one complete Brother body, ready for fingerprinting, retinals, bloodtyping, Bertillon measurements, autopsy, and everything else they can think of. We can expect them to check that set of physical data against every

ID office in the country. And when they find the same identification under different names and numbers in each and every file—all hell is going to let out for noon.”

“It will take time, of course,” said Fourre. “We have put in duplicate sets of non-Brother data too, as you know; that will give them extra work to do. Nor can they be sure which set corresponds to Donner’s real identity.”

In spite of himself, Naysmith grinned again. “Real identity” was an incongruous term as applied to the Brotherhood. However—

“Nevertheless,” went on Fourre, “there is going to be an investigation in every country on Earth and perhaps the Moon and planets. The Brotherhood is going to have to go underground, in this country at least. And just now when I have to be fighting for my service’s continued existence down in Rio!”

They’re closing in. We always knew, deep in our brains, that this day would come, and now it is upon us.

“Even assuming Donner is dead, which is more likely,” said Prior, “his widow would make a valuable captive for the gang. Probably she knows very little about her husband’s Service activities, but she undoubtedly has a vast amount of information buried in her subconscious—faces, snatches of overheard conversation, perhaps merely the exact dates Donner was absent on this or that mission. A skilled man could get it out of her, you know—thereby presenting the enemy detectives with any number of leads—some of which would go straight to our most cherished secrets.”

“Haven’t you tried to spirit her away?” asked Naysmith.

“She won’t spirit,” said Prior. “We sent an accredited agent to warn her she was in danger and advise her to come away with him. She refused flat. After all, how can she be sure our agent isn’t the creature of the enemy? Furthermore, she took some very intelligent precautions, such as consulting the local police, leaving notes in her bankbox to be opened if she disappears without warning, and so on, which have in effect made it impossibly difficult for us to remove her against her will. If nothing else, we couldn’t stand the publicity. All we’ve been able to do is put a couple of men to watching her

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—and one of these was picked up by the cops the other day and we had hell's own time springing him.”

“She's got backbone,” said Naysmith.

“Too much,” replied Prior. “Well, you know your first assignment. Get her to go off willingly with you, hide her and the kid away somewhere, and then go underground yourself. After that, it's more or less up to you, boy.”

“But how'll I persuade her to—”

“Isn't it obvious?” snapped Fourre.

It was. Naysmith grimaced. “What kind of a skunk do you take me for?” he protested feebly. “Isn't it enough that I do your murders and robberies for you?”

VI

BRIGHAM CITY, Utah was not officially a colony, having existed long before the postwar resettlements. But it had always been a lovely town, and had converted itself almost entirely to modern layout and architecture. Naysmith had not been there before, but he felt his heart warming to it—*the same as Donner, who is dead now.*

He opened all jets and screamed at his habitual speed low above the crumbling highway. Hills and orchards lay green about him under a high clear heaven, a great oasis lifted from the wastelands by the hands of men. They had come across many-miled emptiness, those men of another day, trudging dustily by their creaking, bumping, battered wagons on the way to the Promised Land. He, today, sat on plastic-foam cushions in a metal shell, howling at a thousand miles an hour till the echoes thundered, but was himself fleeing the persecutors.

Local traffic control took over as he intersected the radio beam. He relaxed as much as possible, puffing a nervous cigaret while the autopilot brought him in. When the boat grounded in a side lane, he slipped a full mask over his head and resumed, manually, driving.

The houses nestled in their screens of lawn and trees, the low half-underground homes of small families. Men and women, some in laboring clothes, were about on the slideways, and there were more children in sight, small bright flashes of color laughing and shouting, than was common elsewhere. The Mormon influence, Naysmith supposed; free-marriage and the rest hadn't ever been very fashionable in Utah. Most of the fruit-raising plantations were still privately owned small-holdings too, using cooperation to compete with the giant government-regulated agricultural combines. But there would nevertheless be a high proportion of men and women

here who commuted to outside jobs by airbus—workers on the Pacific Colony project, for instance.

He reviewed Prior's file on Donner, passing the scanty items through his memory. The Brothers were always on call, but outside their own circle they were as jealous of their privacy as anyone else. It had, however, been plain that Jeanne Donner worked at home as a mail-consultant semantic linguist—correcting manuscript of various kinds—and gave an unusual amount of personal attention to her husband and child.

Naysmith felt inwardly cold.

Here was the address. He brought the boat to a silent halt and started up the walk toward the house. Its severe modern lines and curves were softened by a great rush of morning glory, and it lay in the rustling shade of trees, and there was a broad garden behind it. That was undoubtedly Jeanne's work; Donner would have hated gardening.

Instinctively, Naysmith glanced about for Prior's watchman. Nowhere in sight. But then, a good operative wouldn't be. Perhaps that old man, white-bearded and patriarchal, on the slideway; or the delivery boy whipping down the street on his biwheel; or even the little girl skipping rope in the park across the way. She might not be what she seemed: the biological laboratories could do strange things, and Fourre had built up his own secret shops—

The door was in front of him, shaded by a small vine-draped portico. He thumbed the button, and the voice informed him that no one was at home. Which was doubtless a lie, but— *Poor kid! Poor girl, huddled in there against fear, against the night which swallowed her man—waiting for his return, for a dead man's return.* Naysmith shook his head, swallowing a gorge of bitterness, and spoke into the recorder: "Hello, honey, aren't you being sort of inhospitable?"

She must have activated the playback at once, because it was only a moment before the door swung open. Naysmith caught her in his arms as he stepped into the vestibule.

"Marty, Marty, Marty!" She was sobbing and laughing, straining against him, pulling his face down to hers. The long

black hair blinded his stinging eyes. "Oh, Marty, take off that blasted mask. It's been so long—"

She was of medium height, lithe and slim in his grasp, the face strong under its elfish lines, the eyes dark and lustrous and very faintly slanted, and the feel and the shaking voice of her made him realize his own loneliness with a sudden desolation. He lifted the mask, letting its helmet-shaped hollowness thud on the floor, and kissed her with hunger. *God damn it, he thought savagely, Donner would have to pick the kind I'm a sucker for! But then, he'd be bound to do so, wouldn't he?"*

"No time, sweetheart," he said urgently, while she ruffled his hair. "Get some clothes and a mask—Jimmy too, of course. Never mind packing anything. Just call up the police and tell 'em you're leaving of your own accord. We've got to get out of here fast."

She stepped back a pace and looked at him with puzzlement. "What's happened, Marty?" she whispered.

"Fast, I said!" He brushed past her into the living room. "I'll explain later."

"She nodded and was gone into one of the bedrooms, bending over a crib and picking up a small sleepy figure. Naysmith lit another cigaret while his eyes prowled the room.

It was a typical prefab house, but Martin Donner, this other self who was now locked in darkness, had left his personality here. None of the mass-produced featureless gimmickry of today's floaters: this was the home of people who had meant to stay. Naysmith thought of the succession of apartments and hotel rooms which had been his life, and the loneliness deepened in him.

Yes—just as it should be. Donner had probably built that stone fireplace himself, not because it was needed but because the flicker of burning logs was good to look on. There was an antique musket hanging above the mantle, which bore a few objects: old marble clock, wrought-brass candlesticks, a flashing bit of Lunar crystal. The desk was a mahogany anachronism among relaxers. There were some animated films on the walls, but there were a couple of reproductions too—a Rembrandt rabbi and a Constable

landscape—and a few engravings. There was an expensive console with a wide selection of music wires. The bookshelves held their share of microprint rolls, but there were a lot of old-style volumes too, carefully rebound. Naysmith smiled as his eye fell on the well-thumbed set of Shakespeare.

The Donners had not been live-in-the-past cranks, but they had not been rootless either. Naysmith sighed and recalled his anthropology. Western society had been based on the family as an economic and social unit; the first *raison d'être* had gone out with technology, the second had followed in the last war and the postwar upheavels. Modern life was an impersonal thing. Marriage—permanent marriage—came late, when both parties were tired of chasing, and was a loose contract at best; the crèche, the school, the public entertainment, made children a shadowy part of the home. And all of this reacted on the human self. From a creature of strong, highly focused emotional life, with a personality made complex by the interaction of environment and ego, Western man was changing to something like the old Samoan aborigines; easy-going, well-adjusted, close friendship and romantic love sliding into limbo. You couldn't say that it was good or bad, one way or the other; but you wondered what it would do to society.

But what could be done about it? You couldn't go back again, you couldn't support today's population with medieval technology even if the population had been willing to try. But that meant accepting the philosophical basis of science, exchanging the cozy medieval cosmos for a bewildering grid of impersonal relationships and abandoning the old cry of man shaking his fist at an empty heaven. *Why?* If you wanted to control population and disease, (and the first, at least, was still a hideously urgent need) you accepted chemical contraceptives and antibiotic tablets and educated people to carry them in their pockets; but then it followed that the traditional relationships between the sexes became something else. Modern technology had no use for the pick-and-shovel laborer or for the routine intellectual; so you were faced with a huge class of people not fit for anything else, and what were you going to do about it? What your great,

unbelievably complex civilization-machine needed, what it *had* to have in appalling quantity, was the trained man, trained to the limit of his capacity. But then education had to start early and, being free as long as you could pass exams, be ruthlessly selective. Which meant that your first classes, Ph.D.'s at twenty or younger, looked down on the Second schools, who took out their frustration on the Thirds—intellectual snobbishness, social friction, but how to escape it?

And it was, after all, a world of fantastic anachronisms. It had grown too fast and too unevenly. Hindu peasants scratched in their tiny fields and lived in mud huts while each big Chinese collective was getting its own powerplant. Murderers lurked in the slums around Manhattan Crater while a technician could buy a house and furniture for six months' pay. Floating colonies were being established in the oceans, cities rose on Mars and Venus and the Moon, while Congo natives drummed at the rain-clouds. Reconciliation—*how?*

Most people looked at the surface of things. They saw that the great upheavals, the World Wars and the Years of Hunger and the Years of Madness and the economic breakdowns, had been accompanied by the dissolution of traditional social modes, and they thought that the first was the cause of the second. "Give us a chance and we'll bring back the good old days." They couldn't see that those good old days had carried the seeds of death within them, that the change in technology had brought a change in human nature itself which would have deeper effects than any ephemeral transition period. War, depression, the waves of manic perversity, the hungry men and the marching men and the doomed men, were not causes, they were effects—symptoms. The world was changing and you can't go home again.

The psychodynamicists thought they were beginning to understand the process, with their semantic epistemology, games theory, least effort principle, communications theory—maybe so. It was too early to tell. The Scientific Synthesis was still more of a dream than an achievement, and there would have to be at least one generation of Synthesis-trained citizens before the effects could be noticed. Meanwhile,

the combination of geriatrics and birth control, necessary as both were, was stiffening the population with the inevitable intellectual rigidity of advancing years, just at the moment when original thought was more desperately needed than ever before in history. The powers of chaos were gathering, and those who saw the truth and fought for it were so terribly few. *Are you absolutely sure you're right? Can you really justify your battle?*

"Daddy!"

Naysmith turned and held out his arms to the boy. A two-year-old, a sturdy lad with light hair and his mother's dark eyes, still half misted with sleep, was calling him. *My son—Donner's son, damn it!* "Hullo, Jimmy." His voice shook a little.

Jeanne picked the child up. She was masked and voluminously cloaked, and her tones were steadier than his. "All right, shall we go?"

Naysmith nodded and went to the front door. He was not quite there when the bell chimed.

"Who's that?" His ragged bark and the leap in his breast told him how strained his nerves were.

"I don't know. I've been staying indoors since—" Jeanne strode swiftly to one of the bay windows and lifted a curtain, peering out. "Two men. Strangers."

Naysmith fitted the mask on his own head and thumbed the playback switch. The voice was hard and sharp: "This is the Federal police. We know you are in, Mrs. Donner. Open at once."

"S-men!" Her whisper shuddered.

Naysmith nodded grimly. "They've tracked you down so soon, eh? Run and see if there are any behind the house."

Her feet pattered across the floor. "Four in the garden," she called.

"All right." Naysmith caught himself just before asking if she could shoot. He pulled the small flat stet-pistol from his tunic and gave it to her as she returned. He'd have to assume her training; the needler was recoilless anyway. "Once more unto the breach, dear friends—" We're getting out of here. Keep close behind me and shoot at their faces

or hands. They may have breastplates under the clothes."

His own magnum automatic was cold and heavy in his hand. It was no gentle sleepy-gas weapon. At short range it would blow a hole in a man big enough to put your arm through, and a splinter from its bursting slug killed by hydrostatic shock. The rapping on the door grew thunderous.

She was all at once as cool as he. "Trouble with the law?" she asked crisply.

"The wrong kind of law," he answered. "We've still got cops on our side, though, if that's any consolation."

They couldn't be agents of Fourre's or they would have given him the code sentence. That meant they were sent by the same power which had murdered Martin Donner. He felt no special compunctions about replying in kind. The trick was to escape.

Naysmith stepped back into the living room and picked up a light table, holding it before his body as a shield against needles. Returning to the hall he crowded himself in front of Jeanne and pressed the door switch.

As the barrier swung open, Naysmith fired, a muted hiss and a dull thump of lead in flesh. That terrible impact sent the S-man off the porch and tumbling to the lawn in blood. His companion shot as if by instinct, a needle thunking into the table. Naysmith gunned him down even as he cried out.

Now—outside—to the boat and fast! Sprinting across the grass, Naysmith felt the wicked hum of a missile fan his cheek. Jeanne whirled, encumbered by Jimmy, and sprayed the approaching troop with needles as they burst around the corner of the house.

Naysmith was already at the opening door of his jet. He fired once again while his free hand started the motor.

The S-men were using needles. They wanted the quarry alive. Jeanne stumbled, a dart in her arm, letting Jimmy slide to earth. Naysmith sprang back from the boat. A needle splintered on his mask and he caught a whiff that made his head swoop.

The detectives spread out, approaching from two sides as

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they ran. Naysmith was shielded on one side by the boat, on the other by Jeanne's unstimulating form as he picked her up. He crammed her and the child into the seat and wriggled across them. Slamming the door, he grabbed for the controls.

The whole performance had taken less than a minute. As the jet stood on its tail and screamed illegally skyward, Naysmith realized for the thousandth time that no ordinary human would have been fast enough and sure enough to carry off that escape. The S-men were good but they had simply been outclassed.

They'd check the house, inch by inch and find his recent fingerprints, and those would be the same as the stray ones left here and there throughout the world by certain Un-man operatives—the same as Donner's. It was *the* Un-man, the hated and feared shadow who could strike in a dozen places at once, swifter and deadlier than flesh had a right to be, and who had now risen from his grave to harry them again. He, Naysmith, had just added another chapter to a legend.

Only—the S-men didn't believe in ghosts. They'd look for an answer. And if they found the right answer, that was the end of every dream.

And meanwhile the hunt was after him. Radio beams, license numbers, air-traffic analysis, broadcast alarms, ID files—all the resources of a great and desperate power would be hounding him across the world, and nowhere could he rest.

VII

JIMMY WAS weeping in fright, and Naysmith comforted him as well as possible while ripping through the sky. It was hard to be gay, laugh with the boy and tickle him and convince him it was all an exciting game, while Jeanne slumped motionless in the seat and the earth blurred below. But terror at such an early age could have devastating psychic effects and had to be allayed at once. *It's all I can do for you, son. The Brotherhood owes you that much, after the dirty trick it played in bringing you into this world as the child of one of us.*

When Jimmy was at ease again, placed in the back seat to watch a televised robotshow, Naysmith surveyed his situation. The boat had more legs than the law permitted, which was one good aspect. He had taken it five miles up, well above the lanes of controlled traffic, and was running northward in a circuitous course. His hungry engines gulped oil at a frightening rate; he'd have to stop for a refill two or three times. Fortunately, he had plenty of cash along. The routine identification of a thumbprint check would leave a written invitation to the pursuers, whereas they might never stumble on the isolated fuel stations where he meant to buy.

Jeanne came awake, stirring and gasping. He held her close to him until the spasm of returning consciousness had passed and her eyes were clear again. Then he lit a cigaret for her and one for himself, and leaned back against the cushions.

"I suppose you're wondering what this is all about," he said.

"Uh-huh." Her smile was uncertain. "How much can you tell me?"

"As much as is safe for you to know," he answered. *Damn it, how much does she already know I can't give myself away*

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yet! She must be aware that her husband is—was—an Un-man, that his nominal job was a camouflage, but the details?

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"I've got a hiding place for you and the kid, up in the Canadian Rockies. Not too comfortable, I'm afraid, but reasonably safe. If we can get there without being intercepted. It—"

"We interrupt this program to bring you an urgent announcement. A dangerous criminal is at large in an Airflyte numbered USA-1349-U-7683 Repeat, USA-1349-U-7683. This man is believed to be accompanied by a woman and child. If you see the boat, call the nearest police headquarters or Security office at once. The man is wanted for murder and kidnaping, and is thought to be the agent of a foreign power. Further announcements with complete description will follow as soon as possible."

The harsh voice faded and the robotshow came back on. "Man, oh man, oh man," breathed Naysmith. "They don't waste any time, do they?"

Jeanne's face was white, but her only words were: "How about painting this boat's number over?"

"Can't stop for that now or they'd catch us sure." Naysmith scanned the heavens. "Better strap yourself and Jimmy in, though. If a police boat tracks us, I've got machine guns in this one. We'll blast them."

She fought back the tears with a heart-wrenching galantry. "Mind explaining a little?"

"I'll have to begin at the beginning," he said cautiously. "To get it all in order, I'll have to tell you a lot of things you already know. But I want to give you the complete pattern. I want to break away from the dirty names like spy and traitor, and show you what we're really trying to do."

"We?" She caressed the pronoun. No sane human likes to stand utterly alone.

"Listen," said the Naysmith. "I'm an Un-man. But a rather special kind. I'm not in the Inspectorate, allowed by charter and treaty to carry out investigations and report violations of things like disarmament agreements to the Council. I'm in the U.N. Secret Service—the *secret* Secret

Service—and our standing is only quasi-legal. Officially we're an auxiliary to the Inspectorate; in practice we do a hell of a lot more. The Inspectorate is supposed to tell the U.N. Moon bases where to plant their rocket bombs; the Service tries to make bombardment unnecessary by forestalling hostile action."

"By assassinating Kwang-ti?" she challenged.

"Kwang-ti was a menace. He'd taken China out of the U.N. and was building up her armies. He'd made one attempt to take over Mongolia by sponsoring a phony revolt, and nearly succeeded. I'm not saying that he was knocked off by a Chinese Un-man, in spite of his successor government's charges. I'm just saying it was a good thing he died."

"He did a lot for China."

"Sure. And Hitler did a lot for Germany and Stalin did a lot for Russia, all of which was nullified, along with a lot of innocent people, when those countries went to war. Never forget that the U.N. exists first, last, and all the time to keep the peace. Everything else is secondary."

Jeanne lit another cigaret from the previous one. "Tell me more," she said in a voice that suggested she had known this for a long time.

"Look," said Naysmith, "the enemies the U.N. has faced in the past were as nothing to what endangers it now. Because before the enmity has always been more or less open. In the Second War, the U.N. got started as a military alliance against the fascist powers. In the Third War it became, in effect, a military alliance against its own dissident and excommunicated members. After Rio it existed partly as an instrument of multilateral negotiation but still primarily as an alliance of a great many states, not merely Western, to prevent or suppress wars anywhere in the world. Oh, I don't want to play down its legal and cultural and humanitarian and scientific activities, but the essence of the U.N. was force, men and machines it could call on from all its member states—even against a member of itself, if that nation were found guilty by a majority vote in the Council. It wasn't quite as large of the United States as you think to turn its Lunar bases over to the U.N. It thought

it could still control the Council as it had done in the past, but matters didn't work out that way. Which is all to the good. We need a truly international body.

"Anyway, the principle of intervention to stop all wars, invited or not, led to things like the Great Jihad and the Brazil-Argentina affair. Small-scale war fought to prevent large-scale war. Then when the Russian government appealed for help against its nationalist insurgents, and got it, the precedent of active intervention within a country's own boundaries was set—much to the good and much to the distaste of almost every government, including the American. The conservatives were in power here about that time, you remember, trying unsuccessfully to patch up the Socialist Depression, and they nearly walked us out of membership. Not quite, though. And those other international functions, research and trade regulation and so on, have been growing apace.

"You see where this is leading? I've told you many times before—" a safe guess, that—"but I'll tell you again. The U.N. is in the process of becoming a federal world government. Already it has its own Inspectorate, its own small police force, and its Lunar Guard. Slowly, grudgingly, the nations are being induced to disarm—we abolished our own draft ten years or so back, remember? There's a movement afoot to internationalize the planets and the ocean developments, put them under direct U.N. authority. We've had international currency stabilization for a long time now; sooner or later, we'll adopt one money unit for the world. Tariffs are virtually extinct. Oh, I could go on all day.

"Previous proposals to make a world government of the U.N. were voted down. Nations were too short-sighted. But it is nevertheless happening, slowly, piece by piece, so that the final official unification of man will be only a formality. Understand? Of course you do. It's obvious. The trouble is, our enemies have begun to understand it too."

Naysmith lit a cigaret for himself and scowled at the blue cloud swirling from his nostrils. "There are so many who would like to break the U.N. There are nationalists and militarists of every kind, every country, men who would

rise to power if the old anarchy returned. The need for power is a physical hunger in that sort. There are big men of industry, finance and politics, who'd like to cut their enterprises loose from regulation. There are labor leaders who want a return of the old strife which means power and profit for them. There are religionists of a dozen sorts who don't like our population-control campaigns and the quiet subversion of anti-contraceptive creeds. There are cranks and fanatics who seek a chance to impose their own beliefs, everyone from Syndics to Neocommunists, Pilgrims to Hedonists. There are those who were hurt by some or other U.N. action; perhaps they lost a son in one of our campaigns, perhaps a new development or policy wiped out their business. They want revenge. Oh, there are a thousand kind of them, and if once the U.N. collapses they'll all be free to go fishing in troubled waters."

"Tell me something new," said Jeanne impatiently.

"I have to lead up to it, darling. I have to explain what this latest threat is. You see, these enemies of ours are getting together. All over the world, they're shelving their many quarrels and uniting into a great secret organization whose one purpose is to weaken and destroy the U.N. You wouldn't think fanatical nationalists of different countries could cooperate? Well, they can, because it's the only way they'll ever have a chance later on to attack each other. The leadership of this organization, which we Un-men somewhat inelegantly refer as to the gang, is brilliant; a lot of big men are members and the whole thing is beautifully set up. Such entities as the Americanist Party have become fronts for the gang. Whole governments are backing them, governments which are reluctant U.N. members only because of public opinion at home and the pressure that can be brought to bear on non-members. Kwang-ti's successors brought China back in, I'm sure, only to ruin us from within. U.N. Councillors are among their creatures, and I know not how many U.N. employees."

Naysmith smiled humorlessly. "Even now, the great bulk of people throughout the world are pro-U.N., looking on it as a deliverer from the hell they've survived. So one way the

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enemy has to destroy us is by sabotage from inside. Corruption, arrogance, inefficiency, illegal actions—perpetrated by their own agents in the U.N. and becoming matters of public knowledge. You've heard a lot of that, and you'll hear still more in the months to come if this is allowed to go on. Another way is to ferret out some of our darker secrets—secrets which every government necessarily has—and make them known to the right people. All right, let's face it: Kwang-ti *was* assassinated by an Un-man. We thought the job had been passed off as the work of democratic conspirators, but apparently there's been a leak somewhere and the Chinese accusation is shaking the whole frail edifice of international cooperation. The Council will stall as long as possible, but eventually it'll have to disown the Service's action and heads will roll. Valuable heads.

“Now if at the proper moment, with the U.N. badly weakened, whole nations walking out again, public confidence trembling, there should be military revolutions within key nations—and the Moon bases seized by ground troops from a nearby colony— Do you see it? Do you see the return of international anarchy, dictatorship, war—and every Un-man in the Solar System hunted to his death?”

VIII

By a roundabout course avoiding the major towns and colonies, it was many hours even at the airboat's speed to Naysmith's goal. He found his powers of invention somewhat taxed enroute. First he had to give Jeanne a half true account of his whereabouts in the past weeks. Then Jimmy, precociously articulate—as he should be, with both parents well into the genius class—felt disturbed by the gravity of his elders and the imminent re-disappearance of a father whom he obviously worshipped, and could only be comforted by Naysmith's long impromptu saga of Crock O'Dile, a green Irish alligator who worked at the Gideon Kleinmein Home for Helpless and Houseless Horses. Finally there were others to contend with, a couple of filling station operators and the clerk in a sporting goods store where he purchased supplies: they had to be convinced in an unobtrusive way that these were dully everyday customers to be forgotten as soon as they were gone. It all seemed to go off easily enough, but Naysmith was cold with the tension of wondering whether any of these people had heard the broadcast alarms. Obviously not, so far. But when they got home and, inevitably, were informed, would they remember well enough?

He zigzagged over Washington, crossing into British Columbia above an empty stretch of forest. There was no official reason for an American to stop, but the border was a logical place for the S-men to watch.

"Will the Canadian police cooperate in hunting us?" asked Jeanne.

"I don't know," said Naysmith. "It depends. You see, American Security, with its broad independent powers, has an anti-U.N. head. On the other hand, the President is pro-U.N. as everybody knows, and Fourre will doubtless see to

it that he learns who this wanted criminal is. He can't actually countermand the chase without putting himself in an untenable position, but he can obstruct it in many ways and can perhaps tip off the Canadian government. All on the Q.T., of course."

The boat swung east until it was following the mighty spine of the Rockies, an immensity of stone and forest and snow turning gold with sunset. Naysmith had spent several vacations here, camping and painting, and knew where he was headed. It was after dark when he slanted the boat downward, feeling his way with the radar.

There was an abandoned uranium-hunting base here, one of the shacks still habitable. Naysmith bounced the boat to a halt on the edge of a steep cliff, cut the engines, and yawned hugely. "End of the line," he said.

They climbed out, burdened with equipment, food, and the sleeping child. Naysmith wheeled the vehicle under a tall pine and led the way up a slope. Jeanne drew a lungful of the sharp moonlit air and sighed. "Martin, it's beautiful! Why didn't you ever take me here before?"

He didn't answer. His flashlight picked out the crumbling face of the shack, its bare wood and metal blurred with many years. The door creaked open on darkness. Inside, it was bare, the flooring rotted away to a soft black mould, a few sticks of broken furniture scattered like bones. Taking a purchased ax, he went into the woods after spruce boughs, heaping them under the sleeping bags which Jeanne had laid out. Jimmy whimpered a little in his dreams, but they didn't wake him to eat.

Naysmith's watch showed midnight before the cabin was in order. He strolled out for a final cigaret and Jeanne followed to stand beside him. Her fingers closed about his.

The Moon was nearly full, rising over a peak whose heights were one glitter of snow. Stars wheeled enormously overhead, flashing and flashing in the keen cold air. The forests growing up the slant of this mountain souged with wind, tall and dark and heady-scented, filled with night and mystery. Down in the gorge there was a river, a long gleam

of broken moonlight, the fresh wild noise of its passage drifting up to them. Somewhere an owl hooted.

Jeanne shivered in the chill breeze and crept against Naysmith. He drew his mantle about both of them, holding her close. The little red eye of his cigaret waxed and waned in the dark.

"It's so lovely here," she whispered. "Do you have to go tomorrow?"

"Yes." His answer came harshly out of his throat. "You've supplies enough for a month. If anyone chances by, then you're of course just a camper on vacation. But I doubt they will, this is an isolated spot. If I'm not back within three weeks, though, follow the river down. There's a small colony about fifty miles from here. Or I may send one of our agents to get you. He'll have a password—let's see—"The crocodiles grow green in Ireland.' Okay?"

Her laugh was muted and wistful.

"I'm sorry to lay such a burden on you, darling," he said contritely.

"It's nothing—except that you'll be away, a hunted man, and I won't know—" She bit her lip. Her face was white in the streaming moon-glow. "This is a terrible world we live in."

"No, Jeanne. It's a—a potentially lovely world. My job is to help keep it that way." He chuckled her under the chin, fighting to smile. "Don't let it worry you. Goodnight, sweet princess."

She kissed him with yearning. For an instant Naysmith hung back. *Should I tell her? She's safely away now—she has a right to know I'm not her husband—*

"What's wrong, Marty? You seem so strange."

I don't dare. I can't tell her—not while the enemy is abroad, not while there's a chance of their catching her. And a little longer in her fool's paradise—I can drop out of sight, let someone else give her the news— You crawling coward!

He surrendered. But it was a cruel thing to know, that she was really clasping a dead man to her.

They walked slowly back to the cabin.

Colonel Samsey woke with an animal swiftness and sat up in bed. Sleep drained from him as he saw the tall figure etched black against his open balcony door. He grabbed for the gun under his pillow.

"I wouldn't try that, friend." The voice was soft. Moonlight streamed in to glitter on the pistol in the intruder's hand.

"Who are you?" Samsey gasped it out, hardly aware of the incredible fact yet. Why—he was a hundred and fifty stories up. His front entrance was guarded, and no copter could so silently have put this masked figure on his balcony.

"Out of bed, boy. Fast! Okay, now clasp your hands on top of your head."

Samsey felt the night wind cold on his naked body. It was a helplessness, this standing unclothed and alone, out of his uniform and pistol belt, looking down the muzzle of a stranger's gun. His close-cropped scalp felt stubbly under his palms.

"How did you get in?" he whispered.

Naysmith didn't feel it necessary to explain the process. He had walked from the old highway on which he had landed his jet and used vacuum shoes and gloves to climb the sheer face of Denver Unit. "Better ask why I came," he said.

"All right, blast you! Why? This is a gross violation of privacy, plus menace and—" Samsey closed his mouth with a snap. Legality had plainly gone by the board.

"I want some information." Naysmith seated himself half-way on a table, one leg swinging easily, the gun steady in his right hand while his left fumbled in a belt pouch. "And you, as a high-ranking officer in the American Guard and a well-known associate of Roger Wade, seemed likeliest to have it."

"You're crazy! This is— We're just a patriotic society. You know that. Or should. We—"

"Cram it, Samsey," said Naysmith wearily. "The American Guard has ranks, uniforms, weapons, and drills. Every member belongs to the Americanist Party. You're a private army, Nazi style, and you've done the murders, robberies, and beatings of the Party for the past five years. As soon as the

government is able to prove that in court, you'll all go to the Antarctic mines and you know it. Your hope is that your faction can be in power before there's a case against you."

"Libel! We're a patriotic social group—"

"I regret my approach," said Naysmith sardonically. And he did. Direct attack of this sort was not only unlawful, it was crude and of very limited value. But he hadn't much choice. He *had* to get some kind of line on the enemy's plans, and the outlawing of the Brotherhood and the general suspicion cast on the Service meant that standard detective approaches were pretty well eliminated for the time being. Half a loaf— "Nevertheless, I want certain information. The big objective right now is to overthrow the U.N. How do you intend to accomplish that? Specifically, what is your next assignment?"

"You don't expect—"

Samsey recoiled as Naysmith moved. The Un-man's left hand came out of his pouch like a striking snake even as his body hurtled across the floor. The right arm grasped Samsey's biceps, twisting him around in front of the intruder, a knee in his back, while the hypodermic needle plunged into his neck.

Samsey struggled, gasping. The muscles holding him were like steel, cat-lithe, meeting his every wrench with practiced ease. And now the great wave of dizziness came. He lurched and Naysmith supported him, easing him back to the bed.

The hypo had been filled with four cubic centimeters of a neoscopaneurine mixture, very nearly a lethal dose. But it would act fast! Naysmith did not think the colonel had been immunized against such truth drugs. The gang wouldn't trust its lower echelons that much.

Moonlight barred the mindlessly drooling face on the pillow with a streak of icy silver. It was very quiet here, only the man's labored breathing and the sigh of wind blowing the curtains at the balcony door. Naysmith gave his victim a stimulant injection, waited a couple of minutes, and began his interrogation.

Truth drugs have been misnamed. They do not intrinsic-

ally force the subject to speak truth; they damp those higher brain centers needed to invent a lie or even to inhibit response. The subject babbles, with a strong tendency to babble on those subjects he has previously been most concerned to keep secret. A skilled psychologist can lead the general direction of the talk.

First, of course, the private nastinesses which every human has buried within himself came out, like suppuration from an inflamed wound. Naysmith had been through this before, but he grimaced—Samsey was an especially bad sort. These aggressively manly types often were. Naysmith continued patiently until he got onto more interesting topics.

Samsey didn't know anyone higher in the gang than Wade. Well, that was to be expected. In fact, Naysmith though scornfully, he, the outsider, knew more about the organization of the enemy than any one member below the very top ranks. But that was a pretty general human characteristic too. A man did his job, for whatever motives of power, profit, or simple existence he might have, and didn't even try to learn where it fitted into the great general pattern. The synthesizing mentality is tragically rare.

But a free society at least permitted its members to learn, and a rational society encouraged them to do so; whereas totalitarianism, from the bossy foreman to the hemispheric dictator, was based on the deliberate suppression of communications. Where there was no feedback, there could be no stability except through the living death of imposed intellectual rigidity.

Back to business! Here came something he had been waiting for, the next task for the American Guard's thugs. The *Phobos* was due in from Mars in a week. Guardsmen were supposed to arrange the death of one Barney Rosenberg, passenger, as soon as possible after his debarkation on Earth. Why? The reason was not given and had not been asked for, but a good description of the man was available.

Mars—yes, the Guard was also using a privately owned spaceship to run arms to a secret base in the Thyle II country, where they were picked up by Pilgrims.

So! The Pilgrims were in on the gang. The Service had

suspected as much, but here was proof. This might be the biggest break of all, but Naysmith had a hunch that it was incidental. Somehow, the murder of an obscure returnee from Mars impressed him as involving greater issues.

There wasn't more which seemed worth the risk of waiting. Naysmith had a final experiment to try.

Samsey was a rugged specimen, already beginning to pull out of his daze. Naysmith switched on a lamp, its radiance falling across the distorted face below him. The eyes focused blurrily on his sheening mask. Slowly, he lifted it.

"Who am I, Samsey?" he asked quietly.

A sob rattled in the throat. "Donner—but you're dead. We killed you in Chicago. You died, you're dead."

That settled that. Naysmith replaced his mask. Systematically, he repaired the alarms he had annulled for his entry and checked the room for traces of his presence. None. Then he took Samsey's gun from beneath the pillow. Silenced, naturally. He folded the lax fingers about the trigger and blew the colonel's brains out.

They'd suspect it wasn't suicide, of course, but they might not think of a biochemical autopsy before the drugs in the bloodstream had broken down beyond analysis. At least there was one less of them. Naysmith felt no qualms. This was not a routine police operation, it was war.

He went back to the balcony, closing the door behind him. Swinging over the edge as he adjusted his vacuum cups, he started the long climb earthward.

The Service could ordinarily have provided Naysmith with an excellent disguise, but the equipment needed was elaborate and he dared not assume that any of the offices which had it were unwatched by Security. Better rely on masks and the feeble observational powers of most citizens to brazen it out.

Calling Prior from a public communibooth, even using the scrambler, was risky too, but it had to be done. The mails were not to be trusted any more, and communication was an absolute necessity for accomplishment.

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The voice was gray with weariness: "Mars, eh? Nice job, Naysmith. What should we do?"

"Get the word to Fourre, of course, for whatever he can make of it. And a coded radio message to our operatives on Mars. They can check this Pilgrim business and also look into Rosenberg's background and associates. Should be a lot of leads there. However, I'll try to snatch Rosenberg myself, with a Brother or two to help me, before the Americanists get him."

"Yeah, you'd better. The Service's hands are pretty well tied just now while the U.N. investigation of the Chinese accusations is going on. Furthermore, we can't be sure of many of our own people. So we, and especially the Brotherhood, will have to act pretty much independently for the time being. Carry on as well as you can. However, I can get your information to Rio and Mars all right."

"Good man. How are things going with you?"

"Don't call me again, Naysmith. I'm being watched, and my own men can't stop a really all-out assassination attempt." Prior chuckled dryly. "If they succeed, we can talk it over in hell."

"To modify what the old *cacique* said about Spaniards in Heaven—if there are nationalists in hell, I'm not sure if I want to go there. Okay, then. And good luck!"

It was only the next day that the newscasts carried word of the murder of one Nathan Prior, semanticist residing at Frisco Unit. It was believed to be the work of foreign agents, and S-men had been assigned to aid the local police.

IX

MOST OF the Brothers had, of course, been given disguises early in their careers. Plastic surgery had altered the distinctive countenance and the exact height, false fingerprints and retinals been put in their ID records; each of them had a matching set of transparent plastic "tips" to put on his own fingers when he made a print for any official purpose. These men should temporarily be safe, and there was no justification for calling on their help yet. They were sitting tight and wary, for if the deadly efficiency of Hessling's organization came to suspect them and pull them in, an elementary physical exam would rip the masquerade wide open.

That left perhaps a hundred undisguised Brothers in the United States when word came for them to go underground. Identical physique could be too useful—for example, in furnishing unshakeable alibis, or in creating the legend of a superman who was everywhere—to be removed from all. Some of these would be able to assume temporary appearances and move in public for a while. The rest had to cross the border or hide.

The case of Juho Lampi was especially unfortunate. He had made enough of a name as a nucleonic engineer in Finland to be invited to America, and his disguise was only superficial. When Fourre's warning went out on the code circuit, he left his apartment in a hurry. A mechanic at the garage where he hired an airboat recognized the picture that had been flashed over the entire country. Lampi read the man's poorly hidden agitation, slugged him, and stole the boat, but it put the S-men on his trail. It told them, furthermore, that the identical men were not only American.

Lampi had been given the name and address of a woman in Iowa. The Brothers were organized into cells of half a dozen, each with its own rendezvous and contacts, and this

was to be Lampi's while he was in the States. He went there after dark and got a room. Somewhat later, Naysmith showed up. Naysmith, being more nearly a full-time operative, knew where several cells had their meeting places. He collected Lampi and decided not to wait for anyone else. The *Phobos* was coming to Earth in a matter of hours. Naysmith had gone to Iowa in a self-driver boat hired from a careless office in Colorado; now, through the woman running the house, the two men rented another and flew back to Robinson Field.

"I have my own boat—repainted, new number, and so on—parked near here," said Naysmith. "We'll take off in it. If we get away."

"And then what?" asked Lampi. His English was good, marked with only a trace of accent. The Brothers were natural linguists.

"I don't know. I just don't know." Naysmith looked moodily about him. "We're being hunted as few have ever been hunted." He murmured half to himself:

*"I heard myself proclaim'd;
And by the happy hollow of a tree
Escap'd the hunt. No port is free; no place,
That guard and most unusual vigilance
Does not attend my taking."*

They were sitting in the Moonjumper, bar and restaurant adjacent to the spaceport. They had chosen a booth near the door, and the transparent wall on this side opened onto the field. Its great pale expanse of concrete stretched under glaring floodlights out toward darkness, a gigantic loom of buildings on three sides of it. Coveralled mechanics were busy around a series of landing cradles. A uniformed policeman strolled by, speaking idly with a technician. Or was it so casual? The technic looked solemn.

"Oh, well," said Lampi. "To get onto a more cheerful subject, have you seen Warschawski's latest exhibition?"

"What's so cheerful about that?" asked Naysmith. "It's awful. Sculpture just doesn't lend itself to abstraction as he seems to think."

Though the Brothers naturally tended to have similar

tastes, environment could make a difference. Naysmith and Lampi plunged into a stiff-necked argument about modern art. It was going at a fine pace when they were interrupted.

The curtains of the booth had been drawn. They were twitched aside now and the waitress looked in. She was young and shapely, and the skimpy playsuit might have been painted on. Beyond her, the bar room was a surge of people, a buzz and hum and rumble of voices. In spite of the laboring ventilators, there was a blue haze of smoke in the air.

"Would you like another round?" asked the girl.

"Not just yet, thanks," said Naysmith, turning his masked face toward her. He had dyed his yellow hair a mousey brown at the hideaway, and Lampi's was now black, but that didn't help much; there hadn't been time to change the wiry texture. He sat stooped, so that she wouldn't see at a casual glance that he was as big as Lampi, and hoped she wasn't very observant.

"Want some company?" she asked. "I can fix it up."

"No, thanks," said Naysmith. "We're waiting for the rocket."

"I mean later. Nice girls. You'll like them." She gave him a mechanically meretricious smile.

"Ummm—well—" Naysmith swapped a glance with Lampi, who nodded. He arranged an assignation for an hour after the landing and slipped her a bill. She left them, swaying her hips.

Lampi chuckled. "It's hardly fair to a couple of hard-working girls," he said. "They will be expecting us."

"Yeah, Probably supporting aged grandmothers, too." Naysmith grinned and lifted the Scotch to the mouth-slit of his mask. "However, it's not the sort of arrangement two fugitives would make."

"What about the American Guardsmen?"

"Probably those burly characters lounging at the bar. Didn't you notice them as we came in? They'll have friends elsewhere who'll—"

"Your attention, please. The first tender from the Phobos will be cradling in ten minutes, carrying half the passengers

from Mars. The second will follow ten minutes later. Repeat, the first—"

"Which one is Rosenberg on?" asked Lampi.

"How should I know?" Naysmith shrugged. "We'll just have to take our chance. Drink up."

He patted his shoulder-holstered gun and loosened the tunic over it. He and Lampi had obtained breastplates and half-boots at the hideaway; their masks were needle-proof, and an arm or groin or thigh was hard to hit when a knee-length cloak flapped around the body. They should be fairly well immune to stet-guns if they worked fast. Not to bullets—but even the Guardsmen probably wouldn't care to use those in a crowd.

The two men went out of the booth and mingled with the people swirling toward the passenger egress. They separated as they neared the gate and hung about on the fringe of the group. There were a couple of big hard-looking men in masks who had shouldered their way up next to the gate. One of them had been in the Moonjumper, Naysmith remembered.

He had no picture of Rosenberg, and Samsey's incoherent description had been of little value. The man was a nonentity who must have been off Earth for years. But presumably the Guardsmen knew what to look for. Which meant that—

There was a red and yellow glare high in the darkened heavens. The far thunder became a howling, bellowing, shaking roar that trembled in the bones and echoed in the skull. Nerves crawled with the nameless half terror of unheard subsonic vibrations. The tender grew to a slim spearhead, backing down with radio control on the landing cradle. Her chemical blasts splashed vividly off the concrete baffles. When she lay still and the rockets cut off, there was a ringing silence.

Endless ceremony—the mechanics wheeled up a stairway, the airlock ground open, a steward emerged, a medical crew stood by to handle space sickness—Naysmith longed for a cigaret. He shifted on his feet and forced his nerves to a shuttering calm.

There came the passengers, half a dozen of them filing

toward the gateway. They stopped one by one at the clearance booth to have their papers stamped. The two Guardsmen exchanged a masked glance.

A stocky Oriental came through first. Then there was a woman engineer in Spaceways uniform who held up the line as she gathered two waiting children into her arms. Then—

He was a small bandy-legged man with a hooked nose and a leathery brown skin, shabbily clad, lugging a battered valise. One of the Guardsmen tapped him politely on the arm. He looked up and Naysmith saw his lips moving, the face etched in a harsh white glare. He couldn't hear what was said over the babble of the crowd, but he could imagine it. "Why, yes, I'm Barney Rosenberg. What do you want?"

Some answer was given him; it didn't really matter what. With a look of mild surprise, the little fellow nodded. The other Guardsman pushed over to him, and he went out of the crowd between them. Naysmith drew his stet-gun, holding it under his cloak, and cat-footed after. The Guardsmen didn't escort Rosenberg into the shadows beyond the field, but walked over toward the Moonjumper. There was no reason for Rosenberg to suspect their motives, especially if they stood him a drink.

Naysmith lengthened his stride and fell in beside the right-hand man. He didn't waste time: his gun was ready, its muzzle against the victim's hip. He fired. The Guardsman strangled on a yell.

Lampi was already on the left, but he'd been a trifle slow. That enemy grabbed the Finn's gun wrist with a slashing movement. Naysmith leaned over the first guardsman, who clawed at him as he sagged to his knees, and brought the edge of his left palm down on the second one's neck, just at the base of the skull. The blow cracked numbingly back into his own sinews.

"What the blazes—" Rosenberg opened his mouth to shout. There was no time to argue, and Lampi needled him. With a look of utter astonishment, the prospector wilted. Lampi caught him under the arms and hoisted him to one shoulder.

The kidnaping had been seen. People were turning around,

staring. Somebody began to scream. Lampi stepped over the two toppled men and followed Naysmith.

Past the door of the bar, out to the street, hurry!

A whistle skirled behind them. They jumped over the slideway and dashed across the avenue. There was a transcontinental Diesel truck bearing down on them, its lights one great glare, the roar of its engine filling the world. Naysmith thought that it brushed him. But its huge bulk was a cover. They plunged over the slideway beyond, ignoring the stares of passersby, and into the shadows of a park.

A siren began to howl. When he had reached the sheltering gloom thrown by a tree, Naysmith looked behind him. Two policemen were coming, but they hadn't spotted the fugitives yet. Naysmith and Lampi ducked through a formal garden, jumping hedges and running down twisted paths. Gravel scrunched underfoot.

Quartering across the park, Naysmith led the way to his airboat. He fumbled the door open and slithered inside. Lampi climbed in with him, tossing Rosenberg into the back seat and slamming the door. The boat slid smoothly out into passing traffic. There were quite a few cars and boats abroad, and Naysmith mingled with them.

Lampi breathed heavily in the gloom. A giant neon sign threw a bloody light over his mask. "Now what?" he asked.

"Now we get the devil out of here," said Naysmith. "Those boys are smart. It won't take them long to alert traffic control and stop all nearby vehicles for search. We have to be in the air before that time."

They left the clustered shops and dwellings, and Naysmith punched the board for permission to take off southbound. The automatic signal flashed him a fourth-lane directive. He climbed to the indicated height and went obediently south on the beam. Passing traffic was a stream of moving stars around him.

The emergency announcement signal blinked an angry red. "Fast is right," said Lampi, swearing in four languages.

"Up we go," said Naysmith.

He climbed vertically, narrowly missing boats in the

higher levels, until he was above all lanes. He kept climbing till his vehicle was in the lower stratosphere. Then he turned westward at top speed.

"We'll go out over the Pacific," he explained. "Then we find us a nice uninhabited islet with some trees and lie doggo till tomorrow night. Won't be any too comfortable, but it'll have to be done and I have some food along." He grinned beneath his mask. "I hope you like cold canned beans, Juho."

"And then—?"

"I know another island off the California coast," said Naysmith. "We'll disguise this boat at our first stop, of course, changing the number and recognition signal and so on. Then at the second place we'll refuel and I'll make an important call. You can bet your last mark the enemy knows who pulled this job and will have alerted all fuel station operators this time. But the man where we're going is an absentminded old codger who won't be hard to deceive." He scowled. "That'll take about the last of my cash money, too. Have to get more somehow, if we're to carry on in our present style."

"Where do we go from there?" said Lampi.

"North, I suppose. We have to hide Rosenberg somewhere, and you—" Naysmith shook his head, feeling a dull pain within him. That was the end of the masquerade. Jeanne Donner would know.

At first Barney Rosenberg didn't believe it. He was too shocked. The Guardsmen had simply told him they were representatives of some vaguely identified company which was thinking of developments on Mars and wanted to consult him. He'd been offered a hotel suite and had been told the fee would be nice. Now he looked at his kidnapers with bewildered eyes and challenged them to say who they were.

"Think we'd be fools enough to carry our real IDs around?" snorted Naysmith, "You'll just have to take our word for it that we're U.N. operatives—till later, anyway, when we can safely prove it. I tell you, the devil is loose on Earth and you need protection. Those fellows were after your

knowledge, and once they got that you'd have been a corpse."

Rosenberg looked from one masked face to the other. His head felt blurred, the drug was still in him and he couldn't think straight. But those voices—

He thought he remembered the voices. Both of them. Only they were the same.

"I don't know anything," he said weakly, "I tell you, I'm just a prospector, home from Mars."

"You must have information—that's the only possibility," said Lampi. "Something you learned on Mars which is important to them, perhaps to the whole world. What?"

Fieri in Drygulch, and the Pilgrim who had been so eager—

Rosenberg shook his head, trying to clear it. He looked at the two big cloaked figures hemming him in. There was darkness outside the hurtling airboat.

"Who are you?" he whispered.

"I told you we're friends. Un-men. Secret agents." Naysmith laid a hand on Rosenberg's shoulder. "We want to help you, that's all. We want to protect you and whatever it is you know."

Rosenberg looked at the hand—strong, sinewy, blunt-fingered, with fine gold hairs on the knuckles. But no, no, no! His heart began thumping till he thought it must shatter his ribs.

"Let me see your faces," he gasped.

"Well—why not?" Naysmith and Lampi took off their masks. The dull panel light gleamed off the same features; broad, strong-boned, blue-eyed. There was a deep wrinkle above each jutting triangle of nose. The left ear was faintly bigger than the right. Both men had a trick of cocking their head a trifle sideways when listening.

We'll tell him we're twin brothers, thought Naysmith and Lampi simultaneously.

Rosenberg shrank into the seat. There was a tiny whimper in his throat.

"Stef," he murmured. "Stefan Rostomily."

X

THE NEWCASTS told of crisis in the U.N. Etienne Fourre, backed by its President, was claiming that the Chinese government was pressing a fantastic charge to cover up designs of its own. A full-dress investigation was in order. Only—as Besser, Minister of International Finance, pointed out—when the official investigating service was itself under suspicion, who could be trusted to get at the facts?

In the United States, Security was after a dangerous spy and public enemy. Minute descriptions of Donner-Naysmith-Lampi were on all the screens. Theoretically, the American President could call off the hunt, but that would mean an uproar in the delicately balanced Congress; there'd have been a vote of confidence, and if the President lost that, he and his cabinet would have to resign—and who would be elected to succeed? But Naysmith and Lampi exchanged grins at the interview statement of the President, that he thought this much-hunted spy was in Chinese pay.

Officially, Canada was cooperating with the United States in chasing the fugitive. Actually, Naysmith was sure it was bluff, a sop to the anti-U.N. elements in the Dominion. Mexico was doing nothing—but that meant the Mexican border was being closely watched.

It couldn't go on. The situation was so unstable that it would have to end, one way or another, in the next several days. If Hessling's men dragged in a Brother— Whether or not Fourre's organization survived, it would have lost its greatest and most secret asset.

But the main thing, Naysmith reflected grimly, was to keep Fourre's own head above water. The whole purpose of this uproar was to discredit the man and his painfully built-up service, and to replace him and his key personnel with nationalist stooges. After that, the enemy would find the next stages of their work simple.

And what can I do?

Naysmith felt a surge of helplessness. Human society had grown too big, too complex and powerful. It was a machine running blind and wild, and he was a fly caught in the gears.

There was one frail governor on the machine, only one, and if it were broken the whole thing would shatter. What to do? What to do?

He shrugged off the despair and concentrated on the next moment. The first thing was to get Rosenberg's information to his own side.

The island was a low sandy swell in an immensity of ocean. There was harsh grass on it, and a few trees gnarled by the great winds, and a tiny village. Naysmith dropped Lampi on the farther side of the island to hide till they came back for him. Rosenberg took the Finn's mask, and the two jetted across to the fuel station. While their boat's tanks were being filled, they entered a public communibooth.

Peter Christian, in Mexico City—Naysmith dialed the number given him by Prior. That seemed the best bet. Wasn't the kid undergoing Synthesis training? His logic might be able to integrate this meaningless flux of data.

No doubt every call across either border was being monitored, illegally but thoroughly. However, the booth had a scrambler unit. Naysmith fed it a coin, but it didn't activate it immediately.

"Could I speak to Peter Christian?" he asked the servant whose face appeared in the screen. "Tell him it's his cousin Joe calling. And give him this message: 'The ragged scoundrel leers merrily, not peddling babies.'"

"*Señor?*" The brown face looked astonished.

"It's a private signal. Write it down, please, so you get it correct." Naysmith dictated slowly. "The ragged scoundrel—"

"Yes, understand. Wait, please, I will call the young gentleman."

Naysmith stood watching the screen for a moment. He could vaguely make out the room beyond, a solid and

handsomely furnished place. Then he stabbed at the scrambler buttons. There were eight of them, which could be punched in any order to yield 40,320 possible combinations. The key letters, known to every Brother, were currently MNTSRPBL, and "the ragged scoundrel" had given Christian the order Naysmith was using. When Hessling's men got around to playing back their monitor tapes, the code sentence wouldn't help them unscramble without knowledge of the key. On the other hand, it wouldn't be proof that their quarry had been making the call; such privacy devices were not uncommon.

Naysmith blanked the booth's walls and removed his own and Rosenberg's masks. The little man was in a state of hypnosis, total recall of the Fieri manuscript he had read on Mars. He was already drawing structural formulas of molecules.

The random blur and noise on the screen clicked away as Peter Christian set the scrambler unit at that end. It was his own face grown younger which looked out at Naysmith—a husky blond sixteen-year-old, streaked with sweat and panting a little. He grinned at his Brother.

"Sorry to be so long," he said. "I was working out in the gym. Have a new mech-volley play to develop which looks promising." His English was fluent and Naysmith saw no reason to use a Spanish which, in his own case, had grown a little rusty.

"Who're you the adoptive son of?" asked the man. Privacy customs didn't mean much in the Brotherhood.

"Holger Christian—Danish career diplomat, currently ambassador to Mexico. They're good people, he and his wife."

Yes, thought Naysmith, they would be, if they let their foster child, even with his obvious brilliance, take Synthesis. The multi-ordinal integrating education was so new and untried, and its graduates would have to make their own jobs. But the need was desperate. The sciences had grown too big and complex, like everything else, and there was too much overlap between the specialties. Further progress required the fully trained synthesizing mentality.

And progress itself was no longer something justified

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only by Victorian prejudice. It was a matter of survival. Some means of creating a stable social and economic order in the face of continuous revolutionary change had to be found. More and more technological development was bitterly essential. Atomic-powered oil synthesis had come barely in time to save a fuel-starved Earth from industrial breakdown. Now new atomic energy fuels had to be evolved before the old ores were depleted. The rising incidence of neurosis and insanity among the intelligent and apathy among the insensitive had to be checked before other Years of Madness came. Heredity damaged by hard radiation had to be unscrambled, somehow, before dangerous recessive traits spread through the entire human population. Communications theory, basic to modern science and sociology, had to be perfected. There had to be. Why enumerate? Man had come too far and too fast. Now he was balanced on a knife edge over the red gulfs of hell.

When Peter Christian's education was complete, he would be one of Earth's most important men—whether he realized it himself or not. Of course, even his foster parents didn't know that one of his Synthesis instructors was an Un-man who was quietly teaching him the fine points of secret service. They most assuredly did not know that their so normal and healthy boy was already initiated into a group whose very existence was an unrecorded secret.

The first Brothers had been raised in the families of Un-man technicians and operators who had been in on the project from the start. This practice continued on a small scale, but most of the new children were put out for adoption through recognized agencies around the world—having first been provided with a carefully faked background history. Between sterility and the fear of mutation, there was no difficulty in placing a good-looking man child with a superior family. From babyhood, the Brother was under the influence—a family friend or a pediatrician or instructor or camp counselor or minister, anyone who could get an occasional chance to talk intimately with the boy, would be a sparetime employee of Fourre's and helped incline the growing personality the right way. It had been established that a

Brother could accept the truth and keep his secret from the age of twelve, and that he never refused to turn Un-man. From then on, progress was quicker. The Brothers were precocious: Naysmith was only twenty-five, and he had been on his first mission at seventeen; Lampi was an authority in his field at twenty-three. There should be no hesitation in dumping this responsibility on Christian, even if there had been any choice in the matter.

"Listen," said Naysmith. "You know all hell has broken loose and that the American S-men are out to get us. Specifically, I'm the one they think they're hunting. But Lampi, a Finnish Brother, and I have put the snatch on one Barney Rosenberg from Mars. He has certain information the enemy wants." The man knew that the boy must be thinking—in a way, those were his own thoughts—and added swiftly: "No, we haven't let him in on the secret, though the fact that he was a close friend of Rostomily's makes it awkward. But it also makes him trust us. He read the report of a Fieri on Mars, concerning suspended animation techniques. He'll give it to you now. Stand by to record."

"Okay, *ja, si*," Christian grinned and flipped a switch. He was still young enough to find this a glorious cloak-and-dagger adventure. Well, he'd learn, and the learning would be a little death within him.

Rosenberg began to talk, softly and very fast, holding up his structural formulas and chemical equations at the appropriate places. It took a little more than an hour. Christian would have been bored if he hadn't been so interested in the material; Naysmith fumed and sweated unhappily. Any moment there might come suspicion, discovery—The booth was hot.

"That's all, I guess," said Naysmith when the prospector had run down. "What do you make of it?"

"Why, it's sensationall! It'll jump biology two decades!" Christian's eyes glowed. "Surgery—yes, that's obvious. Research techniques—*Gud Fader i himlen*, what a discovery!"

"And why do you think it's so important to the enemy?" snapped Naysmith.

"Isn't it plain? The military uses, man! You can use a light

dose to immunize against terrific accelerations. Or you can pack a spaceship with men in frozen sleep, load 'em in almost like boxes, and have no supply worries enroute. Means you can take a good-sized army from planet to planet. And of course there's the research aspect. With what can be learned with the help of suspension techniques, biological warfare can be put on a wholly new plane."

"I thought as much." Naysmith nodded wearily. It was the same old story, the worn-out tale of hate and death and oppression. The logical end-product of scientific warfare was that *all* data became military secrets—a society without communication in its most vital department, without feedback or stability. That was what he fought against. "All right, what can you do about it?"

"I'll unscramble the record—no, better leave it scrambled—and get it to the right people. Hmmm—give me a small lab and I'll undertake to develop certain phases of this myself. In any case, we can't let the enemy have it."

"We've probably already given it to them. Chances are they have monitors on this line. But they can't get around to our recording and to trying all possible unscrambling combinations in less than a few days, especially if we keep them busy." Naysmith leaned forward, his haggard eyes probing into the screen. "Pete, as the son of a diplomat you must have a better than average notion of the overall politico-military picture. What can we do?"

Christian sat still for a moment. There was a curious withdrawn expression on the young face. His trained mind was assembling logic networks in a manner unknown to previous history. Finally he looked back at the man.

"There's about an eighty percent probability that Besser is the head of the gang," he said. "Chief of international finance, you know. That's an estimate of my own; I don't have Fourre's data, but I used a basis of Besser's past history and known character, his country's recent history, the necessary communications for a least-effort anti-U.N. setup on a planetary scale, the—never mind. You already know with high probability that Roger Wade is his chief for North America. I can't predict Besser's actions very closely, since

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in spite of his prominence he uses privacy as a cover-up for relevant psychological data. If we assume that he acts on a survival axiom, and logically apart from his inadequate grounding in modern socio-theory and his personal bias—hm.”

“Besser, eh? I had my own suspicions, besides what I’ve been told. Financial integration has been proceeding rather slowly since he took office. Never mind. We have to strike at his organization. What to do?”

“I need more data. How many American Brothers are underground in the States and can be contacted?”

“How should I know? All that could would try to skip the country. I’m only here because I know enough of the overall situation to act usefully, I hope.”

“Well, I can scare up a few in Mexico and South America, I think. We have our own communications. And I can use my ‘father’s’ sealed diplomatic circuit to get in touch with Fourre. You have this Lampi with you, I suppose?” Christian sat in moody stillness for a while. Then:

“I can only suggest—and it’s a pretty slim guess—that you two let yourselves be captured.”

The man sighed. He had rather expected this.

Naysmith brought the boat whispering down just as the first cold light of sunrise crept skyward. He buzzed the narrow-ledge where he had to land, swung back, and lowered the wheels. When they touched, it was a jarring, brutal contact that rattled his teeth together. He cut the motor and there was silence.

If Jeanne was alert, she’d have a gun on him now. He opened the door and called loudly: “The crocodiles grow green in Ireland.” Then he stepped out and looked around him.

The mountains were a shadowy looming. Dawn lay like roses on their peaks. The air was fresh and chill, strong with the smell of pines, and there was dew underfoot and alarmed birds clamoring into the sky. Far below him, the river thundered and brawled.

Rosenberg climbed stiffly after him and leaned against the boat. Earth gravity dragged at his muscles, he was cold

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and hungry and cruelly tired, and these men who were ghosts of his youth would not tell him what the darkness was that lay over the world. Sharply he remembered the thin bitter sunup of Mars, a gaunt desert misting into life and a single crag etched against loneliness. Homesickness was an ache in him.

Only—he had not remembered Earth could be so lovely.

“Martin! Oh, Martin!” The woman came down the trail, running, slipping on the wet needles. Her raven hair was cloudy about the gallantly lifted head, and there was a light in her eyes which Rosenberg had almost forgotten. “Oh, my darling, you’re back!”

Naysmith held her close, kissing her with hunger. One minute more, one little minute before Lampi emerged, was that too much?

He hadn’t been able to leave the Finn anywhere behind. There was no safe hiding place in all America, not when the S-men were after him. There could be no reliable rendezvous later, and Lampi would be needed. He had to come along.

Of course, the Finn could have stayed masked and mute the entire while he was at the cabin. But Rosenberg would have to be left here, it was the best hideaway for him. The prospector might be trusted to keep secret the fact that two identical men had brought him here—or he might not. He was shrewd; Jeanne’s conversation would lead him to some suspicion of the truth, and he might easily decide that she had been the victim of a shabby trick and should be given the facts. Then anything could happen.

Oh, with some precautions Naysmith could probably hide his real nature from the girl a while longer. Rosenberg might very well keep his mouth shut on request. But there was no longer any point in concealing the facts from her—she would not be captured by the gang before they had the Un-man himself. In any case, she must be told sooner or later. The man she thought was her husband was probably going to die, and it was as well that she think little of him and have no fears and sorrows on his account. One death was enough for her.

He laid his hands on the slim shoulders and stood back a bit, looking into her eyes. His own crinkled in the way she must know so well, and they were unnaturally bright in the dawn-glow. When he spoke, it was almost a whisper.

"Jeanne, honey, I've got some bad news for you."

He felt her stiffen beneath his hands, saw the face tighten and heard the little hiss of indrawn breath. There were dark rings about her eyes, she couldn't have slept very well while he was gone.

"This is a matter for absolute secrecy," he went on, tonelessly. "No one, repeat no one, is to have a word of it. But you have a right to the truth."

"Go ahead." There was an edge of harshness in her voice. "I can take it."

"I'm not Martin Donner," he said. "Your husband is dead."

She stood rigid for another heartbeat, and then she pulled wildly free. One hand went to her mouth. The other was half lifted as if to fend him off.

"I had to pretend it, to get you away without any fuss," he went on, looking at the ground. "The enemy would have—tortured you, maybe. Or killed you and Jimmy. I don't know."

Juho Lampi came up behind Naysmith. There was compassion on his face. Jeanne stepped backward, voiceless.

"You'll have to stay here," said Naysmith bleakly. "It's the only safe place. Here is Mr. Rosenberg, whom we're leaving with you. I assure you he's completely innocent of anything that has been done. I can't tell either of you more than this." He took a long step toward her. She stood her ground, unmoving. When he clasped her hands into his, they were cold. "Except that I love you," he whispered.

Then, swinging away, he faced Lampi. "We'll clean up and get some breakfast here," he said. "After that, we're off."

Jeanne did not follow them inside. Jimmy, awakened by their noise, was delighted to have his father back (Lampi had re-assumed a mask) but Naysmith gave him disappointingly little attention. He told Rosenberg that the three

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of them should stay put here as long as possible before striking out for the village, but that it was hoped to send a boat for them in a few days.

Jeanne's face was cold and bloodless as Naysmith and Lampi went back to the jet. When it was gone, she started to cry. Rosenberg wanted to leave and let her have it out by herself, but she clung to him blindly and he comforted her as well as he could.

XI

THERE WAS no difficulty about getting captured. Naysmith merely strolled into a public lavatory at Oregon Unit and took off his mask to wash his face; a man standing nearby went hurriedly out, and when Naysmith emerged he was knocked over by the stet-gun of a Unit policeman. It was what came afterward that was tough.

He woke up, stripped and handcuffed, in a cell, very shortly before a team of S-men arrived to lead him away. These took the added precaution of binding his ankles before stuffing him into a jet. He had to grin sourly at that, it was a compliment of sorts. Little was said until the jet came down on a secret headquarters which was also a Wyoming ranch.

There they gave him the works. He submitted meekly to every identification procedure he had ever heard of. Fluoroscopes showed nothing hidden within his body except the communicator, and there was some talk of operating it out; but they decided to wait for orders from higher up before attempting that. They questioned him and, since he had killed two or three of their fellows, used methods which cost him a couple of teeth and a sleepless night. He told them his name and address, but little else.

Orders came the following day. Naysmith was bundled into another jet and flown eastward. Near the destination, the jet was traded for an ordinary, inconspicuous airboat. They landed after dark on the grounds of a large new mansion in western Pennsylvania—Naysmith recalled that Roger Wade lived here—and he was led inside. There was a soundproofed room with a full battery of interrogation machines under the residential floors. The prisoner was put into a chair already equipped with straps, fastened down, and left for a while to ponder his situation.

He sighed and attempted to relax, leaning back against the metal of the chair. It was an uncomfortable seat, cold and stiff as it pressed into his naked skin. The room was long and low-ceilinged, barren in the white glare of high-powered fluoros, and the utter stillness of it muffled his breath and heartbeat. The air was cool, but somehow that absorbant quiet choked him. He faced the impassive dials of a lie detector and an electric neurovibrator, and the silence grew and grew.

His head ached, and he longed for a cigaret. His eyelids were sandy with sleeplessness and there was a foul taste in his mouth. Mostly, though, he thought of Jeanne Donner.

Presently the door at the end of the room opened and a group of people walked slowly toward him. He recognized Wade's massive form in the van. Behind him trailed a bearded man with a lean, sallow face; a young chap thin as a rail, his skin dead white and his hands clenching and unclenching nervously; a gaunt homely woman; and a squat, burly subordinate whom he did not know but assumed to be an S-man in Wade's pay. The others were familiar to Service dossiers: Lewin, Wade's personal physician; Rodney Borrow, his chief secretary; Marta Jennings, Americanist organizer. There was death in their eyes.

Wade proceeded quietly up toward Naysmith. Borrow drew a chair for him and he sat down in it and took out a cigaret. Nobody spoke till he had it lighted. Then he blew the smoke in Naysmith's direction and said gently: "According to the official records, you really are Robert Naysmith of California. But tell me, is that only another false identity?"

Naysmith shrugged. "Identity is a philosophical basic," he answered. "Where does similarity leave off and identity begin?"

"Mmmmm-hm." Wade nodded slowly. "We've killed you at least once, and I suspect more than once. But are you Martin Donner, or are you his twin? And in the latter case, how does it happen that you two, or you three, four, five, ten thousand—are *completely* identical?"

"Oh, not quite," said Naysmith.

UN-MAN

"No-o-o. There are the little scars and peculiarities due to environment—and habits, language, accent, occupation. But for police purposes you and Donner are the same man. How was it done?"

Naysmith smiled. "How much am I offered for that information?" he parried. "As well as other information you know I have?"

"So." Wade's eyes narrowed. "You weren't captured—not really. You gave yourself up."

"Maybe. Have you caught anyone else yet?"

Wade traded a glance with the Security officer. Then, with an air of decision, he said briskly: "An hour ago, I was informed that a man answering your description had been picked up in Minnesota. He admitted to being one Juho Lampi of Finland, and I'm inclined to take his word for it though we haven't checked port-of-entry records yet. How many more of you can we expect to meet?"

"As many as you like," said Naysmith. "Maybe more than that."

"All right. You gave yourself up. You must know that we have no reason to spare your life—or lives. What do you hope to gain?"

"A compromise," answered Naysmith. "Which will, of course, involve our release."

"How much are you willing to tell us now?"

"As little as possible, naturally. We'll have to bargain."

Stall! Stall for time! The message from Rio has got to come soon. It's got to, or we're all dead men.

Borrow leaned over his master's shoulder. His voice was high and cracked, stuttering just a trifle: "How will we know you're telling the truth?"

"How will you know that even if you torture me?" shrugged Naysmith. "Your bird dogs must have reported that I've been immunized to drugs."

"There are still ways," said Lewin. His words fell dull in the muffling silence. "Prefrontal lobotomy is usually effective."

Yes, this is the enemy. These are the men of darkness. These are the men who in other days sent heretics to burning, or

fed the furnaces of Belsen, or stuffed the rockets with radioactive death. Now they're opening skulls and slashing brains across. Argue with them! Let them kick and slug and whip you, but don't let them know—

"Our bargain might not be considered valid if you do that."

"The essential element of a bargain," said Wade pompously, "is the free will and desire of both parties. You're not free."

"But I am. You've killed one of me and captured two others. How do you know the number of me which is still running loose, out there in the night?"

Borrow and Jennings flickered uneasy eyes toward the smooth bare walls. The woman shuddered, ever so faintly.

"We needn't be clumsy about this," said Lewin. "There's the lie detector, first of all. Its value is limited, but this man is too old to have had Synthesis training, so he can't fool it much. Then there are instruments that make a man quite anxious to talk. I have a chlorine generator here, Naysmith. How would you like to breathe a few whiffs of chlorine?"

"Or just a vise—applied in the right place," snapped Jennings.

"Hold up a minute," ordered Wade. "Let's find out how much he wants to reveal without such persuasion."

"I said I'd trade information, not give it away," said Naysmith. He wished the sweat weren't running down his face and body for all of them to see. The reek of primitive, uncontrollable fear was sharp in his nostrils; not the fear of death, but of the anguish and mutilation which were worse than oblivion.

"What do *you* want to know?" snapped the Security officer contemptuously.

"Well," said Naysmith, "first off, I'd like to know your organization's purpose."

"What's that?" Wade's heavy face blinked at him, and an angry flush mottled his cheeks. "Let's not play crèche games. You know what we want."

"No, seriously, I'm puzzled." Naysmith forced mildness into his tones. "I realize you don't like the status quo and

want to change it. But you're all well off now. What do you hope to gain?"

"What— That will do!" Wade gestured to the officer, and Naysmith's head rang with a buffet. "We haven't time to listen to your bad jokes."

Naysmith grinned viciously. If he could get them mad, play on those twisted emotions till the unreasoning thalamus controlled them—it would be hard on him, but it would delay their real aims. "Oh, I can guess," he said. "It's personal, isn't it? None of you really know what's driving you to this, except for the stupid jackals who're in with you merely because it pays better than any work they could get on their own merits. Like you, for instance." He glanced at the S-man and sneered deliberately.

"Shut up!" This time the blow was to his jaw. Blood ran out of his mouth, and he sagged a little against the straps that held him. But his voice lifted raggedly.

"Take Miss Jennings, for one. Not that I would, even if you paid me. You're all twisted up inside, aren't you? Too ugly to get a man, too scared of yourself to get a surgical remodeling. You're trying your clumsy damndest to sublimate it into patriotism—and what kind of symbol is a flagpole? I notice it was you who made that highly personal suggestion about torturing me."

She drew back, the rage of a whipped animal in her. The S-man took out a piece of hose, but Wade gestured him away. The leader's face had gone wooden.

"Or Lewin—another case of psychotic frustration." Naysmith smiled, a close-lipped and unpleasant smile of bruised lips, at the doctor. "I warrant you'd work for free if you hadn't been hired. A two-bit sadist has trouble finding outlets these days.

"Now we come to Rodney Borrow."

"Shut up!" cried the thin man. He edged forward. Wade swept him back with a heavy arm.

"Exogene!" Naysmith's smile grew warm, almost pitying. "It's too bad that human exogenesis was developed during the Years of Madness, when moral scruples went to hell and scientists were as fanatical as everyone else. They grew

you in a tank, Borrow, and your pre-natal life, which every inherited instinct said should be warm and dark and sheltered, was one hell of study—bright lights, probes, micro-slides taken of your tissues. They learned a lot about the human fetus, but they should have killed you instead of letting such a pathetic quivering mass of engrammed psychoses walk around alive. If you could call it life, Exogene.”

Borrow lunged past Wade. There was slaver running from his lips, and he clawed for Naysmith's eyes. The S-man pulled him back and suddenly he collapsed, weeping hysterically. Naysmith shuddered beneath his skin. *There but for the grace of God—*

“And how about myself?” asked Wade. “These amateur analyses are most amusing. Please continue.”

“Guilt drive. Overcompensation. The Service has investigated your childhood and adolescent background and—”

“And?”

“Come on, Roger. It's fun. It won't hurt a bit.”

The big man sat stiff as an iron bar. For a long moment there was nothing, no sound except Borrow's sobs; no movement. Wade's face turned gray.

When he spoke, it was as if he were strangling: “I think you'd better start that chlorine generator, Lewin.”

“With pleasure!”

Naysmith shook his head. “And you people want to run things,” he murmured. “We're supposed to turn over a world slowly recovering its sanity to the likes of you.”

The generator began to hiss and bubble at his back. He could have turned his head to watch it, but that would have been a defeat. And he needed every scrap of pride remaining in this ultimate loneliness.

“Let me run the generator,” whispered Borrow.

“No,” said Lewin. “You might kill him too fast.”

“Maybe we should wait till they bring this Lampi here,” said Jennings. “Let him watch us working Naysmith over.”

Wade shook his head. “Maybe later,” he said.

“I notice that you still haven't tried to find out what I'm willing to tell you without compulsion,” interjected Naysmith.

"Well, go ahead," said Wade in a flat voice. "We're listening."

A little time, just a little more time, if I can spin them a yarn—

"Etienne Fourre has more resources than you know," declared Naysmith. "A counter blow has been prepared which will cost you dearly. But since it would also put quite a strain on us, we're willing to discuss—if not a permanent compromise, for there can obviously be none, at least an armistice. That's why—"

A chime sounded. "Come in," said Wade loudly. His voice activated the door and a man entered.

"Urgent call for you, Mr. Wade," he reported. "Scrambled."

"All right." The leader got up. "Hold off on that chlorine till I get back, Lewin." He went out.

When the door had closed behind him, Lewin said calmly: "Well, he didn't tell us to refrain from other things, did he?"

They took turns using the hose. Naysmith's mind grew a little hazy with pain. But they dared not inflict real damage, and it didn't last long.

Wade came back. He ignored Lewin, who was hastily pocketing the truncheon, and said curtly: "We're going on a trip. All of us. Now."

The word had come. Naysmith sank back, breathing hard. Just at that instant, the relief from pain was too great for him to think of anything else. It took him several minutes to start worrying about whether Peter Christian's logic had been correct, and whether the Service could fulfill its part, and even whether the orders that came to Wade had been the right ones.

XII

IT WAS LATE afternoon before Barney Rosenberg had a chance to talk with Jeanne Donner, and then it was she who sought him out. He had wandered from the cabin after lunch, scrambling along the mountainside and strolling through the tall forest. But Earth gravity tired him, and he returned in a few hours. Even then, he didn't go back to the cabin, but found a log near the rim of the gorge and sat down to think.

So this was Earth.

It was a cool and lovely vision which opened before him. The cliffs tumbled in a sweep of gray and slate blue, down and down into the huge sounding canyon of the river. On the farther side, the mountain lifted in a mist of dim purple, up to its sun-blazing snow and the skyey vastness beyond. There were bushes growing on the slopes that fell riverward, green blurring the severe rock, here and there a cluster of fire-like berries. Behind Rosenberg and on either side were the trees, looming pine in a cavern of shadow, slim whispering beech, ash with the streaming, blinding, raining sunlight snared in its leaves. He had not remembered how much color there was on this planet.

And it was alive with sound. The trees murmured. Mosquitoes buzzed thinly around his ears. A bird was singing—he didn't know what kind of bird, but it had a wistful liquid trill that haunted his thoughts. Another answered in whistles, and somewhere a third was chattering and chirping its gossip. A squirrel darted past like a red comet, and he heard the tiny scrabble of its claws.

And the smells—the infinite living world of odors; pine and mould and wildflowers and the river mist! He had almost forgotten he owned a sense of smell, in the tanked sterility of Mars.

UN-MAN

Oh, his muscles ached and he was lonely for the grim bare magnificence of the deserts and he wondered how he would ever fit into this savage world of men against men. But still—Earth was home, and a billion years of evolution could not be denied.

Someday Mars would be a full-grown planet and its people would be rich and free. Rosenberg shook his head, smiling a little. Poor Martians!

There was a light footstep behind him. He turned and saw Jeanne Donner approaching. She had on a light blouse-and-slack outfit which didn't hide the grace of her or the weariness, and the sun gleamed darkly in her hair. Rosenberg stood up with a feeling of awkwardness.

"Please sit down." Her voice was grave, somehow remote. "I'd like to join you for a little while, if I may."

"By all means." Rosenberg lowered himself again to the mossy trunk. It was cool and yielding, a little damp, under his hand. Jeanne sat beside him, elbows on knees. For a moment she was quiet, looking over the sun-flooded land. Then she took out a pack of cigarets and held them toward the man. "Smoke?" she asked.

"Uh—no, thanks. I got out of the habit on Mars. Oxygen's too scarce, usually. We chew instead, if we can afford tobacco at all."

"M-hm." She lit a cigaret for herself and drew hard on it, sucking in her cheeks. He saw how fine the underlying bony structure was. Well—Stef had always picked the best women, and gotten them.

"We'll rig a bed for you," she said. "Cut some spruce boughs and put them under a sleeping bag. Makes a good doss."

"Thanks." They sat without talking for a while. The cigaret smoke blew away in ragged streamers. Rosenberg could hear the wind whistling and piping far up the canyon.

"I'd like to ask you some questions," she said at last, turning her face to him. "If they get too personal, just say so."

"I've nothing to hide—worse luck." He tried to smile. "Anyway, we don't have those privacy notions on Mars. They'd be too hard to maintain under our living conditions."

"They're a recent phenomenon on Earth, anyway," she said. "Go back to the Years of Madness, when there was so much eccentricity of all kinds, a lot of it illegal. Oh, hell!" She threw the cigaret to the ground and stamped it savagely out with one heel. "I'm going to forget my own conditioning too. Ask me anything you think is relevant. We've got to get to the truth of this matter."

"If we can. I'd say it was a well-guarded secret."

"Listen," she said between her teeth. "My husband was Martin Donner. We were married three and a half years—and I mean married. He couldn't tell me much about his work. I knew he was really an Un-man and that his engineering work was only a blind, and that's about all he ever told me. Obviously, he never said a word about having-duplicates. But leaving that aside, we were in love and we got to know each other as well as two people can in that length of time. More than just physical appearance. It was also a matter of personality, reaction-patterns, facial expressions, word-configuration choices, manner of moving and working, the million little things which fit into one bit pattern. An over all *gestalt*, understand?"

"Now this man—What did you say his name was?"

"Naysmith. Robert Naysmith. At least, that's what he told me. The other fellow was called Lampi."

"I'm supposed to believe that Martin died and that this—Naysmith—was substituted for him," she went on hurriedly. "They wanted to get me out of the house fast, couldn't stop to argue with me, so they sent in this ringer. Well, I saw him there in the house. He escaped with me and the boy. We had a long and uneasy flight together up here—you know how strain will bring out the most basic characteristics of a person. He stayed here overnight—" A slow flush crept up her cheeks and she looked away. Then, defiantly, she swung back on Rosenberg. "And he fooled me completely. Everything about him was Martin. *Everything!* Oh, I suppose there were minor variations, but they must have been very minor indeed. You can disguise a man these days, with surgery and cosmetics and whatnot, so that he duplicates almost every detail of physique. But can surgery give him the same

funny slow way of smiling, the same choice of phrases, the same sense of humor, the same way of picking up his son and talking to him, the same habit of quoting Shakespeare, and way of taking out a cigaret and lighting it one-handed, and corner-cutting way of piloting an airboat—the same *soul*? Can they do that?”

“I don’t know,” whispered Rosenberg. “I shouldn’t think so.”

“I wouldn’t really have believed it,” she said. “I’d have thought he was trying to tell me a story for some unknown reason. Only there was that other man with him, and except for their hair being dyed I couldn’t tell them apart—and you were along too, and seemed to accept the story,” She clutched his arm. “Is it true? Is my husband really dead?”

“I don’t know,” he answered grayly. “I think they were telling the truth, but how can I know?”

“It’s more than my own sanity,” she said in a tired voice. “I’ve got to know what to tell Jimmy. I can’t say anything now.”

Rosenberg looked at the ground. His words came slowly and very soft: “I think your best bet is to sit tight for a while. This is something which is big, maybe the biggest secret in the universe. And it’s either very good or very bad. I’d like to believe that it was good.”

“But what do you know of it?” She held his eyes with her own, he couldn’t look away, and her hand gripped his arm with a blind force. “What can you tell me? What do you think?”

He ran a thin, blue-veined hand through his grizzled hair and drew a breath. “Well,” he said, “I think there probably are a lot of these identical Un-men. We know that there are—were—three, and I got the impression there must be more. Why not? That Lampi was a foreigner; he had an accent; so if they’re found all over the world—”

“Un-man.” She shivered a little, sitting there in the dappled shade and sunlight. “It’s a hideous word. As if they weren’t human.”

“No,” he said gently. “I think you’re wrong there. They—well, I knew their prototype, and he was a *man*.”

UN-MAN

"Their—no!" Almost, she sprang to her feet. With an effort, she controlled herself and sat rigid. "*Who was that?*"

"His name was Stefan Rostomily. He was my best friend for fifteen years."

"I—don't know—never heard of him." Her tones were thick.

"You probably wouldn't have. He was off Earth the whole time. But his name is still a good one out on the planets. You may not know what a Rostomily valve is, but that was his invention. He tinkered it up one week for convenience, sold it for a good sum, and binged that away." Rosenberg chuckled dimly, "It made history, that binge. But the valve has meant a lot to Martian colonists."

"Who was he?"

"He never said much about his background. I gathered he was a European, probably Czech or Austrian. He must have done heroic things in the underground and guerrilla fighting during the Third War. But it kind of spoiled him for a settled career. By the time things began to calm a little, he'd matured in chaos and it was too late to do any serious studying. He drifted around Earth for a while, took a hand in some of the fighting that still went on here and there—he was with the U.N. forces that suppressed the Great Jihad, I know. But he got sick of killing, too, as any sane man would. In spite of his background, Mrs. Donner, he was basically one of the sanest men I ever knew. So at last he bluffed his way onto a spaceship—didn't have a degree, but he learned engineering in a hell of a hurry, and he was good at it. I met him on Venus, when I was prospecting around; I may not look it, but I'm a geologist and mineralogist. We ended up on Mars. Helped build Sandy Landing, helped in some of the plantation development work, prospected, mapped and surveyed and explored—we must've tried everything. He died five years ago. A cave-in. I buried him there on Mars."

The trees about them whispered with wind.

"And these others are—his sons?" she murmured. She was trembling a little now.

Rosenberg shook his head. "Impossible. These men are

him. Stef in every last feature, come alive and young again. No child could ever be that close to his father."

"No. No, I suppose not."

"Stef was a human being, through and through," said Rosenberg. "But he was also pretty close to being a superman. Think of his handicaps: childhood gone under the Second War and its aftermath, young manhood gone in the Third War, poor, self-educated, uprooted. And still he was balanced and sane, gentle except when violence was called for—then he was a hellcat, I tell you. Men and women loved him; he had that kind of personality. He'd picked up a dozen languages, and he read their literatures with more appreciation and understanding than most professors. He knew music and composed some good songs of his own—rowdy but good. They're still being sung out on Mars. He was an artist, did some fine murals for several buildings, painted the Martian landscape like no camera has ever shown it, though he was good with a camera too. I've already told you about his inventiveness, and he had clever hands that a machine liked. His physique stood up to anything—he was almost sixty when he died and could still match any boy of twenty. He—why go on? He was everything, and good at everything."

"I know," she answered. "Martin was the same way." Her brief smile was wistful. "Believe me, I had the devil's own time hooking him. Real competition there." After a moment she added thoughtfully: "There must be a few such supermen walking around in every generation. It's just a matter of a happy genetic accident, a preponderance of favorable characteristics appearing in the same zygote, a highly intelligent mesomorph. Some of them go down in history. Think of Michelangelo, Vespucci, Raleigh—men who worked at everything: science, politics, war, engineering, exploration, art, literature. Others weren't interested in prominence, or maybe they had bad luck. Like your friend."

"I don't know what the connection is with these Unmen," said Rosenberg. "Stef never said a word to me—but of course, he'd've been sworn to secrecy, or it might even have been done without his knowledge. Only what was

UN-MAN

done? Matter duplication? I don't think so. If the U.N. had matter duplication, it wouldn't be in the fix it is now. What was done—and *why?*"

Jeanne didn't answer. She was looking away now, across the ravine to the high clear beauty of mountains beyond. It was blurred in her eyes. Suddenly she got up and walked away.

XIII

THERE WAS a night of stars and streaming wind about the jet. The Moon was low, throwing a bridge of broken light across the heaving Atlantic immensity. Once, far off, Naysmith saw a single meteoric streak burning upward, a rocket bound for space. Otherwise he sat in darkness and alone.

He had been locked into a tiny compartment in the rear of the jet. Wade and his entourage, together with a pilot and a couple of guards, sat forward; the jet was comfortably furnished, and they were probably catching up on their sleep. Naysmith didn't want a nap, though the weakness of hunger and his injuries was on him. He sat staring out of the port, listening to the mighty rush of wind and trying to estimate where they were.

The middle Atlantic, he guessed, perhaps fifteen degrees north latitude. If Christian's prognosis of Besser's reactions was correct, they were bound for the secret world headquarters of the gang, but Wade and the others hadn't told him anything. They were over the high seas now, the great unrestful wilderness which ran across three-fourths of the planet's turning surface, the last home on Earth of mystery and solitude. Anything could be done out here, and when fish had eaten the bodies who would ever be the wiser?

Naysmith's gaze traveled to the Moon, riding cold above the sea. Up there was the dominion over Earth. Between the space-station observatories and the rocket bases of the Lunar Guard, there should be nothing which the forces of sanity could not smash. The Moon had not rained death since the Third War, but the very threat of that monstrous fist poised in the sky had done much to quell a crazed planet. If the Service could tell the Guard where to shoot—

Only it couldn't. It never could, because this rebellion was not the armed uprising of a nation with cities and factories

and mines. It was a virus within the body of all humankind. You wouldn't get anywhere bombing China, except to turn four hundred million innocent victims who had been your friends against you—because it was a small key group in the Chinese government which was conspiring against sanity.

You can blast a sickness from outside, with drugs and antibiotics and radiation. But the darkness of the human mind can only be helped by a psychiatrist; the cure must come from within itself.

If the U.N. were not brought tumbling down, but slowly eaten away, mutilated and crippled and demoralized, what would there be to shoot at? Sooner or later, official orders would come disbanding its police and Lunar Guard. Or there were other ways to attack those Moon bases. If they didn't have the Secret Service to warn them, it would be no trick for an enemy to smuggle military equipment to the Moon surface itself and blow them apart from there.

And in the end—what? Complete and immediate collapse into the dog-eat-dog madness which had come so close once to ruining civilization? (*Man won't get another chance. We were luckier than we deserved the last time.*) Or a jerry-built world empire of oppression, the stamping out of that keen and critical science whose early dawn-light was just beginning to show man a new path, a thousand-year nightmare of humanity turned into an ant-hill? There was little choice between the two.

Naysmith sighed and shifted on the hard bare seat. They could have had the decency to give him some clothes and a cigaret. A sandwich at the very least. Only, of course, the idea was to break down his morale as far as possible.

He tried again, for the thousandth time, to evaluate the situation, but there were too many unknowns and intangibles. It would be stupid to insist that tonight was a crisis point in human history. It could be—then again, if this attempt of the Brotherhood ended in failure, if the Brothers themselves were hunted down, there might come some other chance, some compensating factor. *Might!* But passive reliance on luck was ruin.

UN-MAN

And in any case, he thought bleakly, tonight would surely decide the fate of Robert Naysmith.

The jet slanted downward, slowing as it wailed out of the upper air. Naysmith leaned against the wall, gripping the edge of the port with manacled hands, and peered below. Moonlight washed a great rippling mass of darkness, and in the center of it something which rose like a metal cliff.

A sea station!

I should have guessed it, thought Naysmith wildly. His brain felt hollow and strange. *The most logical place; accessible, mobile, under the very nose of the world but hidden all the same. I imagine the Service has considered this possibility—only how could it check all the sea stations in existence? It isn't even known how many there are.*

This one lay amidst acres of floating weed. Probably one of the specially developed sea plants with which it was hoped to help feed an overcrowded planet; or maybe this place passed itself off as an experiment station working to improve the growth. In either case, ranch or laboratory, Naysmith was sure that its announced activities were really carried out, that there was a complete working staff with all equipment and impeccable dossiers. The gang's headquarters would be underneath, in the submerged bowels of the station.

An organization like this had to parallel its enemy in most respects. Complex and world-wide—no. System-wide, if it really included Pilgrim fanatics who wanted to take over Mars. It would have to keep extensive records, have some kind of communications center. *This is it! By Heaven, this is their brain!*

The shiver of excitement faded into a hard subsurface tingle. A dead man had no way of relaying his knowledge to Fourre.

There was a landing platform at one end of the great floating structure. The pilot brought his jet down to a skillful rest, cut the motors, and let silence fall. Naysmith heard the deep endless voice of the sea, rolling and washing against the walls. He wondered how far it was to the next humanity. Far indeed. Perhaps they were beyond the edge of death.

UN-MAN

The door opened and light filtered into the compartment. "All right, Naysmith," said the guard. "Come along."

Obediently, the Un-man went out between his captors to stand on the platform. It was floodlit, cutting off the view of the ocean surging twenty or thirty feet under its rails. The station superstructure, gymbal-mounted and gyro-stabilized above its great caissons, wouldn't roll much even in the heaviest weather. There were two other jets standing nearby. No sign of armament, though Naysmith was sure that missile tubes were here in abundance and that each mechanic carried a gun.

The wind was chill on his body as he was led toward the main cabin. Wade strode ahead of him, cloak flapping wildly in the flowing, murmuring night. To one side, Naysmith saw Borrow's stiff white face and the sunken expressionlessness of Lewin. Perhaps those two would be allowed to work him over.

They entered a short hallway. At the farther end, Wade pressed his hand to a scanner. A panel slid back in front of an elevator cage. "In," grunted one of the S-men.

Naysmith stood quietly, hemmed into a corner by the wary bodies of his guards. He saw that Borrow and Jennings were shivering with nervous tension. A little humorless smile twisted his mouth. Whatever else happened, the Brotherhood had certainly given the enemy a jolt.

The elevator sighed to a halt. Naysmith was led out, down a long corridor lined with doors. One of them stood ajar, and he saw walls covered with micro-file cabinets. Yes, this must be their archive. A besmoked man went the other way, carrying a computer tape. Unaided human brains were no longer enough even for those who would overthrow society. Too big, too big.

At the end of the hall, Naysmith was ushered into a large room. It was almost as if he were back in Wade's torture chamber—the same bright lights, the same muffling walls, the same instruments of inquisition. His eyes swept its breadth until they rested on the three men who sat behind a rack of neuroanalyzers.

UN-MAN

The Brothers could tell each other apart; there were enough subtle environmental differences for that. Naysmith recognized Lampi, who seemed undamaged except for a black eye; he must have been taken directly here on orders. There was also Carlos Martinez of Guatemala, whom he had met before, and a third man whom he didn't recognize but who was probably South American.

They smiled at him, and he smiled back. Four pairs of blue eyes looked out of the same lean muscular faces, four blond heads nodded, four brains flashed the same intangible message: *You too, my Brother? Now we must endure.*

Naysmith was strapped in beside Martinez. He listened to Wade, speaking to Lucientes who had been suspected of being the Argentine sector chief of the rebels: "Besser hasn't come yet?"

"No, he is on the way. He should be here very soon."

Besser is the real head, then, the organizing brain—and he is on his way! The four Brothers held themselves rigid, four identical faces staring uncannily ahead, not daring to move or exchange a glance. *Besser is coming!*

Wade took a restless turn about the room. "It's a weird business," he said thinly. "I'm not sure I like the idea of having all four together—in this very place."

"What can they do?" shrugged Lucientes. "My men captured Villareal here in Buenos Aires yesterday. He had been an artist, supposedly, and dropped out of sight when word first came about a fugitive Un-man answering that description. But he made a childish attempt to get back to his apartment and was arrested without difficulty. Martinez was obtained in Panama City with equal ease. If they are that incompetent—"

"But they aren't! They're anything but!" Wade glared at the prisoners. "This was done on purpose, I tell you. Why?"

"I already said—" Naysmith and Villareal spoke almost simultaneously. They stopped, and the Argentine grinned and closed his mouth. "I told you," Naysmith finished. "We wanted to bargain. There was no other quick and expedient way of making the sort of contact we needed."

"Were four of you needed?" snapped Wade. "Four valuable men?"

"Perhaps not so valuable," said Lewin quietly. "Not if there are any number of them still at large."

"They are not supernatural!" protested Lucientes. "They are flesh and blood. They can feel pain, and cannot break handcuffs. I know! Nor are they telepaths or anything equally absurd. They are—" His voice faltered.

"Yes?" challenged Wade. "They are what?"

Naysmith drew into himself. There was a moment of utter stillness. Only the heavy breathing of the captors, the captors half terrified by an unknown, and all the more vicious and deadly because of that, had voice.

The real reason was simple, thought Naysmith—so simple that it defeated those tortuous minds. It had seemed reasonable, and Christian's logic had confirmed the high probability, that one man identical with the agent who had been killed would be unsettling enough, and that four of them, from four different countries, would imply something so enormous that the chief conspirator would want them all together in his own strongest and most secret place, that he himself would want to be there at the questioning.

Only what happened next?

"They aren't human!" Borrow's voice was shrill and wavering. "They can't be. Not four or five or a thousand identical men. The U.N. has its own laboratories. Fourre could easily have had secret projects carried out."

"So?" Lewin's eyes blinked sardonically at the white face.

"So they're robots—androids—synthetic life—whatever you want to call it. Test-tube monsters!"

Lewin shook his head, grimly. "That's too big a stride forward," he said. "No human science will be able to do that for centuries to come. You don't appreciate the complexity of a living human being—and our best efforts haven't yet synthesized even one functioning cell. I admit these fellows have something—superhuman—about them. They've done incredible things. But they can't be robots. It isn't humanly possible."

"*Humanly!*" screamed Borrow. "Is man the only scientific

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race in the universe? How about creatures from the stars? Who's the real power behind the U.N?"

"That will do," snapped Wade. "We'll find out pretty soon." His look fastened harsh on Naysmith. "Let's forget this stupid talk of bargaining. There can be no compromise until one or the other party is done for."

That's right. The same thought quivered in four living brains.

"I—" Wade stopped and swung toward the door. It opened for two men who entered.

One was Arnold Besser. He was a small man, fine-boned, dark-haired, still graceful at seventy years of age. There was a flame in him that burned past the drab plainness of his features, the eerie light of fanaticism deep within his narrow skull. He nodded curtly to the greetings and stepped briskly forward. His attendant came after, a big and powerful man in chauffeur's uniform, cat-quiet, his face rugged and expressionless.

Only—only—Naysmith's heart leaped wildly within him. He looked away from the chauffeur-guard, up into the eyes of Arnold Besser.

"Now, then." The chief stood before his prisoners, hands on hips, staring impersonally at them but with a faint shiver running beneath his pale skin. "I want to know you people's real motive in giving yourselves up. I've studied your 'vised dossiers, such as they are, on the way here, so you needn't repeat the obvious. I want to know everything else."

"The quality of mercy is not strained," murmured Lampi. Naysmith's mind continued the lovely words. He needed their comfort, for here was death.

"The issues are too large and urgent for sparring," said Besser. There was a chill in his voice as he turned to Lewin. "We have four of them here, and presumably each of them knows what the others know. So we can try four different approaches. Suggestions?"

"Lobotomy on one," answered the physician promptly. "We can remove that explosive detonator at the same time, of course. But it will take a few days before he can be questioned, even under the best conditions, and perhaps

there has been some precaution taken so that the subject will die. We can try physical methods immediately on two of them, in the presence of each other. We had better save a fourth—just in case.”

“Very well.” Besser’s gaze went a white-jacketed man behind the prisoners. “You are the surgeon here. Take one away and get to work on his brain.”

The doctor nodded and began to wheel Martinez’ chair out of the room. Lewin started a chlorine generator. The chauffeur-guard leaned against a table, watching with flat blank eyes.

The end? Goodnight, then, world, sun and moon and wind in the heavens. Goodnight, Jeanne.

A siren hooted. It shrilled up and down a saw-edged scale, ringing in metal and glass and human bones. Besser whirled toward a communicator. Wade stood heavy and paralyzed. Jennings screamed.

The room shivered, and they heard the dull crumping of an explosion. The door opened and a man stumbled in, shouting something. His words drowned in the rising whistle and bellow of rocket missiles.

Suddenly there was a magnum gun in the chauffeur’s hand. It spewed a rain of slugs as he crouched, swinging it around the chamber. Naysmith saw Besser’s head explode. Two of the guards had guns halfway out when the chauffeur cut them down.

The communicator chattered up on the wall, screaming something hysterical about an air attack. The chauffeur was already across to the door switch. He closed and locked the barrier, jumped over Wade’s body, and grabbed for a surgical saw. It bit at the straps holding Naysmith, drawing a little blood. Lampi, Martinez, and Villareal were whooping aloud.

The chauffeur spoke in rapid Brazilo-Portuguese: “I’ll get you free. Then take some weapons and be ready to fight. They may attack us in here, I don’t know. But there will be paratroops landing as soon as our air strength has reduced their defenses. We should be able to hold out till then.”

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It had worked. The incredible, desperate, precarious plan had worked. Besser, in alarm and uncertainty, had gone personally to his secret headquarters. He had been piloted by his trusted gunman as usual. Only—Fourre's office would long have known about that pilot, studied him, prepared a surgically disguised duplicate from a Brazilian Un-man and held this agent in reserve. When Christian's message came, the chauffeur had been taken care of and the Un-man had replaced him—and been able to slip a radio tracer into Besser's jet—a tracer which the Rio-based U.N. police had followed.

And now they had the base!

Naysmith flung himself out of the chair and snatched a gun off the floor. He exchanged a glance with his rescuer, a brief warm glance of kinship and comradeship and belongingness. Even under the disguise and the carefully learned mannerisms, there had been something intangible which he had known—or was it only the fact that the deliverer had moved with such swift and certain decision?

"Yes," said the Brazilian unnecessarily. "I too am a Brother."

XIV

THERE WAS one morning when Naysmith came out of his tent and walked down to the sea. This was in Northwest National Park, the new preserve which included a good stretch of Oregon's coast. He had come for rest and solitude, to do some thinking which seemed to lead nowhere, and had stayed longer than he intended. There was peace here, in the great rocky stretch of land, the sandy nooks between, the loneliness of ocean, and the forest and mountains behind. Not many people were in the park now, and he had pitched his tent remote from the camping grounds anyway.

It was over. The job was finished. With the records of Besser's headquarters for clues and proof, Fourre had been in a position to expose the whole conspiracy. Nobody had cared much about the technical illegality of his raid. Several governments fell—the Chinese had a spectacularly bloody end—and were replaced with men closer to sanity. Agents had been weeded out of every regime. In America, Hessling was in jail and there was talk of disbanding Security altogether. The U.N. had a renewed prestige and power, a firmer allegiance from the peoples of the world. Happy ending?

No. Because it was a job which never really ended. The enemy was old and strong and crafty, it took a million forms and it could never quite be slain. For it was man himself—the madness and sorrow of the human soul, the revolt of a primitive animal against the unnatural state called civilization and freedom. Somebody would try again. His methods would be different, he might not have the same avowed goal, but he would be the enemy and the watchers would have to break him. *And who shall watch the watchmen?*

Security was a meaningless dream. There was no stability

except in death. Peace and happiness were not a reward to be earned, but a state to be maintained with toil and grief.

Naysmith's thinking at the moment concerned personal matters. But there didn't seem to be any answer except the one gray command: Endure.

He crossed the beach, slipping on rocks and swearing at the chill damp wind. His plunge into the water was an icy shock which only faded with violent swimming. But when he came out, he was tingling with wakefulness.

Romeo, he thought, toweling himself vigorously, was an ass. Psychological troubles are no excuse for losing your appetite. In fact, they should heighten the old reliable pleasures. Mercutio was the real hero of that play.

He picked his way toward the tent, thinking of bacon and eggs. As he mounted the steep, rocky bank, he paused, scowling. A small airboat had landed next to his own. *Damn! I don't feel like being polite to anybody.* But when he saw the figure which stood beside it, he broke into a run.

Jeanne Donner waited for him, gravely as a child. When he stood before her, she met his gaze steadily, mute, and it was he who looked away.

"How did you find me?" he whispered at last. He thought the fury of his heartbeat must soon break his ribs. "I dropped out of sight pretty thoroughly."

"It wasn't easy," she answered, smiling a little. "After the U.N. pilot took us back to the States, I pestered the life out of everyone concerned. Finally one of them forgot privacy laws and told me—I suppose on the theory that you would take care of the nuisance. I've been landing at every isolated spot in the park for the last two days. I knew you'd want to be alone."

"Rosenberg—?"

"He agreed to accept hypno-conditioning for a nice payment—since he was sure he'd never learn the secret anyway. Now he's forgotten that there ever was another Stefan Rostomily. I refused, of course."

"Well—" His voice trailed off. Finally he looked at her again and said harshly: "Yes, I've played a filthy trick on

you. The whole Service has, I guess. Only it's a secret which men have been killed for learning."

She smiled again, looking up at him with a lilting challenge in her eyes. "Go ahead," she invited.

His hands dropped. "No. You've got a right to know this. I should never have—oh, well, skip it. We aren't complete fanatics. An organization which drew the line nowhere in reaching its aims wouldn't be worth having around."

"Thank you," she breathed.

"Nothing to thank me for. You've probably guessed the basis of the secret already, if you know who Rostomily was."

"And what he was. Yes, I think I know. But tell me."

"They needed a lot of agents for the Service—agents who could meet specifications. Somebody got acquainted with Rostomily while he was still on Earth. He himself wasn't trained, or interested in doing such work, but his heredity was wanted—the pattern of genes and chromosomes. Fourre had organized his secret research laboratories. That wasn't hard to do, in the Years of Madness. Exogenesis of a fertilized ovum was already an accomplished fact. It was only one step further to take a few complete cells from Rostomily and use them as—as a chromosome source for undifferentiated human tissue. Proteins are autocatalytic, you know, and a gene is nothing but a set of giant protein molecules.

"We Brothers, all of us, we're completely human. Except that our hereditary pattern is derived entirely from one person instead of from two and, therefore, duplicates its prototype exactly. There are thousands of us by now, scattered around the Solar System. I'm one of the oldest. There are younger ones coming up to carry on."

"Exogenesis—" She couldn't repress a slight shudder.

"It has a bad name, yes. But that was only because of the known experiments which were performed, with their prenatal probing. Naturally that would produce psychotics. *Our* artificial wombs are safer and more serene even than the natural kind."

She nodded then, the dark wings of her hair falling past the ivory planes of her cheeks. "I understand. I see how it

must be—you can tell me the details later. And I see why. Fourre needed supermen. The world was too chaotic and violent—it still is—for anything less than a brotherhood of supermen.”

“Oh—look now!”

“No, I mean it. You aren’t the entire Service, or even a majority of it. But you’re the crack agents, the sword-hand.” Suddenly she smiled, lighting up the whole universe, and gripped his arm. Her fingers were cool and slender against his flesh. “And how wonderful it is! Remember *King Henry the Fifth*?”

The words whispered from him:

*“And Crispin Crispian shall ne’er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered,
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers—”*

After a long moment, he added wryly: “But we can’t look for fame. Not for a long time yet. The first requirement of a secret agent is secrecy, and if it were known that our kind exists half our usefulness would be gone.”

“Oh, yes. I understand.” She stood quiet for a while. The wind blew her dress and hair about her, fluttering them against the great clean expanse of sea and forest and sky.

“What are you going to do now?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. Naturally, we’ll have to kill the story of a wanted murderer answering our description. That won’t be hard. We’ll announce his death resisting arrest, and after that—well, people forget. In a year or two the memory will be gone. But of course several of us, myself included, will need new identities, have to move to new homes. I’ve been thinking of New Zealand.”

“And it will go on. Your work will go on. Aren’t you ever lonely?”

He nodded, then tried to grin. “But let’s not go on a crying jag. Come on and have breakfast with me. I’m a hel-luvva good egg frier.”

“No, wait.” She drew him back and made him face her. “Tell me—I want the truth now. You said, the last time, that you loved me. Was that true?”

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"Yes," he said steadily. "But it doesn't matter. I was unusually vulnerable. I'd always been the cat who walks by himself, more so even than most of my Brothers. I'll get over it."

"Maybe I don't want you to get over it," she said.

He stood without motion for a thunderous century. A sea gull went crying overhead.

"You are Martin," she told him. "You aren't the same, not quite, but you're still Martin with another past. And Jimmy needs a father, and I need you."

He couldn't find words, but they weren't called for anyway.

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by Poul Anderson

IT WAS an anachronism to have a human receptionist in this hall of lucent plastic, among the machines that winked and talked between jade columns soaring up into vaulted dimness—but a remarkably pleasant one when she was as long-legged and red-headed a stun-blast as the girl behind the desk. Captain Torres drew to a crisp halt, and a gauntleted hand went to his gilt helmet. Traveling down sumptuous curves, his eye was jarred by the small needler at her waist.

"Good day, sir," she smiled. "One moment, please, I'll see if Freeman van Rijn is ready for you." She switched on the intercom and a three-megavolt oath bounced out. "No, he's still conferring on the vid. Won't you be seated?"

Before she turned it off, Torres caught a few words: "... By damn, he'll give us the exclusive franchise or do without our business. Who do these little emperors think they are? All right, so he has a million soldiers under arms. You can tell him to take those soldiers, with field artillery and hobnailed boots, by damn, and—" *Click*.

Torres wrapped his cape about the deep-blue tunic and sat down, laying one polished boot across the other knee of his white culottes. He felt out of his depth, simultaneously overdressed and naked. The regalia of a Lodgemaster in the Federated Brotherhood of Spacemen was stiff with gold braid, medals, and jewelry, far removed from the gray coverall he wore on deck or the loungers of planet leave. Worse, the guards in the tower entrance, a kilometer below, had not only checked his credentials and retinal patterns, but had unloaded his sidearm.

Blast Nicholas van Rijn and the whole Polesotechnic League! Good saints, drop him on Pluto without his underwear!

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Of course, a merchant prince did have to be wary of assassins—and most of them went to great lengths to avoid formal duels, though Van Rijn himself was supposed to be murderously fast with a handgun. Nevertheless, arming your receptionist was not a high-born thing to do—

Torres wondered, rather wistfully, if she was one of the old devil's mistresses. Perhaps not; but with the trouble between the Company—no, the whole League—and the Brotherhood, she'd have no time for him, being doubtless bound by a contract of personal fealty. His gaze went to the League emblem on the wall, a golden sunburst afire with opals, surrounding an ancient-style rocketship of the Caravel model, and the motto: *All the traffic will bear*. That could be taken two ways, he reflected sourly. Beneath it was the trademark of Van Rijn's own outfit, the Solar Spice & Liquors Company.

The girl turned on the intercom again and heard the vidophone being switched off; there followed a steady rumble of obscenities. "Go on in now, sir," she said, and into the speaker: "Captain Rafael Torres, representing the Brotherhood."

The spaceman straightened himself and went through the inner door. His lean dark face clamped into careful lines. It would be a new experience, meeting his ultimate boss; for ten years, as captain of a ship and Lodgemaster of the union local, he had not called anyone "sir."

The office was big, with an entire side transparent, overlooking a precipitous vista of Batavia's towers, green landscape, hot with tropical gardens, and the molten glitter of the Java Sea. The other walls were lined with the biggest referobot Torres had ever seen, with shelves of extraterrestrial curios, and—astonishingly—a thousand or more old-type folio books, exquisitely bound in tooled leather and looking well-worn. The room and the desk were littered, close to maximum entropy, and the ventilators could not quite dismiss a tobacco haze. The most noticeable object on the desk was a small image of St. Dismas, carved from sandroot in the

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Martian style. The precise and perfect patron for Nicholas van Rijn, thought Torres.

He clicked his heels and bowed till the helmet plume swept his nose. "Lodgemaster-Captain Torres speaking for the Brotherhood, sir."

Van Rijn grunted. He was a huge man, two meters high, and the triple chin and swag belly did not make him appear soft. Rings glittered on the hairy hands and bracelets on the thick wrists, under snuff-soiled lace. Small gray eyes, set close to the great hook nose under a sloping forehead, blinked at the spaceman. He went back to filling his churchwarden, and said nothing until he had a good head of steam up.

"So, by damn," he muttered then. "You speak for the whole louse-bound union, I hope." The long handlebar mustaches and goatee waggled over a gorgeously embroidered waistcoat. Beneath it was only a sarong, columnar legs and bare splay feet.

Torres checked his temper. "Yes, sir. For all the locals in the Solar Federation, and every other lodge within ten light-years. We understood that you would represent the League."

"Only tentatively. I will convey your demands to my colleagues, such of them as I can drag out of their offices and harems. Sit."

Torres did not give the chair an opportunity to mold itself to him; he sat on the edge and said harshly: "It's simple enough, sir. You already know our decision. We aren't calling a real strike . . . yet. We just refuse to take any more ships through the Kossaluth of Borthu till the menace there has been stopped. If you insist that we do so, we will strike."

"By damn, you cut your own throats," replied Van Rijn with surprising mildness. "Not alone the loss of pay and commissions. No, but if Antares is not kept steady supplied, she loses taste maybe for cinnamon and London dry gin. Not to speak of products offered by other companies. Like if Jo-Boy Technical Services bring in no more indentured scientists, Antares builds her own academies. Hell and lawyers! In a few years, no more market at Antares and all fifteen planets. You lose, I lose, we all lose."

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"The answer is simple enough, sir. We just detour around the Kossaluth. I know that'll take us through more hazardous regions, we'll have more wrecks, but the brothers don't mind that risk."

"What?" Somehow, Van Rijn managed a basso scream. "Pest and cannon balls! Double the length of the voyage! Double the fuel bills, salaries, ship and cargo losses . . . halve the deliveries per year! We are ruined! Better we give up Antares at once!"

It was already an expensive route, Torres knew; whether or not the companies could actually afford the extra cost, he didn't know, for by the standard treaty which Sol had also signed, the League's books were its own secret. He waited out the dramatics, then said patiently:

"The Borthudian press gangs have been operating for two years now, sir. We've tried to fight them, and can't. We didn't make this decision overnight; if it had been up to the brothers at large, we'd have voted right at the start not to go through that hellhole. But the Lodgemasters held back, hoping something could be worked out. Apparently it can't."

"See here," growled van Rijn. "I don't like this losing of men and ships any better than you. Worse, maybe. A million credits a year or more it costs this company alone. But we can afford it. Only fifteen per cent of our ships are captured. We would lose more, detouring through the Gamma Mist or the Stonefields. Crewfolk should be men, not jellyfish."

"Easy enough for you to say!" snapped Torres. "We'll face meteors and dust clouds, rogue planets and hostile natives, warped space and hard radiation . . . but I've *seen* one of those pressed men. That's what decided me. I'm not going to risk it happening to me, and neither is anyone else."

"Ah, so?" Van Rijn leaned over the desk. "By damn, you tell me."

"Met him on *Arkan III*, autonomous planet on the fringe of the Kossaluth, where we put in to deliver some tea. One of their ships was in, too, and you can bet your brain we went around in armed parties and were ready to shoot anyone who even looked like a crimp. I saw him, this man

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they'd kidnaped, going on some errand, spoke to him, we even tried to snatch him back so we could bring him to Earth for deconditioning— He fought us and got away. God! He wasn't human any more, not inside. And still you could tell he wanted out, he wanted to break the conditioning, and he couldn't, *and he couldn't go crazy either—*"

Torres grew aware that Van Rijn was thrusting a full goblet into his hand. "Here, you drink this." It burned all the way down. "I have seen conditioned men. I was a rough-and-tumbler myself in younger days." The merchant went back behind his desk and rekindled his pipe. "It is a fiendish thing to do, *ja*."

"If you want to outfit a punitive expedition, sir," said Torres savagely, "I guarantee you can get full crews."

"No." The curled, shoulder-length black locks swished greasily as Van Rijn shook his head. "The League does not have many capital ships. It is unprofitable. The cost of a war with Borthu would wipe out ten years' gains. And then we will have trouble with the milksop governments of a hundred planets. No."

"Isn't there some kind of pressure you can put on the Kos-salu himself?"

"Hah! You think maybe we have not tried? Economic sanctions do not work; they are not interested in trade outside their own empire. Threats they laugh at. They know that they have more navy than we will ever build. Assassins never get close to the big potatoes." Van Rijn cursed for two straight minutes without repeating himself. "And there they sit, fat and greedy-gut, across the route to Antares and all stars beyond! It is not to be stood!"

He had been prowling the floor; now he whirled about with surprising speed for so large and clumsy a man. "This strike of yours brings it to a head. And speaking of heads, it is getting time for a tall cold beer. I shall have to confer with my fellows. Tell your men there will be steps taken if it is financially possible. Now get out!"

It is a truism that the structure of a society is basically determined by its technology. Not in an absolute sense—there

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may be totally different cultures using identical tools—but the tools settle the possibilities: you can't have interstellar trade without spaceships. A race limited to one planet, possessing a high knowledge of mechanics but with all its basic machines of commerce and war requiring a large capital investment, will inevitably tend toward collectivism under one name or another. Free enterprise needs elbow room.

Automation made manufacturing cheap, and the cost of energy nose-dived when the proton converter was invented. Gravity control and the hyperdrive opened a galaxy to exploitation. They also provided a safety valve: a citizen who found his government oppressive could usually emigrate elsewhere, which strengthened the libertarian planets; their influence in turn loosened the bonds of the older world.

Interstellar distances being what they are, and intelligent races all having their own ideas of culture, there was no union of planetary systems. Neither was there much war: too destructive, with small chance for either side to escape ruin, and there was little to fight about. A race doesn't get to be intelligent without an undue share of built-in ruthlessness, so all was not sweetness and brotherhood—but the balance of power remained fairly stable. And there was a brisk demand for trade goods. Not only did colonies want the luxuries of home, and the home planets want colonial produce, but the old worlds had much to swap.

Under such conditions, an exuberant capitalism was bound to strike root. It was also bound to find mutual interest, to form alliances and settle spheres of influence. The powerful companies joined together to squeeze out competitors, jack up prices, and generally make the best of a good thing. Governments were limited to a few planetary systems at most; they could do little to control their cosmopolitan merchants. One by one, through bribery, coercion, or sheer despair, they gave up the struggle.

Selfishness is a potent force. Governments, officially dedicated to altruism, remained divided; the Polesotechnic League became a super-government, sprawling from Canopus to Polaris, drawing its membership from a thousand species. It was a horizontal society, cutting across all politi-

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cal and cultural boundaries. It set its own policies, made its own treaties, established its own bases, fought its own minor wars—and, in the course of milking the Milky Way, did more to spread a truly universal civilization and enforce a lasting *Pax* than all the diplomats in the galaxy.

But it had its own troubles.

One of Nicholas van Rijn's mansions lay on the peak of Kilimanjaro, up among the undying snows. It was an easy spot to defend, and a favorite for conferences.

His gravcar slanted down through a night of needle-sharp stars, toward the high turrets and glowing lanterns. Looking through the roof, he picked out the cold sprawl of Scorpio. Antares flashed a red promise, and he shook his fist at the suns between. "So! Monkey business with Van Rijn, by damn. The whole Sagittarius clusters waiting to be opened, and you in the way. This will cost you money, my friends, gut and kipper me if it don't."

He thought back to days when he had ridden a bucketing ruin of a ship through the great hollow spaces, bargaining under green skies, and in poisonous winds for jewels Earth had never seen before, and a moment's wistfulness tugged at him. A long time now since he had been any farther than the Moon . . . poor old fat man, chained to one miserable planet and unable to turn an honest credit. The Antares route was more important than he dared admit; if he lost it, he lost his chance at the Sagittarian developments to corporations with offices on the other side of the Kossaluth. In today's pitiless competition, you either went on expanding or you went under. And he had made too many enemies, they were waiting for the day of his weakness.

The car landed itself, and the guards jumped out to flank him. He wheezed the thin chill air into sooty lungs, drew his cloak of phosphorescent onthar skin tightly about him, and scrunched across frosty paving to the house. There was a new maid at the door, pretty little baggage . . . Venusian-French, was she? He tossed his plumed hat at her as the butler said the Freemen were already here. He sat down and

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told the chair "Conference Room" and went along corridors darkly paneled in the wood of a hundred planets.

There were four colleagues around the table when he entered. Kraaknach of the Martian Transport Company was glowing his yellow eyes at a Frans Hals on the wall. Firmage of North American Engineering puffed an impatient cigar. Mjambo, who owned Jo-Boy Technical Services—which supplied indentured labor to colonial planets—was talking into his wristphone. Gornas-Kiew happened to be on Earth and was authorized to speak for the Centaurians; he sat quietly waiting, hunched into his shell, only the delicate antennae moving.

Van Rijn plumped himself into the armchair at the head of the table. Waiters appeared with trays of drinks, smokes, and snacks. He took a large bite from a ham sandwich and looked inquiringly at the others.

Kraaknach's owl-face turned to him. "Well, Freeman host, I understand we are met on account of this Borthudian *brokna*. Did the spacemen make their ultimatum?"

"Ja." Van Rijn picked up a cigar and rolled it between his fingers. "It grows serious. They will not take ships through the Kossaluth, except to get revenge, while this shanghai business goes on."

"So, why not blast the Borthudian home planet?" asked Mjambo.

"Death and damnation!" Van Rijn tugged at his goatee. "I had a little computation run off today. Assuming we lost no ships—and Borthu has good defenses—but allowing for salaries, risk bonus, fuel, ammunition, maintenance, depreciation, estimated loss due to lack of protection elsewhere, lawsuits by governments afraid the Kossaluth may strike back, bribes, and loss of profits to be had if the cost were invested peaceably—the bill for that little operation would come to about thirty trillion credits. In a nutshell, we cannot afford it. Simmons, a bowl of Brazils!"

"You will pardon my ignorance, good sirs," clicked Gornas-Kiew's artificial vocalizer. "My main interests lie elsewhere,

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and I have been only marginally aware of this trouble. *Why* are the Borthudians impressing our men?"

Van Rijn cracked a nut between his teeth and reached for a glass of brandy. "The gruntbrains have not enough of their own," he replied shortly.

"Perhaps I can make it clear," said Kraaknach. Like most Martians of the Sirruch Horde, he had a mind orderly to the point of boredom. He ran a clawlike hand through his gray feathers and lit a rinn-tube. "Borthu is a backward planet . . . terrestroid to eight points, with humanoid natives. They were in the early stage of nuclear energy when explorers visited them seventy-eight years ago, and their reaction to the presence of a superior culture was paranoid. They soon learned how to make modern engines of all types, and then set out to conquer themselves an empire. They now hold a volume of space about forty light-years across, though they only occupy a few Soltype systems within it. They want nothing to do with the outside universe, and are quite able to supply all their needs within their own boundaries—with the one exception of efficient spacemen."

"Hm-m-m," said Firmage. "Their commoners might see things differently, if we could get a few trading ships in there. I've already suggested we use subversive agents—get the Kossalu and his whole bloody government overthrown from within."

"Of course, of course," said Van Rijn. "But that takes more time than we have got, unless we want Spica and Canopus to sew up the Sagittarius frontier while we are stopped dead here."

"To continue," said Kraaknach, "the Borthudians can produce as many spaceships as they want, which is a great many since their economy is expanding. In fact, its structure—capitalism not unlike ours—requires constant expansion if the whole society is not to collapse. But they cannot produce trained crews fast enough. Pride, and a not unjustified fear of our gradually taking them over, will not let them send students to us any more, or hire from us, and they have only one understaffed academy of their own."

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"I know," said Mjambo. "It'd be a hell of a good market for indentures if we could change their minds for them."

"Accordingly, they have in the past two years taken to waylaying our ships—in defiance of us and of all interstellar law. They capture the men, hypnocondition them, and assign them to their own merchant fleet. It takes two years to train a spaceman; we are losing an important asset in this alone."

"Can't we improve our evasive action?" wondered Firmage. "Interstellar space is so big. Why can't we avoid their patrols altogether?"

"Eighty-five percent of our ships do precisely that," Van Rijn told him. "But the hyperdrive vibrations can be detected a light-year away if you have sensitive instruments—pseudogravitational pulses of infinite velocity. Then they close in, using naval vessels, which are faster and more maneuverable than merchantmen. It will not be possible to cut our losses much by evasion tactics. Satan and small pox! You think maybe I have not considered it?"

"Well, then, how about convoying our ships through?"

"At what cost? I have been with the figures. It would mean operating the Antares run at a loss—quite apart from all the extra naval units we would have to build."

"Then how about our arming our merchantmen?"

"Bah! A frigate-class ship needs twenty men for all the guns and instruments. A merchant ship needs only four. Consider the salaries paid to spacemen. And sixteen extra men on every ship would mean cutting down all our operations elsewhere, for lack of crews. Same pestiferous result: we cannot afford it, we would lose money in big fat gobs. What is worse, the Kossalu knows we would. He needs only wait, holding back his fig-plucking patrols, till we were too broke to continue. Then he would be able to start conquering systems like Antares."

Firmage tapped the inlaid table with a restless finger. "Bribery, assassination, war, political and economic pressure, all seem to be ruled out," he said. "The meeting is now open to suggestions."

There was a silence, under the radiant ceiling.

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Gornas-Kiew broke it: "Just how is this shanghaiing done? It is impossible to exchange shots while in hyperdrive."

"Well, good sir, statistically impossible," amended Kraaknach. "The shells have to be hypered themselves, of course, or they would revert to sublight velocity and be left behind as soon as they emerged from the drive field. Furthermore, to make a hit, they would have to be precisely in phase with the target. A good pilot can phase in on another ship, but the operation is too complex, it involves too many factors, for any artificial brain of useful size."

"I tell you how," snarled Van Rijn. "The pest-bedamned Borthudian ships detect the vibration-wake from afar. They compute the target course and intercept. Coming close, they phase in and slap on a tractor beam. Then they haul themselves up alongside, burn through the hull or the air lock, and board."

"Why, the answer looks simple enough," said Mjambo. "Equip our boats with pressor beams. Keep the enemy ships at arm's length."

"You forget, esteemed colleague, that beams of either positive or negative sign are powered from the engines," said Kraaknach. "And a naval ship has larger engines than a merchantman."

"Well, then, why not arm our crews? Give 'em heavy blasters and let 'em blow the boarding parties to hell."

"The illegitimate-offspring-of-interspecies-crosses Borthudians have just such weapons already," snorted Van Rijn. "Sulfur and acid! Do you think that four men can stand off twenty?"

"Mm-m-m . . . yes, I see your point," agreed Firmage. "But look here, we can't do anything about this without laying out *some* cash. I'm not sure offhand what our margin of profit is—"

"On the average, for all our combined Antarean voyages, about thirty per cent on each voyage," said Van Rijn promptly.

Mjambo started. "How the devil do you get the figures for *my* company?"

Van Rijn grinned and drew on his cigar.

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"That gives us a margin to use," said Cornas-Kiew. "We can invest in fighting equipment to such an extent that our profit is less—though I agree that there must still be a final result in the black—for the duration of the emergency."

"Ja," said Van Rijn, "only I have just told you we have not the men available to handle such fighting equipment."

"It'd be worth it," said Mjambo viciously. "I'd take a fair-sized loss just to teach them a lesson."

"No, no." Van Rijn lifted a hand which, after forty years of offices, was still the broad muscular paw of a working spaceman. "Revenge and destruction are un-Christian thoughts. Also, they will not pay very well, since it is hard to sell anything to a corpse. The problem is to find some means within our resources which will make it *unprofitable* for Borthu to raid us. Not being stupid heads, they will then stop raiding and we can maybe later do business."

"You're a cold-blooded one," said Firmage.

Van Rijn drooped his eyes and covered a shiver by pouring himself another glass. He had suddenly had an idea.

He let the others argue for a fruitless hour, then said: "Freemen, this gets us nowhere, *nie?* Perhaps we are not stimulated enough to think clear."

"What would you suggest?" asked Mjambo wearily.

"Oh . . . an agreement. A pool, or prize, or reward for whoever solves this problem. For example, ten per cent of all the others' Antarean profits for the next ten years."

"Hoy there!" cried Firmage. "If I know you, you robber, you've just come up with the answer."

"Oh, no, no, no. By good St. Dismas I swear it. I have some beginning thoughts, maybe, but I am only a poor rough old space walloper without the fine education all you Freemen had. I could so easy be wrong."

"What is your idea?"

"Best I not say just yet, until it is more clear in my thick head. But please to note, he who tries solving this problem takes on all the risk, and it may well be some small expense. Also, without his solution nobody has any more profits. Does not a little return on his investment sound fair and proper?"

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There was more argument. Van Rijn smiled with infinite benevolence.

He was satisfied with an agreement in principle, sworn to by mercantile honor, the details to be computed later.

Beaming, he clapped his hands. "Freemen, we have worked hard tonight and soon comes much harder work. By damn, I think we deserve a little celebration. Simmons, prepare an orgy."

Captain Torres was shocked. "Are you seriously asking us to risk that?"

Van Rijn stared out through the office wall. "In all secrecy," he answered. "I must have a crew I can trust."

"But—"

"We will not be stingy with the bonuses."

Torres shook his head. "Sir, I'm afraid it's impossible. The Brotherhood has voted absolute refusal of any trips into the Kossaluth except punitive expeditions—which this one is not. Under the constitution, we can't change that policy without another vote, which would have to be a public matter."

"It can be publicly voted on after we see if it works," urged Van Rijn. "The first trip will have to be secret."

"Then the first trip will have to do without a crew."

"Rot and pestilence!" Van Rijn's fist crashed down on the desk and he surged to his feet. "What sort of cowards do I deal with? In my day we were men! We would have sailed through Hell's open gates if you paid us enough!"

Torres sucked hard on his cigarette. "I'm stuck with the rules, sir," he declared. "Only a Lodgemaster can . . . well, all right, let me say it!" His temper flared up. "You're asking us to take an untried ship into enemy sky and cruise around till we're attacked. If we succeed, we win a few measly kilo-credits of bonus. If we lose, we're condemned to a lifetime of purgatory, locked up in our own skulls and unable to will anything but obedience and *knowing* how our brains have been chained. Win, lose, or draw for us, you sit back here plump and safe and rake in the money. *No.*"

Van Rijn sat quiet for a while. This was something he had not foreseen.

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His eyes wandered forth again, to the narrow sea. There was a yacht out there, a lovely thing of white sails and gleaming brass. Really, he ought to spend more time on his own ketch—money wasn't as important as all that. It was not such a bad world, this Earth, even for a lonely old fat man, it was full of blossoms and good wine, clean winds and beautiful women and fine books. In his forebrain, he knew how much his memories of earlier-days were colored by nostalgia—space is big and cruel, not meant for humankind. Let's face it, here on Earth we belong.

He turned around. "You say a Lodgemaster can legally come on such a trip without telling anyone," he remarked quietly. "You think you can raise two more like yourself, hah?"

"I told you, we won't! And you're only making it worse. Asking an officer to serve as a common crewhand is grounds for a duel."

"Even if I myself am the skipper?"

The *Mercury* did not, outwardly, look different after the engineers were finished with her. And the cargo was the same as usual: cinnamon, ginger, pepper, cloves, tea, whiskey, gin. If he was going to Antares, Van Rijn did not intend to waste the voyage. Only wines were omitted from the list, for he doubted if they could stand a trip as rough as this one was likely to be.

The alteration was internal, extra hull bracing and a new and monstrously powerful engine. The actuarial computers gave the cost of such an outfitting—averaged over many ships and voyages—as equal to three times the total profit from all the vessel's Antarean journeys during her estimated lifetime. Van Rijn had winced, but ordered his shipyards to work.

It was, in all truth, a very slim margin he had, and he had gambled more on it than he could afford. But if the Kossalu of Borthu had statistical experts of his own—always assuming, of course, that the idea worked in the first place—

Well, if it didn't, Nicholas van Rijn would die in battle or be executed as useless; or end his days as a brain-churned

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slave on a filthy Borthudian freighter; or be held for a ruinous ransom. The alternatives all looked equally bad.

He installed himself, the dark-haired and multiply curved Dorothea McIntyre, and a good supply of brandy, tobacco, and ripe cheese, in the captain's cabin. One might as well be comfortable. Torres was his mate, Captains Petrovich and Seichi his engineers. The *Mercury* lifted from Quito Spaceport without fanfare, hung unpretentiously in orbit till clearance was given, and accelerated on gravity beams away from the sun. At the required half-billion kilometers' distance, she went on hyperdrive and outpaced light.

Van Rijn sat back on the bridge and stuffed his churchwarden. "Now is a month's voyage to Antares," he said piously. "Good St. Dismas watch over us."

"I'll stick by St. Nicholas," murmured Torres. "Even if you do bear the same name."

Van Rijn looked hurt. "Do you not respect my integrity?"

Torres grinned. "I admire your courage—nobody can say you lack guts and you may very well be able to pull this off. Set a pirate to catch a pirate."

"You younger generations have a loud mouth and no courtesy." The merchant lit his pipe and blew reeking clouds. "In my day we said 'sir' to the captain even when we mutinied."

"I'm worrying about one thing," said Torres. "I realize that the enemy probably doesn't know about the strike yet, and so they won't be suspicious of us—and I realize that by passing within one light-year of Borthu itself we're certain to be attacked—but suppose half a dozen of them jump us at once?"

"On the basis of what we know about their patrol patterns, the estimated probability of more than one ship finding us is only ten per cent, plus or minus three." Van Rijn heaved his bulk onto his feet. One good thing about spacefaring, you could set the artificial gravity low and feel almost young again. "What you do not know so well yet, my young friend, is that there are very few certainties in life. Always we must go on probabilities. The secret of success is to arrange things so the odds favor you—then in the long run you are sure to

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come out ahead. It is your watch now, and I recommend to you a book on statistical theory to pass the time. As for me, I will be in conference with Freelady McIntyre and a liter of brandy."

"I wish I could arrange my own captain's chores the way you do," said Torres mournfully.

Van Rijn waved an expansive hand. "Why not, my boy, why not? So long as you make money and no trouble for the Company, the Company does not interfere with your private life. The trouble with you younger generations is you lack initiative. When you are a poor old feeble fat man like me you will look back and regret so many lost opportunities."

Even in low-gee, the deck vibrated under his tread as he left.

Here there was darkness and cold and a blazing glory of suns. The viewscreens held the spilling silver of the Milky Way, the ruby spark of Antares among distorted constellations, the curling edge of a nebula limned by the blue glare of a dwarf star. Brightest among the suns was Borthu's, yellow as minted gold.

The ship drove on through night, pulsing in and out of four-dimensional reality and filled with waiting.

Dorothea sat on a wardroom couch, posing long legs and high prow with a care so practiced as to be unconscious. She could not get her eyes from the screen.

"It's beautiful," she said in a small voice. "And horrible."

Nicholas van Rijn sprawled beside her, his majestic nose aimed at the ceiling. "What is so bad, my little sinusoid?"

"Them . . . lying out there to pounce on us and— Why did I come? Why did I let you talk me into it?"

"I believe there was mention of a tygron coat and Santorian flamedrop earrings."

"But suppose they catch us?" Her fingers fell cold on his wrist. "What will happen to me?"

"I told you I have set up a ransom fund for you. I also warned you maybe they would not bother to collect, and maybe we get broken to bits in this fight and all die. Satan's horns and the devil who gave them to him! Be still, will you?"

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The intraship speaker burped and Torres' voice said: "Wake of highpowered ship detected, approaching from direction of Borthu."

"All hands to posts!" roared Van Rijn.

Dorothea screamed. He picked her up under one arm, carried her down the hall—collecting a few scratches and bruises en route—tossed her into his cabin, and locked the door. Puffing, he arrived on the bridge. The visual intercom showed Petrovich and Seichi, radiation-armored, the engines gigantic behind them. Their faces were drawn tight and glistening with sweat. Torres was gnawing his lip, fingers shaking as he tuned in the hypervid.

"All right," said van Rijn, "this is the thing we have come for. I hope you each remember what you have to do, because if not we will soon be very dead." He dropped into the main control chair and buckled on the harness. His fingers tickled the keys, feeling the sensitive response of the ship. So far they had been using only normal power, the great converter had been almost idling; it was good to know how many wild horses he could call up.

The hypervid chimed. Torres pressed the *Accept* button and the screen came to life.

It was a Borthudian officer who looked out at them. Skin-tight garments were dead black on the cat-lithe frame. The face was almost human, but hairless and tinged with blue; yellow eyes smoldered under the narrow forehead. Behind him could be seen the bridge, a crouching gunnery officer, and the usual six-armed bassalt idol.

"Terran ship ahoy!" He ripped out crisp, fluent Anglic, only subtly accented by a larynx and palate of different shape. "This is Captain Rentharik of the Kossalu's frigate *Gantok*. By the law, most sacred, of the Kossaluth of Borthu, you are guilty of trespass on the dominions of His Frightfulness. Stand by to be boarded."

"By double-damn, you out-from-under-wet-logs-crawling poppycock!" Van Rijn flushed turkey red. "Not bad enough you pirate my men and ships, with all their good expensive cargoes, but you have the copperbound nerve to call it legal!"

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Rentharik fingered the ceremonial dagger hung about his neck. "Old man, the writ of the Kossalu runs through this entire volume of space. You can save yourself punishment—nerve-pulsing, to be exact—by surrendering peacefully and submitting to judgment."

"By treaty, open space is free to ships of all planets," said Van Rijn. "And it is understood by all *civilized* races that treaties override any local law."

Rentharik smiled bleakly. "Force is the basis of law, captain."

"Ja, it is, and now you make the mistake of using force on Van Rijn! I shall have a surprise for your strutting little slime mold of a king."

Rentharik turned to a recorder tube and spoke into it. "I have just made a note to have you assigned to the Ilyan run after conditioning. We have never found any way to prevent seepage of the Ilyan air into the crewman's helmets; and it holds chlorine."

Van Rijn's face lit up. "That is a horrible waste of trained personnel, captain. Now it so happens that on Earth we can make absolutely impervious air systems, and I would gladly act as middleman if you wish to purchase them—at a small fee, of course."

"There has been enough discussion," said Rentharik. "You will now be grappled and boarded. There is a fixed scale of punishments for captured men, depending on the extent of their resistance."

The screen blanked.

Torres licked sandy lips. Tuning the nearest viewscreen, he got the phase of the Borthudian frigate. She was a black shark-form, longer and slimmer than the dumpy merchantman, of only half the tonnage but with armor and gun turrets etched against remote star-clouds. She came riding in along a curve that would have been impossible without gravitic acceleration compensators, matching velocities in practiced grace, until she loomed huge a bare kilometer away.

The intercom broke into a scream. Van Rijn swore as he saw Dorothea having hysterics in the cabin. He cut her out

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of the circuit and thought with anguish that she would probably smash all the bottles—and Antares still eleven days off!

There was a small, pulsing jar. The *Gantok* was in phase and the gravity-fingers of a tractor beam had reached across to lay hold of the *Mercury*.

"Torres," said Van Rijn. "You stand by, boy, and take over if anything happens to me. I may want your help anyway, if it gets too rough. Petrovich, Seichi, you got to maintain our beams and hold 'em tight, no matter what the enemy does. O.K.? We go!"

The *Gantok* was pulling herself in, hulls almost touching now. Petrovich kicked in the full power of his converter. Arcs blazed blue with million-volt discharges, the engine bawled, and ozone was spat forth sharp and smelling of thunder.

A pressor beam lashed out, an invisible hammerblow of repulsion, five times the strength of the enemy tractor. Van Rijn heard the *Mercury's* ribs groan with the stress. The *Gantok* shot away, turning end over end. Ten kilometers removed, she was lost to vision among the stars.

"Ha, ha!" bellowed van Rijn. "We spill all their apples, eh? By damn! Now we show them some fun!"

The Borthudian hove back into sight. She clamped on again, full strength attraction. Despite the pressor, the *Mercury* was yanked toward her with a brutal surge of acceleration. Seichi cursed and threw in all the pressor power he had.

For a moment Van Rijn thought his ship would burst open. He saw the deckplates buckle under his feet and heard steel shear. Fifty million tons of force were not to be handled lightly. The *Gantok* was batted away as if by a troll's fist.

"No so far! Not so far, you dumbhead! Let me control the beams." Van Rijn's hands danced over the pilot board. "We want to keep him for a souvenir!"

He used a spurt of drive to overhaul the *Gantok*. His right hand steered the *Mercury* while his left wielded the tractor and the pressor, seeking a balance. The engine thunder rolled and boomed in his skull. The acceleration compensator could not handle all the fury now loosed, and straps creaked as his weight was hurled against them. Tor-

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res, Petrovich, and Seichi were forgotten, part of the machinery, implementing the commands his fingers gave.

Now thoroughly scared, the Borthudian opened her drive to get away. Van Rijn equalized positive and negative forces, in effect welding himself to her hull by a three-kilometer bar. Grinning, he threw his superpowered engine into reverse. The *Gantok* strained to a halt and went backwards with him.

Lightning cracked and crashed over his engineers' heads. The hull shuddered as the enemy fought to break free. Her own drive was added to the frantic repulsion of her pressors, and the gap widened. Van Rijn stepped down his own pressors. When she was slammed to a dead stop, the blow echoed back at him.

"Ha, like a fish we play him! Good St. Peter the Fisherman, help us not let him get away!"

It was a bleak and savage battle, nine and a half trillion empty kilometers from anyone's home, with no one to watch but the stars. Rentharik was a good pilot, and a desperate one. He had less power and less mass than the *Mercury*, but he knew how to use them, lunging, bucking, wheeling about in an attempt to ram. Live flesh could only take so much, thought Van Rijn while the thunders clattered around him. The question was, who would have to give up first?

Something snapped, loud and tortured, and he felt a rush of stinging electrified air. Petrovich cried it for him: "Burst plate—Section Four. I'll throw a patch on, but someone's got to weld it back or we'll break in two."

Van Rijn signaled curtly to Torres. "Can you play our fish? I think he is getting tired. Where are the bedamned spacesuits?"

He reeled from his chair and across the pitching deck. The *Gantok* was making full-powered leaps, trying to stress the *Mercury* into ruin. By varying their own velocity and beam-force, the humans could nullify most of the effect, but it took skill and nerve. God, but it took nerve! Van Rijn felt his clothes drenched on his body.

He found the lockers and climbed awkwardly into his

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pecially built suit. Hadn't worn armor in a long time—forgotten how it stank. Where was that beblistered torch, anyhow? When he got out on the hull, surrounded by the blaze of all the universe, fear was cold within him.

One of those shocks that rolled and yawed the ship underfoot could break the gravitic hold of his boots. Pitched out beyond the hyperdrive field and reverting to normal state, he would be forever lost in a microsecond as the craft flashed by at translight speeds. It would be a long fall through eternity.

Electric fire crawled over the hull. He saw the flash of the *Gantok's* guns—she was firing wildly, on the one-in-a-billion chance that some shell would happen to be in phase with the *Mercury*. Good—let her use up her ammunition. Even so, it was a heart-bumping eerie thing when a nuclear missile passed through Van Rijn's own body. No, by damn, through the space where they coexisted with different frequencies—must be precise—now here is that fit-for-damnation hull plate. Clamp on the jack, bend it back toward shape. Ah, heave ho, even with hydraulics it takes a strong man to do this, maybe some muscle remains under all that goose grease. Slap down your glare filter, weld the plate, handle a flame and remember the brave old days when you went hell-roaring halfway across this arm of the galaxy. Whoops, that lunge nearly tossed him off into God's great icebox!

He finished his job, reflected that there would have to be still heavier bracing on the next ship of this model, and crept back to the air lock, trying to ignore the ache which was his body. As he entered, the rolling and plunging and racketing stopped. For a moment he thought he had been stricken deaf.

Then Torres' face swam into the intercom, wet and haggard, and said hoarsely: "They've quit. I don't think they expect their own boat can take any more of this—"

Van Rijn straightened his bruised back and whooped. "Excellent! Wonderfull! But pull us up alongside quick, you lardhead, before—"

There was the twisting sensation of reversion to normal state, and the hyperdrive noise spun into silence. Van Rijn

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lost his footing as the *Mercury* sprang forward and banged against the enemy.

It had been an obvious tactic for Rentharik to use: Switching off his interstellar drive, in the hope that the Terran ship would remain hyper and flash so far away he could never be found again. The answer was equally simple—a detector coupled to an automatic cutoff, so that the *Mercury* would instantly do likewise. And now the League ship was immediately alongside the *Gantok*, snuggled beneath the very guns the frigate could no longer bring to bear and held by a tractor force she could not break.

Van Rijn struggled back to his feet and removed his helmet. The intercom blushed at his language.

"Captain!" Petrovich yelped the realization. "*They're going to board us!*"

"Name of Judas!" van Rijn's breastplate clashed on the deck. "Must I do all your thinking for you? What use is our pressor if not to swat off unwelcome guests?" He threw back his head and bellowed with laughter. "Let them try, let them try! Our drive field envelops theirs, so it does not matter whether they use their engines or not—and we are stronger, *nie?* We can drag them with us even if they fight it. All my life I have been a deep-sea fisherman. And now, full speed ahead to Antares with this little minnow that thought it was a shark!"

A hypervid call to Antares as soon as they were in range brought a League carrier out to meet them. Van Rijn turned the *Gantok* over to her and let Torres pilot the battered *Mercury* in. Himself, he wanted only to sleep.

Not that the Borthudians had tried any further stunts, after their boarding party was so cold-bloodedly shoved into deep space. Rentharik was sensible enough to know when he was beaten, and had passively let his ship be hauled away. But the strain of waiting for any possible resistance had been considerable.

Torres had wanted to communicate with the prisoned crew, but Van Rijn would not allow it. "No, no, my boy, we demoralize them more by refusing the light of our

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eyes. I want the good Captain Rentharik's fingernails chewed down to the elbow when I see him."

That was, in the governor's mansion, in Redsun City. Van Rijn had appropriated it for his own use, complete with wine cellar and concubines. Between banquets he had found time to check on local prices and raise the tag on pepper a milli-credit per gram. The colonists would grumble, but they could afford it; if it weren't for him, their meals would be drab affairs, so didn't he deserve an honest profit?

After three days of this, he decided it was time to see Rentharik. He lounged on the governor's throne, pipe in one hand.

Rentharik advanced across the parquet floor, gaunt and bitter under the guns of two League gentlemen. He halted before the throne.

"Ah, so there you are!" Van Rijn beamed and waved the bottle. "I trust you have had the pleasant stay? Redsun City jails are much recommended, I am told."

"My government will take measures," spat the Borthudian. "You will not escape the consequences of this piracy."

"Your maggoty little kingleet will do nothing of the sort," declared Van Rijn. "If the civilized planets did not dare fight when he was playing buccaneer, he will not when it is the other way around. He will accept the facts and learn to love them."

"What do you plan to do with us?"

"Well, now, it may be we can collect a little ransom for you, perhaps, eh? If not, the local iron mines are always short of labor. But out of the great goodness of my heart, I let you choose one man who may go home freely and report what has happened. After that we negotiate."

Rentharik narrowed his lids. "See here, I know how your filthy trading system works. You won't do anything that doesn't pay you. And to equip a vessel like yours—one able to capture a warship—costs more than the vessel could ever hope to earn."

"Quite so. It costs just about three times as much."

"So . . . we'll ruin the Antares route for you! Don't think

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we'll give up our patrols in our own sovereign territory. We can outlast you, if you want a struggle of attrition."

"Ah!" Van Rijn waggled his pipestem. "That is what you cannot do, my friend. You can reduce our profit considerably, but you cannot eliminate it; therefore, we can continue the route indefinitely under present conditions. You see, each voyage nets a thirty per cent profit."

"And it costs three hundred per cent of your profit to outfit a ship—"

"Indeed. But we are only so equipping every *fourth* ship. That means we operate on a smaller margin, yes, but a little arithmetic should show you we can still scrape by in the black ink."

"Every fourth—!" Rentharik shook his head, frankly puzzled. "But what will you gain? Out of every four encounters, we will win three."

"Just so. And by those three victories, you will capture twelve slaves. The fourth time, we rope in twenty Borthudian spacemen. Naturally, you will never know beforehand which ship is going to be the one that can fight back. You will either have to give up your press gangs or see them whittled away." Van Rijn rubbed his horny palms together. "So you see, by damn, always I operate on the statistics, and always I load the statistics. My friend, you have had it edgewise."

Rentharik crouched where he stood and blazed at his captor: "I learned, here, that your union will not travel through the Kossaluth. Do you think reducing the number of impressed men by one fourth will change their minds?"

Van Rijn grinned. "If I know my spacemen—why, of course. Because if you do continue to raid us, you will soon reduce yourselves to so few crews as to be helpless. Then you will *have* to deal with us, and our terms will include freeing of all the slaves, deconditioning, and good fat indemnities. Any man worth his salt can stand a couple years' service, even on your moldy rustbuckets, if he knows he will then be freed and paid enough to retire on."

He cleared his throat, buttered his tone, and went on: "So is it not wise that you make terms at once? We will be

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very lenient if you do. You will have to release and indemnify all your present captives, and stop raiding, but you can send students to our academies at not much more than the usual fees. We will want a few minor trade concessions as well, of course—”

“And in a hundred years you’ll own us!” It was a snarl.

“If you do not agree, by damn, in three years we will own you. The choice is yours. You must have a continuously expanding supply of spacemen or your economy collapses. You can either let us train them in civilized fashion, and give us a wedge by which we ruin you in three generations, or you can impress them and be ruined inside this decade. Pick your man; we will let him report to your king-pig. And never forget that I, Nicholas van Rijn of the Polesotechnic League, do nothing without very good reason. Even the name of my ship could have warned you.”

“The name—?” whispered Rentharik.

“*Mercury*,” explained van Rijn, “was the god of commerce, gambling—and thieves.”

—

THE LIVE COWARD

THE LIVE COWARD

by Poul Anderson

THE FUGITIVE ship was pursued for ten light-years. Then, snapping in and out of subspace drive with a reckless disregard of nearby suns and tracer-blocking dust clouds, it shook the Patrol cruiser.

The search that followed was not so frantic as the danger might seem to warrant. Haste would have done no good; there are a million planetary systems affiliated with the League, and their territory includes several million more too backward for membership. Even a small planet is such a wilderness of mountains, valleys, plains, forests, oceans, icefields, cities, and loneliness—much of it often quite unexplored—that it was hopeless to ransack them meter by meter for a single man. The Patrol knew that Varris' boat had a range of three hundred parsecs, and in the course of months and man-years of investigation it was pretty well established that he had not refueled at any registered depot. But a sphere two thousand light-years across can hold a lot of stars.

The Patrol offered a substantial reward for information leading to the arrest of Samel Varris, human, from the planet Caldon (No. so-and-so in the Pilots' Manual), wanted for the crime of inciting to war. It circulated its appeal as widely as possible. It warned all agents to keep an eye or a feeler or a telepathic organ out for a man potentially still capable of exploding a billion living entities into radioactive gas. Then it waited.

A year went by.

Captain Jakor Thymal of the trading ship *Ganash*, operating out of Sireen in the primitive Spiral Cluster area, brought the news. He had seen Varris, even spoken to the fellow. There was no doubt of it. Only one hitch: Varris had taken

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refuge with the king of Thunsba, a barbarous state in the southern hemisphere of a world known to the Galactics—such few as had ever heard of it—as Ryfin's Planet. He had gotten citizenship and taken the oath of service as a royal guardsman. Loyalty between master and man was a powerful element in Thunsban morality. The king would not give up Varris without a fight.

Of course, axes and arrows were of small use against flammers. Perhaps Varris could not be taken alive, but the Patrol could kill him without whiffing very many Thunsbans. Captain Thymal settled complacently back to wait for official confirmation of his report and the blood money. Nothing ever occurred to him but that the elimination of Varris would be the simplest of routine operations.

Like hell!

Wing Alak eased his flitter close to the planet. It hung in cloudy splendor against a curtain of hard, needle-sharp spatial stars, the Cluster sky. He sat gloomily listening to the click and mutter of instruments as Drog checked surface conditions.

"Quite terrestroid," said the Galmathian. His antennae lifted in puzzlement above the round, snouted face and the small black eyes. "Why did you bother testing? It's listed in the Manual."

"I have a nasty suspicious mind," said Alak. "Also an unhappy one." He was a thin, medium-tall human with the very white skin that often goes with flaming red hair. His Patrol uniform was as dandified as regulations allowed.

Drog hitched three meters of green, eight-legged body across the cabin. His burly arms reached out to pick up the maps in three-fingered hands. "Yes . . . here's the Thunsba kingdom and the capital city . . . what's it called? . . . Wainabog. I suppose our quarry is still there; Thymal swore he didn't alarm him." He sighed. "Now I have to spend an hour at the telescope and identify which place is what. And you can sit like my wife on an egg thinking beautiful thoughts!"

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"The only beautiful concept I have right now is that all of a sudden the Prime Directive was repealed."

"No chance of that, I'm afraid . . . not till a less blood-thirsty race than yours gets the leadership of the League."

"Less? You mean more, don't you? 'Under no circumstances whatsoever may the Patrol or any unit thereof kill any intelligent being.' If you do—" Alak made a rather horrible gesture. "Is that blood-thirsty?"

"Quite. Only a race with as gory a past as the Terrans would go to such extremes of reaction. And only as naturally ferocious a species could think of making such a commandment the Patrol's great top secret . . . and bluffing with threats of planetwide slaughter, or using any kind of chicanery to achieve its ends. Now a Galmathian will run down a farstak in his native woods and jump on its back and make a nice lunch while it's still running . . . but he wouldn't be able to imagine cold-bloodedly sterilizing an entire world, so he doesn't have to ban himself from honest killing even in self-defense." Dregs' caterpillar body hunched itself over the telescope.

"Get thee behind me, Satan . . . and don't push!" Alak returned murkily to his thoughts. His brain was hypnotically stuffed with all the information three generations of traders had gathered about Thunsba. None of it looked hopeful.

The king was—well, if not an absolute monarch, pretty close to being one, simply because the law had set him over the commons. Like many warlike barbarians, the Thunsbans had a quasi-religious reverence for the letter of the law, if not always for its spirit. The Patrol had run head-on into two items of the code: (a) the king would not yield up a loyal guardsman to an enemy, but would fight to the death instead; (b) if the king fought, so would the whole male population, unmoved by threats to themselves or their mates and cubs. Death before dishonor! Their religion, which they seemed quite fervent about, promised a roisterous heaven to all who fell in a good cause, and suitably gruesome hell for oath-breakers.

Hm-m-m . . . there was a powerful ecclesiastical organization, and piety had not stopped a good deal of conflict be-

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tween church and throne. Maybe he could work through the priesthood somehow.

The outworld traders who came to swap various manufactured articles for the furs and spices of Ryfin's Planet had not influenced the local cultures much. Perhaps they had inspired a few wars and heresies, but on the whole the autochthones were content to live in the ways of their fathers. The main effect of trading had been a loss of superstitious awe—the strangers were mighty, but they were known to be mortal. Alak doubted that even the whole Patrol fleet could bullyrag them into yielding on so touchy a point as Varris' surrender.

"What I can't understand," said Drogs, "is why we don't just swoop down and give the city a blanket of sleep-gas." This mission had been ordered in such tearing haste that he had been given only the most nominal briefing; and on the way here, he had followed his racial practice of somnolence—his body could actually "store" many days' worth of sleep.

His free hand gestured around the flitter. It was not a large boat, but it was well equipped, not only with weapons—for bluffing—but with its own machine shop and laboratory.

"Metabolic difference," said Alak. "Every anaesthetic known to us is poisonous to them, and their own knockout chemicals would kill Varris. Stun beams are just as bad—supersonics will scramble a Ryfinnian's brain like an egg. I imagine Varris picked this world for a bolthole just on that account."

"But he didn't know we wouldn't simply come down and shoot up the den."

"He could make a pretty shrewd guess. It's a secret that we never kill, but no secret that we're reluctant to hurt innocent bystanders." Alak scowled. "There are still a hundred million people on Caldon who'd rise—bloodily—against the new government if he came back to them. Whether he succeeded or not, it'd be a genocidal affair and a big loss of face to the Patrol."

"Hm-m-m . . . he can't get far from this world without more fuel; his tanks must be nearly dry. So why don't we

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blockade this planet and make sure he never has a chance to buy fuel?"

"Blockades aren't that reliable," said Alak. Drogs had never been involved in naval operations, only in surface work. "We could destroy his own boat easily enough, but word that he's alive is bound to leak back to Caldon now. There'd be attempt after attempt to run the blockade and get him out. Sooner or later, one would succeed. We're badly handicapped by not being allowed to shoot to hit. No, damn it, we've got to lift him, and fast!"

His eyes traveled wistfully to the biochemical shelves. There was a potent drug included, a nembutal derivative, hypnite. A small intramuscular injection could knock Varris out; he would awaken into a confused, passive state and remain thus for hours, following any lead he was given. Much useful information about his conspiracy could be extracted. Later, this drug and other techniques would be used to rehabilitate his twisted psyche, but that was a job for the specialists at Main Base.

Alak felt more handcuffed than ever before in his pragmatist life. The blaster at his waist could incinerate a squad of Thunsban knights—but their anachronistic weapons weren't so ridiculous when he wasn't allowed to use the blaster.

"Hurry it up," he said on a harsh note. "Let's get moving—and don't ask me where!"

A landing field had been made for the traders just outside the walls of Wainabog. Those bulked thick and gray, studded with turrets and men-at-arms, over a blue landscape of rolling fields and distant hills. Here and there Alak saw thatch-roofed hamlets; two kilometers from the town was a smaller community, also fortified, a single great tower in its middle crowned with a golden X. It must be the place mentioned in the trader narratives. Grimmoich Abbey, was that the name?

It was not too bad a mistranslation to speak of abbeys, monks, knights, and kings. Culturally and technologically, Thunsba was fairly close to medieval Europe.

Several peasants and townsfolk stood gaping at the flitter as Alak emerged. Others were on their way. He swept his

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gaze around the field and saw another spaceboat some distance off—must be Varris', yes, he remembered the description now. A dozen liveried halberdiers guarded it.

Carefully ignoring the drab-clad commons, Alak waited for the official greeters. Those came out in a rattle of plate armor, mounted on yellow-furred animals with horns and shoulder humps. A band of crossbowmen trotted in their wake and a herald wearing a scarlet robe blew his trumpet in their van. They pulled up with streaming banners and thunderous hoofs; lances dipped courteously, but eyes had a watchful stare behind the snouted visors of their helmets.

The herald rode forth and looked down at Alak, who was clad in his brightest dress uniform. "Greeting to you, stranger, from our lord Morlach, King of all Thunsba and Defender of the West. Our lord Morlach bids you come sup and sleep with him." The herald drew a sword and extended it hilt first. Alak ran hastily through his lessons and rubbed his forehead against the handle.

They were quite humanoid on Ryfin's Planet—disturbingly so, if you hadn't seen as many species as Alak. It was not the pale-blue skin or the violet hair or the short tails which made the difference: always, in a case like this, the effect was of a subtler wrongness. Noses a shade too long, faces a trifle too square, knees and elbows held at a peculiar angle—they looked like cartoon figures brought to life. And they had a scent of their own, a sharp mustardy odor. Alak didn't mind, knowing full well that he looked and smelled as odd to them, but he had seen young recruits get weird neuroses after a few months on a planet of "humanoids to six points of classification."

He replied gravely in the Thunsban tongue: "My lord Morlach has my thanks and duty. I hight Wing Alak, and am not a trader but an envoy of the traders' king, sent hither on a mission most delicate. I pray the right to see my lord Morlach as soon as he grant."

There was more ceremony, and a number of slaves were fetched to carry Alak's impressive burden of gifts. Then he was offered a mount, but declined—the traders had warned him of this little joke, where you put an outworlder on a beast

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that goes frantic at alien smells. With proper haughtiness he demanded a sedan chair, which was an uncomfortable and seasick thing to ride but had more dignity. The knights of Wainabog enclosed him and he was borne through the gates and the cobbled avenues to the fortresslike palace.

Inside, he did not find the rude splendor he had expected, but a more subtle magnificence, really beautiful furnishings. Thunsba might throw its garbage out in the streets, but had excellent artistic taste. There were a hundred nobles in the royal audience chamber, a rainbow of robes, moving about and talking with boisterous gestures. Servants scurried around offering trays of food and liquor. A small orchestra was playing: the saw-toothed music hurt Alak's ears. A number of monks, in gray robes and with hoods across their faces, stood unspeaking along the walls, near the motionless men-at-arms.

Alak advanced under gleaming pikes and knelt before the king. Morlach was burly, middle-aged, and long-bearded, wearing a coronet and holding a naked sword on his lap. At his left, the place of honor—most of this species were left-handed—sat an older "man," clean-shaven, hook-nosed, bleak-faced, in yellow robe and a tall bejeweled hat marked with a golden X.

"My duty to you, puissant lord Morlach. Far have I, unworthy Wing Alak of Terra, come to behold your your majesty, before whom the nations tremble. From my king unto you, I bear a message and these poor gifts."

The poor gifts made quite a heap, all the way from clothes and ornaments of lustrous synthetic to flash-lights and swords of manganese steel. Ryfin's Planet couldn't legally be given modern tools and weapons—not at their present social stage of war and feudalism—but there was no ban on lesser conveniences which they couldn't reproduce anyhow.

"Well met, Sir Wing Alak. Come, be seated at my right." Morlach's voice rose, and the buzzing voices, already lowered in curiosity, stopped at once. "Be it known to all men, Sir Wing Alak is in truth my guest, most holy and inviolable,

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and all injuries to him, save in lawful duel, are harms to me and my house which the Allshaper bids me avenge."

The nobles crowded closer. It was not a very formal court, as such things go. One of them came to the front as Alak mounted the high seat. The Patrolman felt a tingle along his back and a primitive stirring in his scalp.

Samel Varris.

The refugee war lord was dressed like the other aristocrats, a gaudy robe of puffed and slashed velvet, hung with ropes of jewels. Alak guessed correctly that a royal guardsman ranked very high indeed, possessing his own lands and retinue. Varris was a big dark man with arrogant features and shrewd eyes. Recognition kindled in him, and he strode forward and made an ironic bow.

"Ah, Sir Wing Alak," he said in Thunsban. "I had not awaited the honor of your calling on me yourself."

King Morlach huffed and laid a ringed hand on his sword. "I knew not you twain were acquainted."

Alak covered an empty feeling with his smoothest manner. "Yes, my lord, Varris and I have jousted erenow. Indeed, my mission hither concerns him."

"Came you to fetch him away?" It was a snarl, and the nobility of Wainabog reached for their daggers.

"I know not what he has told you, my lord—"

"He came hither because foemen had overwhelmed his own kingdom and sought his life. Noble gifts did he bring me, not least of them one of the flame-weapons your folk are so niggardly with, and he gave wise redes by which we hurled back the armies of Rachanstog and wrung tribute out of their ruler." Morlach glared from lowered brows. "Know then, Sir Wing Alak, that though you are my guest and I may not harm you, Sir Varris has taken oaths as my guardsman and served right loyally. For this I have given him gold and a broad fief. The honor of my house is sacred . . . if you demand he be returned to his foes, I must ask that you leave at once and when next we meet it shall be the worse for you!"

Alak pursed his lips to whistle, but thought better of it. Handing out a blaster—! It was unimportant in itself, the

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firearm would be useless once its charge was spent, but as a measure of Varris' contempt for Galactic law—

"My lord," he said hastily, "I cannot deny I had such a request. But it was never the intent of my king or myself to insult your majesty. The request will not be made of you."

"Let there be peace," said the high priest on Morlach's left. His tone was not as unctuous as the words: here was a fighter, in his own way, more intelligent and more dangerous than the brawling warriors around him. "In the name of the Allshaper, we are met in fellowship. Let not black thoughts give to the Evil an entering wedge."

Morlach swore.

"In truth, my lord, I bear this envoy no ill will," smiled Varris. "I vouch that he is knightly, and wishes but to serve his king as well as I seek to serve yourself. If my holy lord abott"—the title was nearly equivalent—"calls peace on this hall, then I for one will abide by it."

"Yes . . . a sniveling shavechin to whine peace when treachery rises," growled Morlach. "You have enough good lands which should be mine, Abbot Gulmanan—keep your greasy fingers off my soul, at least!"

"What my lord says to me is of no consequence," answered the cleric thinly. "But if he speaks against the Temple, he blasphemes the Allshaper."

"Hell freeze you, I'm a pious man!"—roared Morlach. "I make the sacrifices—for the Allshaper, though not for his fat-gutted Temple that would push me off my own throne!"

Gulmanan flushed purple, but checked himself a bit, narrow lips together and made a bridge of his bony fingers. "This is not the time or place to question where the ghostly and the worldly authorities have their proper bounds," he said. "I shall sacrifice for your soul, my lord, and pray you be led out of error."

Morlach snorted and called for a beaker of wine. Alak sat inconspicuously till the king's temper had abated. Then he began to speak of increased trade possibilities.

He had not the slightest power to make treaties, but he wanted to be sure he wasn't kicked out of Wainabog yet.

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Heavily dosed with anti-allergen, Alak was able to eat enough of the king's food to cement his status as guest. But Drogs brought him a case of iron rations when the Galmathian came to attend his "master" in the assigned palace apartment.

The human sat moodily by the window, looking out at the glorious night sky of clotted stars and two moons. There was a fragrant garden beneath him, under the bleak castle walls. Somewhere a drunken band of nobles was singing—he had left the feast early and it was still carousing on. A few candles lit the tapestried dankness of the room; they were perfumed, but not being a Ryfinnian he did not enjoy the odor of mercaptan.

"If we got several thousand husky Patrolmen," he said, "and put them in armor, and equipped them with clubs, we might slug our way in and out of this place. Right now I can't think of anything else."

"Well, why don't we?" Drogs hunched over a burbling water pipe, cheerfully immune to worry.

"It lacks finesse. Nor is it guaranteed—these Thunsbans are pretty hefty too, they might overpower our men. If we used tanks or something to make ourselves invincible, it'd be just our luck to have some gallant fathead of a knight get squashed under the treads. Finally, with the trouble at Sannanton going on, the Patrol can't spare so large a force—and by the time they can, it might well be too late. Those unprintable traders must have told half the League that Varris has been found. We can look for a rescue attempt from Caldon within a week."

"Hm-m-m . . . according to your account, the local church is at loggerheads with the king. Maybe it can be persuaded to do our work for us. Nothing in the Prime Directive forbids letting entities murder each other."

"No—I'm afraid the Temple priests are only allowed to fight in self-defense, and these people never break a law." Alak rubbed his chin. "You may have the germ of an idea there, though. "I'll have to—"

The gong outside the door was struck. Drogs humped across the floor and opened.

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Varris came in, at the head of half a dozen warriors. Their drawn blades gleamed against flickering shadow.

Alak's blaster snaked out. Varris grinned and lifted his hand. "Don't be so impetuous," he advised. "These boys are only precautionary. I just wanted to talk."

Alak took out a cigarette and puffed it into lighting. "Go on, then," he invited tonelessly.

"I'd like to point out a few things, that's all." Varris was speaking Terran; the guards waited stolidly, not understanding, their eyes restless. "I wanted to say I'm a patient man, but there's a limit to how much persecution I'll stand for."

"Persecution! Who ordered the massacres at New Venus?"

Fanaticism smoldered in Varris' eyes, but he answered quietly: "I was the legitimately chosen dictator. Under Caldonian law, I was within my rights. It was the Patrol which engineered the revolution. It's the Patrol which now maintains a hated colonialism over my planet."

"Yes—until such time as those hellhounds you call people have had a little sense beaten into them. If you hadn't been stopped, there'd be more than one totally dead world by now." Alak's smile was wintry. "You'll comprehend that for yourself, once we've normalized your psyche."

"You can't cleanly execute a man." Varris paced tiger-fashion. "You have to take and twist him till everything that was holy to him has become evil and everything he despised is good. I'll not let that happen to me."

"You're stuck here," said Alak. "I know your boat is almost out of fuel. Incidentally, in case you get ideas, mine is quite thoroughly boobytrapped. All I need do is holler for reinforcements. Why not surrender now and save me the trouble?"

Varris grinned. "Nice try, friend, but I'm not that stupid. If the Patrol could have sent more than you to arrest me, it would have done so. I'm staying here and gambling that a rescue party from Caldon will arrive before your ships get around to it. The odds are in my favor."

His finger stabbed out. "Look here! By choice, I'd have my men cut you down where you stand—you and that slimy

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little monster. I can't, because I have to live up to the local code of honor; they'd throw me out if I broke the least of their silly laws. But I can maintain a large enough body-guard to prevent you from kidnaping me, as you've doubtless thought of doing."

"I had given the matter some small consideration," nodded Alak.

"There's one other thing I can do, too. I can fight a duel with you. A duel to the death—they haven't any other kind."

"Well, I'm a pretty good shot."

"They won't allow modern weapons. The challenged party has the choice, but it's got to be swords or axes or bows or—something provided for in their law." Varris laughed. "I've spent a lot of time this past year, practicing with just such arms. And I went in for fencing at home. How much training have you had?"

Alak shrugged. Not being even faintly a romantic, he had never taken much interest in archaic sports.

"I'm good at thinking up nasty tricks," he said. "Suppose I chose to fight you with clubs, only I had a switchblade concealed in mine."

"I've seen that kind of thing pulled," said Varris calmly. "Poison is illegal, but gimmicks of the kind you mention are accepted. However, the weapons must be identical. You'd have to get me with your switchblade the first try—and I don't think you could—or I'd see what was going on and do the same. I assure you, the prospect doesn't frighten me at all.

"I'll give you a few days here to see how hopeless your problem is. If you turn your flitter's guns on the city, or on me . . . well, I have guns, too. If you aren't out of the kingdom in a week—or if you begin to act suspiciously before that time—I'll duel you."

"I'm a peaceable man," said Alak. "It takes two to make a duel."

"Not here, it doesn't. If I insult you before witnesses, and you don't challenge me, you lose knightly rank and are whipped out of the country. It's a long walk to the border,

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with a bull whip lashing you all the way. You wouldn't make it alive."

"All right," sighed Alak. "What do you want of me?"

"I want to be let alone."

"So do the people you were going to make war on last year."

"Good night." Varris turned and went out the door. His men followed him.

Alak stood for a while in silence. Beyond the walls, he could hear the night wind of Ryfin's Planet. Somehow, it was a foreign wind, it had another sound from the rushing air of Terra. Blowing through different trees, across an un-earthly land—

"Have you any plan at all?" murmured Drogs.

"I had one." Alak clasped nervous hands behind his back. "He doesn't *know* I won't bushwhack him, or summon a force of gunners, or something lethal like that. I was figuring on a bluff—but it seems he has called me. He wants to be sure of taking at least one Patrolman to hell with him."

"You could study the local *code duello*," suggested Drogs. "You could let him kill you in a way which looked like a technical foul. Then the king would boot him out and I could arrest him with the help of a stun beam."

"Thanks," said Alak. "Your devotion to duty is really touching."

"I remember a Terran proverb," said Drogs. Galmathian humor can be quite heavy at times. "The craven dies a thousand deaths, the hero dies but once."

"Yeh. But you see, I'm a craven from way back. I much prefer a thousand synthetic deaths to one genuine case. As far as I'm concerned, the live coward has it all over the dead hero—" Alak stopped. His jaw fell down and then snapped up again. He flopped into a chair and cocked his feet up on the windowsill and ran a hand through his ruddy hair.

Drogs returned to the water pipe and smoked imperturbably. He knew the signs. If the Patrol may not kill, it is allowed to do anything else—and sublimated murder can be most fascinatingly fiendish.

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In spite of his claims to ambassadorial rank, Alak found himself rating low—his only retinue was one ugly nonhumanoid. But that could be useful. With their faintly contemptuous indifference, the nobles of Wainabog didn't care where he was.

He went, the next afternoon, to Grimmoach Abbey.

An audience with Gulmanan was quickly granted. Alak crossed a paved courtyard, strolled by a temple where the hooded monks were holding an oddly impressive service, and entered a room in the great central tower. It was a large room, furnished with austere design but lavish materials, gold and silver and gems and brocades. One wall was covered by bookshelves, illuminated folios, many of them secular. The abbot sat stiffly on a carved throne of rare woods. Alak made the required prostration and was invited to sit down.

The old eyes were thoughtful, watching him. "What brought you here, my cub?"

"I am a stranger, holy one," said the human. "I understand little of your faith, and considered it shame that I did not know more."

"We have not yet brought any outworlder to the Way," said the abbot gravely. "Except, of course, Sir Varris, and I am afraid his devotions smack more of expediency than conviction."

"Let me at least hear what you believe," asked the Patrolman with all the earnestness he could summon in daylight.

Gulmanan smiled, creasing his gaunt blue face. "I have a suspicion that you are not merely seeking the Way," he replied. "Belike there is some more temporal question in your mind."

"Well—" They exchanged grins. You couldn't run a corporation as big as this abbey without considerable hard-headedness.

Nevertheless, Alak persisted in his queries. It took an hour to learn what he wanted to know.

Thunsba was monotheistic. The theology was subtle and complex, the ritual emotionally satisfying, the commandments flexible enough to accommodate ordinary fleshly weak-

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nesses. Nobody doubted the essential truth of the religion; but its Temple was another matter.

As in medieval Europe, the church was a powerful organization, international, the guardian of learning and the gradual civilizer of a barbarous race. It had no secular clergy—every priest was a monk of some degree, inhabiting a large or small monastery. Each of these was ruled by one officer—Gulmanan in this case—responsible to the central Council in Augnachar city; but distances being great and communications slow, this supreme authority was mostly background.

The clergy were celibate and utterly divorced from the civil regime, with their own laws and courts and punishments. Each detail of their lives, down to dress and diet, was minutely prescribed by an unbreakable code—there were no special dispensations. Entering the church, if you were approved, was only a matter of taking vows; getting out was not so easy, requiring a Council decree. A monk owned nothing; any property he might have had before entering reverted to his heirs, any marriage he might have made was automatically annulled. Even Gulmanan could not call the clothes he wore or the lands he ruled his own: it all belonged to the corporation, the abbey. And the abbey was rich; for centuries, titled Thunsbans had given it land or money.

Naturally, there was conflict between church and king. Both sought power, both claimed overlapping prerogatives, both insisted that theirs was the final authority. Some kings had had abbots murdered or imprisoned, some had gone weakly to Canossa. Morlach was in-between, snarling at the Temple but not quite daring to lay violent hands on it.

“ . . . I see.” Alak bowed his head. “Thank you, holy one.”

“I trust your questions are all answered?” The voice was dry.

“Well, now . . . there are some matters of business—” Alak sat for a moment, weighing the other. Gulmanan seemed thoroughly honest; a direct bribe would only be an insult. But honesty is more malleable than one might think—

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"Yes? Speak without fear, my cub. No words of yours shall pass these walls."

Alak plunged into it: "As you know, my task is to remove Sir Varris to his own realm for punishment of many evil deeds."

"He has claimed his cause was righteous," said Gulmanan noncommittally.

"And so he believes. But in the name of that cause, he was prepared to slay more folk than dwell on this entire world."

"I wondered about that—"

Alak drew a long breath and then spoke fast. "The Temple is eternal, is it not? Of course. Then it must look centuries ahead. It must not let one man, whose merits are doubtful at best, stand in the way of an advancement which could mean saving thousands of souls."

"I am old," said Gulmanan in a parched tone. "My life has not been as cloistered as I might have wished. If you are proposing that you and I could work together to mutual advantage, say so."

Alak made a sketchy explanation. "And the lands would be yours," he finished.

"Also the trouble, my cub," said the abbot. "We already have enough clashes with King Morlach."

"This would not be a serious one. The law would be on our side."

"Nevertheless, the honor of the Temple may not be compromised."

"In plain words, you want more than I've offered."

"Yes," said Gulmanan bluntly.

Alak waited. Sweat studded his body. What could he do if an impossible demand was made?

The seamed blue face grew wistful. "Your race knows much," said the abbot. "Our peasants wear out their lives, struggling against a miserly soil and seasonal insect hordes. Are there ways to better their lot?"

"Is that all? Certainly there are. Helping folk progress when they wish to is one of our chief policies. My . . . my

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king would be only too glad to lend you some technicians—farmwrights?—and show you how.”

“Also . . . it is pure greed on my part. But sometimes at night, looking up at the stars, trying to understand what the traders have said—that this broad fair world of ours is but a mote spinning through vastness beyond comprehension—it has been an anguish in me that I do not know how that is.” Now it was Gulmanan who leaned forward and shivered. “Would it be possible to . . . to translate a few of your books on this science astronomic into Thunsban?”

Alak regarded himself as a case-hardened cynic. In the line of duty, he had often and cheerfully broken the most solemn oaths with an audible snap. But this was one promise he meant to keep though the sky fell down.

On the way back, he stopped at his flitter, where Drogs was hiding from a gape-mouthed citizenry, and put the Galmathian to work in the machine shop.

A human simply could not eat very much of this planet's food; he would die in agony. Varris had taken care to have a food-synthesizer aboard his boat, and ate well that night of special dishes. He did not invite Alak to join him, and the Patrolman munched gloomily on what his service imagined to be an adequate, nutritious diet.

After supper, the nobles repaired to a central hall, with a fireplace at either end waging hopeless war on the evening chill, for serious drinking. Alak, ignored by most, sauntered through the crowd till he got to Varris. The fugitive was conversing with several barons; from his throne, King Morlach listened interestedly. Varris was increasing his prestige by explaining some principles of games theory which ought to guarantee success in the next war.

“ . . . And thus, my gentles, it is not that one must seek a certain victory, for there is no certainty in battle, but must so distribute his forces as to have the greatest *likelihood* of winning—”

“Hogwash!” snapped Alak. The Thunsban phrase he used was more pungent.

Varris raised his brows. “Said you something?” he asked.

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"I did." Alak slouched forward, wearing his most insolent expression. "I said it is nonsense you speak."

"You disagree, then, sir?" inquired a native.

"Not exactly," said the Patrolman. "It is not worth disagreeing with so lunkheaded a swine as this baseborn Varris."

His prey remained impassive. There was no tone in the voice: "I trust you will retract your statement, sir."

"Yes, perhaps I should," agreed Alak. "It was too mild. Actually, of course, as is obvious from a single glance at his bloated face, Sir Varris is a muckeating sack of lip-wagging flatulence whose habits I will not even try to describe since they would make a barnyard blush."

Silence hit the hall. The flames roared up the chimneys. King Morlach scowled and breathed heavily, but could not legally interfere. His warriors dropped hands to their knives.

"What's your purpose?" muttered Varris in Terran.

"Naturally," said Alak in Thunsban, "if Sir Varris does not dispute my assertions, there is no argument."

The Caldonian sighed. "I will dispute them on your body tomorrow morning," he answered.

Alak's foxy face broke into a delighted grin. "Do I understand that I am being challenged?" he asked.

"You do, sir. I invite you to a duel."

"Very well." Alak looked around. Every eye in the place was welded to him. "My lords, you bear witness that I have been summoned to fight Sir Varris. If I mistake me not, the choice of weapons and ground is mine."

"Within the laws of single combat," rumbled Morlach venomously. "None of your outworld sorceries."

"Indeed not." Alak bowed. "I choose to fight with my own swords, which are lighter than your claymores but, I assure you, quite deadly if one does not wear armor. Sir Varris may, of course, have first choice of the pair. The duel will take place just outside the main gate of Grimmoch Abbey."

There was nothing unusual about that. A badly wounded contestant could be taken into the monks, who were also the local surgeons. In such a case, he was allowed to recover after which a return engagement was fought. In the simple and logical belief that enmities should not be permitted to

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fester, the Thunsban law said that no duel was officially over till one party had been killed. It was the use of light swords that caused interest.

"Very good," said Varris in a frosty voice. He was taking it well; only Alak could guess what worries—*what trap is being set?*—lay behind those eyes. "At dawn tomorrow, then."

"Absolutely not," said Alak firmly. He never got up before noon if he could help it. "Am I to lose my good sleep on account of you? We will meet at the time of Third Sacrifice." He bowed grandly. "Good night, my lord and gentles."

Back in his apartment, he went through the window and, with the help of his small antigrav unit, over the wall and out to his boat. Varris might try to assassinate him as he slept.

Or would the Caldonian simply rely on being a better swordsman? Alak knew that was the case. This might be his last night alive.

A midafternoon sun threw long streamers of light across blue turf and the walls of Grimmoch Abbey. There was a hundred-meter square cleared before the gate; beyond that, a crowd of lords and ladies stood talking, drinking, and betting on the outcome. King Morlach watched ominously from a portable throne—he would not thank the man who did away with the useful Sir Varris. Just inside the gateway, Abbot Gulmanan and a dozen monks waited like stone saints.

Trumpets blew, and Alak and Varris stepped forth. Both wore light shirts and trousers, nothing else. An official frisked them ceremoniously for concealed weapons and armor. The noble appointed Master of Death trod out and recited the code. Then he took a cushion on which the rapiers were laid, tested each, and extended them to Varris.

The outlaw smiled humorlessly and selected one. Alak got the other. The Master of Death directed them to opposite corners of the field.

Alak's blade felt light and supple in his fingers. His vision and hearing were unnaturally clear, it was as if every grass blade stood out sharp before him. Perhaps his brain was

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storing data while it still could. Varris, one hundred forty meters off, loomed like a giant.

"And now, let the Allshaper defend the right!"

Another trumpet flourish. The duel was on.

Varris walked out, not hurrying. Alak went to meet him. They crossed blades and stood for a moment, eyes thrusting at eyes.

"Why are you doing this?" asked the refugee in Terran. "If you have some idiotic hope of killing me, you might as well forget it. I was a fencing champion at home."

"These shivs are gimmicked," said Alak with a rather forced grin. "I'll let you figure out how."

"I suppose you know the penalty for using poison is burning at the stake—" For a moment, there was a querulous whine in the voice. "Why can't you leave me alone? What business was it ever of yours?"

"Keeping the peace is my business," said Alak. "That's what I get paid for, anyhow."

Varris snarled. His blade whipped out. Alak parried just in time. There was a thin steel ringing in the air.

Varris danced gracefully, aggressively, a cold intent on his face. Alak made wild slashes, handling his rapier like a broadsword. Contempt crossed Varris' mouth. He parried a blow, riposted, and Alak felt pain sting his shoulder. The crowd whooped.

Just one cut! Just one cut before he gets me through the heart! Alak felt his chest grow warm and wet. A flesh wound, no more. He remembered that he'd forgotten to thumb the concealed button in his hilt, and did so with a curse.

Varris' weapon was a blur before his eyes. He felt another light stab. Varris was playing with him! Coldly, he retreated, to the jeers of the audience, while he rallied his wits.

The thing to do . . . what the devil did you call it, riposte, slash, *en avant*? Varris came close as Alak halted. The Patrolman thrust for his left arm. Varris blocked that one. Somehow, Alak slewed his blade around and pinked the outlaw in the chest.

Now—God help me, I have to survive the next few seconds! The enemy steel lunged for his throat. He slapped

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it down, clumsily, in bare time. His thigh was furrowed. Varris sprang back to get room. Alak did the same.

Watching, he saw the Caldonian's eyes begin helplessly rolling. The rapier wavered. Alak, deciding he had to make this look good, ran up and skewered Varris in the biceps—a harmless cut, but it bled with satisfactory enthusiasm. Varris dropped his sword and tottered. Alak got out of the way just as the big body fell.

The nobles were screaming. King Morlach roared. The Master of Death rushed out to shove Alak aside. "It is not lawful to smite a fallen man," he said.

"I . . . assure you . . . no such intention—" Alak sat down and let the planet revolve around him.

Abbot Gulmanan and the monks stooped over Varris, examining with skilled fingers. Presently the old priest looked up and said in a low voice that somehow cut through the noise: "He is not badly hurt. He should be quite well tomorrow. Perhaps he simply fainted."

"At a few scratches like that?" bawled Morlach. "Master, check that red-haired infidel's blade! I suspect poison!"

Alak pressed the retracting button and handed over his sword. While it was being inspected, Varris was borne inside the abbey and its gate closed on him. The Master of Death looked at both weapons, bowed to the king, and said puzzledly:

"There is no sign of poison, my lord. And after all, Sir Varris had first choice of glaives . . . and these two are identical, as far as I can see . . . and did not the holy one say he is not really injured?"

Alak swayed erect. "Jussa better man, tha's all," he mumbled. "I won fair an' square. Lemme go get m' hurts dressed— I'll see y' all in the morning—"

He made it to his boat, and Drogs had a bottle of Scotch ready.

It took will power to be at the palace when the court convened—not that Alak was especially weakened, but the Thunsbans started their day at a hideous hour. In this case,

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early rising was necessary, because he didn't know when the climax of his plot would be on him.

He got a mixed welcome, on the one hand respect for having overcome the great Sir Varris—at least in the first round—on the other hand, a certain doubt as to whether he had done it fairly. King Morlach gave him a surly greeting, but not openly hostile; he must be waiting for the doctors' verdict.

Alak found a congenial earl and spent his time swapping dirty jokes. It is always astonishing how many of the classics are to be found among all mammalian species. This is less an argument for the prehistoric Galactic Empire than for the parallelism of great minds.

Shortly before noon, Abbot Gulmanan entered. Several hooded monks followed him, bearing weapons—most unusual—and surrounding one who was unarmed. The priest lifted his hand to the king, and the room grew very quiet.

"Well," snapped Morlach, "what brings you hither?"

"I thought it best to report personally on the outcome of the duel, my lord," said Gulmanan. "It was . . . surprising."

"Mean you Sir Varris is dead?" Morlach's eyes flared. He could not fight his own guest, but it would be easy enough to have one of his guardsmen insult Wing Alak.

"No, my lord. He is in good health, his wounds are negligible. But—somehow the grace of the Allshaper fell on him." The abbot made a pious gesture; as he saw Alak, one eyelid dropped.

"What mean you?" Morlach dithered and clutched his sword.

"Only this. As he regained consciousness, I offered him ghostly counsel, as I always do to hurt men. I spoke of the virtues of the Temple, of sancity, of the dedicated life. Half in jest, I mentioned the possibility that he might wish to renounce this evil world and enter the Temple as a brother. My lord, you can imagine my astonishment when he agreed . . . nay, he insisted on deeding all his lands and treasure to the abbey and taking the vows at once." Gulmanan rolled his eyes heavenward. "Indeed, a miracle!"

"What?" It was a shriek from the king.

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The monk who was under guard suddenly tore off his hood. Varris' face glared out. "Help!" he croaked. "Help, my lord! I've been betrayed—"

"There are a dozen brothers who witnessed your acts and will swear to them by the mightiest oaths," said the abbot sternly. "Be still, Brother Varris. If the Evil has reentered your soul, I shall have to set you heavy penances."

"Witchcraft!" It whispered terribly down the long hall.

"All men know that witchcraft has no power inside the walls of a sacred abbey," warned Gulmanan. "Speak no heresies."

Varris looked wildly about at the spears and axes that ringed him in. "I was drugged, my lord," he gasped. "I remember what I did, yes, but I had no will of my own—I followed this old devil's words—" He saw Alak and snarled. "*Hypnite!*"

The Patrolman stepped forth and bowed to the king. "Your majesty," he said, "Sir Varris-that-was had first choice of blades. But if you wish to inspect them again, I have them here."

It had been easy enough, after all: two swords with retractible hypodermic needles, only they wouldn't do you any good unless you knew of them and knew where to press. The flitter's machine shop could turn one out in a couple of hours.

Alak handed them to the king from beneath his cloak. Morlach stared at the metal, called for a pair of gauntlets, and broke the blades in his hands. The mechanism lay blatant before him.

"Do you see?" cried Varris. "Do you see the poisoned darts? Burn that rogue alive!"

Morlach smiled grimly. "It shall be done," he said.

Alak grinned, and inwardly his muscles tightened. This was the tricky point. If he couldn't carry it off, it meant a pretty agonizing death. "My Lord," he answered, "that were unjust. The weapons are identical, and Sir Varris-that-was had first choice. It is permitted to use concealed extra parts, and not to warn of them."

"Poison—" began Morlach.

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"But this was not poison. Does not Varris stand hale before you all?"

"Yes—" Morlach scratched his head. "But when the next engagement is fought, I shall provide the swords."

"A monk," said Gulmanan, "may not have private quarrels. This novice is to be returned to his cell for fasting and prayer."

"A monk may be released from his vows under certain conditions," argued Morlach. "I shall see to it that he is."

"Now hold!" shouted Wing Alak in his best Shakespearian manner. "My lord, I have won the duel. It were unlawful to speak of renewing it—for who can fight a dead man?"

"Won it?" Varris wrestled with the sturdy monks gripping his arms. "Here I stand, alive, ready to take you on again any minute—"

"My lord king," said Alak, "I crave leave to state my case." The royal brow knotted, but: "Do so," clipped Morlach.

"Very well." Alak cleared his throat. "First, then, I fought lawfully. Granted, there was a needle in each sword of which Sir Varris had not been warned, but that is allowable under the code. It might be said that I poisoned him, but that is a canard, for as you all see he stands here unharmed. The drug I used has only a temporary effect and thus is not, by definition, a poison. Therefore, it was a lawful and just combat."

Morlach nodded reluctantly. "But not a completed battle," he said.

"Oh, it was, my lord. What is the proper termination of a duel? Is it not that one party die as the direct result of the other's craft and skill?"

"Yes . . . of course—"

"Then I say that Varris, though not poisoned, died as an immediate consequence of my wounding him. *He is now dead!* For mark you, he has taken vows as a monk—he did this because of the drug I administered. Those oaths may not be wholly irrevocable, but they are binding on him until such time as the Council releases him from them. And . . . a monk owns no property. His wordly goods revert to his

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heirs. His wife becomes a widow. He is beyond all civil jurisdiction. He is, in short, *legally dead!*"

"But I stand here!" shouted Varris.

"The law is sacred," declared Alak blandly. "I insist that the law be obeyed. And by every legal definition, you are dead. You are no longer Sir Varris of Wainabog, but Brother Varris of Grimmoach—a quite different person. If this fact be not admitted, then the whole structure of Thunsban society must topple, for it rests on the total separation of civil and ecclesiastical law." Alak made a flourishing bow. "Accordingly, my lord, I am the winner of the duel."

Morlach sat for a long while. His mind must be writhing in his skull, hunting for a way out of the impasse, but there was none.

"I concede it," he said at last, thickly. "Sir Wing Alak, you are the victor. You are also my guest, and I may not harm you . . . but you have till sunset to be gone from Thunsba forever." His gaze shifted to Varris. "Be not afraid. I shall send to the Council and have you absolved of your vows."

"That you may do, lord," said Gulmanan. "Of course, until that decree is passed, Brother Varris must remain a monk, living as all monks do. The law does not allow of exceptions."

"True," grumbled the king. "A few weeks only . . . be patient."

"Monks," said Gulmanan, "are not permitted to pamper themselves with special food. You shall eat the good bread of Thunsba, Brother Varris, and meditate on—"

"I'll die!" gasped the outlaw.

"Quite probably you will depart ere long for a better world," smiled the abbot. "But I may not set the law aside—To be sure, I *could* send you on a special errand, if you are willing to go. An errand to the king of the Galactics, from whom I have requested certain books. Sir Wing Alak will gladly transport you."

Morlach sat unstirring. Nobody dared move in all the court. Then something slumped in Varris. Mutely, he nodded. The armed brethren escorted him out toward the spacefield.

Wing Alak bade the king polite thanks for hospitality and followed them. Otherwise he spoke no word until his

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prisoner was safely fettered and his boat safely space-borne, with Drogs at the control panel and himself puffing on a good cigar.

Then: "Cheer up, old fellow," he urged. "It won't be so bad. You'll feel a lot better once our psychiatrists have rubbed out those kill-compulsions."

Varris gave him a bloodshot glare. "I suppose you think you're a great hero," he said.

"Lord deliver me, no!" Alak opened a cupboard and took forth the bottle of Scotch. "I'm quite willing to let you have that title. It was your big mistake, you realize. A hero should never tangle with an intelligent coward."

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