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JOHN BRUNNER A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

One man to a world
—or was one man too many?



Complete Novel

WORLDHOLD: ZYGRA

Kynance Foy was young, beautiful, intelligent and highly trained in both qua-space physics and business law when she left Earth to seek her fortune in the interstellar outworlds. But she found that the further she got from Earth, the tougher became the competition from the environment-hardened populations of these young worlds . . . and by the time she reached the planet Nefertiti, she was facing poverty.

Then, unexpectedly, a wonderful opportunity opened up for her: the job of Planetary Supervisor of the fabulously wealthy world called Zygra, where exotic pelts costing a million credits each were grown. The salary was huge, and at the end of the year's tour of duty she would be transported free of charge back to Earth, where she would be a very wealthy young woman.

There had to be a catch to it, she thought as she signed the contract. And, of course, there was.

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A Planet of Your Own

by

JOHN BRUNNER

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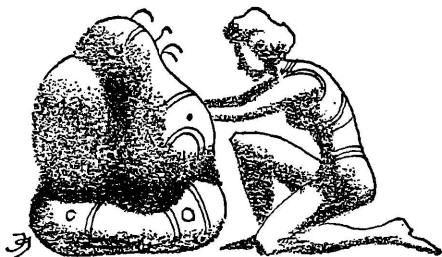
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THE BEASTS OF KOHL

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I

THERE WAS one item on display in the enormous window: a zygra pelt. Kynance Foy stood and looked at it. There were a lot of other women doing the same thing.

But she was the only one who was gritting her teeth.

It wasn't the first time in her life she'd been the odd one out, so that figured. For example—and the most glaring example—she hadn't *had* to leave Earth, which marked her off immediately even on a comparatively highly populated out-world like Nefertiti. The massive “encouraged emigration” of the Dictatrix period had lowered the premium on wanderlust at home; it was a full generation since Nefertiti had declared itself independent and set quotas for Earthside immigrants, and then found them superfluous because the demand wasn't there.

For the umpteenth time Kynance read the discreet hand-lettered price tag attached to one corner of the stand on which the zygra pelt was draped. It read: *One million credits*. No other price had ever been asked for the pelts.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

Okay, Kynance told herself sourly. *I was naïve . . .*

She had never confessed it even to her closest friends, but one of the things she had planned to bring back when she returned to astonish those who had mocked was—a zygra pelt. She had pictured herself emerging from the exit of the starship wearing it: not elegantly, but casually, tossed around her, her body molded by it into insurpassable perfection, yet her pose implying that she had had it so long she was becoming faintly bored with the attention she attracted.

And at this moment she did not even possess the price of a square meal.

Other plans, other ambitions, had been shed one by one as she had doggedly worked her way towards Nefertiti, reasoning that the closer one came to the source the cheaper the pelts might become. Not so; only the cost of interstellar freight shrank, while the asking price remained steady at one million.

She stood watching the pelt's shifts of sheen and texture, wondering what exotic perfumes it had been trained to secrete—what, for instance, matched that liquid rainbow phase when the pelt seemed to run in endless streams of pure color?—and cursing her own stupidity.

Yet . . .

Could I have known better?

Oh, maybe. Her brash confidence, though, hadn't lacked evidence to support it. She had been fresh out of college with a brilliant record; she had deliberately changed her major to qua-space physics and her minor to interstellar commerce when she had made up her mind, but before that she had been well grounded in the unfeminine combination of business law and practical engineering—the latter by accident, merely to get even with a sneering boyfriend who had once offered to fix her skycar.

This, moreover, was not her only equipment. She was exactly five and a half feet tall; she was exotically gorgeous, having inherited dark eyes and sinuous grace from a Dutch ancestor who had fallen from grace in Java in the company of a temple dancer, and hair of a curious iron-gray shade traceable only to a colony of Cornish tin-miners totaling some five

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

hundred persons in a multi-billion galactic population, against which her tanned skin burned like new copper.

There had been no risk—so she had argued—of her ever being stranded. If the worst came to the worst, and neither qua-space physics nor her encyclopedic knowledge of interstellar commerce could secure her employment, she could always . . .

Well, she had never phrased the idea clearly to herself, but it had involved some romantically handsome young starship officer willing to hazard his career for the sake of her company on a trip to some more promising planet, a crotchety captain won over by her dazzling personality, and delivery with unsolicited testimonials to an entrepreneur in need of a private secretary when they arrived.

She had begun to suspect she had made the wrong decision on the first stop out from Earth, when she had still had the cash to go home. What she had overlooked was that during the miserable régime of the Dictatrix incredible numbers of non-pioneer types had been—in the official terminology of the day—"encouraged" to emigrate, chief among them intractable intellectuals doubtful of the universal benefits Her Magnificence had supposedly been bestowing. Consequently the outworlds had been colonized, forcibly, by a swarm of brilliant and *very* angry men and women. Having nothing left but the desire to get even, they had buckled down and made the best of what they had. Not for this breed of colonist was the broad axe or the draft-ox or the log-cabin; they were used to lasers, vidding and mutable furniture, they knew the necessary techniques, and with the determination of fanatics they had set out not merely to provide such luxuries for themselves but to ensure that if the same fate overtook their children or their children's children the youngsters would be able to repeat the process.

Which was not to imply that there were absolutely no openings on such old-settled worlds as Ge and New Medina for moderately talented young women; had this been the case she would have turned around despite the scorn she would have faced from her friends on retreating to Earth. Instead,

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

she found temporary work; saved up; moved on, convincing herself that things would be different further out.

They were. By her third or fourth stopover, she had been encountering sea-harvesters supervised by ten-year-olds, each responsible for two thousand tons of protein-rich food a week and a mainstay of the planetary economy, and reading bulletin boards at spaceports bearing blanket warnings—to save the labor of writing the words on every single advertisement—that no one lacking a Scholar degree in the relevant subjects need bother to apply.

And even her asset of last resort, her appearance, had failed her. What she hadn't reckoned with—or had omitted to find out—was that once they had been clear of Earth, and the traditional association of appearance with regional origins, the emigrants whether forced or voluntary had become satisfied to be human beings rather than Europeans or Africans or Asians. By the time a couple of generations had slipped away, the mixing of the gene-pool had already been producing types which made the concept "exotic" seem irrelevant: Swedish and Quechua, Chukchi and Matabele, the wildest extremes of physique met in a mad succession of paradoxes. Then, released from Earthside attachment to local types, the more prosperous girls had started to experiment, drawing on some of the finest talents in biology and surgery. Within ten yards of where Kynance was standing, there were: a Negress with silver hair and blood-red irises, a miniaturized Celtic redhead no higher than her elbow and very nicely stacked, and a shimmering golden girl with slanted eyes and the quiet hypnotic movements of a trained geisha. Any of the three would have monopolized a roomful of sophisticated Earthmen.

On Druid, somebody had asked Kynance to marry him. On Quetzal someone else had asked her to act as hostess for him and be his acknowledged mistress. On Loki a third man had suggested, in a rather bored manner, that she become his son's mistress, the son being aged sixteen and due to submit his scholar's thesis in cybernetics.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

And on Nefertiti she would have been grateful for even that much attention.

Confronted with the symbol of her empty ambitions, she admitted the truth to herself at last. She was *scared*.

Well, gawking at the zygra pelt wasn't solving the problem of hunger. She started to move away.

At that moment, a soft voice emanated from the air. It came over a biaxial interference speaker, so for practical purposes the statement was exact. She stopped dead.

"The Zygra Company draws your attention to a vacancy occurring shortly in its staff. Limited service contract, generous remuneration, comfortable working conditions, previous experience not necessary, standard repatriation clause. Apply at this office, inquiring for Executive Shuster."

The message was repeated twice. Kynance stood in a daze, waiting for the rush to begin. There was no rush. The only reaction was the sound of an occasional sarcastic laugh as people who had been gazing at the pelt were disturbed and decided to wander on.

No. Ridiculous. Impossible. She must have dreamed it. Not enough food and too much worry had conspired to make her mind play a trick.

Nonetheless she was on her way to the entrance of the Zygra Building. She hadn't made a conscious decision—she was following a tropism as automatic as that of a thirsty man spotting an oasis across the desert. She did wonder why one or two people she jostled looked pityingly at her eagerness, but that was afterwards.

II

EXECUTIVE SHUSTER was a vain man of early middle age. It was obvious he was vain—his expensive clothes were meant to look expensive, his fastidiously arranged office was a frame for him, and his manner as he looked her over implied that he hoped she would instantly fall on her knees.

Kynance did nothing of the sort. Right now she had room in her head for precisely one thought, and she uttered it.

"You're offering a job. What is it?"

Shuster looked her over a second time, shrugged, and put on a practiced artificial smile. "I must say that it's seldom I have the pleasure of interviewing such an attractive candidate for one of our posts—"

"What's the job?"

Shuster blinked. He retreated to Position Two: superior knowledgeability. "I can tell by your accent you're not Nefertitian—oh, do sit down, won't you? And would you care for a drink?"

Kynance stayed put. Not that she cared what the job was—she'd have accepted the chance to be junior dish washer on an interstellar tramp providing the contract carried the standard repatriation clause. That was the bait which had brought her into this room—not the prospect of getting on the inside of the Zygra Company itself. She would have traded every pelt in the galaxy for a berth on a ship bound for home.

The repatriation clause was one of the few attempts made by Earth's current government to impose a decree on the unruly outworlds, and the only attempt to have succeeded. Following the Dictatrix period, everyone in the galaxy was shy of absolute decrees. But there was enough mobility among the outworlds themselves to generate support for the concept of compulsory repatriation, so even the greediest entrepreneurs had had to succumb and write in the clause.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

It stated simply that if the place of work was on another planet than the world where the laborer was engaged, compliance with the conditions of employment entitled the employee to repatriation at the expense of the company . . . whether or not the planet of origin was the one where the worker had been hired.

Prior to this, some of the less scrupulous companies had forcibly colonized profitable outworlds by methods even less polite than the Dictatrix's: luring workers into their net with temptingly high salaries, then, abandoning them light-years from any place where they could spend their earnings.

To Kynance, this was salvation—if she got the job.

"I would not care for a drink," she said. "All I want is a plain answer."

Shuster retreated to Position Umpteen, sighed, and gestured at his desketary. "The contract is a very long and detailed one," he murmured with a last attempt at regaining lost ground. "I do think you should sit down while we discuss it."

With the mobile bulk of the desketary to help him, he outnumbered Kynance. She was forced to accept a seat on a two-thin-person lounge along the window wall, where Shuster joined her. He then maneuvered the desketary so that she couldn't run away across the room, and rubbed his shoulder against hers.

When he gets to the knee-mauling stage, Kynance promised herself, *I'll—I'll think about it.*

She was that desperate, and hadn't realized it before.

"The post," Shuster was saying urbanely, "isn't such a demanding one really. It's a shame, in fact, that so lovely a girl—"

"Executive, unless you're stupid you've already figured out what interests me about the job," Kynance snapped.

"The repatriation clause? Oh, it's there, in full." Shuster smiled and moved a little closer. "Though strictly in confidence—"

"If you don't give girls straight answers," Kynance purred with malice, "don't you expect them to misunderstand you?"

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

The trap worked fine. Shuster diminished the pressure of his shoulder against hers by at least ten per cent and spoke in a voice as mechanical as a desketary's.

"Supervisor of Zygra for a term of one year at a salary of a hundred thousand credits."

Supervisor of Zygra—?

There was a long silence. At last Kynance said in a thin voice, "You can't possibly mean the *planet* Zygra? You must mean a farm, or a plantation, or—or something!"

Shuster curled his lips into a pleased grin. "Of course, coming as you do from Ge, you wouldn't know much about zygra pelt production, would you? So—"

"Your announcement said no experience was necessary. And I'm from Earth, not Ge."

She bit her tongue, fractionally too late, seeing in imagination her chance of the post vanishing into vacuum. With repatriation involved, logically the Zygra Company would prefer to hire someone from Nefertiti, where it had its registered headquarters, or from some nearer world than Earth at least—some world convenient for its own ships. For the sake of a gibe at this horrible stranger she had sacrificed . . .

But what was he saying?

Unperturbed, Shuster was continuing in the same tone. "But you must have spent some time on Ge, at least? I could have sworn I detected it in your accent. Well, let's set the record straight, shall we? Central Computing, please," he added to the desketary. "Category application for employment, subcategory supervisor of Zygra, candidate Foy, Kynance, new reference number."

He sat back, contriving to restore the pressure on her. "By the way, I did mean supervisor of the *planet* Zygra," he concluded, and enjoyed the impact of the words.

That definitely settled the matter, Kynance decided bitterly. For the task of supervising the unique, jealously guarded home of the pelts, they would never pick—

Hang on, though! Why was the job described in these terms anyway? The demand for pelts implied a massive installation at the point of origin—a staff of hundreds, more

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

likely thousands—breeding, training, a million-and-one subsidiary tasks

She frowned and rubbed her forehead in a frantic attempt to remember what little she had ever known about the production of Zygra pelts. Something about the planet being unfit for colonization . . . ?

“How *are* the things raised?” she asked, surrendering.

“Hmmm? Oh!” Shuster leaned confidentially close. “The term ‘pelt’ is a misnomer, and it’s no breach of company secrecy to say so nowadays, although when they were first being imported to civilized worlds the admission would have been an automatic breach of an employee’s contract, since it was thought advisable to mislead purchasers and possible rivals by making them think it was the skin of an animal. Actually, the pelts are entire lifeforms in themselves, and insofar as they’re related to anything we know they’re a kind of moss. So I suppose ‘plantation’ is as good a term as any for the place where they grow!” He laughed and jabbed her in the ribs.

“—Though it’s impossible to grow anything else there, I tell you frankly. Zygra is a sort of . . . how how shall I describe it?”

“You’ve been there yourself?” Kynance suggested, trying to wriggle away and finding her progress firmly blocked by the end of the narrow lounge.

“Naturally I’ve been there,” Shuster said loftily. “In actual fact, the supervisor of Zygra is responsible to me, so one of the duties which I undertake is ensuring that the terms of the contract are strictly adhered to. Of course this involves direct inspection and . . .”

He ran on at some length, to make sure she didn’t miss the point. In essence, he was saying: *It pays to be nice to me.*

“You were telling me about Zygra,” she murmured finally.

“Oh yes! A sort of vegetable stew is as near as one can come to describing it, I think. Marshland, a few patches of open water, much smaller than oceans on planets which have satellites, and—plants. I believe the parasitism extends to the fourteenth degree; in other words, there are some highly-

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

evolved forms, including the pelts, which can't absorb nutrient until it's been processed by an ecological chain fourteen units long. They remain plants rather than animals, you understand."

Dim facts were beginning to seep up from Kynance's memory—not dim merely because she had never studied the subject seriously, but also because as a matter of policy the Zygra Company shrouded its operations in mystery. Not even the Dictatrix had dared to monkey with so powerful and wealthy an organization.

Come to think of it, it was a wonder that they'd agreed to repatriation clauses. They, and they alone, might have managed to stand up against the general trend.

A little faintly, she said, "Look, I'm sorry if I'm being silly, but the impression I get is that this job involves being the only person on Zygra."

"That is correct." He eyed her calculatingly. "So if you wish to reconsider the application I'll find it perfectly understandable. To be alone on a strange planet is bad enough when there are millions of people there already, as I'm sure you've found out. So why don't I take you around a bit and introduce you to some of my friends, get you over the worst of it? Believe me, I know how difficult it is to—"

"Repatriation clause," Kynance muttered between clenched teeth, too faintly for Shuster to hear her. He was edging even closer now, a feat she would have thought impossible. Aloud and with a flashing smile, she said, "Then how is the—the plantation run?"

"Automated," Shuster sighed. "The most complete and elaborate system of automation, and I may add the most thoroughly defended against interference, in the entire galaxy. The supervisor's post pretty much of a sinecure."

She turned it over in her mind. *A sinecure for which the all-powerful Zygra Company pays this vast salary? There must be a catch, but I'm damned if I can see what— Oh, this matter of being the only person on the planet!*

"Let me get this completely right," she said. "The supervisor is alone on the planet?"

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

"The supervisor of Zygra," Shuster said patiently, "is the only employee of the Zygra Company whose place of employment is on Zygra itself."

"Claim-jumping," Kynance said.

"What?"

"Claim-jumping. Automated equipment in operation doesn't constitute possession of an astral body: Government and People of the United States versus Government and People of the Soviet Union, International Court of Justice, 1971. You have to maintain at least the fiction of human habitation, or anybody else could step in and occupy Zygra."

Shuster, she was delighted to see, blanched. He said, "You—you've studied law?"

"Of course."

"Well, then . . ." Shuster rubbed his chin and withdrew a few millimeters.

You look as if you've forgotten something, buster. And you have: you should have exploited this perfect opportunity to find out all about me.

Absolutely correct. Shuster's next step was to reach for the controls of the desketary.

"There is the slight additional point to consider, isn't there?" he muttered. "I mean, not only whether the job suits you, but whether you suit the job. Uh—Central Computing!"

"Waiting," said the desketary rather sullenly.

"Applicant Foy, Kynance. Personal and career details follow."

"I am twenty-five years old," Kynance began clearly, and went ahead from there, visualizing a standard application form in her mind's eye. Halfway through her college courses the idea struck her that Shuster was getting nervous; she went on with as much detail as she could muster, hoping she was on the right track, and found she was when the desketary finally started to ring an interruption bell.

"Further information superfluous," the mechanical voice grunted.

"Shut up!" Shuster rapped, but the machine finished what it had to say anyhow.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

"Applicant's qualifications greatly in excess of stipulated minimum!"

There must be a catch in it. Must be, must be! Maybe it's in the contract itself.

It was Shuster's turn to detect worry. He recovered fast from his annoyance at what the desketary had revealed—or rather, the company's economically-minded computers, determined not to waste time on questions to which the answer was known.

"That's fine, then, isn't it?" he said. "So—but I see you're not happy."

"Show me the contract, please," Kynance said, and waited for the desketary to issue a copy of it.

Somewhat to her surprise, it was by no means the most weasely she had seen. It was long, but it was explicit. All but a handful of its clauses were patterned on a hopeful standard form laid down by Earth's government in the aftermath of the Dictatrix period, and consequently weighted heavily against arbitrary conditions.

So the trap is in the non-standard clauses . . .

Her instinct in similar situations before had been to get an independent evaluation, preferably from a computer programmed by a reformed confidence trickster with a deep knowledge of human deceit. Now, lacking even the price of a meal, she had to rely on her own judgment.

I wish my eyes wouldn't keep drifting back to the repatriation bit!

She said, without looking up, "When does the contract take force?"

"On signature," Shuster said. His tone suggested he was enjoying a private and rather cruel joke. "The commencement of actual work is according to the schedule you've read, and the basic term is one Nefertitian year. Option to renew must be signified in advance but not less than one month before due date of repatriation."

She pounced. "In other words, I start work less than one month from now?"

"Ah—not exactly." But Shuster didn't seem put out. "The

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

previous incumbent is due to leave in two months' time, but you understand we must insure ourselves against the contingency you've already mentioned: the risk of leaving Zygra without a legal occupant acting for the company. Also, there is a short period of training, environmental familiarization, and so forth. Customarily we advertise ahead of the due date."

"But I become an employee immediately when I validate the contract?"

"If I were in your place I wouldn't jump right into it," Shuster said insinuatingly. "Why don't you consider—?"

None of his alternative proposals was apt to contain a repatriation clause. Kynance shuddered as imperceptibly as possible and went on examining the form.

One wouldn't expect the Zygra Company to be tender-hearted, but even so the schedule was stark. In this sector stars were marginally hotter than Sol, so habitable planets orbited a little further out; like Nefertiti, Zygra had a year longer than Earth's. Once in the course of that year the company landed a ship, which stayed about a week at the time when the harvest was ripe. (That was awe-inspiring, in a way: one ship per year, and its cargo paid for *everything* several times over!) The "incumbent," to borrow Shuster's term, was delivered on one visit, picked up on the next. If he were injured or fell sick, the policy was straightforward and indeed spelled out: he or she was kept alive by prosthetic devices so that when the next ship landed continuity in the legal sense was established. After that it was presumably a matter of chance whether or not you died on the way home—the company wouldn't be bothered.

Might sue for your injuries . . . ? No, forbidden as an *ex post facto* breach of contract. Arguable, might not stand in a court, but a helpless cripple up against the Zygra Company would be ill advised to find out. Of course, some rival firm might finance a claim, but to what purpose? They'd settle with the offer of an undernourished surplus-to-requirement pelt, and the owner would become instantly rich.

Stick to the point, woman! Kynance adjured herself.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

There were a good many ways to break the contract and render it void, but try as she might she couldn't imagine herself throwing away the chance of repatriation for any of the conceivable reasons, and as for the inconceivable ones, it must purely be legal excess of caution that put them in. For example, this non-standard clause mortared into the middle of half a dozen stock items:

"It shall be absolute and agreed grounds to void this contract if the signatory B"—the employee—"shall at any time during his/her term of employment herein specified reveal, divulge, indicate or in any fashion whatsoever communicate to a person not an employee of the signatory A"—the Zygra Company—"any information relevant to the production, training, conditioning or other process of manufacture of the product known as Zygra pelts; or shall signal or shall attempt to signal or in any way establish communication from the place of employment to or with any person not an employee of the signatory A on any subject whatsoever whether or not concerned with the business of the said signatory A."

The place of employment was defined as *"the surface of the planet Zygra or any place or places whatsoever in the absolute discretion of the signatory A defined as a place or places where the business of the signatory A is carried on."*

Was that the hole? Did it imply that the contract was void if, prior to the year's end, she told a spacelines booking clerk she had been working on Zygra? It might, but even a year's isolation wasn't going to lower her determination to go home! She could keep her mouth shut as long as she had to, and not even the Zygra Company could compel her to keep quiet once the year was over.

One final time she leafed through the contract; then she reached out abruptly and moistened her thumb on the desketary's validation pad. Her hand poised over the form. And still she hesitated.

"How many other applicants have there been for this post?" she asked abruptly.

Shuster had forgotten to cancel his circuit to the firm's

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

computers; blindly, acting on his authorization, the voice ran out:

"No other candidate has—"

"*Shut up!*" Shuster roared, and this time he was quick enough to activate the canceling mechanisms. Kynance looked at him and said nothing.

"Ah . . ." He ran his finger around the collar of his tunic. "I could tell something was bothering you, and I'm not surprised. Of course, there's the point that we've just begun to advertise the post—"

Kynance tapped the form stonily; according to the schedule incorporated in it, the harvesting ship was due to call in less than seven weeks.

"Moreover, even at the salary we offer, there are few people who are willing to accept a year's absolute isolation." Shuster was recovering again—he bounced back fast and always to the same orbit. Now he was sliding his arm behind her, fingers groping for the bare skin under her nape-hair. "But in strict and total confidence there is something which holds people back from applying, even people like yourself who are lonely on Nefertiti and have few friends . . ." The fingers slithered down her shoulder; the other hand fumbled around her waist and upwards. Kynance waited, frozen.

"If you take my advice," Shuster whispered, "I think you'll find it pays in the long run, and it's much more fun than sitting for a year watching machines look after a lot of moss—beautiful moss, but just moss in the last analysis. Look, before you validate the contract shall we—?"

I know what the reason is why people don't apply in droves. The word's gotten around that they have to get past you.

Kynance made four precisely timed movements. The first slid her out from the grip on her shoulder; the second detached the hand trespassing on her breast; the third stabbed her thumb hard on the validation box of the contract; and the fourth slapped Shuster resoundingly on the cheek.

For long seconds he didn't react. Then, the mark burning redly on his pale skin, he took the contract and entered the

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

firm's validation also, making the gesture a completed vocabulary of abuse.

Finally he spoke between clenched teeth:

"And I hope you *rot*."

III

IF, IN THAT MOMENT, anyone had told Kynance only a few more days would pass before she found herself wishing for another sight of Shuster, she would have thought the speaker crazy. Yet that was how it turned out.

There was something absolutely terrifying for an Earthsider in the impersonal, almost machinelike way the Zygra Company accepted its new employee. Of course, outworlders were accustomed to this method of treatment—people whose family tradition embraced the concept of taming a whole planet with less than a thousand responsible adults, or homesteading half a continent with servos jury-rigged out of spaceship scrap, would probably prefer emotionless mechanical supervision to the unpredictability of human beings.

Kynance's previous jobs since leaving Earth, though, had been with small entrepreneurial undertakings, or with private individuals. These were flexible enough to put up with the nonstandard human material she represented. Firms in the middle brackets had their sights fixed on expansion; they needed outworlders who fitted their preset requirements and had no slack available to make adjustments for strangers.

A firm as huge as the Zygra Company, by contrast simply took it for granted that its employees did fit, and if they didn't actually do so the company ignored the fact.

Superficially she had no cause to complain about the way she was treated. Once instructed that she was working for the company, the computers accorded her strictly what she was entitled to. She was given an advance against salary, a bedroom in a subsidiary wing of the headquarters building, and a schedule for her training program; she was medically examined and cured of a minor sinus infection which had been bothering her since Loki; she was automatically interrogated

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

under flicker-stimulation to make certain she wasn't a spy for some rival organization—but that she had anticipated, and could hardly resent.

What wore her down, though, was the way in which the Zygra Company reflected the sparse population of all the out-worlds in microcosmic form. Days of empty corridors, empty elevators, blankly closed doors of offices, testified to the efficiency with which human resources were exploited. No time wasted in going from place to place around the building, nor in casual chatting. That habit would come back in another generation or two; right now, there was still a shortage of manpower, so that the Zygra Company, which owned the whole of a planet, had fewer staff members at its headquarters than aboard one of its interstellar freighters.

A slight consolation was the fact that the training program was intensive. Shuster had said the post was a sinecure; that might be true, but the company's computers were of an economical turn, as she had already established, and no one had told them not to take trouble. There was always the slight chance that something might go wrong with the fabulous cybernetic devices on Zygra and some crucial decision might land in the lap of the single human occupant of the planet. In that case, the computers apparently reasoned, said human occupant must be equipped with the fullest possible knowledge of the situation.

So . . .

Head ringing, she struggled to absorb everything she was told or shown. A real pelt was an essential part of the instructional environment; after a week, she had forgotten its cash value and liked it solely because it was another living thing in this otherwise mechanical setting.

She would have welcomed even Shuster's company.

Zygra: a vegetable stew. A planet fractionally smaller than Earth, with a virtually uniform warm damp climate and no satellite large enough to generate sizable tides. Solar attraction created sluggish surges in its universal marshes—swamps—everglades—whatever one cared to call them. But any term

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

you applied was slightly wrong, for Zygra remained uniquely itself.

Since the atmosphere was breathable and there were no organisms capable of infecting human tissue and equally there were no animals, hence no hostile species to exterminate, it would certainly have been a prize for colonization if it had had any dry land at all. However, over ninety-nine percent of the surface a human being either swam, or sank to his waist in mud, or required artificial life-support systems. Kynance began to catch on to some of the reasons why nobody had ever seriously tried to take possession of the planet away from the Zygra Company when she learned that the annual cost of maintaining the supervisor in reasonable comfort was equivalent to two pelts—about two million credits.

Another hundred thousand in salary atop that seemed almost negligible.

Apart from swamp, there were two other notable features of the surface. First, and natural, the vegetation: a complex as elaborate as any known on an Earthlike world, extending as Shuster had said over ecological chains fourteen units in length, climaxing in the pelts. In their home environment they frequented certain mat-like rafts of another plant, on which parasitized the intervening members of the chain. Their incredible changeability, their flexibility and their scent-secretions seemed to be a kind of evolutionary luxury; no one had assigned them with any certainty to adaptational measures. At the season of maximal solar tide, their glory reached optimum; then came the harvest, when they were shock-conditioned into a permanent state of excitation and coated on their underside with a solid solution of concentrated nutriment. Those so provisioned would last twenty to thirty years regardless of how they were used—tears repaired themselves; the shimmer and odor continued unabated until old age set in.

No wonder the pelts were the most sought-after objects in the galaxy.

The second feature of Zygra was artificial and recent. It was the automated harvesting and breeding system Shuster

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

had mentioned. As he had said, it was defended against interference. Orbital guardposts would challenge and destroy any ship emerging from qua-space without the correct recognition-signals, even if the ship was in distress—for there was only one place on Zygra a ship could set down without sinking instantly into the swamps, and that was the company's own main station, floating around the planet as the pelts migrated from raft to raft of their indispensable weed.

From the main station, scores upon scores of wholly automatic substances fanned out, herding the pelts, selecting and tagging those which displayed the most remarkable variations, culling drab ones, crossfertilizing sports with known strains to produce extra-gorgeous lines, prodding, poking, exciting and in every way directing their fate.

Also there were factories distilling and concentrating the ingredients for the solid nourishment with which the export pelts had to be coated, telescoping five or six years of natural processing into as many months: extract of yardweed fed to blockweeds, extract of blockweed fed to dinglybells, extract of dinglybell fed to Zygran bladderwrack, extract of bladderwrack fed to pseudosponge . . .

Gelatinized, fortified, sprayed on and allowed to dry.

"I think," Kynance said very softly to herself, "that I won't go crazy, even if I am alone on the planet. I think it's going to be rather interesting."

IV

HORST LAMPETER parted the fronds of the bladderwrack and peered over the ribbon-like expanse of temporarily open water. It could hardly be called a river, because it had no banks—it was just a channel between two patches of mingled bladderwrack and dinglybells which had used up enough of the nearer bondroots to let a former mudbank dissolve into silt and wash away.

Damn this mist, blurring his view! Or *was* it the mist obscuring details? Were his eyes perhaps going bad on him? It was all too likely—a local diet was deficient in so many necessities, and the mere fact that you could choke something down without vomiting didn't imply proper nutriment.

He chopped the thought off short. Going blind on Zygra was too depressing an idea to be allowed to prey on his mind. *Concentrate*, he told himself. *Concentrate!*

Instead of straining to see, he listened. Zygra was a quiet planet—maddeningly quiet, lacking as it did any form of animal life—but there was always a susurrus of background noise, the plashing of open water, the suck and shift of subsiding mudbanks, the occasional flop of pelts returning to a floating phase from high on the edge of a weed-raft. What could he hear that didn't belong in this normal murmuring?

Nothing. Maybe Victor had calculated wrong after all.

He sighed, and remembered to shift before the bladderwrack accumulated enough cell-strain to collapse the floats on which he was balancing. A man could easily get lost among the trailing roots and fail to find his way back to air in the minute or so he could hold his breath. Shadowed so that the light bathing him had a weird greenish quality, he looked down at himself.

He was naked except for a belt of plaited weed on which

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

he had hung his crude wooden tools. His chest was so shrunken that he could count his ribs by eye, and his skin was pallid even without the greenish tinge of the shadows. His feet and ankles felt puffy and waterlogged. His hair and beard, grown long for lack of any means of trimming them, were braided together to keep them out of his way.

I must look like a bogeyman out of a savage's nightmare.

Listening anew, he still caught no sound distinct from the ordinary. How to know whether or not Victor's calendar was accurate? Time in this horrible setting was so fluid—as fluid as the marshy ground, which changed and drifted so that one could never be sure where he was unless the night sky was clear for a change and it was possible to sight on the stars with the notched crossed sticks he called his "sextant."

And even if by some miracle the calendar was correct, to within a few days at least, and the time of harvest was really coming close, how to be sure that some freak of circumstances wouldn't take the pelts by the northern route this time? Four years back, they'd gone north instead of south in response either to a fluctuation of the climate or tide, or else because some blind machine had decided this course would be more profitable to the Zygra Company.

Horst wished for solid ground on which to stamp his foot. Failing it, he pounded fist into palm in a futile gesture of hatred. Why did people have to be this way—so greedy to wring the last drop from a profitable venture, even if the last drop was a man's lifeblood? It was as though the pattern of suspicion and jealousy imposed by the Dictatrix's régime had rippled outward from Earth, and now, long after it had died at its point of origin, it still ruled the minds of those in power on the outworlds, ferociously though they would have denied the charge.

A sound? A sort of flopping sound? He jumped, just in time to save himself from being precipitated down among the bladderwrack's root system as it collapsed three square feet of floats in response to the strain of his weight, and peered along the channel as he had done earlier.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

This time his heart gave a lurch. No doubt about it: those were migrating pelts!

The lay on the smooth surface of the water with hardly a hint of the quality which made them so prized by humanity. Their upper sides glistened, but only from wetness. It took an eye trained by bitter experience to inform Horst of the all-important truth: that smear of red, that ripple of gold, overlying the pelts' basic greenish-brown, foreshadowed the full glory of harvest-time.

Frantically he reached behind him for the bundle of mat-weed fronds strung with a piece of vine from an upper branch of the bladderwrack. The fronds were twisted and bruised so that they would leak their juices into the water. Without making a splash that could be detected at a distance, he set the bundle adrift.

Moments passed. The first taste of juice reached the searching pelts, and they began to wriggle in their astonishing flexible manner towards the presumed source of the lure.

Horst let some of the tension ooze away and whistled over his shoulder. The bladderwrack surged underfoot in response to movement across its surface, and then the others were alongside, keeping their distance carefully because to have four men's weight in one spot would trigger the collapse of the floats instantly. The bladderwrack was one of many species of plant free-floating on the surface of Zygra, but no other seemed to have evolved the notion of gas-filled cysts sensitive to weight on the upper side. The process went like this: a seed or spore would settle on the float, feed there until it was heavier than a certain critical load, at which point the collapse of the bladders dropped it underwater and it became food for the larger plant, entwined among root-tendrils and squeezed of its sap.

A man's weight speeded the process so that it cycled to completion in three to eight minutes. Nothing on Zygra was solid and stable.

"They're pelts, all right," Victor muttered, adding in a tone of weak triumph, "Didn't I say so?"

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

Scrawny, skin yellow and bagging, his large head wobbling on his thin neck, he chuckled his self-approbation.

"Shut up," Coberley told him. Insofar as there could be a leader in this situation, Coberley was theirs. He was neither cleverer than Victor—whose IQ, in his normal phase, would have run close to genius level—nor more skillful than Horst, who was anyway fifteen years younger. But he fed on some invisible source of energy, probably hatred, and he was always the one who found the willpower to continue when the natural impulse was to weary surrender. He was a former fat man; now he was puffy, his skin loose without substance beneath to round it and firm it.

"I don't see a monitor," Coberley went on. "What do we do if we've picked up a stray herd? There are some, you know. In a good year a few escape the monitors and wander about on their own."

"Kill them!" Victor shrilled. "Rip them up and ruin them! Cost the company a million for every one we kill!"

"Shut up!" Coberley repeated, this time with malice, and Victor complied. They waited. And at last, at last, the monitor came in sight: awash in the water, barely protruding above the herd of pelts, but hiding beneath its flush narrow deck a store of miracles.

They sighed in unison. "Solomon!" Coberley snapped, and the fourth member of the party acknowledged with a cautious pace towards the edge of the channel.

Solomon Weit was going to make their bid simply because, having been here a shorter time than any of his companions, he was stronger and quicker. Even so, he was a shadow of what he had once been. He was an immensely tall man, three-quarters of African extraction, and Horst had always found something oddly comforting in his very darkness. It brought to mind solid things: blocks of ebony, ingots of bronze. He seemed to resist the leeching soddenness of Zygra while all the others grew wan and feeble.

Yet he had lately begun to cough on cool nights, and his eyes were rimmed with red.

"Now?" he said.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

"Now," confirmed Coberley, and they threw themselves flat on their bellies, distributing their weight over a wide enough area of the bladderwrack to delay its collapse a few precious extra minutes.

Plunging their hands into the water as the pelts surged by, they struggled to get a grip on their clammy edges.

If the people who pay a million could get them in the raw state, they wouldn't be so eager, Horst thought for the hundredth time, or the hundred thousandth.

"Got one!" Solomon exclaimed, and the others rolled closer, helping him to haul it from the water. Patches of white and navy-blue shimmered over its upper end; they didn't stop to admire the play of color, but laid it flat and held it down so that Solomon could slide onto it and get it wrapped securely around him. In response to the contact, it subsided and began to conform to him.

"Damnation, it's too advanced!" Coberley muttered. "Look, it's clinging already, and we needed an unripe one which would take on a random shape—"

"Too late to worry about that," Horst countered. "Just have to hope it fools the monitor anyway. Unless you feel it's not safe, Solomon?"

The dark man looked at the monitor from the shadow of a kind of hood into which he had prodded and teased the pelt. "I don't think there's time to get it off and catch another," he grunted. "And we don't dare miss this chance! It may take weeks to get within reach of another monitor. . . . Give me the hammer, quickly!"

Horst detached the "hammer" from his belt. It was only a piece of wood, first gnawed into a club-shape and then dried, over heart-breaking weeks, in the intermittent sunlight until it was harder than most things on Zygra. Solomon closed his fist around it and wiggled to the very edge of the bladderwrack.

"A ripe one may not be a bad idea," Victor suggested. "The monitor is more likely to try and retrieve a ripe one, isn't it?"

"Shut up," Coberley told him again.

Tense, they held their breath as the monitor drew abreast

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

of the pelt enshrouding Solomon. It sensed the presence of its responsibility, slowed down and bobbed towards the side of the channel. Victor whimpered faintly.

Relays evaluated, circuits closed. The monitor decided that this pelt ought not to be stranded and left behind, but returned to the herd. Arms reached out from its nearer handling unit, closed tenderly on the pelt and Solomon too, lifted the load and began to swing it across the low deck so it could be replaced in mid-channel—*exactly as we hoped*, Horst reminded himself without excitement. His mouth was dry and his guts were churning.

Go to it, Solomon. Make it come true all the way!

How many long lonely hours of planning, how many dreams and arguments, had led to this moment! Now, now Solomon was making his bid for mastery of the little vessel: in mid-air stripping off the pelt with huge sucking noises, startling the monitor and throwing it over to the seldom-used interference circuits. He dropped awkwardly on the deck, almost losing his footing as the impact drove the monitor completely below the surface. His "hammer" rose and fell with a slam on the base of the handling unit, cracking the plastic across and letting water into unproofed circuits so that steam spurted out and something hissed as if in rage.

The arms let go the pelt and it fell in the water. Solomon paid no attention. With all his might he was trying to extend that crack completely across the monitor's hull, to wreak havoc that would force the machine's return to the main station for servicing and carry him ignorantly with it.

"Look out!"

Who called? Horst realized with amazement that it had been his own voice, and he had spoken too late. The handling unit on the other side of the monitor was intact, and it sprang into action. Two huge arms snatched Solomon off the deck. The power surged and the stern-jets screamed, driving the hull into mid-channel again. The arms shot out to full stretch and let Solomon go. He plunged into the bladderwrack beyond the channel, screaming, and the scream ended abruptly as the glugging noise of collapsing floats greeted his fall.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

There was a period of worse than silence, during which the monitor evaluated its own damage, decided it was still serviceable, and resumed the pursuit of its pelts. When it was out of sight, Horst stirred.

"Now, we have no choice," he said. "If we're going to get off Zygra alive we'll have to tackle the main station."

"You're crazy!" Victor shrilled. "If we can't even take a monitor, what chance have we of—?"

"I'd rather be crazy than dead," Horst whispered. "At least . . . I *think* I would."

V

WHEN THE announcement reached Kynance, it was bald and to the point:

The previous incumbent of the post of supervisor of Zygra has failed to exercise his option of a further year's employment. Kindly ready yourself for departure aboard the starship Zygra One at fourteen hundred tomorrow.

She looked at it a second time and gave a sigh. She reminded herself about the repatriation clause and wondered if the attraction of a guaranteed trip home was going to lose its glamour in the same way as zygra pelts already had.

Suppose the "previous incumbent" had exercised his option: what would they have done with her, having stuffed her mind full of so much information? Washed it all out again? Kept her on the staff in some minor capacity for a year and then sent her to Zygra after all?

No, more likely just turned her loose. In the history of the company someone at some stage must have decided to stay on a second year at the last moment, but the trainee replacement would have learned the same crucial fact that Kynance had grown to accept: just as the Zygra Company had given up misleading its rivals by making them think the pelts were animal skins, so it had given up worrying about how much an outsider knew of the technicalities involved. There was no place in the universe where the data were of value except on Zygra itself. Launching an attack on the planet with a view to taking it over was still a possibility—there were other operators in this sector of the galaxy capable of mounting one or even two assaults fierce enough to defeat the Zygra Company's best efforts. But the main station and substations

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN.

were all boobytrapped; if they ceased to receive a signal being broadcast by the orbital guardposts, they released a flood of poison into the water, and for at least the next fifty years, until the pelts reestablished themselves, there would be no crop worth harvesting. And without destroying all the guardposts there was no chance of making a landing.

Moreover, there was nowhere to *land* in the literal sense, so that a ship designed to put down on the marshes instead of aboard the deck of the main station was bound to be a somewhat peculiar vessel, bulging with flotation chambers and equipped with some sort of seagoing propulsion. As part of her training Kynance had been shown the record of one ill-starred venture along these lines: the Zygra Company's spies had discovered the preparations being made to adapt a ship belonging to a company on Loki, had waited till the work had been almost done—involving the expenditure of half the rival company's capital—and then had blandly notified the Nefertitian government, which had a considerable stake itself in the Zygra operation, through the tax bills it imposed on the company's headquarters.

There had followed a protest to the Lokian authorities, a swoop by a team of inspectors from the Bureau of Interstellar Trade, and a huge claim for damages which had bankrupted the would-be pirates.

It was with something of a shock that, towards the end of the didactic recital, Kynance had recognized a case which had been dinned into her many times in college. "Manufacture of a device or devices uniquely fitted to conditions pertaining on a world not legally accessible to the manufacturer is *prima facie* evidence of piratical intent"—the Zygra Company and the Government of Nefertiti versus Wade, Wang and Hoerbiger, 2113, otherwise irreverently known as the smile on the face of the zygra.

At first she had wondered why the company didn't simply assign members of its own staff to hold down the chair for a year at a time, perhaps on a rota basis. Later she had realized this was contrary to outworld psychology; anyone making a career with the company was trained for work far more im-

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

portant than sitting on Zygra and watching a lot of machines tending a lot of moss. Any casual applicant, reasonably greedy and moderately intelligent, would suffice, and would cost no more than salary for a year and ship-room to and from the Zygra system plus a course of training that occupied a mere fraction of the computers' attention, and would be dismissable on his return without the company having to worry any more about him.

If someone with inside information about harvesting the pelts wanted to sell out to another company, he'd have to have experience at the headquarters end as well as on Zygra, and if he worked well enough to rise in the firm to a level where his knowledge was likely to be useful to a third party, he'd have to be either a fool or a maniac to risk the gamble.

Kynance was coming to admire the Zygra Company in an upside-down fashion. There was no denying the efficient cynicism with which they conducted their operations.

As the reluctant admiration grew, so her original doubts subsided. This was no chiseling two-bit undertaking which could add to its profit margin by a fat percentage if it weaseled on its employment contracts. This was a firm big enough and inarguably profitable enough to tolerate such minor budget items as repatriation of an Earthsider. An extra five percent on the freight charges for a single consignment of Earthbound pelts would more than absorb her passage home.

And she was not going to give them the slightest hint, the slightest suggestion of a hint, that she had infringed the contract.

Since the interview at which she'd been engaged, she hadn't seen Shuster again. But he was the first person she spotted when she presented herself at the spaceport an hour ahead of the scheduled time, and she recalled with sick anticipation that he had claimed to be directly in charge of the Zygra supervisors, so there was no chance of eluding him.

She mentally squared her shoulders, and marched boldly towards him. The group of spacemen with whom he was talk-

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

ing noticed her before he did, and one or two of them stared in a flattering manner. Then the senior among them, a lean type with second-mate braids on his tunic, tapped Shuster's arm and pointed towards her.

"What's the girl doing here, d'you know?" The words carried distinctly above the racket from the sterngates of the ship, where autohandlers were packing in empty pelt-crates that rang with hollow booms every time they were moved.

Shuster half-turned, and recognized her. Was he still smarting from the smack on the face? She couldn't tell by his expression, nor by the tone he used to answer the inquiry.

"Her? Oh, that's the new supervisor taking over from Evan."

"What?" The second mate recoiled as though he'd been struck under the chin, and two or three of his companions exclaimed simultaneously. "Now look here, Executive! You can't do a thing like that to—"

"Shut your mouth," Shuster told him coolly. "If you want to keep your berth aboard this ship . . . ?" The last word rose to a gently questioning note, and the second mate swallowed hard and held his tongue.

Eyes searching for some clue to the reason for the outburst, all her misgivings returning in full force, Kynance stopped a pace distant from Shuster.

"Congratulations," he said icily. "I'm informed you're the best trainee the company has ever had for the post you're taking on."

"Thanks," Kynance muttered. It seemed safest to stifle her dislike of the man until he made some overt reference to the reason for it.

Let him just try and talk me out of it again!

"Executive!" the second mate said. "Does that mean you won't—?"

"If you poke your snout in one more time where it doesn't belong," Shuster snapped, "I'll cut it off. Is that clear?"

Kynance shivered. The looks on all these faces, except Shuster's own, were such as she would only have expected to

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

see at a funeral. There must be a catch in the deal after all—that was the only explanation!

But she'd persuaded herself there couldn't be, because the Zygra Company was too prosperous to bother with cheating its casual employees. Anyway, what sort of cheating was possible? By now she could have recited the contract word for word from memory, and there wasn't a loophole. The grounds for voiding it were set forth as clearly as anyone could wish, and provided she kept her head she'd last out the year.

"Go to your cabin," Shuster was saying. "It's clearly arrowed from this lock here: number ninety. And remember that you are not to interfere with the running of this ship in any way. Delaying a crewman in the exercise of his duty constitutes interference, and when the ship is at space all crewmen are considered to be on duty twenty-four hours a day. In short, you will break your contract and lose your chance of repatriation if you talk to anybody except me. Is that understood?"

He could have been reading her mind. Her plan had been formed a moment earlier: to corner one of these glum-looking men and pump him for explanations. He'd sensed it and forestalled her with orders given before witnesses. Pretty girl or no pretty girl, a spaceman in the lucrative zygra trade wasn't going to jeopardize his career for her sake.

Was he?

Hopefully she surveyed the men one last time, and read in their shrugs that they were resigned to her fate, whatever it was.

Why not? It's not going to happen to them!

Abruptly she discovered that she hated the Zygra Company and Shuster as its personification, because contact with him had made her so bitter that she seemed like a stranger to herself.

With weary apathy she entered the ship and found her cabin. Surrounded by the noise of preparations for takeoff, she stowed her gear and sat down on the bunk.

In five or ten minutes—she had lost track of the time—Shuster came calling.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

Shifty-eyed, he slipped through the door and pushed it closed quickly. He gave her a quick false smile and spoke in low tones.

"I'm sorry I haven't been able to see you since our first meeting, my dear, but I've been tremendously busy—you'll understand that the company's business follows the same life-rhythm as the pelts themselves, ha-ha!, and as the time for harvesting approaches so we find ourselves more and more frantically busy—but I have kept a close eye on your progress and I must say that despite your lack of what we generally lay down as minimum qualifications for entering our employment, that is to say a scholar degree in some major field, you've done very well and it might easily be possible to arrange for you to join the company's permanent staff on completion of your tour at Zygra"

All this time he had been closing the distance between them, and now he was sitting next to her, hands returning to the very same positions from which she had pushed them on the former occasion.

She detested men who were so egotistical that their preliminaries to love-making followed a pattern like a computer program, fixed and unalterable, so that a girl could never tell if they were thinking of her, or the last partner, or the next. She gritted her teeth, forcing herself to stay calm in the hope of picking up some clue to the pitfall she had overlooked.

There must be one. She was convinced she had deluded herself.

"I think perhaps that during the voyage we could become quite good friends, don't you? And a word from me in praise of your ability could carry a lot of weight with the firm, you know"

Fumble, maul, squeeze—no, it was more than she could stand. She didn't slap him this time, but made her voice sound as though she wanted to when she said stonily, "I'm sorry, but I'm not interested in a career with the company. I want to get home, and if it takes a year on Zygra to do it I'll spend a year on Zygra."

He withdrew, flushing, and stood up. For a second she

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

thought he was going to hurl some taunt at her, reveal how he believed he had tricked her, but he bit down hard on his shiny-wet lower lip and went out.

VI

DICKERY EVAN stretched and yawned under the shower, let it progress by itself from steaming-hot through lukewarm to icy and at last to hot dry air. He was a stocky, well-built young man mostly of New Zealand extraction, the Maori side predominating.

He didn't dress as he left the shower—why bother, when there was no one else to see him? He padded to the autochef and dialed breakfast, then carried it on a tray to his favorite vantagepoint, the dome overlooking the main station's landing-deck.

He'd thought at first that, but for the presence of that deck, that smooth sheet of immensely tough metal constituting the largest solid surface on Zygra, he'd have gone crazy. Now, right at the end of his tour, he wasn't so sure. He'd seriously considered putting in for an extension, because it was the only way he could see himself ever drawing down a salary this size, and the complete isolation was growing easier to bear all the time, but for one thing—the lack of women.

Still, it was too late to do anything about an extension now. He'd put off and put off a decision, until the day had come when the calendar had advised him it was less than one month before his time expired. Best that way, perhaps—he didn't want to get so used to loneliness that he couldn't readjust to human company.

He thought of half a dozen girls he planned to look up when he got home, and the time he could give them with his accumulated pay . . . oh, not all of it, of course, because he planned to keep himself and a long succession of girls in great comfort with it for the rest of his active life. If he bought a share in some promising enterprise with say ten thousand of it, and started a small business of his own with

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

another twenty, and acquired some land and had a house put on it, which would cost about sixteen to eighteen depending on the size . . .

His mind ran on happily along these lines as he watched the monitors drifting in towards the main station. Drifting was the word; they were simply riding the same currents, the same sluggish solar tides, that the pelts followed to their rendezvous with harvest.

Since his arrival—his forehead creased with the effort of picturing the concepts involved—those monitors had been all over the planet. The trail of the pelts was immensely long. Scarcely one of the beautiful things had less than twenty thousand miles of wandering to its credit. Four years old: ripe for the harvest . . .

When he had first been left here by himself, he had passed much of the time in figuring out ways of getting a pelt off the planet when he was picked up. There was one girl in particular he thought would look marvelous in a pelt, and nothing else. What it must be like to make love to a woman wearing a sort of living rainbow cum scent-organ.

Then he'd found out various discouraging facts, such as how the pelts felt when they hadn't been treated and coated with the solid nourishment necessary to their survival off Zygra, and that every single one which was selected for export was watched by computers keener than hawks, and that there was no chance at all of getting into the coating-station and stealing a batch of the prepared nutriment to be applied by hand.

That had killed a subsidiary ambition, too. He'd thought of all the inside secrets about zygra pelts which he'd acquired, and considered the idea of setting up as a refurbisher of the things. That would be a good line of business for an ex-supervisor of Zygra. Plenty of rich people whose pelts were finally wearing out would pay ten thousand for a fresh coating of nutriment even if it only lasted an extra couple of years. Someone in a position to buy two pelts in a lifetime was a real rarity—even rarer than the pelts were!

But he wasn't a good enough chemist to duplicate the re-

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

sult of the complex natural processes the coating-station merely accelerated, and ultimately he'd concluded that if refurbishing the pelts had been an economic proposition the Zygra Company would have established the service themselves.

Anyhow, he couldn't get his hands on a sample of the coating for someone else to copy, short of stripping it from a finished pelt. And he couldn't get a finished pelt, so . . .

Besides, he told himself comfortably, somebody's bound to have tried that already, just as they've tried to breed the things on other planets and failed. Wasn't there some rich fool over Loki way who bought five of them and tried to raise them in an artificial swamp?

Silly ass. Better to be content with what he was going to get honestly: a hundred thousand credits, free passage home, and a good, pleasant, undemanding existence for the rest of his life, natural or otherwise. Good point in there somewhere—set aside a small sum to cover geriatric treatment at age sixty or so . . .

He dozed, while the watery morning sunlight sifted over the gathering hordes of zygra pelts, and the monitors closing in behind them, and the bulk of the coating-station looming over the horizon from its regular site among a particularly rich patch of yardweed and blockweed, bringing the huge vats of gelatinized fortified nutriment for the pelts.

He came awake with a jolt. Somewhere at the edge of consciousness he'd detected a shrilling noise. What the—?

Oh *no*! He 'd heard that noise before, at the very beginning of his stay. They'd turned a switch somewhere in the bowels of the main station, and an alarm siren had started to squall. The man who'd been showing him around (what was the name?—oh yes: Executive Shuster) had let it sound for half a minute and then turned it off.

And he'd said, "Remember that noise, Evan! It may go off at any time, day or night. It indicates a malfunction of the automatics. One of the two reasons you're here at all is that such a malfunction may occur. It never has yet, but if it does,

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

the problem is in your lap. Which is why I'm stressing the importance of recognizing the alarm."

Evan had scuffled at the deck with his feet a bit and then said wonderingly, "But—there's no other noise I'm likely to confuse it with, is there there?"

"No, there isn't." Shuster had smiled blandly, rather oilily. "But you heard how long I let it run for—thirty seconds?"

"Yes."

"It may sound at any time with *or without* a malfunction. The point of this is to make sure you're on your toes. If it sounds, you have exactly those thirty seconds to reach this switch and cut it off—survey the operation from spawn to finished pelts—and report what you find. It may be that everything is in order; in that case, you'll know it was only a test. But I warn you quite bluntly that if you fail to reach it in thirty seconds—"

Evan leapt to his feet and headed for the switch at a dead run.

His trembling hand missed on the first grab, got it on the second. The clamor died instantly. But his skin was prickly with sweat. How long had it been sounding before he'd caught on—more than thirty seconds?

No, please! It's not possible for me to have lost everything after eleven months!

Frantically he surveyed the telltale boards which relayed the information from all the substations and monitors. As far as he could tell, everything was as it ought to be. So this had been a dummy alarm, a test to make sure he was on his toes.

The bastards! The radiated pigs! To leave him eleven months without a test at all, then catch him napping!

Heart sinking, he reported to the computers that everything seemed to be in order despite the siren. He hesitated, breathing deeply until he was in a fair approximation of the state in which the alarm had caught him, made his way back to where he had been dozing, and timed himself on the run to the switch.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

The run alone took him fifteen seconds. He tried again, and registered seventeen.

He exhaled gustily. Well, there was no choice then. Unless he was to be cheated of his pay and passage home, he had to doctor the record of the time the alarm had sounded. It was a terrible decision to make, since unwarranted tampering with any of the automatics constituted sabotage and voided the contract of employment, but he wasn't going to let one lapse cancel nearly a year of his life.

He slid up the front panel of the alarm unit and peered cautiously into its bowels. Ah: straightforward enough. A band of white tape had reeled out like a dry tongue from the base of the siren, and it was clearly calibrated in one-second intervals. All he needed to do was ease it back so that about twenty-five of the gradations showed, instead of—he counted—the damning total of forty-nine at present visible.

He stretched out his arm and grasped the tape.

Instantly the front panel of the alarm unit slammed down, smashing the bones of his forearm a few inches below the elbow. He screamed and tried to tear himself free, straining to claw the panel up again with his other hand, feeling the raw ends of bone rub and scrape agonizingly. Through a white fire of pain he heard a majestic impersonal voice seal his doom.

"You are reminded that unauthorized tampering with any of the automatic mechanisms constitutes sabotage of the Zygra Company's operations. Accordingly you are no longer a contracted employee of the Zygra Company."

"No!" he screamed, wrenching loose his shattered arm and cradling it in the other. He kicked the alarm unit as if he could make it suffer as much as he did.

"You are no longer a contracted employee of the Zygra Company."

He recovered a little of his self-control, thought of having his arm mended, and went stumbling to the medicare unit, a coffin-sized block of automatics sited at the base of the observation dome. He pushed its switches awkwardly with his good hand, trying to avoid jarring the other arm.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

"You are no longer a contracted employee of the Zygra Company," said the unit.

"Wha-a-at?" The voice was shrill; Evan barely knew it for his own rather than another recorded signal. "But you can't do this to me! You can't—it's inhuman!"

They could.

Two hours later, having set his arm crudely in a sort of splint without benefit of anesthetic, he settled to his own satisfaction that there was no longer any automatic device on the station prepared to serve him. Even the autochef was included in the ban; it spat stinking burned fat at him. The shower, too—that delivered a stream of boiling water. In the smoke and steam his ambitions evaporated: goodbye house, goodbye girls, goodbye geriatric treatment, goodbye Dickery Evan. For without the autochef he would starve before the harvesting ship was due.

"Then we'll make sure those radiated swine don't enjoy what they've done to me," he promised between clenched teeth, and went to see what weapons he could find.

But he had only killed one pelt, chopping it to messy shreds in the water, before the nearest monitor came chugging up and seized him in its powerful mechanical arms, to carry him off across the lonely swamps and abandon him to his fate on a drifting mat of weed. The force with which he was dumped made the bones of his arm grind together again, and the dazzling-bright pain blotted out his consciousness.

Ignorant even of identity, heedless of his fate, Dickery Evan floated on the sluggish solar tides of Zygra.

VII

ARMS ACHING, hands sore from gripping the crude paddle, Horst Lampeter kept thinking of Solomon and how real, how physical, this work made his loss seem. Their boat was difficult enough to drive along anyway, consisting as it did of only a rough frame supporting them on half a hundred pieces of bladderwrack, the cysts inflated by lungpower and resealed with a gummy exudation from the stems of dinglybells. Every other day it was necessary to check the whole caboodle and replace a dozen or so of the cysts which were starting to rot.

But while Solomon had been with them paddling had been disproportionately easier. He'd driven his blade harder than Horst and Coberley put together—Victor could be ignored, since he was the weakest of any of them and often fainted after a couple of hours in full sun. Also, Solomon had been able to crack an occasional joke, tell a story, true or invented, or sing bawdy songs in his resonant bass voice.

Now he rots among the roots . . . He'd have made a joke of that too—or a new verse for one of his songs.

"Take the right-hand side of that weed ahead!" Victor called in his thin, piping imitation of a shout.

"Does it matter?" Coberley snarled. "We don't even know if we're on the same half of the damned planet as the main station!"

"But we are," Victor insisted, sounding close to tears. Horst suspected that both he and Coberley had been equally affected by the death of Solomon, though none of them—including himself—had said how much he was missed. They gave their feelings away all the time, nonetheless: Coberley had been more than ever irascible since the disaster, while Victor had taken to whimpering aloud.

"Haven't we seen the monitors nearby?" Victor went on.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

"Haven't we seen that the pelts they were driving were ripe ones? Haven't I taken star-sightings, sitting up all night for breaks in the cloud while you two snored your heads off?"

"And haven't you snored your head off while we sweat over these damned paddles?" Coberley thundered back.

"Don't argue," Horst pleaded wearily. "We can't be certain we're on the right course—as you've pointed out, Coberley, they may be withholding some of the pelts for next year because there seem to be so many of them—but Victor is almost always right, and I don't know how he manages to keep track of so many calculations in his head."

The others were both mollified by that, and for a while they simply forged ahead, turning a little to the right as directed when they approached the next mat of weed.

Horst didn't look at it except to make sure they were running clear of its fringe of roots; he was far more concerned about the risk of it being grounded on a mudbank, in which case they'd have to backtrack and go around the other side after all. Getting around Zygra in a powerboat would have been a slow job; the only sensible transport would be a hovercraft, and at that you might run into a floating forest with trees of a sort rising fifty or sixty feet from a base ten miles long—

"Look!" Victor shrilled. "Look there, on the edge of the mat!"

Their heads jerked around to see what he was pointing at, and they gasped.

On the very edge of the mat, half in the water, lay a stocky man with one arm crudely bandaged.

"Can we get him off?" was Horst's first question, knowing that they had to. There was only one explanation for his presence, which Coberley voiced by implication.

"Damn the Zygra Company! May Shuster rot eternity away!"

"You think that's the latest of the supervisors?" Victor muttered.

"How else could the poor bastard have got here?" retorted Coberley savagely.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

"Then we *are* in the right area of the planet!" Victor exclaimed. "What did I tell you?"

"Oh, shut up!" Coberley blazed. "He may have been drifting for weeks! And in any case they wouldn't have trapped the poor bastard until the last possible moment, the same way we were trapped, so we can be damned sure the harvesting ship is due at any time now."

"I wonder if he's still alive," Horst whispered.

He was. The pain of having his arm touched while they wrestled him aboard the boat made him stir and moan, and when they revived him by squeezing the sour but nourishing juice of a dinglybell into his mouth he cursed loudly in a language they didn't know, musical and full of open vowel-ended syllables.

The cursing ran dry. He licked his lips and rolled his eyes, surveying them in mingled wonder and dismay, naked as he was himself, sick-looking, wild-haired.

"You too?" he said.

"Us too," Horst agreed.

And at that instant of time they heard the beginning of what they had hoped not to hear before sighting the main station: the faint drumming across the sky that marked the arrival of a spaceship to take away the annual yield of pelts.

"Are we far from the main station now?" Victor asked hopefully.

"How should I know?" the man with the broken arm answered bitterly. "For all I can tell, I've been unconscious for days on end."

Shuster was a man capable of harboring a grudge, nurturing it, encouraging it until the time was ripe for getting even. Kynance realized the fact with a sinking heart and set about trying to elude him long enough to garner clues to his likely deceptions from some sympathetic crewman.

Even when the ship had set down at the main station on Zygra, however, he prevented her from talking to people.

"The business of harvesting is no concern of yours," he snapped at her. "Your responsibility begins when this year's

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

pelts are aboard, and ends when we come back next time—if you're still validly contracted, of course."

He said that with a peculiar relish. It was a meager hint, but it was a hint. Kynance turned it over in her mind and decided that it yielded only the same conclusion she had previously reached: whether it was Shuster's private intention or the policy of the company, some effort was going to be made to invalidate her contract by trickery.

Almost certainly, then, the trick would come right at the end of her tour, when she had lost the chance to apply for an extension. It would be less trouble simply to leave her here in the grip of the prosthetics designed to ensure survival after serious injury than to risk her doing something to revenge herself for being tricked—but others tricked in the same way might have tried and failed, and anyhow there was Laban Rex Chan versus Gunther Ranji, 2108, to consider: "The exercise of a contractual option is impossible if the party allegedly exercising it is not fully conscious and in his right mind," this ruling preventing an unconscious person supported by prosthetics from "occupying" Zygra indefinitely . . .

What horrible byways her mind was being led down by this disgusting man! She wiped her face wearily with the back of her hand. Now she was thinking in terms of being mutilated deliberately and left here to uphold the company's claim on the planet!

Mustn't. Mustn't. That path led to insanity. She rose and sneaked a look out of her cabin. No one was in sight. If she very quietly stole out to some lock-door not currently in use, and watched the loading of the pelts, surely even Shuster wouldn't invoke that petty disobedience as grounds for invalidation. Or if he tried, she'd fight.

She reached a lock unchallenged, and for some time stood drinking in the scene. Close at hand, men and machines were bringing up and crating treated pelts from the temporary store in which they were kept prior to shipment; the colors flared dizzily and the scents made the air almost unbreathably sweet. Russët and tawny, green and gold, white and

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

scarlet and orange and black and other tints without names but all possessing the same fantastic beauty

Further away, men conducted physical checks of the automatics: here on the main station, they were restocking the life-support systems with vitamins and proteins and fitting up the library with entertainment spools; out at the coating-station she saw them testing the distillation columns and the concentrators and the myriad other devices she had been taught about; others were overhauling monitors—one had a bad crack in its casing through which water had shorted out a handling unit—and installing newly devised programs for breeding from sports They'd said something about the possibility of evolving a striped pelt, which would always display its colors in regular parallel bands instead of randomly over the surface

"Ah, there you are."

The voice made her skin crawl. She turned and saw Shuster behind her. But he wasn't going to complain about her being here. He was simply saying, "The loading is almost complete, so it's about time I showed you around the station and gave you your on-the-spot briefing."

He sounded almost affable. Kynance followed him with a sense of relief.

Mentally she checked off all the ways in which she could be caught out in a breach of her contract; she planned to write them down in a list when she had the chance, and add to the list as other points struck her later. For example, this alarm siren which might or might not indicate a genuine malfunction. It would be easy to arrange a false alarm when she was in the shower. She'd have to rig some sort of extension to the switch, so it could be inactivated from a dozen points instead of one.

No, just a second: that might be construed as tampering with the automatics, hence sabotage Cancel that: Horace Bellamy versus Guy and Guy Starlines, 2084, specified that "a switch designed for manual operation is not and cannot be regarded as an automatic device."

Good. The prospect of being able to do something to fore-

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

stall Shuster's skulduggery cheered her enormously. Only one cloud still hung over her apart from those to which she had grown accustomed, and that became darker as they progressed further with the tour of inspection.

Where was her predecessor? Why wasn't he being called on to give her tips he'd picked up during his own stay?

She ventured to ask Shuster that when there was a lull in his flow of instructions. He didn't reply; he simply curled his lip and showed his teeth.

Her stomach turned over with a lurch.

What can they have done to him? Could they have thrown him over the side, drowned him? Because—think, think—who's going to know?

Nobody ever came to Zygra except company employees. By law there had to be a record of the operation of the automatics available for government inspection—Hughes and Leblanc versus Mario della Casa, 2092—but in this case the government was that of Nefertiti, and she'd already recognized the stake that government had in Zygra.

Panic gripped her. For all she knew, the contract was irrelevant, empty, a scrap of paper. No one from Earth would come hunting her if she failed to return; they could safely leave her a year here, let her elude the obvious pitfalls, and then invalidate the contract in the simplest way, by killing her.

The world seemed to spin off its axis as she learned the reason behind Shuster's temporary geniality. He was saying now, "And one final thing which may interest you before I leave you and go aboard the ship for takeoff. You were asking why your predecessor isn't here to show you around. Well, he willfully infringed the terms of his contract. You're a great one for legalisms, so if you want to see the proof which we'll be displaying to the government when we get back you're welcome. He didn't get to the alarm in the prescribed thirty seconds—"

So I was right; that is one of their main traps.

"—and consequently he was no longer an employee of the Zygra Company."

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

"What happened to him?" she whispered out of a fog of sick dismay.

"How should I know?" Shuster shrugged. "Once he'd broken the contract, the automatics ceased to recognize his existence." He started to turn away, then paused.

"Oh, and on a related point: of the last nine supervisors, not one has completed his contract without infringing one of its clauses. Didn't I tell you, right back at our first meeting, that you should reconsider your application and go along with my suggestion instead? Well, it's too late now, of course. On your own pretty head be it, my dear!"

VIII

SHE WAS NOT—not—NOT going to give that horrible man Shuster the privilege of seeing her break down. Somehow she maintained her self-control until the pelts were all loaded and the crew had gone back aboard the ship, doing it so well, in fact, that the last time Shuster glanced at her before entering the airlock his face revealed a hint of gratifying uncertainty, as much as to say: *Am I the one who's overlooked something?*

She managed a smile and gave him a mocking wave, which he did not return.

The steel deck of the main station—visibly lower in the water because of the massive cargo of pelts piled into the ship's holds—thrummed to the warming of the interstellar drive. Vast energies made the air prickly to the skin; a chance resonance made the station's plates vibrate and stir the water into patternless ripples. Kynance watched impassively, repressing her impulse to dash out of the station's observation dome and hammer on the airlock for admission.

The ship lifted. For the first few feet the station rose also, floating higher with the reduction in weight. A crack of daylight appeared under the polished hull; the station rocked gently, as if relieved to give up its burden. And the starship was on its way.

That was when Kynance had to burst into tears.

She had never in her life felt so exposed, so vulnerable, so psychologically naked. When the sobs allowed her to catch her breath, she cursed everyone she could think of to blame for her plight, beginning with Shuster and continuing through those bland college tutors who had made her believe in the actuality of galactic law, concluding with herself as the most responsible of all.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

The tears purged her of all the unvoiced terror she had stored so tightly and so long, and when they ended she was able to think with a clearer mind than for weeks previous. One factor dominated all her thoughts: the problem of enforcement of what Shuster had contemptuously called "legalisms."

It hadn't been fair to curse her old tutors for making her regard legality as a solid concept. She'd been exposed to enough new information since leaving Earth, surely, to cure her of such academic illusions! It was time now or never to take a hard cold look at the predicament in which she had landed herself, and to gamble everything on the assumption that Shuster had been telling the truth when he had sourly complimented her on being the best candidate the Zygra Company had ever had for this post.

Why? Start there, and perhaps the rest would follow.

Well . . . Consider the fantastic underpopulation of the outworlds, compared with the standard of living and technological development they enjoyed. The same reason which prevented the Zygra Company from assigning this post to their own employees in rotation must operate when it came to finding an outside candidate. Anybody capable of making himself a career in outworld society would already be grabbed by some other employer. The demands of intensive training and incredibly high job-qualification would mean that people were reluctant—even for a year at an enormous salary—to quit their permanent employment and sit watching moss grow under automatic supervision.

In effect, this was an unskilled post. If it weren't for the legal requirement that a celestial body must be occupied by a human being in order for the company to maintain its claim, nobody would live here at all.

What unskilled labor was there available on worlds like Nefertiti, where ten-year-old children were already needed as productive members of society? Hardly any, and what there was fell neatly into two categories: social misfits, and immigrants unused to the pace, lacking qualifications with which they could compete on even terms against native outworlders.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

Put me in category two, Kynance told herself bitterly.

Now moderate her original assumption that the government of Nefertiti had a vested interest in the continued operations of the Zygra Company. (At this point she felt a stir of optimism, which was very welcome.) Although the tax bills for the company must be enormous—large enough, more than likely, to figure as a separate entry in the planetary budget—wouldn't it be infinitely more profitable to dispossess the company, annex this unique world and operate it without intermediaries? Of course it would! Hence the Zygra Company would be constrained to some extent at least to comply with the galactic commercial laws. Minor infringements wouldn't be worth taking up; the company could so easily render expropriation profitless by triggering the poison reservoirs in its wandering monitors, when the situation became hopeless. But a major, flagrant violation would certainly drive the government to act.

This much, then, was on her side: when Shuster talked of displaying records of the company's operation here to government inspectors, he wasn't referring to a mere formality, but to an essential condition of the company's continued existence.

What of her predecessors, though? Legally or not, they had all been maneuvered into breaking their contracts. Why? Surely immigrants in despair, desperate for repatriation and lacking the funds to get home, would be a tiny minority among the unskilled workers who applied for this post. (It rankled to think of herself in this fashion, but she forced herself to recognize the truth of the term in an outworld context.)

She made the tentative assumption that during a stay of a year on Zygra it was possible to pick up information that the company wanted to keep secret. Or—no, cancel that! She tensed as a great light dawned on her.

Short of finding some crazy hermit, who might go out of his head and start systematically sabotaging the fabulously complex automatics here, the company stood no chance at all of getting a permanent supervisor. This followed from the obvious premise that they advertised annually. After a period of

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

several years, there would be, scattered around the local star-systems, several ex-supervisors of Zygra. Some enterprising rival firm might pick the brains of all of them, and thus gain sufficient data to make a successful raid on the Zygra Company. An accumulation of small facts might reveal far more than the superficially attractive method of planting a company spy to apply for the post.

She frowned. So far she had reached two diametrically opposite conclusions, one reassuring and one terrifying. On the one hand, she felt that the Zygra Company had to watch its step extremely carefully, but on the other, she felt it was probably desperately—paranoically—afraid that its secrets might somehow leak out and afford the opportunity for another firm to pirate its source of wealth.

What could she do, stranded here with the powerful Zygra Company as her opponent, to ensure that the balance would tip the right way at the end of her tour? She had to take it for granted that the company could not just murder her and dump her body over the side of the station; if this were possible without the Nefertiti government stepping in, then she had been as good as lost the minute she had entered Shuster's office.

After a little thought she decided it was safe to accept that the reason for her being the best-qualified candidate ever interviewed for the job was a little more complicated than had at first appeared.

Typically, her predecessors would have been in what she had called category one: social misfits without permanent careers or outstanding qualifications enabling them to switch jobs with impunity. Even people like that, however, would normally have some kind of ties—wives, parents, brothers and sisters—and hence if they disappeared on Zygra someone might come making inquiries. None of the previous nine supervisors, Shuster had boasted, had lasted through his year of office. But if nine sets of relatives had proceeded to kick up a fuss, this might easily have excited enough public concern to cause the Nefertitian government to expropriate the company. So the company would ideally seek candidates who,

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

first, were unskilled, and second, lacked kinfolk to ask awkward questions.

(A corollary of this was the depressing point that it might well have been her remote Earthside origin, not her qualifications, that had secured her the post. She scowled at the idea and shoved it to the back of her mind.)

But people with neither skills nor family would be very rare indeed on planets like Nefertiti. For one thing, underpopulation implied an almost obsessive urge to exploit human resources; for another, isolation would have made family ties more precious than at home on Earth; and finally, if the potential candidate got to a stage where he was actively antisocial, rather than just asocial, the government would step in and order psychiatric treatment to restore him or her as a contributing member of society.

She nodded very slowly. This was a comforting conclusion to have reached, and it would be best to cling to it as long as she could. Kynance Foy, with Earthside college degrees in qua-space physics and interstellar commerce, not to mention her earlier study of business law and practical engineering, was a very different proposition from some neurotic Nefertitian precariously poised between nonconformity and psychotherapy.

Just as she had brought a load of trammeling mental baggage with her from Earth, in the shape of her preconceptions about the force of law and the way society ought to operate, so too the Zygra Company—including the computers which made the ultimate decisions—would predicate its future plans on a set of vulnerable axioms.

Hadn't Shuster blanched when he'd learned that she had studied law? Why, if not because the company he worked for were flying a perilously tight orbit?

"Studholme and Zacharias versus the Perseus Asteroid Mining Company, 2011," she murmured aloud. "A contract entered into by one of the parties with intent to deceive or defraud is not a valid contract."

How far did the term "intent to deceive or defraud" extend? Did it include the setting of traps to make the victim

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

break the conditions of employment, or was that covered by the "caveat signator" ruling in Bücher versus the Ngat Yu Rare Earths Combine, 2066? Not likely; the latter case concerned the supply of goods, not payment of salary or exercise of an employee's contractual benefits.

Chin in hand, staring at nothing, she concentrated on what she remembered of the great trail-blazing precedents with a ferocity her college instructors would have applauded—though they might have been astonished. Gubbins and Kinoshita versus the Loki Rhodium Monopoly, 2012: "A company in law is a corporate counterpart of the individual; hence an individual and a company enter into a contract with equal standing before the law"—not very helpful, since most subsequent judges had tended to be influenced by the fact that Judge Petropavlov had been institutionalized three weeks later for senile dementia

What a flimsy house-of-cards-like structure the law was, when you examined it in this state of mind! How many people's lives—and deaths, she reminded herself with a shudder—had been affected by what a judge had had for breakfast!

She rose determinedly to her feet. She knew, or at any rate she could reasonably believe, that from now until the harvesting ship returned to Zygra every moment of the day and night she would be watched by recorders in some form or another, so that government computers on Nefertiti could be assured of the legality of this operation. What could she say or do to make certain the computers cited this moment, now, to bring to the attention of the government's human officials?

She took a deep breath and addressed the air.

"My name is Kynance Foy." She added the date and time. "I have been engaged in the capacity of supervisor here by the Zygra Company. As a result of certain remarks made to me by Executive Shuster of that company, I believe that an attempt will be made to infringe the spirit of the contract of employment I have entered into. I adduce as circumstantial evidence the admitted fact that none of my nine immediate predecessors has managed to complete his year of duty and

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

collect his salary. Compare Studholme and Zacharias versus the Perseus Asteroid Mining Company, 2011—I think,” she concluded on a more doubtful note.

Merely saying it made her feel immensely better at once. Let the Zygra Company beware—Kynance Foy, armed with her Earthside non-specialist education, was a different proposition from some neurotic Nefertitian! (But better not say that aloud, for fear it might offend officials of that planet’s government.)

If she could leave nothing else behind her—if they did in fact murder her—at least she might be remembered as a legal precedent. Humming, sustained by that vicarious form of immortality, she began to survey the surroundings in which she found herself.

IX

LOGICALLY, the first thing to do was to count the jaws of the trap. She already had her mental list of obvious pitfalls; now she turned it into a written catalogue, which grew with dismaying speed as she surveyed her surroundings.

They were taking no chances, for instance, with injury or sickness. She had never seen the threshold of an automatic medicare cabinet set so low. If she so much as slept the clock around, she would waken to find a snuffling servo making metabolic checks beside the bed, and behind it, alert for the trigger-signal, the prosthetics responsible for the fiction of "live human occupancy" and hence continued ownership of the planet.

Just a second, though. She narrowed her eyes as something half-shadowed at the base of the medicare master unit caught her attention. Even someone seriously enough injured to require hundred percent life-support of the quality available here was entitled to compulsory repatriation—Abdul Gamaliel Higgins versus the Systemwide Communications Company, 2018: "An individual legally alive in respect of the Celestial Bodies Occupancy Act is legally alive in respect of any other contract or obligation whatsoever." That had been an interesting case—the only one on the galactic statute book where the proxies who had fought the case had been held unable to benefit from the success of it.

In short: you can't have it both ways.

But the Zygra Company seemed determined to do so. There was something at the very back of this medicare unit which she didn't think belonged. Cautiously she fetched a circuit-tracer and began to work out what it was. Before touching anything, of course, she spoke to the impersonal recorders monitoring her every movement.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

"I suspect a malfunction in part of the automatic equipment and propose to verify the suspicion. 'Inspection for the purpose of verification or repair of non-manually operated equipment does not constitute sabotage'—the Lyon et Marseilles Freight Company versus Adolphe ben Hossein, 1992!"

When she finally did discover the purpose of the mysterious addition to the cabinet, she was shaking with fury. It was nothing more than a self-fatiguing resonator plate, attached as one of the seals on the piping from the plasma store, far below in the station's bowels, to the life-supporting prosthetics here. To what signal it was sensitive she couldn't be sure, but she suspected it would resonate to the frequencies generated as *Zygra One* boomed down to land on the station's steel deck. Broken, it would admit air to the pipe, and—that would be the end of the supervisor, and of the company's worry about the cost of repatriation. "In the event of an employee's decease, funerary arrangements shall be undertaken in accordance with custom at his place of origin; next of kin may exercise right of repatriation but the company shall be at liberty to stow the remains in an unpressurized hold." That was a very recent decision: *Relict of Arthur Wong versus Universal Exploitation*, 2176.

Of course, the fractured plate would have been replaced with a sound one automatically before the starship's crew emerged to find the body

For a little while after that she was cast into despair again. There was something fiendishly subtle about a trap so simple yet so nearly infallible—how could she ever hope to match the deviousness of the minds who had conceived it?

Yet as she proceeded with her survey her spirits lightened anew. The Zygra Company's planners had themselves been victims of circumstance. Developing new planets at high pressure—in her earlier image, homesteading half a continent with scrap equipment—led to a particular attitude of mind. The ideal aimed at was "turn her on and let her run," and the more successful the outworlders had grown at achieving high reliability, the less they had worried about modifications and improvements.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

They had started, right back in the early days of colonization, from a given basis of technical knowledge. They had been too busy applying what they'd already known to undertake much original research; their genius-level breakthroughs had been on the practical, not the theoretical, level. Inspired corner-cutting was no substitute for Earthside-style exhaustive testing. Earth had the manpower to waste on minor changes for the sake of closer tolerances, a one percent improvement in energy consumption, or even for change's own sake. Fashion was a powerful force at home, but its return was still a novelty among the outworlders.

Consequently, when Kynance came to look over the machinery running Zygra, she was struck by an aura of obsolescence. It was by far the largest integrated automatic system in the known galaxy, but for precisely that reason the Zygra Company had chosen to incorporate in it tried and true devices, not ones which lacked adequate field-tests.

The impact was so unexpected she had difficulty fixing it in her mind as real, rather than wishful thinking. She made what comparisons she could in an attempt to convince herself. Suppose, for instance, two centuries previous, it had been necessary to build a transport system across hostile territory—say an African desert. By then, there were hovercraft, monorails, flying mules and so forth to choose from; nuclear power reactors, linear induction motors, fuel-cells, and a number of other possible power sources had been known.

But the decision would almost certainly have been for conventional diesel locomotives hauling conventional trains on steel rails of a type already familiar for a hundred and fifty years or more. In other words, the automatics controlling Zygra were to faster-than-light starships as a railroad to a nuclear power-station.

Which left her in approximately the position of someone trying to stop a diesel locomotive with sheer ingenuity: a tough problem, but not beyond a solution.

Self-preservation came first, though. Actual interference would have to wait.

Even the simplest of her necessary tasks—rigging remote

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

extensions for the central alarm—was tricky, not because she couldn't take precautions against infringing the contract, but because so many things that sprang to mind for the purpose simply weren't available.

She could say to the recording machines, "In my opinion the alarms are inadequate to comply with the conditions of my employment—von Hagen and Machetti versus Ice V Construction Company of Titan, 2119: '*Ceteris paribus* the experience of employees in the field carries more weight than predictions by even the most up-to-date computers not at the site of operations.'"

But she couldn't make a qua-space signal relay out of Zygran wood and old plastic food-boxes.

Somehow she managed to jury-rig her alarm switches. Heartened, she tackled the self-fatiguing plate on the medicare cabinet, exchanging it for a proper seal impervious to anything but a carbide-tooth saw. During that job, she established that the station's central computers were indeed well primed with legal information. The moment she touched the plasma pipe, a warning about her contract dinned into her ears. She waited till it was over, then quoted Lyon et Marseilles versus Hossein again, and tried a second approach. This time the computer didn't raise any objections.

Wonderful! How about a less directly applicable precedent? She thought hard for ten minutes and settled on Yukinawa, dos Passos and Szerelmy versus Ge Nuclear Fusion Monopoly, 2087: "Modifications to automatic machinery which improve its function without detriment to the purposes of the proprietor do not constitute grounds for voiding a contract of employment."

At this point she had a feeling she detected a somewhat unhappy grinding sound in the machinery below the deck on which she stood. A grim smile flitted over her face. The computer's experience obviously didn't include supervisors of *her* stamp.

Later, for the sake of company, it might be fun to rig some vocal-communication circuits with the central computer—no

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

substitute for another human being, but better than nothing.

Although the harvest was over, the area surrounding the main station was still swarming with undersized pelts. It was also, and not by coincidence, at present the largest area of open water on the planet. The solar tide which had drawn the pelts to their rendezvous with the starship had submerged several hundred square miles which ordinarily counted as land by Zygran standards: slimy mudflats and patches of silt temporarily anchored by unconsumed bondroots.

But as the waterlevel subsided, so the pelts, and their herding monitors, and the coating-station and all the rest of the automatically-controlled substations, would disperse over half the planet's surface.

If she wanted to get acquainted at first hand with the whole of her responsibility, now was the time to do so. She could investigate the unexplored portions of the main station at leisure, but everything else would shortly be hull-down over the horizon.

She checked out one of the reserve monitors. It wasn't intended for transporting passengers, and her weight put the deck half an inch below water, but it wouldn't sink, and if she fell off she could always swim back to the main station. Clinging with fingers and toes to the slippery plastic casing of the handling units, she steered it awkwardly to the coating-station.

The place stank like a glue factory. That was a factor she hadn't reckoned with, though it was only to be expected considering that the whole business of this vessel nearly as big as the main station was to concentrate, distill and apply a sort of gummy organic jelly to full-grown pelts. There was probably no time to go back and get a respirator; underfoot she could sense the vibrations of the drive warming, and very soon now the vessel would take off in search of specially rich clumps of the weed with which it started its annual cycle of processing.

Breathing as shallowly as possibly, she toured the whole of it, and everywhere found evidence for her conclusion about

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

the technical status of the devices here. She had never studied organic chemistry properly, but before the boy who had mocked her for not being able to fix her skycar there had been another who had been insufferably proud of his ability in the garden, and she had crammed enough horticulture into her head to wipe the grin off his face. This enabled her to say without fear of argument (*Argument with whom?* muttered an annoying small voice at the back of her mind) that any competent Earthside organochemist could have increased the efficiency of the coating-station by fifty percent inside of a week.

She crossed next to one of the substations which rode herd on the monitors in the same way that the latter did on the pelts: tracking them, reporting to the main station their location and the environment they encountered and performing routine repairs and maintenance. She was barely in time; some instinct was exciting the pelts, and a gorgeous polychrome stream of them was heading westwards, compelling the automatics to start scattering. But she was aboard it long enough to make doubly sure of her conclusions.

"That cuts the company down to size!" she told the air as she swam back to the main station—her monitor had answered a call from its parent and was well out of reach, but she didn't mind the short swim because it gave her the chance to speak aloud without being recorded. "I must stop thinking of it as a bunch of infinitely clever villains, and regard it as a belligerent dinosaur: big, but stupid!"

She clambered up the side of the main station and stood looking out over the steel deck with pools of water dripping from her clothes. Now at least she knew what she had to do. All it would take to save her from infringing her contract was a mixture of caution and dirty-minded suspiciousness. And once that was settled, she could let herself relax occasionally. The climate was damp, but at least it was warm—when the sun broke through, it would be quite pleasant to lie out here on the deck and acquire an all-over tan . . .

She turned slowly through a complete circle, a hint of awe

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

coloring her thoughts as she at last took in what it meant to be in charge of a whole planet almost the size of Earth.

—And froze, staring at something impossible, incredible, intolerable. In letters of fire a clause from her contract blazed across her field of vision: a clause she had thought there was no risk of breaking, but which in this instant she realized was the one she could not force herself, here, now, to comply with.

Not if she wanted to keep company with herself for the rest of her life.

Even a wave is a signal, she realized bitterly. At least she could keep her hands by her sides. But all that could do was postpone the reckoning. She was already doomed.

X

"TOO LATE!" Victor moaned. "The bastard's made us too late!"

By "bastard" he meant the miserable Dickery Evan, whose weight slumped across the stern of their clumsy "boat" made it even more difficult than usual to force through the water. They had been able to do nothing for him except feed him and re-tie the displaced splint on his broken forearm—and at that, Horst suspected, they hadn't helped noticeably. Unless he got back to civilization he would have a deformed arm until he died.

Coberley rounded on Victor. "Be quiet!" he thundered. "Maybe you could have left the character to die out there, but I couldn't have. And what do you mean, anyway—he made us too late? Who was supposed to be navigating us? Who sent us straight into a mudbank, hey?"

Horst winced, remembering the loathsome sucking sensation of that mud around his legs up to the knee as he and Coberley had struggled to get their craft afloat again. They had still been trying to find a line of clear water more than a few inches deep and pointing in the direction they wanted to go, when they'd heard the knelling sound of the starship taking off again.

"It wasn't my fault we ran aground!" Victor screamed. "I wasn't in the bow looking out for shoals, was I?"

Horst caught Coberley's eye and scowled at him. "There's no point in arguing with him," he muttered. "He's in one of his down-phases again. We're lucky he's stayed on the up-swing this long—at least if he goes completely crazy now we know we're close to where we want to get."

It was pretty slim comfort. Victor's cycles of clear thinking alternated with periods of moody noncommunication, sometimes lasting for days on end, out of which he would

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

only emerge to voice complaints or angry insults. He should never have come to Zygra. The isolation had broken him completely.

Horst twisted his mouth in a parody of a smile. Should *any* of them have come here?

And now: this last absurd desperate gamble ahead of them. What a plot to be hatched by four naked men, one almost insane, one driven only by hate, and one crippled with a broken arm!

As for the fourth . . .

He shook his head violently. He dared not wonder if he himself was still mentally normal.

Mechanically pumping the paddle with hands that had forgotten how to report the pain of exhaustion, he stared at the prospect ahead. At least there was no further immediate risk of running aground—the tide had deepened the water to maximum and in places it was now sixty feet deep. Curiously abbreviated, the stems and fronds of the longest bottom-plants swayed against their own reflections: mud-sequoias, aquatic arbutus, mock-magnolia—the latter heavy with blossoms of an unhealthy greenish-white unconnected with their own life-cycle, being aerophytes more akin to orchids than anything else familiar to humans.

At this moment, his impulse was to be thankful for the parasite flowers. There was no animal life at all on Zygra, so flowers to attract insects were irrelevant and all pollination took place via water or wind; the oxygen-cycle was closed by putrefying bacteria, not animal lungs.

But thinking about the flowers reminded him of their isolation, their ensnarement, their reduction to miserable skulking half-starved beasts. Worse than beasts. They too had become parasites on the lush but drab vegetation of Zygra. And not very successful parasites, at that, he added as he glanced down at his wasted body.

He forced himself off that line of thought too. Better to go over their plan and try to convince himself it was feasible.

We should have worked up the courage for it when Solomon was still alive

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

At that, so clearly and mockingly that he swung around to see if the words had actually been spoken, his memory shouted in Victor's voice of a few minutes back: "*Too late!*"

Right back at the beginning, years ago, somebody he had heard of in garbled fashion from Victor and Coberley had been foolish enough to think the Zygra Company would simply take pity on an employee—*ex*-employee—stranded here. He'd hung around the main station, eking out a diet of whatever edible stems and seeds he could lay hands on, until the starship had landed, and then had shown himself.

The crew, under orders from some company official, had shot him down, affecting to mistake him for a pirate or some other rival illegally on this private planet, or perhaps a wild beast—on a world without animals!

The frightening moral of that, for the others who followed, was to keep clear of the annual human visitors. Accordingly, devious ways were tried of getting messages out. The pelts were not normally inspected by the humans who came to pick them up, but crated and loaded by machinery. Horst had been told that one year there had been an attempt to get a message into a pelt-crate. What had seemed like a fool-proof method had been worked out.

The station, with majestic disregard for life other than the pelts', had smashed the man's legs with an automatic packing-press—and that had been the end of a year's cunning and scheming.

Another year, hiding messages in young pelts had been tried, in the hope that inspection on arrival would reveal they had been tampered with. Nothing had come of that, though no lives had been lost.

Another year—

Oh, it wasn't important. Men had died: had been killed, or had just withered away from deficiency diseases. Time had passed. The company had ignored the stranded men on Zygra, and would go on doing so until they became a nuisance. Perhaps it was a source of surprise that they survived so long on their own. It was certainly nothing more. Sabotaging the

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

pelt-crop was nearly impossible, with a monitor accompanying every herd; it was taken for granted that approaching the main station was tantamount to suicide; getting a message off-planet was out of the question except once a year and then—likewise

This, though, was only the second time they had been so numerous. When Horst had joined Coberley, his immediate predecessor, and Victor, who had been around for perhaps two, perhaps three previous years, he had raised the total to its all-time high. Then Solomon had joined them, and they'd begun to recall the taste of hope, especially when they had devised the notion of seizing and smashing a monitor so that its parent station would have to ship it back to the main station for large-scale overhaul, carrying a man hidden in its pelt-compartment.

But now Solomon was dead, and their newest recruit was both crippled by his arm and partly dazed with pain.

Enough. More than enough. Now was the time to gamble and if necessary lose everything. Death would be better than this half-aware existence, this fetid damp vegetable continuation of what had once been human lives.

Furious at the very start of it, railing blindly against the company that had trapped him into breaking his contract, Horst had screamed at Coberley, telling him they ought to go straight back to the main station and tackle the new supervisor.

To which Coberley had said only, "Suppose Victor and I had come asking you for help?"

And Horst had shut his mouth on a vomit-like rising of self-disgust. He had no loyalty to the Zygra Company, to keep him within the terms of his contract, but he had needed to serve out his time and collect his pay.

There had been a certain girl . . .

Lost forever now. Probably thinks I'm dead. But wouldn't have made inquiries to find out.

He was coming to feel that humanity was a horrible species, glamorous on the outside with a sort of star-spangled gaudiness, but inside stinking and foul with rot.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

So now: the double-or-nothing throw. Approach the main station, risking being spotted by the newly arrived—hence still alert—supervisor (it would have been safer to wait till he was lulled into apathy and the assumption that the whole of his stay would be a lonely vacation, but they couldn't stand further delay); either invoke his help, which he couldn't give without breaking his contract, or goad him into exposing himself where they could overpower him, then set about wrecking the automatics so thoroughly that the company would have to send an unscheduled ship. Which might excite interest at government level, and save them from simply being killed off.

A thin chance indeed. But it was all they had. And Horst felt it might work. After all, unless something more blatant had been installed since he'd last seen the main station, all its weapons had had to be disguised as something else and excused as "devices to prevent willful sabotage." The Nefer-titian inspectors hadn't winked at computer-operated laser guns or anything of that kind.

He wasn't looking at anything now—hadn't been, for how long he didn't know. His mind was far away and his motions were as unthinking as a machine's. He hadn't heard Coberley tell him to stop paddling; it took the man's savage back-handed slap to make him aware of his surroundings.

Dazed, he stared over the water. There was the coating station, apparently just beginning to get up power to go hunt weeds; there were the substations and monitors in a sea of unripe pelts; there was the main station, its landing-deck glistening in the watery sunlight, and on the deck—

"It's a woman," Horst said softly.

Coberley, who had been snapping out some sort of orders from sheer habit, broke off. "What?"

"It's a woman!" Horst repeated, trying to rise to his feet and re-learning what he had forgotten in the heat of the moment: this craft had no bottom except for the clumped bladderwrack cysts.

"How do you know?"

"My eyes aren't *that* bad." Horst closed and rubbed them,

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

then looked again. "Yes, there's no question about it—a woman. Do you hear me, Coberley?"

But Coberley wasn't listening. He was trying to stop Victor from waving at the new supervisor.

"Get your head down! We want this damned boat to look like a raft of flotsam, not—"

"*He-elp!*" Dickery Evan ignored him, flinging his good arm into the air and waving as frantically as Victor. "*He-e-elp!*"

Why shouldn't a woman who'd taken on this job be as callous as a man? She'd have taken the post for the same reasons as they had, her predecessors, and she'd know as well as they that even to wave back was to forfeit her pay at the end of her year's tour: signaling to someone not employed by the Zygra Company voided the contract.

Yet Horst was waving too, now, and shouting, and after a moment of silent fury even Coberley gave in and did the same.

XI

DOOMED OR NOT, Kynance realized sickly, nothing in the galaxy could prevent her from giving assistance to those men on their weird makeshift boat. So within a couple of days of starting her year-long tour, she could kiss goodbye to her chance of repatriation. For all her attempts to persuade herself that she was going to win out, it had been an illusion all along. Unless those were survivors from a starship which had crashed on Zygra—and the odds against that were enormous—their presence could be accounted for in only one way.

They must be what Shuster had called "previous incumbents," deliberately disqualified from the company's employ and left to live or die as the planet let them.

Their arrival proved one thing, of course: the Zygra Company's insistence that this place was uninhabitable without millions of credits' worth of equipment was at least an exaggeration and probably a downright lie. She shuddered as she contemplated the idea of having to wrest a living from this boundless marshland.

Among the—how many? She narrowed her eyes and counted: four men.—Among them, there must be at least one of remarkable talent and determination. You'd have expected resignation or even suicide by this time.

Somebody like that shouldn't be abandoned to fate, even by a callous super-organism like the Zygra Company. She clenched her fists and turned towards the observation dome, through which access was gained to the interior of the main station. She was meticulously careful not to indicate that she had noticed them; if her contract was going to be voided, the moment must be delayed still another few minutes, until she had taken some necessary precautions.

For instance, if the computer was under orders to refuse

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

compliance with her commands the moment she waved—in the terms of the contract, signaled or attempted to signal to someone who wasn't an employee—all hell might break loose; there would be no more booming warnings when she touched a part of the automatic machinery, nor opportunities to justify her actions with legal precedents. She would simply be treated as a saboteur and the machines would defend themselves.

Her mind raced. Those men would need food, showers, clothing, perhaps medical attention, so she had to isolate the autochef, the domestic services and the medicare unit from the central control. But in order to gain access they would have to be allowed aboard the main station, so she must find a reason to keep the computer from blocking their path

Geoffrey Kotilal versus Astronaut Ambulance Company, 2094! Where the ambulance pilot, *en route* to a disaster already attended by three rival firms, had declined to rescue a lone spaceman who'd lacked a guarantee of payment, and had been held negligent on the grounds that "the duty of any person in space to save the life or attempt to save the life of any other person in space is paramount above considerations of remuneration."

Stretching it a bit to apply it to rescue operations on a planetary surface, since it specified "in space" . . . But—

She whistled. Hadn't it been ruled, in McGillicuddy and Kropotkin versus Callisto Methane Derivatives, 2106, that interplanetary space included any solid body not possessed of its own independent jurisdiction? As of this moment, therefore, the whole planet Zygra counted as an asteroid.

She was driving her nails so deep into her palms that it hurt. A tremendous wave of excitement had gripped her. A sort of drunkenness was making her sway. There was no time to examine this crazy notion of hers in detail; she would just have to make the latest and wildest of all her gambles, and trust that her memory, or some later precedent superseding those she had studied, wouldn't blast a hole in her plan.

Feverishly she ran to get tools and attacked the various

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

automatic devices she was most likely to need. She couldn't think of any better excuse to repair the medicare unit than the one she had already used—suspected malfunction—but the computer, though it generated an aura of puzzlement and distrust, didn't actually argue until the greater part of the job was finished.

Then, firmly, it slammed the front panel of the master monitor control unit and reported its own ignorance of any fault in that system. Kynance bit her lip. She had hoped to add at least one of the really crucial control circuits to the list of those she had isolated from the computer before she rendered the job effectively permanent by disconnecting the circuit-restorers in the central maintenance block. But—well, at any minute now that ridiculous bladder-and-stick boat might come bobbing up to the station's hull, and she would have to concede a showdown.

She ran to the circuit-restorer, uttered her little piece about suspected malfunction, and cut off its power. On a casuistic legal basis, she could justify this because anyone attempting manual repairs to circuits like these risked being fried with several hundred volts.

The central computer was now half-paralyzed, but the services necessary to make life tolerable, if not comfortable, were all removed from its jurisdiction and under manual control. Anything else?

She forced herself to stand rock-still for half a minute, surveying everything in sight, then decided she dared spend no more time down here in case the computer accused her of sabotage and voided her contract on those grounds. That would be fatal.

She dashed towards the observation dome and emerged into sight of the four naked men as they paddled their boat to within fifty yards of the main station. Then she waved, and hallooed, and invited them to come aboard.

"She's gone to get a gun!" Victor whimpered as the woman vanished.

"Think so?" Coberley blasted. "Then why didn't you get

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

your head down instead of waving at her and drawing her attention?"

"Maybe she didn't see us," Dickery Evan suggested weakly.

"Of course she saw us!" Coberley growled. "Horst, which way is the current carrying us?"

"No current worth speaking of." Horst shrugged. "We'll have to paddle over there, and take the risk of being driven off by force. If we'd managed to catch the tidal surge as it passed this point—"

"I wasn't in the front looking for shoals!" Victor shouted.

I give up. Horst grasped his paddle and sank it into the silty water. On the second stroke, when Coberley joined in, he realized with a shock how completely he meant that. If this woman was going to do what Coberley had accused him of doing in the same circumstances—ignoring them, refusing to help because it would mean voiding her contract—he would be glad to die. He wouldn't want to rejoin the human race if a member of it could be so cynically cruel.

After that, there was a long period of nothing but paddling, the ragged rhythm of splashes blotting out coherent thought. Around them the pelts scattered and the impassive automatics plotted the directions they were taking, fed power to engines and set monitors and substations on the first leg of their annual wanderings. If one of the monitors had headed straight for them, Horst decided later, they would have lacked the energy to turn aside and avoid a collision.

Fortunately, nothing barred their way until they were within fifty yards or so of the main station, at which point the woman reappeared. She was panting hard and had to regain her breath before she called to them, but it was clear that she intended to recognize them and give help.

"Come on! This way! Come on!" she cried, waving with both arms like a mad semaphorist.

Behind Horst there was an unaccountable noise. He glanced around and saw that Dickery Evan had put his head down into the palm of his good hand and was sobbing with relief.

Not case-hardened like the rest of us, Horst thought. He gathered his force for an answering shout at the woman a-

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

head, and was just choosing words when another voice rang out: the dreadful mechanical doom-laden call which all of them knew far too well.

"You have signaled to or in some other fashion communicated with a person or persons not employed by the Zygra Company. Accordingly your contract is void."

"Oh, God" Coberley breathed in a tiny despairing whisper. "What happens now?"

"Keep paddling," Horst told him, white-lipped. "She's grinning so wide I can see it from here!"

"Come on! It's all right!" The woman had advanced to the very edge of the station's deck, and was making gestures like an embrace to bring them closer.

Simply letting things happen without trying to figure out reasons or explanations, Horst and his companions closed the last gap separating them from the station. The woman dropped on her belly and reached out her arm to help them off their boat. Victor insisted on pushing forward first, nearly sinking them, and went off on a crazy run around the entire deck, head bobbing on his thin neck like a chicken's, crowing with delight and disbelief.

Horst understood the impulse, and wished he could do the same. But there was the injured Evan to be helped onto the deck, and so much weight in one place on the boat tilted it to a dangerous angle. Somehow they managed to lift him and drag him aboard; then Coberley followed, and last of all Horst.

The sensation of solid steel underfoot seemed to magnify his weight enormously. He could barely stand and look at their savior, and try to recognize the instincts which informed him she was well worth looking at: petite, fine-featured, with strange iron-colored hair framing her face.

All he could find to say was an inane question which made him feel so silly he wanted to bite his tongue, yet he had to force it out. "If you've broken your contract, what are you going to do?"

The woman—correction: she was still a girl—gave a tired-

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

looking smile. She said, "Did you expect me to leave you out there to rot?"

"They thought you might!" Victor put in, pausing at the end of his first circuit around the deck and shrieking the words like a parrot.

"I'm not surprised," the girl sighed. "I guess you must have been trapped into breaking your contracts, and you probably feel the whole galaxy is against you after what you've suffered here But it isn't the end of the universe to have been tricked out of your pay and repatriation, you know."

"Damned near!" Coberley muttered. His eyes were switching fearfully from side to side, as though he expected the automatics to pitch them into the sea at any moment.

"No!" the girl insisted. "The mere fact that you're here proves my point, doesn't it? Ah—I take it you are some of the nine of my predecessors who failed to complete their tour of duty?"

"That's right," Horst agreed. "Uh—I'm Horst Lampeter. This is Giuseppe Coberley—Dickery Evan, who's the latest arrived of us four—and Victor Sjoberg is the one going around and around the deck there."

"I'm Kynance Foy," the girl said. "I come from Earth."

"And you've given up your chance of being repatriated?" Horst demanded, as two and two slotted together in his mind.

"What else could I do? What could anyone have done?"

"But—what's the use?" Horst countered. "I mean, here you've voided your contract, so apart from being able to feel a solid floor instead of that disgusting mud there's not much benefit in—"

"Proper food? Medical attention? A hot shower? Even"—Kynance curled her lip into a shadow of a smile, glancing at his bare body with engaging frankness—"clothes?"

"But you're not employed by the company any longer!" Coberley exclaimed. "The automatics won't obey you now!"

"It just so happens," Kynance said in a judicious tone, "that I'm rather particular about automatics which are sup-

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

posed to look after me. I've been doing a check of several of the important systems, and at the moment when I—ah—infringed my contract, quite a few of them were disconnected so that I could check their condition. I don't suppose it will be difficult to convert them to manual operation; all of them except the circuit-restorer are still receiving power."

"But you were forbidden to touch the automatics at all!" That was Dickery Evan, raising his broken arm as mute witness to the truth of his statement.

"Not exactly," Kynance murmured. "Not even the Zygra Company can rewrite galactic legal precedents to suit its own convenience. I assure you that the only thing I've done which did entitle them to fire me was to wave to you, and *that* might not stand up too long in court However, before we get it to a court we have to attend to you. Come along—this way!"

XII

WITHIN AN HOUR, Horst's bewilderment had given way to awe. Nothing much had visibly altered here in the familiar environment of the main station, but in the dragging years since he had been dismissed from his post for trying to re-wire a faulty book-projector classed as "crucial equipment" by virtue of its theoretical use for supplementary briefing, his memory of it had been distorted by nightmares into a kind of hell.

And indeed it had been a gigantic trap for him, ready to spring at the most trivial excuse.

Not for Kynance, though. This astonishing young woman had opened the back of the medicare unit and manually revised the settings first for Evan's arm—now comfortable in a proper plastic healing-sheath instead of his own rough splints—and then for Victor's deficiency disease. Vitamins, proteins, and God-knew-what had gone streaming into his knobbled veins, and now he lay snoozing on the supervisor's bunk for the first time in—how many years had he been a starving wanderer across the face of Zygra?

Not starving any longer. While Horst and Coberley took their turns in the shower-cabinet and borrowed her comb to impose order on their shaggy hair and beards, Kynance had re-routed the organic synthesizer flow supplying the autochef so that it would cope with demands for five portions instead of one, and when they were clean and dressed they found platters of unbelievable food waiting; it had all started its existence as forms of what they had been eating for years, but the transformation was like a miracle. She had even refrained from setting the autochef to *salad*, rightly judging that their diet of uncooked Zygran plants had soured them forever on anything remotely similar.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

Coberley merely tucked in, grunting, as though the source of his energy—hate against the universe in general and the Zygra Company in particular—had dried up and left him without initiative. Horst, though, found himself staring at Kynance and eating by touch alone.

"You must be an extraordinary person!" he burst out at last.

"What have I done?" Kynance parried. "You're the ones who are astonishing. How long have you been out there without help, resources, or"—gesturing at the loaded table—"terrestrial food?"

"That's not so . . ." Horst passed his hand over his face; the fingers were trembling. "Not so important," he finished emptily. "What I mean is—well, if *I'd* done some of the things you seem to have done here, like trying to bring the automatics under control without the computer, I'd have expected to be treated like Dickery here and tossed aside on a clump of floating weed as though I were garbage!"

He repressed a shiver. He still had the sense that he was in a maze full of dangerous traps, and had to keep reminding himself that this mere girl, so much younger than he was, had drawn at least half the teeth of the machinery.

"You must have done something much worse than just interfering with one of the automatics, then," Kynance said, glancing at Evan.

"I guess I did," came the sullen answer. "When this happened to me and the automatics wouldn't listen, I got so mad I wanted to ruin the pelt-crop."

"I thought so." Kynance leaned forward earnestly. "If you hadn't done that, you could have stayed here indefinitely—it's a matter of galactic law that a person in distress and especially in danger of his life, which you could have argued *you* were, being injured and unable to fend for yourself, commits no crime if he helps himself to someone's property in order to sustain himself."

"Fat lot of good telling me now," Evan answered sharply.

"Shut up," Coberley said, raising his eyes and checking an enormous gobbet of food on the way to his greasy mouth.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

He turned his gaze to Kynance. "You mean I could have stuck around and just taken whatever I wanted, and they couldn't have stopped me?"

"Goodness, yes. Food and drink and medical supplies, anyway."

"The hell you say," Coberley muttered. "Well, it wouldn't have done me much good, anyhow. I reacted the same as Dickery—got crazy-mad at the company."

"If you'll forgive my saying so . . ." Kynance began, and hesitated.

"Say whatever you like," Horst told her. "You've earned the right." He gestured to indicate the station around them.

"Well, it sounds pretty unfair after what you've all been through . . ." She bit her lip. "Frankly, though, I think you walked into this with your eyes shut, and it was damned silly of you."

"Think we don't realize that?" Horst exclaimed. "I've kicked myself twice around the planet! I got into this because it looked like a shortcut to getting a girl I wanted. I was no prize and I thought I could make myself into one. I'd been a damned fool all my life, skipping from one course of study to another until I'd wound up without a decent degree in anything, and that meant I couldn't hold a job drawing the kind of salary this girl had in mind, so I volunteered for Zygra against the advice of what few friends I had . . ."

He broke off. Kynance was looking at him oddly. "A bit of a romantic, hm?" she said. "The outworlds aren't kind to romantics, as I've recently learned."

"Call trying to buy a girl with a year of your life 'romantic'?" Coberley jeered. Some of his spirit seemed to have returned with the food he'd engulfed.

"I didn't quite mean that," Kynance said. "What I had in mind was this bit about skipping from subject to subject instead of buckling down and fitting himself into the right sort of mold for Nefertiti. You *are* Nefertitian?" she added. Horst gave a nod. "There can't be many people like that on the outworlds, and it's one of the things I've missed most: people who like to associate with people, spend times chat-

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

ting idly, instead of driving themselves around the clock. I'd figured out that at least some of the volunteers for Zygra must have been like you, because there's so little room for them anywhere off Earth. The outworlds don't offer them the chance for a decent living."

"I often thought I'd like to go to Earth," Horst admitted. "But there was nothing I could have done—except come here—where I'd have a chance of making the cost of the fare." He paused briefly. "And you know something else? I guess that's why I never made any real friends at home. Everybody else on the whole damned planet seemed to be so involved in making a career, earning a fortune—while to me it simply didn't seem like enough to give purpose to a man's life."

"Listen to him!" scoffed Coberley. "He's been going on like this ever since I first knew him, playing the same tape over and over."

"What induced *you* to come to Zygra?" Kynance inquired.

"Me? I was stupid, same as Horst and Dickery and Victor. Wouldn't think it to look at me now, but when I was Horst's age I had muscles and there was a big demand for men who were built, back on Loki—which is my home world. I didn't have too many brains to go with the muscles, though, and I got kind of left behind by events. So I jumped at what I thought was a snap."

"Dickery?"

He told her, with many sighs, about what he had planned to do with the salary he would have collected on leaving here. It made him seem like what she had at first guessed: a rather nice, but lazy, man not bright enough to invest twenty years' hard work in some other job against the promise of later enjoyment. Easy meat for the Zygra Company. All of them were, including Victor, about whom the others reported that in a fit of deep depression he'd decided he wanted to get the hell away from the entire human race, and had grabbed this job as a hermitage. Of course, when his condition had cycled back to the upward phase, he'd regretted it.

"Do any of you know why the Zygra Company adopted this policy of changing its supervisors annually, recruiting

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

them on this absurd basis and deliberately trapping them into infringing their contracts?" she asked next.

"I think so," Horst answered. "Victor knew the man before him, who knew the first of these nine Shuster told you about. It seems that there was a man called Zbygniewski who was planted by another company to find out what he could about this place and the life-cycle of the pelts. He must have been armored up to the roof of his skull with post-hypnotics and drugs, because he got through the company's routine interrogation, joined the staff, was assigned to his tour of duty here—it was farmed out among permanent employees then, you see—and after his year's stay he got away with information that enabled his bosses to launch the most nearly successful of all the raids on Zygra. He'd also planted a boobytrap for his successor, the idea being that this would make the planet legally unoccupied so that someone else could land and claim possession before the harvesting ship came to pick up the next crop."

He broke off. Something in Kynance's expression had given him a clue to what she was thinking. He said, listening to his own words in near-bewilderment, "Legally—unoccupied . . .?"

"Not so fast," Kynance objected, raising a hand. But she also gave him a wink. "I assume that this boobytrap he left was what started the company on its present course?"

"I gather from hints I've picked up that it was Shuster's idea, the thing that advanced him in the company," Horst said.

"That fits," Kynance nodded. "A swine like him wouldn't be much liked even by the fellow swine who must run the Zygra Company, so you'd expect him to have done something exceptionally nasty to get ahead to where he is now. And the dirty underhandedness of the traps people run into matches his personality."

"You can say that again," agreed Dickery Evan fervently.

"Just how underhanded?" Kynance went on, disregarding the interruption. "Would you please tell me how each of you was inveigled into breaking his contract?"

So they did. Horst wondered optimistically if some of the

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

means employed would turn out to be illegal—Kynance seemed to know a great deal about the law. But that hope was quenched as time after time she cited reasons to justify the company's position.

To Evan she said, "I'm afraid tampering with an officially-required record of your work does count as sabotage and voids the contract without chance of appeal: Levi Rico versus Free Space Haulage Company, 2153."

And to Horst she said rather sadly, "I know they might never have used that book-projector to give you supplementary instructions, but legally you were not entitled to do anything that risked garbling vital information from your employers. Computers are legally non-conscious machines, hence devoid of intelligence, so you should have told the record that you suspected a malfunction needing manual repairs—then you'd have been within your rights."

And to Coberley, who had been snared through trying to reset the autochef when it had burned his breakfast: "The computer was bound to consider the chance that you might alter another of its settings and perhaps poison yourself—Fernando Duquesne versus the Osceola Food Company, 2099, is quite clear on that."

"All right, since you're so smart," Coberley spat, "now tell us what we can do to get off this stinking mudball!"

"I'm not sure I can do that," Kynance admitted.

"Then what in the name of—?"

"Coberley, pipe down!" Horst rapped. "This girl has done things you and I wouldn't have had the guts to try even if we'd thought of them."

"That's nothing very special," Kynance said. "You see—well, it strikes me that you outworlders are too used to relying absolutely on machines. It's only natural; you've done miracles with integrated automatic systems which were never needed on Earth, like this one which looks after Zygra so efficiently. When your life depends on them, you don't interfere with their operations. The moment I caught sight of you paddling your boat along, I realized I'd fallen into the same trap—swallowed whole what the Zygra Company told me

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

about the planet being impossible to colonize and even the single supervisor needing life-support equipment costing millions of credits."

"I thought you wouldn't have sacrificed your contract without some plan in mind," Horst said softly.

"If it's not a plan to get us out of here I'm not interested," Coberley snapped.

"It may well lead to that," Kynance told him. "Though at best it's going to involve a delay of a year—a Zygran year, I mean. There are one hell of a lot of compensations, nonetheless. You might say there's a fat prize attached which will more than make up for the salaries we've lost."

Dickery sat up and began to take notice, and she unfolded to them the fantastic scheme which had come to her in a flash of inspiration.

XIII

THE REAL IRONY of the whole thing, Kynance reflected as she tried to stifle her boundless impatience, was the way the situation kept turning on little pivots of time, a few days or even a few hours in size, separated by enormous gulfs of months or years when they did nothing except sit around and wish for the future to catch up with them, because they dared not do anything.

If, for example, the four men had been a couple of days later in reaching the main station aboard their clumsy raft, her inspired plan would have been impossible to implement for at least another year, and *then* they would have had to wait the compulsory year following until the harvesting ship made its regular trip.

So now, too, they had to wait, hating every minute's limping progress, for an arbitrary deadline—whereupon they would have to cram into a few narrow hours the fruit of months upon months of scheming, plotting, thinking, arguing, examining and re-examining.

And it might all come to nothing in the end—some petty snare might still catch a foot and bring the enterprise to a foolish halt.

They were assembled in the observation dome, where she had rigged a remote for the calendar clock in the supervisor's quarters. The hands were ticking now towards the red line she had carefully inscribed across the face first thing to-day. One by one they had fallen silent; the chattering that had signaled the release of old tension, now that the day of their revenge was here, hadn't lasted, and now they sat and sweated, or paced up and down, or went to the head from nervousness rather than need.

"*Can't we?*" Dickery suggested, and didn't have to specify

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

what, but he closed his hand on the can of paint beside him on his bench-seat.

"No!" Horst rasped. "Kynance has explained over and over—this has got to be done so watertight that nobody, not even a dozen Zygra Companies, could spring a leak in it!"

"I don't know how much longer I can bear to wait," Victor complained. But he had been saying the same thing daily for half a year, and they ignored it as a formality.

At first, Kynance remembered, she had scarcely expected to survive to this moment. The strain of knowing that yet one more year must leak away had almost climaxed in murder—it had caused at least three fights between Evan and Coberley, and one between Evan and Horst. But that kind of thing had stopped; the pressure behind it had seeped away as one by one they'd begun to accept the consequences of their joint action.

She had first begun to let herself believe in success the day she'd come upon Coberley—of all the men, Coberley!—standing by himself at the edge of the huge steel deck of the station, staring at the white sunlight on the pools of water pitting the nearest mudflats, at the matted vegetation, at the drab olive-dun shapes of some unripe pelts drifting ahead of a tireless monitor.

He'd stood several moments longer without realizing he was being watched; then, noticing her, he'd turned and given a scowl. He'd said, "Damned bastards in the Zygra Company—trying to pretend this isn't a fit world for human beings!"

After that, it had become possible to regard her companions as colleagues, and the tone of their discussions together had altered from desperate—a search for escape—to proud. Even Victor, whose bitterness was too deeply ingrained in his personality by years of privation ever to be eliminated completely had done his best to spare the others the effects of it, and had taken to stealing away on his own to sweat out his indefinable fear.

What a bunch of misfits! Kynance thought, and then added with a burst of near-affection: *Yet there's something spe-*

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

cial about anyone, neurotic or normal, who'll accept the responsibility of looking after a whole damned planet!

And the finest integrated automatic system in the galaxy made no difference one way or the other to that basic truth.

"Kynancel" Horst said harshly, and she started. While she had been wrapped in thought, the clock had reached the red line.

She took a deep breath, and began to recite the necessary legal formulas. They seemed to take half of eternity, but they could not be skipped; "it is necessary not only that justice be done, but that it be seen to be done."

Finally she ran out of words and breath at the same time. She could only give a nod to her companions, and they shot away like so many rising starships to tackle the jobs she had assigned them.

With paint, with circuit-tracers, with meters and gauges and sheets of paper on which computer programs had been fair-copied after a dozen revisions, they set out to conquer Zygra.

The boom of the starship at the edge of atmosphere reached them just as the job was finished. Dickery, paint on face and hands, was the last to join them in the observation dome, and they grinned at him and slapped each other on the back before turning to watch the ship make its landing.

The impact of Dickery's work was all that could have been hoped for. The moment the drive died, and the viewports of the ship were opened to local air, a head appeared from what must have been the bridge compartment. It turned to survey the station, and was confronted with Dickery's handiwork: letters three feet high running along the side of the observation dome.

They said ZYGRA MAIN SPACEPORT.

Another head appeared. There was some shouting. A third head peered out—by the glitter on the shoulders below, it belonged to the captain. And then Shuster appeared.

"All right then," Kynance said with uncharacteristic grim-

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

ness. "I think it's time to go and welcome them, don't you?"

She looked at Horst. He said suddenly, "Kynance, have I ever told you I think you're the most extraordinary person I've ever met?"

"Just as well," Victor said. "The galaxy would fall apart if there were many more like her."

Kynance flushed, gathered up the folder of documents she had prepared against this moment, and led the way onto the deck. In the shadow of the newly arrived starship, they formed a semicircle and waved cheerfully to the astonished crewmen peering out of the bridge.

Another couple of minutes, and the nearest passenger lock shot open to disgorge Shuster and several others, including the second mate who had tried to remonstrate when Kynance had shown up to join the ship at Nefertiti. They were armed with lasguns, and she had to force herself not to step back in sheer panic.

But she had rehearsed this moment mentally so many times that the necessary words sprang to her lips without conscious decision. She found herself saying, "Which of you is the senior representative of the company operating this vessel? You have not signified acceptance of the scale of harbor dues in force at this spaceport, and you are required to agree to the terms and furnish proof of ability to meet them before discharging or loading cargo."

Shuster had gone as white as a comet's tail. He had recognized all of them as ex-supervisors of this private treasure-planet, and the shock of being confronted by four men and a woman he'd given up for dead was too much for him.

He pulled the rags of his self-possession together and started to bluster.

"What is all this nonsense? Put these pirates under arrest!"

So it had penetrated his thick skull already—the central fact that he couldn't just order them burned down where they stood. Kynance acknowledged that that was a very fast deduction.

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

She said aloud, "Are you the senior company official, then?"

"You know damned well I am!" Shuster roared. "And I want to know the meaning of this—this *slogan* you've scrawled on my company's main station!" He shot out an arm at the huge white letters across the observation dome.

"Not yours," Kynance said delicately.

The second mate lowered his gun and gestured for his companions to do the same. With worried glances at Shuster they complied.

"What nonsense are you spouting?" Shuster raged. "I—"

"Is there somebody up there with a recorder?" Kynance called to the men leaning out of the bridge, ignoring Shuster's fury.

"Ah—" A hasty whispered conference, and then a defiant cry to assure them there was, and everything was being recorded in full, "So that you damned pirates and claim-jumpers will get what's coming to you!"

Kynance drew herself up to her full height, such as it was, and heard behind her a mutter of encouragement: "Give it to 'em, girl!" She thought it was Coberley's voice.

"If there is any piracy going on around here, it looks as though it's on your side, landing a party of"—she counted rapidly—"nine armed men at this spaceport!"

"Spaceport!" shouted Shuster. "This is the Zygra Company's main station!"

"Correction," Kynance informed him. "This is Zygra Main Spaceport, under the control and direction of the Zygra Port Operations Company—keep that recorder pointed at me!" she added in a sudden bellow the force of which amazed her. "I want the whole story down for any legal investigation that may be needed to substantiate what I'm about to tell you!"

The snout of the recorder wavered, but remained trained.

"My name is Kynance Foy. I was engaged to act as supervisor of this planet on behalf of the Zygra Company, to conform with the legal requirement that a celestial body to which a claim of absolute sovereignty is laid must be occupied by at least one living person. My contract for-

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

bade me to signal or in any way communicate with a person not an employee of the company.

"Within two days of the commencement of my tenure I was approached by four ex-incumbents of the post I now held, who had been inveigled into infringing their contracts—"

"It's a slanderous lie!" screamed Shuster. Kynance disregarded him.

"—and who consequently were no longer employees of the company. By waving to them, later by speaking to them, I invalidated my own contract and thereupon automatically ceased to be an employee of the Zygra Company.

"Since that moment, the planet Zygra has reverted to the status of an *unclaimed celestial body*. It is well established that to maintain its claim of sovereignty a company must maintain representation on its behalf."

"Oh, God," said the second mate in a barely audible voice.

"But you can't claim Zygra—" Shuster began, and stopped dead.

"I can," Kynance answered demurely, and wondered when he would start to squirm.

"But—but just a second!" Grasping at a straw, Shuster stumbled over his own tongue. "That doesn't apply to property deposited upon a celestial body—"

"You mean this thing here, the new Zygra Main Port?" Kynance permitted herself a faint smile. "Executive Shuster, are you familiar with the law of salvage?"

"Salvage?" Shuster echoed. "What does that have to do with—?" Suddenly he stopped, seeming to choke as the relevance of it sank in.

"I think you understand me," Kynance said. "Property cast away upon an unclaimed celestial body is subject to reclamation as salvage and sale by the recoverer after a period of one local or one Earthside standard year, whichever is the shorter. It just so happens that the Zygran year is four days and five hours longer than an Earthside year.

"Approximately three hours ago this vessel—note, whether you call it a 'main station' or whatever other name you

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

apply, it is legally of its nature a waterborne vessel, in other words a ship!—was reclaimed as salvage by the Zygra Salvage Company, who thereupon sold it to the present owners with warranty of title. If you wish to exercise a lapsed previous title you must purchase it back from the new owners at the currently accepted estimate of its value. Conservatively, I'd say it's worth a thousand million credits—wouldn't you agree?" She gave him a sunny smile.

"Woman, you're crazy!" Shuster moaned. "Why, that's half the value of our pelts for a year!"

"Your pelts?" Kynance said softly. "I'm sorry, but this was an unclaimed celestial body—had you forgotten already? The pelts are the property of the Zygra Pelt Exporting Company."

"What?"

"They were purchased from the Zygra Pelt Raising Company about—oh—forty minutes ago. The Pelt Raising Company is the new owner of the substations, monitors and coating-station, which they purchased about two and a half hours ago from the Zygra Salvage Company."

Shuster clamped both palms against his temples as though afraid his brain would burst his skull. "What are all these companies you keep talking about?" he whimpered. "You—"

"You forgot something, Executive Shuster," Kynance said. "Are you acquainted with the regulations governing the formation of a company desirous of operating interstellar trade? I am—I studied interstellar commerce in college, as a follow-up to my earlier courses in business law."

"Oh," Shuster said in a dead voice.

"Got there? Better late than never," Kynance told him sweetly. "The moment you allowed five people loose on the surface of this planet you dug your own grave. The law states that a company such as I've described requires five officers: president, chairman, managing director, treasurer and company secretary, of whom not fewer than three must be citizens of the planet where the company is registered. The holding of one office in any given company does not debar

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

an individual from holding the same or another office in some other company. Am I correct?"

Swaying a little on his feet, Shuster stared wildly from one to other of the group facing him, gulping enormous draughts of air.

"Do you wish to inspect the documents relating to the four companies now operating on the planet Zygra?" Kynance asked him formally. "That is to say: the Pelt Raising Company, the Pelt Exporting Company, the—"

"But you can't register a company here!" Shuster shrieked. "A company also has to be registered with a planetary government!"

Kynance fused, dropped and exploded her last and greatest bombshell.

She said, "*We are* a government."

XIV

AND THERE IT WAS. By grace and virtue of the fact that she had been compelled to break her contract less than one Zygran year but more than one Earthside standard year prior to its expiry.

"Whichever is the shorter!" The words rang in her memory like a reprieve from death.

Shuster was beyond speech. Giving him a puzzled glance, the second mate holstered his gun and stepped forward. He said, "I—I guess I don't understand what's gone on here."

Once, long ago, Kynance had had a private dream involving a personable young space officer. This second mate could have fit quite nearly into the rôle she'd envisaged. But that was so far in the past she felt the whole thing had happened to someone else. She only remembered how he, and all his fellows, had shut their mouths when they must have known it was company policy that no supervisor should return from Zygra.

She said clearly, for the benefit of the records, "Don't you? You must be either ignorant or stupid. Three conditions must be fulfilled before an independent government can be set up on any celestial body: first, the body must be fit for human habitation—as is evidenced by the fact that these ex-supervisors of the Zygra Company have survived without artificial aids for many years; second, it must be free of any claim of absolute sovereignty previously registered by an empowered company—and we've been all through that; third, it must be inhabited by members of both sexes. We comply in all respects with these conditions.

"One Earthside standard year, plus one minute, after the abandonment of Zygra by any employee of the company formerly recognized as sovereign here, we became eligible to

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

declare ourselves the legal government, and we did so. Our President, Horst Lampeter!"

Horst stepped forward, eyes a little narrowed against the sun, and scowled at Shuster. He said, "Remember me?"

"Our Minister of Planetside Affairs: Dickery Evan!"

Dickery swaggered forward alongside Horst.

"Our Minister of Trade and Finance!"

Victor joined the row, and Kynance fell in at his right. "I myself," she said, "am serving in the capacity of Minister of External Affairs, and our Minister of Justice is—"

She gestured. Coberley tramped forward. This past year his fat had melted off him, letting the hard muscles of his youth show through, and he hunched menacingly as he approached Shuster, arms swinging loose from the shoulder as if he were prepared to pick the smaller man up bodily and hurl him over the side to drown among the gorgeous pelts gathering for the harvest.

In that instant taut with menace, Shuster must have seen a vision of everything that had combined to threaten him: the dispossession of the company for which he had cheated and betrayed innocents and led them to their deaths, the inevitable investigations, the relentless exposure of all the subtle pitfalls by means of which he had ruined his victims. Beyond the mere financial collapse of the Zygra Company loomed other terrors. Once it was shown that he had deliberately tricked the supervisors into breaking their contracts and then abandoned them to their fate, no government in the galaxy would be able to refrain from ordering the payment of damages to those who had suffered, or to their surviving relatives. The Zygra Company had lost not only its monopoly on the pelts and the means of obtaining them, but its other assets too—its unsold stock, its interstellar freighters, its headquarters building and everything else. Kynance had done some calculations; assuming the fines were levied as a percentage of assets—the usual practice—and the damages as a percentage of the balance, she estimated that the company would have to sell everything in order

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

to pay a month's salary in lieu of notice to its other employees.

A *very* satisfactory outcome.

Shuster put both hands over his face and began to cry.

"But—but doesn't this mean that you're going to have to stay here indefinitely?" the second mate suggested nervously. Overhead, some sort of argument could be heard. Kynance let it proceed uninterrupted. Pretty soon the captain would turn up and the discussion could continue. Meantime . . .

"It sounds as if you've swallowed your company propaganda as willingly as Shuster did," she said. "He came to believe the big lie put out to discourage intruders here—that it required millions of credits' worth of life-support gear to keep a man alive on Zygra. Bunkum! It's perfectly possible to live off the native vegetation, provided you have the determination. How do you think these people managed, hm?"

"But in that case—" the mate began, and stopped short.

"In that case," Kynance confirmed, "Zygra is a greater prize than Loki, or Ge, or a score of other planets that could only be made habitable by importing Earthside plants, animals and bacterial. We are wide open for immigration—or we will be, as soon as we've disposed of our first crop of pelts."

"How are you going to do that?" demanded the mate. "You don't own any ships!"

"No, that's true," Kynance admitted. "But—well, you haven't seen the scale of port charges currently in force. For a ship of this class, they amount to—Victor?"

"A hundred million credits per local day," Victor said with considerable satisfaction.

"What?" the mate and his companions spoke as one.

"Well, any underdeveloped planet needs to exploit its resources," Kynance said. "And currently we only have one—the pelts. Mind you, the rate applicable to the ships under charter to the planetary government of Zygra is substantially lower, and we're extremely interested in chartering a few vessels on a profit-sharing basis."

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

"Do you mean shared among the *crew*?"

"Well, this would involve the setting up of a common fund," Victor said judiciously. "But it's one of the schemes which we've worked out in some detail. If you're interested ...?"

Interested! That was an understatement, Kynance told herself with cynical satisfaction. Her experience before taking off from Nefertiti to come here had shown beyond a doubt that these men were greedy. A share in the most profitable cargoes in the galaxy had looked like the quickest route to their loyalty, and apparently it was working like magic.

"Here's the captain, I see," she murmured. "I wonder how he'll feel about chartering the ship to us."

It took a whole day, but it worked out. Patiently, citing authority after authority with the assurance due to a solid Earth year of milking the legal data banks installed in the central computer of the main station, Kynance showed how it could be done. First came the question of ownership of the cargo: Philpot-Soames and Honegger versus the Transit Company of Loki, 2094, pointed out that it was illegal to transport cargo without the permission of the owners, and hence they could not load pelts without the Zygran government's say-so.

The Zygra Company owned *nothing* on Zygra. They had sent the ship to bring away someone else's property, and this was piracy within the meaning of the precedent set by Balewa and Chatterji versus Earth-Luna Shuttle Corporation back in 1997. No company—*vide* Olaf Gunarson versus Phobos Metals, 2045—could compel any employee to engage in illegal undertakings; hence the captain and his entire crew were free to accept work with any other employer.

And so forth, and so forth. When she had finished, Kynance was in a state like a waking dream, soaked in perspiration and hoarse with hours of non-stop explanations. But she knew she had done it. She had set precedents which would take years to filter through the successive courts of the

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

galactic legal system, but they would complete the course as surely as the extract of blockweed would come out of the Zygra coating-station—changed, refined, fortified, but ultimately turned into a solid layer of nourishment for many years ahead, to be transmuted by the living pelt on which it was spread into something with far more meaning, far more importance, and almost infinitely greater value. Not price. Value.

A sort of beauty.

Kynance shivered.

Loaded, chartered, under orders, the renamed vessel *Kynance Foy* dwindled towards the shredded clouds of Zygra's sky. Victor, Coberley and Evan were somewhere below in the supervisor's quarters, celebrating their elevation to ministerial rank in this youngest of planetary governments with the help of some Gean wine bought on credit from the ship's stores, but Kynance wanted to wait a while before joining them. She stood with hands shading her eyes, watching her namesake ship head for the stars.

Abruptly she became aware that Horst was watching too—not the ship, but her. She laughed self-consciously and smiled at him. He didn't return the smile.

He said, "I said you were extraordinary. The most extraordinary thing of all is—well, I've realized just this minute that none of us know anything about you. Even after a year, jammed together aboard this floating box of ours. No wonder we're all a little afraid of you. You seem like a machine, a computer full of miracles."

"I know," Kynance said after a pause. "I had to be, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Well, I've hated it. And thank you for reminding me before it was too late and I got into the habit for life!" She laughed this time without embarrassment.

"I'll tell you something I've never told anyone else," she went on. "When I left Earth, I had this secret dream. I was going to come home wearing a zygra pelt and a blasé

A PLANET OF YOUR OWN

expression, just to jolt the hell out of all my friends who said I'd never make it. By the time I ran into Shuster, I was ready to settle for a square meal and a ticket home, and I didn't give a *damn* about zygra pelts. Now, if I go home, I'll be able to take cases and crates and shiploads of the things, and this is simply ridiculous!"

"If you go home . . . ? Don't you want to go back to Earth?"

"Surely. It has its points. But—I've been on Earth, Horst. I don't mind going back the long way around."

"I used to think Earth was the only place in the galaxy where I might fit in," Horst muttered. "But that's not true any longer, is it? There's a planet called Zygra where people like me can fit in. . . . I wonder if they'll realize that."

"I think so. I estimate—oh—half a year before the first applicants for immigration show themselves."

"I tell you one thing," Horst smiled. "If you're going to stop behaving like a machine and start acting like a woman, there had damned well better be some more women among those early immigrants!"

She gave him a mischievous grin and took his hand. "Let's join the others," she said. "After all, it's the first official function held by the Zygran Government, so it ought to be quite an occasion."

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