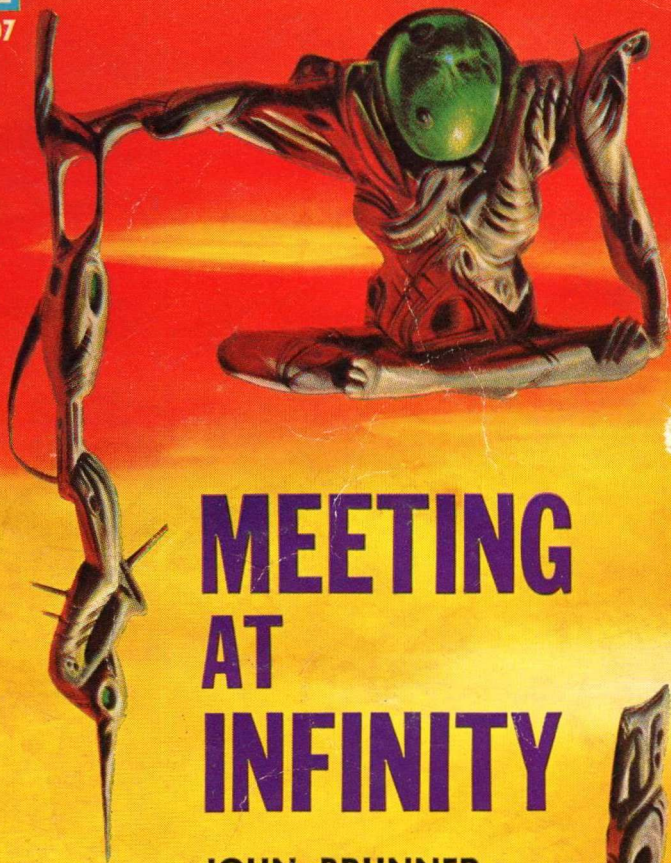


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# MEETING AT INFINITY

JOHN BRUNNER

First Book Publication



## WHERE WORLD LINES CROSS . . .

Allyn Vage was once a beautiful woman, but due to an accident—which may have been a murder attempt—she was now a hopeless cripple, burned and disfigured, and without the sense of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. When they brought her to Jome Knard, that noted physician had no choice but to employ a certain apparently miraculous device, incomprehensible even to him, to keep her immobile body alive and to restore and regulate her sensory perception.

This strange machine had been imported from a seemingly primitive people on the world of Akkilmar. They had allowed it to be exported, but there was something about it they couldn't—or wouldn't—explain.

Little did either the doctor or his patient realize that between them they had now become the lever that could topple a world!

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JOHN BRUNNER writes of himself:

"Biographical data? Born, I believe; married, 12th July, 1958; dead, not yet. I've been reading science-fiction since I was seven and writing it since I was nine—but I didn't actually collect my first rejection slip till I was thirteen . . .

"I don't regard myself in any sense as a quote creative writer unquote. I prefer to communicate with my audience, not make them puzzled, and consequently am not all that fond of literary obscurities such as typify modern, recognized *literature*.

"My wife and I live in a three-room apartment in West Hampstead, London; we share it with a friend, three guitars, a banjo, a nine-foot concert grand piano, a recorder, a stack of records, couple of radios, tape recorder (the previous recorder is the kind you blow through), a dog, and more books than I can be bothered to count.

"Out of sympathy with: intolerance of all kinds, the beat generation, angry young men, and angry old women. In sympathy with: the human race—it's in a hell of a mess."

# MEETING AT INFINITY

by

J O H N   B R U N N E R

ACE BOOKS, INC.

23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N.Y.

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*John Brunner is the author of:*

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**BEYOND THE SILVER SKY**

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NORTH AND SOUTH, the avenues were called after Marco Polo and Vasco da Gama; east and west, the honors went to Magellan and Columbus. Like the lines drawn for tick-tack-toe, the four avenues defined the basal area of the white tower called The Market.

The avenues seethed with people. Maybe there were fifty thousand people within a quarter-mile of the tower. A few of them moved with purpose. The others just moved.

The avenues each had four central traffic lanes, but they carried very little traffic—use of the roadway, here in the city center, was strictly regulated and something of a privilege. Therefore the big black and white police cruiser was not causing an obstruction as it crawled very slowly past the main entrance of The Market.

In the rear seat sat Kingsley Athlone. He was a solid man approaching middle age, muscular, with the beginnings of a paunch which he carried with dignity. His dark grey uniform fitted him perfectly—fitted not only his body, but the expression on his face and the tone of his voice. As the cruiser passed the entrance of The Market for the second time, he said, "Benny!"

The driver glanced around. He was bigger than Athlone; he had a square red face in which a good-natured mildness fought a perpetual battle with a look of bewilderment. He said, "Yes, boss?"

"See him?" Athlone grunted.

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Benny's eyes switched along the sidewalk, and he slowed the cruiser to less than walking pace. "I see him, Boss."

"*That's* what a killer looks like, Benny," said Athlone in a scratchy voice. "Remember that, hey? He doesn't look like a wild animal, or a savage. He doesn't have to look like a dreg. He could be anybody, Benny. He looks like you. He looks like me."

With the inevitability of reflex, Benny objected. He said, "I don't think he looks like you, boss."

Athlone scowled. His voice grew almost sweet. "Benny," he said, "you're not much better than a moron. Do you know that? One day soon, if you aren't careful, one bright sunshiny day like this one, you're going to find yourself back among the dregs."

Benny didn't say anything. He knew better. He just pulled the cruiser over against the sidewalk.

Athlone went on watching the killer. Half a frown drew his thick eyebrows together; he was suddenly angry with himself. The killer had status, and it bloomed like a fireball among the streams of men and women thronging the Avenue Columbus. He didn't need a bodyguard, imported tailoring or a luminous sign above his head to differentiate him from the ruck and rabble. The proof lay in the fact that Benny had spotted him.

And that was what Athlone had meant when he said the killer looked like himself. He had meant that, and hadn't meant to say it. If he had let the words out within hearing of anyone but Benny, he would have had to take steps to ensure they were never repeated. Fortunately, he was fairly certain that Benny was too blockheaded to read into the phrase the jealousy it betokened.

Nonetheless, the time would surely come—and all the sooner for that slip of the tongue—when Benny would have to go back into the faceless world of the dregs.

Meantime, there was the killer trying to lose himself in



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the crowd. He'd been trying for about two months. He had put on a brown coverup like a hundred other brown coverups; he had gotten himself an automat barberclip like a thousand other barberclips. He could *not* imitate the rushing gait of those who moved only to delude themselves that they were busy. He could *not* imitate the purposeless lounging of those deluding themselves that idleness was a worthwhile luxury.

And he could not make the hunger—that hunger which would devour men—burn in his eyes.

Benny had seen (but Benny was probably too stupid to evaluate) such a hunger burning in Athlone's eyes.

At a carefully judged distance from the entrance of The Market, there was a group of three cultists with a portable altar. One of them was limping, one had his right arm in a sling, one kept shaking his head due to an uncontrollable tic. A fluorescent light burned on the altar, casting a greenish glow over the piles of tracts with titles like *No Truck with Tacket!* and *Whose Fault was the White Death?* An effigy of Tacket, two feet high with nails driven into its face, loomed above the lamp. The cultist who limped was shrieking imprecations in a hysterically high voice, pausing occasionally to wipe his face and pant for breath.

There was a small island of empty pavement around the group; those who were moving moved a little more quickly as they passed the altar, and those who were lounging moved discreetly a few yards further along. Although the cults were losing their influence, they still were able to make a lot of people feel guilty.

The crowd also created a small island of vacancy around Luis Nevada, and it frightened him because he could not blend away from sight as he intended to. Here on the streets fronting The Market he was marked as clearly as though a halo shone sun-bright over him, as though he were a man

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with no shadow, as though a hundred people who knew his secret moved among the crowd uttering whispered warnings. There were always a few curious eyes turned on him. There were always men and women who stepped out of his path automatically, giving way to a nonexistent bodyguard. Why? Had Athlone somehow contrived to . . .

No use. No use. He was a man with a face among the men without faces.

He shot a glance up at the clock on the wall of The Market, and felt his palms sticky with sweat. Noon had come and gone, and he was still in the nightmare. He had lived among dregs for over two months now; he had thought he could come out and be inconspicuous. Instead, he was signposted for what he was, and no matter how good his nerves were, a man could take just so much of this vague, fascinated staring.

Maybe he'd have done better to stick to his original intention, instead of betting so heavily on Erlking's word—

But in the instant when the idea crossed his mind, he knew he couldn't have endured that. Essentially the choice was between taking Erlking's confused, muddy promise—and committing suicide.

When was that bastard Lyken going to come *out*?

One thousand stories above the city, Ahmed Lyken sat in a high-backed chair, behind which his six giant bodyguards moved scarcely a muscle, and read his personal doom in the glitter of hard black-irised eyes. He had known it was coming, of course. In ancient times, when an officer was on trial by court-martial, they would lay his sword on the table before calling him back to hear his sentence; if the point was towards him, he had been found guilty, if the hilt was towards him, he had been acquitted.

One could not imagine Manuel Clostrides—high bailiff of The Market—wielding a sword, but nonetheless he had given a similar message.

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Once more his eyes roamed the room, noting items that Clostrides had lately been given as presents and had found worthy of display in his huge office. One tall copper vase with strange bronze and green blossoms in it, each flower as big as a man's head. One ebony statue of a woman giving birth, life-size. One natural rock weighing two hundred pounds: white quartz veined with the raw glitter of gold.

Customarily, before receiving Ahmed Lyken, Clostrides would have placed on display a gift received from him. But today there was nothing.

Lyken's gaze moved back, unhurriedly, to Clostrides' round, pale face under its thatch of black hair, to his plain, black clothes relieved only by jeweled status badges on the shoulders, to the great chair in which he sat like a judge. It would have been preferable, Lyken thought, if that pale face had worn a smirk, a sneer, some expression indicating that the man derived personal satisfaction from ruining an individual of power and influence.

He found his voice in the distant caverns of himself and shaped a reply to what Clostrides had said.

"You're threatening to repossess my franchise. Is that what it comes down to?"

Clostrides leaned back in his chair and shook his head a very little.

"Not threatening, Ahmed. *Intending to.*"

"Because of a fungus growing on a consignment of grain?"

"Because of what that fungus might mean to the public at large. Half the world remembers the White Death, Ahmed."

"I say to you"—Lyken's voice was frigid, like icebergs breaking in a gray winter sea—"that this is a trumped-up excuse. That it's a fiction contrived to excuse robbery."

Clostrides did not react to the accusation. "Sometimes the public believes a fiction more readily than the truth. If I were alone, Ahmed, I might stretch the regulations—and I'd do so

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willingly. But we aren't in a position to dictate to the world, regardless of what people think."

"We dictate to hundreds of worlds!"

"We aren't responsible to the Tacket worlds. We are responsible to our own."

It was finished, of course; nonetheless, for the sake of appearances, Lyken had to say more. If he was to gain the maximum advantage from the precautions he had taken against this event, he would have to be misleading until the very last moment.

Gruffly, he said, "Go on."

Clostrides shrugged. "There's hardly anything else to say. The Directors have met and sealed the order. Your assigned Tacket numbers return to the public domain at midnight. Will you yield to your peers?"

"Of course not."

"Then we shall have to repossess them by force."

"You can try, if you like." Lyken watched the effect of his words on Clostrides. Had they been perhaps a trifle too confident? In case they had, he added swiftly, "Perhaps I would yield the franchise for another of comparable value."

"Out of the question," said Clostrides. "The harm that might well have arisen from the affair of this fungus made the Directors consider that idea unfavorably."

"Then you're lying," said Lyken without heat. "I'll concede that some of our Directors are so timid they could imagine a new White Death in a grain blight! But were you speaking truth, all that would matter would be the closure of my present franchise. That's not what you want. Who's after my franchise? Yorell? Or Klein? Or Lanchery? Who?"

"The consensus was," murmured Clostrides, "that letting in that fungus was the act of another Tacket."

Somewhere deep within Lyken was a childhood memory, raw and tender, that Tacket's name could touch. He had

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jerked up from his chair and taken a stride forward before he recovered his self-control.

"Who said that vile thing?" he forced between clenched teeth.

"It was said—and that's enough!" All of a sudden Clotrides's voice rang like a hammer striking iron. Muscles tensed unexpectedly along his bare forearms. He looked, now, like what he was: a man who spoke as first among equals with the greatest of his age. He too stood up, but smoothly.

"Go!" he said finally, and deliberately turned his back.

Lyken hesitated fractionally. He had been going to allow himself a foretaste of revenge; he had been going to give a glimpse of the hidden power in which he had put his trust. Now savage anger wiped away the petty desire. Let the bastards find out the hard way!

He spun on his heel and stormed from the office; with machine-like precision his giant bodyguards followed.

## 2

THE CRUISER was of unfamiliar shape and special materials; large, luxurious, immaculate, it hummed down the Avenue Columbus a yard above the ground. It moved swiftly, but word of its going outran it.

The news was at the main entrance of The Market a full minute ahead, and the faceless ones began to clot together like blood corpuscles at the site of a wound. Conjured from their regular beats, twenty Market police moved in. Four of them got rid of the cultists and their portable altar, paying

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no attention to the maledictions screamed at them, while the others drove back the crowd, held them tensely in check.

"Lyken!"

The word sent tingling, weakening bolts of anticipation through Luis Nevada's guts. He had to lick his lips and set his shoulders deliberately back, to give himself the illusion of new confidence. *At least—the bitter reflection crossed his mind—the intangible aura that keeps them away from me will not be of advantage . . .*

Thinking so, he struggled to make his way forward to the front of the crowd, he thrust past a fat woman and came to within a yard of the front rank. In the same moment the ooh-ing and aahing began, and the physical tension of the crowd relaxed. The huge portals of The Market slammed silently back. Magnificent, majestic, Ahmed Lyken and his guard of six giants strode towards the cruiser that awaited them.

Nevada saw the look of fury boiling on Lyken's face, and his heart sank. Nonetheless, he pushed another six inches forward and filled his lungs for the cry which might bring him salvation.

A large hand closed on his arm with crushing painful force, and a thick rasping voice burned on his ear. "Don't shub me, bud. Who ya think y'are."

Head spinning, Nevada saw that he had been grabbed by a man almost as tall as one of Lyken's giants, in a scarlet cover-up across the chest of which gold letters proclaimed the man's identity: Breaker Bolden, they said.

A pug. Nevada's head spun; he choked up words automatically, all the time viewing Lyken climbing into his cruiser and out of reach. He said, "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to shove you."

The pug's face seemed to draw together towards its center, and his hand tightened still further on Nevada's arm. He was probably not very bright; his battered appearance suggested he had been a long time in his game. So he would

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not have detected what almost everyone else had seen instantly—that Nevada, dressed like a dreg, wasn't. But the status-charged inflections of Nevada's voice were unmistakable.

"No'ody shub me like y' didl!"

A fist like a pile driver waved under Nevada's nose. He shut his eyes and did what he had meant to do when he came. He cried out, "Lyken! Lyken! Remember Akkilmar!"

He heard a puzzled grunt from the pug; then there was a world-shaking explosion against his face, and a mask of pain blinded him even when his eyes had started to open. The grasp on his arm ended abruptly, making him stagger and fall back against his neighbors in the crowd.

He began to piece together information again. One of Lyken's enormous bodyguards had cracked him scientifically over the head with a baton, and was watching, hands on hips, for signs of further resistance. Another of the giants was reaching out towards Nevada, was catching his arm, and dragging him forward.

Putting his free hand up to his face and feeling blood run from his nose, Nevada struggled to walk upright and with dignity. He was going towards Lyken, and the gamble had come off.

The merchant prince waited for him, a startled look on his face; all around, the faceless ones stared at the stranger who could command the prince's attention. What lay behind it?

Nevada was presented in front of Lyken now, as though he were a trophy brought back from the hunt, and Lyken's eyes searched his battered face. Long seconds passed.

Then Lyken gestured to his bodyguard. "Put him in the cruiser," he said, and spun on his heel.

At first Athlone was too startled to do anything but curse. He began to review in his mind the underlings whose heads would roll for not discovering that Nevada had influence

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with someone as powerful as Lyken. Then the savage foretaste of pleasure in that gave way to a sour apprehension.

How was Allyn going to react to *this* news?

He felt himself sweating; he felt one of his hands clench crushingly on the other and had to force them apart. But this was appalling! To be under the protection of a merchant prince was not officially valid; in practice—as Athlone knew too well—it was worth battle armor.

"Something wrong, boss?" said Benny uncomfortably, with his talent for saying the wrong thing. Athlone gave him a scowl and a wordless snarl, and he shut up.

No, this could *not* be the end. Athlone damned himself for reacting like a stupid coward. So Lyken was a merchant prince, so Nevada had by some trick got himself taken into Lyken's private cruiser. So what? Maybe Nevada thought that that would frighten him off, perhaps act as a sort of threat. It wasn't going to. It couldn't be allowed to.

Athlone could feel not fright, but shyness, stupid, puerile shyness. The world of The Market wasn't his world. He'd never touched it, never come into closer contact with it than thirdhand. It had overtones of divinity. It did to almost everyone. It still wasn't going to scare him off.

He felt his mind fill with warm astonishment at his own presumption; he relaxed, expanded, sat back on the soft cushions. All right! If he couldn't tell Lyken where to get off—and he couldn't—then he was going to get hold of a man that could.

He said, "Benny, you ever hear of a Manuel Clostrides?"

"Why—uh—" Benny's incessant look of bewilderment deepened. "Why, yes, boss. The man who runs *that*, you mean?" He gestured across the avenue towards the great white tower.

"That's the man. We're going to see him, Benny. You and I. Run over to the entrance. And make it a smooth turn!"

Yet by the time he managed to reach Clostrides, his self-



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assurance had leaked away. It was phony, anyway. All he had to sustain him was the same force that drove him always, and it was not enough. In the big, straight-backed chair he was given, he found he did not know what to do with his hands. He placed them eventually on the arms of the chair, grasping so tightly that white marks showed over his knuckles.

Clostrides did not let the fact pass unnoticed. It was a long time since a man with only a single bodyguard had sat in that chair. Nonetheless, circumstances at present were extraordinary, and the news of something puzzling occurring outside the main entrance, had already reached him. Maybe Athlone would be worth listening to.

He spent, as he always did, about a minute studying his visitor carefully, before he deigned to open the conversation. When at length he did speak, he could see the relief flood Athlone's mind, although his voice was sharp and his question curt.

"What do you want?"

"I—I'll keep it short, because I know you're busy," said Athlone. "You may have heard of a man called Luis Nevada."

The name meant nothing to Clostrides; still, he inclined his head fractionally. Athlone would give him indirectly all necessary information about the man, and what he did not give could be discovered later.

"I'm vice-sheriff of the Eastern Quarter," said Athlone, and for once did not give the title the resounding emphasis he generally accorded it. "This man Nevada is a killer—very clever one. He has eluded me for going on six months now, simply because the only evidence against him is the unsupported word of his victim. He got an injunction against me to prevent me from divulging his identity without his permission in places where he's been living, and he tied my hands that way."

"And—?" Clostrides said quietly while Athlone was drawing

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breath. His tone conveyed that he felt Athlone was taking longer than he had promised over his tale.

"Well, there's a statute of limitations in force. I have to close the case and apply for trial within one year and one day of the discovery of the crime. And the only source of evidence against him now is himself."

"I'm not concerned with law enforcement," said Clostrides.

"I know that, Bailiff! And I wouldn't trouble you—but it's a citizen's duty, binding upon all of us, to assist the course of justice, not to obstruct it."

"Am I obstructing it?" Clostrides sounded amused now.

"Ahmed Lyken appears to be obstructing it."

"Oh!" said Clostrides, and cupped his hand under his chin. A smile, the curve of which exactly paralleled the curve of his hand, crossed his face. "You interest me now!"

Conscious of having made his opening, Athlone let himself relax. He said, "I've been watching Nevada very closely for some time. These past couple of months, he's been trying to melt into the crowd, to disguise himself as one of the dregs of society. But I've never lost track of him. Not until today outside The Market, when—"

"When he shouted something at Lyken and got taken into Lyken's private cruiser," nodded Clostrides. "I see."

Athlone stopped with his mouth half-open, his bombshell fizzling out. He recovered himself, finding vague comfort in the reflection that to get where Clostrides was you had to be very quick on the uptake. He said, "Uh—yes, that's right. I don't know what he has in mind, exactly. But there's one thing he might do, which I've *got* to prevent. I suspect he might try to bribe Lyken—"

Clostrides looked disbelieving. Athlone hastened to buttress the statement.

"Oh yes! He's a wealthy man still, even though he's trying to pass for one of the dregs. He was a speculator and trader in imports. Anyway, if he wants what I think he does, it

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won't cost Lyken anything. Nevada will probably want him to take him into his franchise until the statute of limitations takes effect. And that's what I've got to stop."

Clostrides nodded absently and got to his feet. Uncertain whether he also should stand up, Athlone hesitated.

"It's an ingenious idea," said Clostrides musingly. He began to stroll about the room, pausing in turn in front of each of the three notable gifts he had on display today. "To escape the long arm of the law by buying your way where no one can touch you."

The words seemed to Athlone like nails in a coffin. But he had to disbelieve them, challenge them, even with the authority of the high bailiff behind them. He said fiercely, "Not at *all*?"

Clostrides said patiently, with a bored air, "Criminal or not, Athlone, a man in the precincts of a Tacket franchise is answerable only to the proprietor of that franchise, and no one can touch him."

Mingled with the coffin nail finality of the flat statement was simple shock; Athlone was not of the world of The Market, and it took him aback to hear Clostrides use Tacket's name as a technical term and not as an obscenity. The shock passed; the despair remained.

"You must surely have known that," Clostrides said, not looking round. He put out a hand and traced the lines of the golden veins seaming the huge white rock before him. "You must know that those who loosed the White Death on the world were reckless, unsupervised fools, and that the system of The Market was set up to ensure that use of Tacket's Principle was properly regulated. Yes?"

Athlone gave a miserable nod. He hardly heard Clostrides; he was occupied with his own troubles.

"Well, then, you must grant that franchise holders are entitled to some compensation for the restrictions they observe.

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A franchise once sold, then, is totally exclusive—unique to its proprietor. Yes?”

Again Athlone muttered some sort of answer.

“Therefore the system has to be proof against abuse from either direction—from carelessness on the part of a concessionary, and from interference with a concessionary. Moreover, unsupervised application of Tacket’s Principle has to be rigorously suppressed. Fortunately, the force of public opinion is against it, and that’s the strongest safeguard of all. Half the living population recalls the White Death, you realize. We sell a franchise only when it’s been properly explored; we sell it only to a party we consider reliable—whether an individual or a syndicate. But thereafter the onus is on the concessionary to observe the rules. In the case of any infringement, we act at once.”

A peculiar note in Clostrides’s voice cut through the fog of Athlone’s gloom. It seemed to him that the bailiff was playing him, that in fact he was concealing a sliver of hope. He looked up.

“Is harboring a wanted criminal an infringement, maybe?” he suggested, clutching at a straw.

Clostrides shrugged, turning away from the gold-lined rock. “How badly wanted?” he said. “And by whom? I should have said that if you can’t get evidence to convict this man Nevada right here, you stand small chance of being able to extradite him if Lyken permits him entry to his franchise.”

Defeated, Athlone sagged in his chair.

Clostrides watched him with faint amusement. It was quite obvious what was going on in the man’s mind. Of course, it was no concern of his. The Market, like the medieval church, was a society within society, having its own laws and its own law enforcement methods. Nonetheless, it would cost nothing to add to the truth he had already spoken. Half a truth was often more misleading than a straightforward lie, Clostrides found.

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He returned to his chair.

"Anyway," he said, "the problem is really academic. We're repossessing Lyken's franchise tomorrow."

Athlone was not so far lost in his own problems that he could not recognize world-shaking news when it was given to him. He leaned forward, shaking a little. "Why?" he demanded.

"For reasons good and sufficient!" snapped Clostrides.

"I—I didn't mean to be inquisitive—"

"All right. You'll find out when the news is announced officially. As I was saying: we're going to repossess. Lyken has refused to yield, so we shall have to take the franchise by force. This man Nevada—if we find him in the franchise and alive, I suppose we could turn him over to you. I warn you, it's unlikely; he'll represent an encumbrance to Lyken, and the chances are good he'll be used as cannon fodder. It depends at least partly on how successful Lyken's recruiting is this evening."

"His—?"

"His recruiting, I said." Clostrides sounded impatient. "He's usually quick off the mark; his agents may already be on the streets signing up the dregs. If you want to get anywhere in a hurry before midnight, I'd avoid the streets near his base. They'll be choked to near roof level with eager would-be suicides—not that they'll know they're suiciding."

Athlone shook his head. "It's a little above me, this," he confessed humbly, and hated himself for the admission.

"Is it?" Clostrides seemed surprised. "Why, a franchise is a valuable property, and Lyken will want to hang on to it. So he'll raise and drill an army; he'll get weapons through to the maximum of his credit before midnight, which is when we foreclose. Then it's a matter of time. In the end, it may prove uneconomic to repossess, and we'll have to come to an arrangement. Some of our most famous concessionaries have had to fight for what they have. We live in a jungle. You're a—

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what shall I call you?—you're a jackal, perhaps, in a jungle where lions are fighting. I should advise you not to involve yourself more than you can help, even though revenge is sweet. What did Nevada do to you, Athlone?"

For an instant Athlone felt like an insect, rather than a jackal; it was as though Clostrides was studying him through a microscope, laying bare his very heart with a micro-scalpel. At least, though, his last question was wide of a mark. He could lie himself into believing that it was wide of a mark.

He said chokingly, "Nevada has done nothing to *me*."

"Then forget your duty as vice-sheriff of the Eastern Quarter," said Clostrides with heavy irony. "If he's nothing to you, you don't have to care what becomes of him. And I'm sure the Quarter isn't so peaceful that you can spend all your time on one man."

Shaking, Athlone rose to his feet. He knew that the talk had gone long past the danger mark. Blast Clostrides for being so damnably acutel He shot a sidelong glance at Benny. Benny was going to have to go, now. A bodyguard who had seen his master's feelings laid so naked was too dangerous.

"I'm honored that you conceded me so much of your time, Bailiff," he said with an attempt at offhand formality. "I appreciate your giving me this advance information. I'll keep it to myself, of course. And may I look forward to having Nevada handed over to me if he . . . survives?"

*If he doesn't, my life will be hell. But it's hell anyway.*

"You may," said Clostrides, still with irony. "Look forward to it all you wish."

When Athlone had gone, Clostrides sat chuckling in his big chair. Superficially, of course, the Athlone-Nevada affair excluded him. It was something of a love-hate relationship on Athlone's side for sure, and perhaps reciprocally. And yet Nevada's connection with Lyken might yield information of

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importance. Lyken would hardly have taken a perfect stranger into his cruiser on a moment's notice—not even in his present state of mind.

Clostrides debated with himself only a few moments before concluding that he had to know more. Accordingly he sent for Dismar Grail, his Chief Remembrancer.

Vacuous-faced, pasty of complexion, gangling and awkward, the Remembrancer came in and stood shifting from foot to foot before his employer. Bulging out behind the pale eyes, the snub nose, the wet-lipped mouth, was an encyclopedic store of knowledge better than the best-indexed reference library. Better for two reasons: a Remembrancer could index himself, and could spot correlations between improbable items; and a reference library gives up its information to any and all comers. There were ways of stopping Remembrancers from doing that.

Of course, the strain was considerable; Dismar Grail had served Clostrides for six years now and was nearing the end of his useful life. A successor would have to be found for him soon.

Clostrides cut short his reflections. He said, "A man by the name of Luis Nevada, Dismar. He's said to be a killer."

The Remembrancer looked doubtful. He said in his odd, off-key voice, "There was a Luis Nevada in the Eastern Quarter who made the newstapes about four or five months ago . . ." He let the last word trail off, waiting for encouragement.

"That's right," said Clostrides.

"I have complete court reports," ventured Grail. Clostrides shook his head.

"Just the essentials, Dismar. You're very good at giving the essentials, aren't you?"

The Remembrancer gave a nod; he liked to recite verbatim, which was his greatest pleasure because it was his only accomplishment. Nonetheless, Clostrides' compliment partly

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made up the deficit. He said, "He was a man called Luis Nevada. He was thirty-two years old. He was a distributor and speculator in imported goods, with special ties with Norrogood and Baleground. He's married to a woman called Allyn Vage. There was an accident with the heating apparatus in their apartment; a Maxwell demon had its governors fail and shunted localized heat into the wife's bed. There was a fire. She was burned and disfigured. She accused Nevada of trying to kill her. The case was conducted by the vice-sheriff of the Eastern Quarter in person, Kingsley Athlone. There was no evidence except the word of the wife. The courts said accident. Provisional verdict. Athlone appealed. Statute of limitations is relevant, year and a day period. A month later Nevada obtained an injunction against Athlone, claiming persecution and slander. He stopped Athlone from publicizing his identity in places where he lodged. That's about all."

"So in face he hasn't killed anyone?" Clostrides said.

"That's right." Dismar Grail waited, his mouth working as though he were repeating what he had said under his breath, double-checking for errors.

Clostrides shrugged. He had expected something of the sort from the way Athlone behaved. Still, he wasn't concerned with law-enforcement; he wanted to know about Lyken.

He said, "Dismar, what was the substance of what Nevada said to Lyken outside The Market about an hour ago?"

"The words that he said were: 'Lyken, remember Akkil-mar!'"

Clostrides frowned. "What does that mean?"

"Restricted information," said Grail smugly.

Clostrides glanced at the calendar on his desk, and ran down the list of hypnokeys in his mind till he fell on the words appropriate for today's date. "Ah—'water is dry.'"

Grail gave a weak smile. He always smiled at the non-



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senical hypnokeys. He said, "Akkilmar is the name of a tribe, and a country ruled by that tribe, and its capital city, in the franchise assigned to Ahmed Lyken."

"Is it now?" said Clostrides. Automatically, Dismar Grail began to sob, because it was the worst kind of cruelty to him to have the accuracy of his information questioned, even inadvertently. Clostrides' words were absent-minded; he took them literally, nonetheless.

Clostrides comforted him with a few exaggerated compliments, and thought the information over. He said at length, "Did Nevada have any trade connections with Lyken?"

Grail shook his head mutely, his protuberant pale eyes bright with tears.

That was peculiar, then. Clostrides mulled it over. For Nevada's shout to have such an effect on Lyken, it must have been significant. If it concerned something in Lyken's franchise, the chances were a good hundred to one in favor of it being a trade secret. He said, "Water is dry, Dismar. How is it that we know what Akkilmar means?"

"Uh—preliminary inquiries turned it up before the franchise was assigned to Ahmed Lyken."

So within the franchise, it was pretty well known. Had to be. Preliminary scouting of a new franchise was necessarily not very thorough, whatever the public was told. However that might be, Clostrides decided, this would bear investigation.

He began to give the orders at once.

### 3

POPULAR TRADITION afterwards endowed Tacket with the attributes of a rat—snipy nose, projecting teeth, shifty eyes,

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sallow complexion probably garnished with pimples. In fact, he was a moderately good-looking man with bushy fair hair and a determined chin—a feature which amateur physiognomists ought to class more often among danger signs.

But the worst danger sign of all was abstract. Tacket played with number, and with physical analogues of number. He was not a practical man, yet he was clever with his mind and his hands. Up till the time of his great discovery, his main accomplishment had been devising mechanical puzzles.

The great discovery—that of his celebrated Principle, which changed the world—was the fruit of an examination of  $\pi$ . It fired his mind; his mind was explosive; the explosion came near to destroying everything.

$\pi$ , it seemed, was invariant. However, certain deductions from curved-space mathematics indicated conditions under which it would assume values different from the familiar 3.1416. It would remain an irrational number of course. But the physical conditions for altering its value could be described. Tacket's preoccupation with analogues of number did the rest.

The point was that to apply his Principle Tacket needed only power and a comparatively simple, inexpensive device for controlling that power. He built the device. It generated a field within which the value of  $\pi$  altered. So did other characteristics of space. Tacket looked through his new toy. He didn't intend it to be much more than a toy. Then he *went* through it. Then the news burst upon the world that there were hundreds—possibly thousands—of sister Earths circling old Sol. While the world was still going “ooh!” and “aah!” over the discovery, other people built the same device, powered it, went adventuring.

Those were Tacket's Expeditions.

Of course, Tacket himself never knew about the majority of them. It was even questionable whether he personally had

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anything to do with the most infamous expedition of all, the fatal one—though tradition later insisted that he did.

News came pouring back. Civilizations! All different from one another! Almost all founded on the same root that was later to underpin the thousand-story tower of The Market: greed. Where there was greed, there was trade. People began to trade immediately, randomly, and the word “imported” suddenly reappeared in languages from which the century-old World Economic Union had banished it.

Even in the first frenzy of discovery and exploitation, some hard facts were established. There were probably thousands of adjacent Earths in which other Tackets had made similar discoveries. There, however, the value of *pi*—used as a convenient basis for identifying and cataloguing the sister Earths—differed from the familiar one only after some hundreds of decimal places. The world accordingly decided that time would take care of the difference; meanwhile there were about a hundred thousand worlds more or less readily accessible, and there was business to be done.

For a short while, the world shared Tacket's elation and jubilation. For a long while, it cursed his name and all he stood for.

The White Death was a virus disease—that was established—which originated beyond the Tacket threshold, and killed by the millions.

It rose apparently simultaneously in scores of places, though afterwards all the outbreaks were traced to a common source. It raged for the better part of a year without check. The first signs appeared at the extremities; the toes and little fingers paled and lost all sensation. Within forty-eight hours, symptoms similar to GPI set in—the victims staggered, spoke with difficulty, suffered fits of causeless rage. Eyesight began to blur. Then the limbs paled like the toes and fingers to deathly whiteness, and at about the time motor co-ordination

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failed completely—a week or two after the onset—the brain tissues started to degenerate.

About a hundred million people died. So completely did the White Death disrupt communications and government that registration of deaths broke down over whole states. It was more certain that approximately a thousand million people were more or less badly affected, from paralysis and insanity to apparent complete recovery. The ones who recovered were infected late, when the virus appeared to have mutated into a less lethal strain.

No cure had been found when the death toll dropped to nil.

In the chaos of the White Death, many things happened. Tacket was killed, for instance. Fanatical avengers blew his laboratory up, with him in it, and his portals. Innocent explorers returning from innocent Tacket trips found welcoming parties waiting for them with noose, gun or knife. Their equipment was usually smashed or burned.

Certain cults appeared. Some vanished quickly; some endured.

And the economy of the planet threatened to fall to bits.

When the worst was over, and government was being restored, the governors found themselves faced with a terrible paradox. On the one hand, it was known that the White Death had come from one of the sister Earths, and that Tacket's Principle had let it in. On the other, it was seen that unless outside aid was siphoned in, the economy was going to dissolve in famine, rioting and maybe warfare.

You can't bury knowledge. You can only bury the people who possess it. There was just one answer ready to hand, and The Market stood as its symbol.

They rebuilt the economy of the world as a middleman's economy. They banned indiscriminate use of Tacket's Principle. They leased franchises to reliable parties—to skilled entrepreneurs or to hastily formed syndicates—sold them

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power, and guaranteed their rights. They had to give guarantees. In those years directly following the White Death, anyone meddling with Tacket's Principle was liable to be hung on a handy tree.

Then they begged to be saved from scarcity.

Some people rebelled. They wanted no more truck with Tacket's Principle, no matter how efficient the safeguards might appear. The concessionaries ignored these people's objections. They found other people who were too hungry, cold or weary to care, and formed bodyguards. They occupied their franchises; they policed them; they exploited them.

A good franchise was the richest investment in history.

Those who still objected found refuge with the most viable of the cults, and sought to save their souls by refusing to buy "imported" goods. They seldom kept that up for long, unless they were fanatics. Pretty soon, the concessionaries had found out how to get almost anything that was needed by cross-trading between the Tacket worlds. Some few items—heavy engineering, means of transport, and other things essential to advanced civilization—could not be got from the comparatively backward Tacket worlds. But food and fibers and furniture, and every sort of raw material, could be got aplenty. By and large, the world adapted itself to living off the traders' commission rather quickly.

If it had not been for the White Death, it would not have happened quite so quickly and smoothly.

There were obstacles. There were problems. What automation had failed to do two centuries before, Tacket did without the least intention—rendered full employment inconceivable. The dregs of society went to the bottom. Half the world's population became pensioners of the other half, and hated them for it. The other half engaged in distribution. Compared with the volume of imports, manufactures dropped to a trickle. The major home industry was power—power for

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the huge portals through which the merchant princes brought their goods.

There were occasional scares and scandals. Half a dozen franchises had to be closed because of unidentified disease. Others, however, yielded incredible antibiotics; the two canceled out and left only the screeching of the fanatical cultists.

In general, then, people liked the setup. The emergency systems of government improvised after the chaos of the White Death persisted, simply because no one got around to changing them. Thus Clostrides was high bailiff of The Market, and the most influential man on Earth. Thus new ranks solidified; thus *status* became something tangible, to speak of as though it could be weighed and measured. Almost, it could be. Meantime Tacket's name degenerated to a casual obscenity; hatred diminished, but was not allowed to die. The new lords of the new Earths were jealous of their rights.

For that reason there were still, after all these years, departments in every law-enforcement agency charged with detecting unauthorized application of Tacket's Principle. They had simple instruments as convenient as radiation counters.

For an extension of that reason, Ahmed Lyken was being driven into a corner. The new lords of the new Earths were sometimes jealous of their colleagues' rights—and Ahmed Lyken had never taken pains to make himself popular.

Unaware of the passage of the hour of noon-for-doom, Luis Nevada sank back on the inflated cushions of the luxurious cruiser and stared disbelievingly at Lyken. The relief which overwhelmed him was as violent as the blow the pug had given him in the face.

He had never really expected it to work. He had just had to do something more than wait passively and skulk in corners. He had sustained himself on a hope he did not believe, and the strain of lying to himself for weeks on end had sapped his energy to the point of collapse. Now that the gamble had

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come off, he found dismayingly that he had no plan prepared, no scheme for survival past this crucial point. And he was too weak to prepare one now.

Nonetheless, illogical elation started to possess him.

For the first few minutes of the humming journey, Lyken seemed to have forgotten his new passenger. He drew the face-piece of a transceiver from a concealed panel in the side of the cruiser, put it on, and spoke and listened with intent concentration. Nevada judged that he was giving orders. Although he had spent his working life successfully speculating in the products which men like Ahmed Lyken had imported, he had no very clear picture of their world. Sometimes people had suggested to him that if he went about it the right way he might get a franchise of his own in ten years' time. But he felt temperamentally ill-equipped for the task, and had never considered the idea seriously. Now, therefore, his mind filled with vague impressions of vast trading deals—buy this, sell that, send another team into unexplored country, trace the source of those strange textiles—which Lyken might now be setting in motion.

He waited passively till Lyken was through.

Suddenly eyes hard and penetrating seemed to slap his face as Lyken detached the transceiver and thrust it back in its compartment. A brittle voice betraying no real interest demanded of him, "What do you know of Akkilmar?"

"Where and what it is," said Nevada promptly. It was at least half a lie. Erlking's ramshackle mind had released little more than the simple name and a hint of its importance. But he had staked his future on that; he was willing to ride his luck a little further.

"I see." Lyken's tone was brusque. "What do you want?"

"Refuge," said Nevada, letting the words come as they would. "I've been hounded for months by the vice-sheriff of the Eastern Quarter, for attempting to murder my wife. He says. She says. I didn't do it. I've been told that once on the

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territory of a franchise, no one can touch you without the concessionary's permission."

"True," said Lyken bleakly. "So—?"

"So I want six months' refuge in your franchise. I'll do anything useful. And what's more, I'll pay."

"How much?"

"Half a million," he said. He would find that.

"How soon?"

"Today, if you like."

"Done," said Lyken, and the ghost of a smile crossed his face. He put the transceiver facepiece back on and went on talking to his unseen correspondent.

The blood had dried on Nevada's face. He mopped at it with a kerchief and let his mind blank out with utter weariness.

### 4

CURDY WENCE was in the front rank of the crowd when Nevada got taken up into Lyken's cruiser. He was seventeen years old, born rankless, determined not to stay that way, and as measured as anything, as measured as a foot-rule, as measured as time. He was everything the yonder boys admired about themselves. And he was on the way up.

So far, working for Jockey Hole was the only upward path he'd found. And that was strictly piecework. Still, if you were good at it, it paid all right. Curdy Wence was better than good at it. He was born lucky. That was why he, and not another of Jockey's hangabouts, was in this particular crowd at this particular time.



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There were dozens like him assembled to watch Lyken's departure—young dregs in artificially broad-shouldered jackets of dull gold, maroon or sage green and high boots decorated painstakingly by hand with chrome appliqué work. Their barberclips were personalized with tints of carrot-red or white; they moved with a gangling gait designed to suggest huge reserves of strength. Some of them actually had strength. Not many of them were measured the way Curdy was. Thinking was what counted. Everybody knew there were people working for Jockey Hole who could take him to bits one-handed, but it was Jockey who figured out things to be done. That was where Curdy was going. He'd made up his mind.

Now this little event here, this minute. That was curio, it was indeed.

The commotion died slowly; Lyken's big cruiser hummed away down the Avenue Columbus, bound for his base. Curdy waited, changing occasionally from foot to foot and chewing on a pad of trunks. Everybody knew that Jockey Hole had got where he was because he was measured like anything. He never got flustered or worked up about anything. Maybe to him that came naturally. Maybe not. Curdy thought he probably used trunks like everyone else.

Waiting, he let the words he had heard revolve slowly in his mind. Had the pug got anything to do with it? Curdy knew him by sight, had heard accounts of him from places. Thickhead, was the account. Stupid like stone. All that connected him with the affair, odds were, would be the baton Lyken's bodyguard had used to crack his head. Also to be weighed: whether Breaker Bolden would be capable of talking any other way than with his fists just now. Curdy could look after himself. Most of the yonder boys had to know how. Difference was, Curdy reflected, that a pug of Breaker Bolden's kind didn't care about looking after himself at all. What he wanted was to take care of the other guy.

"Lyken! Remember Akkilmar!"

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It should mean something. It meant something to Lyken. Curdy slipped his whangee stick out of the sewn slot in his right high boot and began to curve it back and forth, considering. Jockey would want to know about this.

He tossed a mental coin to decide whether he should sell the news at once, and hope to get a bonus for speed in delivery, or whether he should fish around a while and try and get details of what Akkilmar actually meant, thus earning his bonus for giving all and more.

The mental coin landed on its edge and teetered as a further idea struck him: the chances were good that if Akkilmar meant anything significant, Jockey would know already. The coin toppled and said for immediate delivery.

The crusted clot of faceless corpuscle-people about the entrance of The Market had dispersed. As usual, the stream of humanity moved by. Still bending and flexing his whangee stick, Curdy moved with it.

Across the entrance the cultists had come back, the altar high-heaped with tracts. The nail-studded effigy of Tacket loomed behind the green light. The cultist who did the pitch was limping over to Breaker Bolden with a nail and a mallet in his hands, a collection can rattling on his belt.

Curdy watched and grinned without amusement. The cultists had it figured all wrong, as usual. They expected the pug, sullenly nursing his battered head, to be an easy touch; he'd want to buy a nail and drive it into Tacket, they thought. Not measured at all, those cultists—wild aiming always.

The pug just snarled at first. The cultist persisted. A few people gathered around, keeping out of arm's reach. Bolden told the persistent cultist to go away. The cultist went on trying. He tried once too many times. Bolden reached out and grabbed his mallet, and hit him with it on the top of the head. The other two cultists came limping up to protest. Curdy didn't stay to see any more. But when he was thirty yards down the street he could still hear the row.

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There was a police cruiser parked outside The Market. It was empty. Maybe it had something to do with the Lyken problem. Curdy saw it when he glanced back. But there was no one in sight who might make the connection.

He went quickly—but careful not to give the appearance of hurrying—to a crosstown travolator stage. Noon. The chances were good that Jockey was inspecting his manor, the Eastern Quarter where something like one and a half per cent of the population were said to owe him allegiance. Curdy always thought of it that way, the measured way. Converted into terms of individuals, it was staggering—made his eyes unfocus and sliced down his self-control.

He got back on the sidewalk at the East Hundredth stage—East Hundredth being the street the yonder boys called Holy Alley because it was Jockey Hole's, from the lodging blocks at the southern end to the warehouses at the northern. He dropped questions at the pleasure pad called the Venus, simply because it was the first hangout he passed. No one important was around.

Four doors along, he tried the Octopus Bar, which was a spare headquarters of Jockey's, the place where he was to be found most evenings. The boss wasn't in. Someone said to try the Pleasuredrome because they were rehearsing a new historical pageant and Jockey had an interest. The Pleasuredrome was on Holy Alley.

The Pleasuredrome, though, was closed when Curdy got down to it, it being the middle of the day and the 'drome being a nighttime haunt. It took Curdy a fair amount of searching to find a side entry; when he did, and when he emerged into the dark echoing empty interior, he ran into a one-eyed gorilla.

The gorilla could have been a pug, only he looked more alert than pugs usually did. Curdy stood quite still, hands relaxed at his sides. He said, "Jockey Hole here?"

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The gorilla nodded, his one eye sharp and bright like a diamond. "So?"

"So I bring news. Hot news. He'll want to hear!"

"Okay, so spit the string an' I'll spin it along."

Curdy would have spat in the diamond eye at that. Was he going to be cheated of his bonus? No gorilla going to take a split of it. But the gorilla was six foot three and his shoulders were naturally broad; Curdy was five eleven and his shoulders were padded. He weighed and measured and started talking persuasively. He was still at it when Jockey came out from the arena.

Gaffles was with him, and six bodyguards; they weren't matched up the way Lyken's six giants were, but they still made a pretty impressive retinue. They paused when they came into the passage that Curdy and the gorilla were blocking; a word and a sign from Jockey, and Gaffles came forward alone. He was Jockey's right hand; he was the gorilla's size and if you hadn't known you'd have said he had status, from the way he dressed, the way he spoke. Only not now. He barked at the gorilla in dregtalk.

"Chay, Redeye! What's with, what's with?"

The gorilla half-turned, sullenly, sensing opportunity slipping away. He grunted and drew back. Curdy addressed Gaffles.

"I bring news, Gaffles. It was hot, but Redeye let it cool awhile. I been fifteen minutes here now."

"Hot hot he says!" The gorilla broke in contemptuously. "Prolly not worth a trip with Tacket!"

Gaffles ignored him. His careful eyes studied Curdy's face.

"You're Curdy Wence, ain't that right?" he said. "Ah-hah. What's the news, then? What's it with?"

"Lyken," said Curdy succinctly.

"With Lyken, that's hot." Jockey's quiet voice cut in from the background, and he came forward with his guards. "Yes, Curdy—spit the string."

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Curdy still hadn't quite got over his automatic nervousness at speaking to Jockey face to face. The first time he'd nearly stammered with excitement. This time he measured it, all of it, and the words came smooth and easy.

"Ahmed Lyken was in The Market this morning around eleven-forty. He left a few minutes after noon. He looked fury-ol"

"Ah-hah! Something happen?"

"There was this one in the crowd. Brown coverup, average height, automat barberclip, brown hair plain, all like anyone. But he didn't look like a dreg, didn't smell like a dreg, and when he shouted out to Lyken he didn't sound like a dreg. In my tapes, that's curio."

"In mine too." Jockey stood, looking measured as all time, with hands in pockets, his head a little back. "And said--?"

"Sounded this way: 'Remember Akkilmar!'"

Having fired the shot, Curdy watched for signs that the last word meant something already to Jockey. It didn't show if it did. Maybe he should have hung on and pried around to bring in more details. Still. . . . He went on.

"That stopped Lyken with all brakes, bang! He gets his bodyguard to disentangle this number from the crowd and put him in his cruiser. Went off. That's the string spun."

Jockey didn't react. He never reacted. He just turned the news over in his mind.

"Is it hot?" demanded Curdy eventually. Jockey seemed to come back from a great distance.

"Can't say," he answered, and gave a shrug. "As of now, I can't say. But because *you* gave it to me, Curdy, I'm going to lay on it. I think you're born lucky, Curdy. You better watch yourself, or you'll get to thinking luck is everything in this world. Still, like I say, I'll bet this time."

He gestured to Gaffles. "Give Curdy a Rate One, Gaffles," he commanded.

Tranks or no tranks, that was enough to shake anyone off

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the measured way, Curdy decided. In Jocky's scale Rate One meant a flat thousand—more than he'd got for his previous jobs put together. He said, "That's gold Jockey! Will take."

"Not so speedy!" said Jockey with a crooked smile. "Measure it! You didn't earn a Rate One yet, Curdy. I'm going to lay on you, that's all. I'm laying on your finishing the job. Now you go detect for me what that word means, that word—Akkilmar! You're staked to expenses with that Rate One. Gold?"

Curdy grunted. So okay, it was flattering to get the job. He took the thousand bill Gaffles passed him and folded it up small.

"I thought it would mean something to you," he said.

Again the crooked smile. "You angle for clues, yonder boy? You're a good boy as they go, so okay, so words of guidance. Now you start to ask who could be in a position to know something that means something to Ahmed Lyken. It's free fall!"

It didn't sound that way to Curdy; it smelled of hard work into the bargain. He turned to go. Jockey called after him.

"One thing too, Curdy! Like I say, you're going to stretch that luck too far. Don't stretch it with Tacket, that's all."

Curdy spun round. "And how?" he demanded.

"Word came the other minute that Lyken's out recruiting—large scale. The way the filters let it through, they're passing wooden credits. Not yet, I don't know what's brewing. I just guess. I guess poison. So don't sign with Lyken, Curdy boy, not even if they offer you Rate One a day."

Some yonder boys weren't measured; they dreamed of getting to be merchant princes and didn't touch smaller stuff. Hands clean, pockets empty, they stayed where they were. Curdy was going where Jockey was; Jockey had shown

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that could be done. He said so. Jockey's smile came back without the crook in it.

"Weigh and measure, boy!" he said. "And fall straight."

### 5

THERE WERE ways of postponing the inevitable; Athlone used all of them up, and the inevitable still came upon him too soon. Arrangements for the dismissal of Benny, for the hypnolocking of his mind, for other routine precautions, absorbed a little time. But much too quickly postponement became impossible, and he had to go unwillingly, almost fearfully, to the penthouse on top of a lodging block where his nemesis sat in darkness.

Only three people had access to the penthouse; one of them was a girl servant, one was himself, and the third was the greatest living doctor, Jome Knard. When he came into the foyer of the penthouse, Athlone found Knard awaiting him.

The doctor was a small man with a barking voice who wore a sterile mask night and day; to the patients he treated, and especially the present patient, the greatest danger was from unfiltered human breath. Athlone greeted him curtly.

"How is she?" he added. It was a meaningless question; there would be no change. No change was possible, except at a rate so slow the passage of a day was imperceptible.

Knard didn't answer directly. He said, getting out of the chair where he had been waiting, "What's happened, Athlone? Something disastrous?"

Athlone felt a shuddering wave work its way through his bowels, but contrived to keep his voice steady. "Do I look

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as though there's been a disaster?" he countered. He felt it was possible; Knard knew him well and was more astute than most people.

But the doctor shook his head. "I didn't get it from you," he said. "I had it from—her." And he jerked his head in the direction of the room next to the foyer.

"What did she say?" Athlone snapped.

"So there has been trouble." Knard's voice shook noticeably, and there was a movement behind his sterile mask which suggested he was passing his tongue over his lips. "You'd better hear what she said, then. Over here."

He turned to the corner which served him as an office, where he had his cupboards of equipment, his electronic desk, his diagnostic and therapeutic devices on racks almost to the ceiling. His quick, deft fingers touched a series of switches; a familiar, breathy, impersonal voice came from twin speakers mounted on the desk and aligned to give full stereo to Knard when he sat in his adjustable chair before it. Athlone felt that voice, all down his nape and back, like claws dipped in acid. He moved forward into the focus of the speakers, closing his hands to stop his fingers trembling.

"—Tell you a thing or two about this man who's hired you, doctor. Something you ought to know. This resounding title he makes so much play with—vice-sheriff of the Eastern Quarter! I'm sure you know why he hides behind it, don't you?"

Knard had presumably said something placatory but out of reach of the pickup; there was a brief interlude of hissing. Then there was a scornful interruption.

"No! Behind it he's no better than a dreg. He's so petty and incompetent he has to have someone still more incompetent to take out his own inferiority on—this knuckleheaded man Benny, for example. I wonder how he's going to find someone even stupider than Benny, now that he's got rid of him. And even Benny was—"



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Athlone's exclamation of horrified bewilderment caused Knard to switch off. The voice died. Knard uttered a silent question with his eyes.

"How does that hellish machine of yours work?" Athlone demanded in a strangled voice.

"You mean you have dismissed your bodyguard?" Knard seemed to be as much disturbed as Athlone.

"Yes! But—but—damnation! I only decided to do it a short while ago; I only just gave instructions. I didn't mention it to anyone except my staff—" He broke off, and his face hardened into a suspicious glare. "Knard, are you trying to hoax me? I warn you, it's a dangerous pastime. If I find out that someone called you from my headquarters and told you—"

Knard's face, above the mask, remained impassive. Athlone broke off, spreading his hands.

"All right. You wouldn't. You haven't any interest in doing a thing like that. Just tell me: how did *she* know?"

Knard shut off the speakers. "There was more, but you'll hear it direct," he muttered as he turned away. "As to how she knew—look, Athlone, you've asked me twenty times how the rho function field perceptor works, and I've told you at least as often that unless you study the math involved, you *can't* understand it. I suppose I've used it with a dozen patients before this case, at least. And even now I can't say more than that the information comes from the analogue of reality which the perceptor supplies."

"But that's just meaningless noise!"

"So it's noise!" The doctor's nerves seemed to be frayed; he passed his hand across his face. "I've never experienced it myself, because normal sensory input heterodynes the data the user gets from it. You have to be almost completely cut off from reality before you can use it. So all I can tell you is what recovered patients have told me. Why do you think I undertook your case, Athlone? Sold you my exclusive services?"

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For the money? I've made four times what you can pay me, without half trying. No, simply because I wanted to explore to the ultimate the interaction between a patient and a perceptor."

"Did you know this was going to happen?" demanded Athlone. "Did you know she could know things without being present?"

"Something of the sort was highly probable," admitted Knard after a pause. "But she's had far more experience of the perceptor now than anyone else I've treated, and she's got more skilled in using it—"

A shrill bell, impatiently sounded, interrupted him. He glanced around automatically.

"She was expecting you," he said. "Better go on in."

In another epoch, Allyn Vage would not have lived. That was a fact which Athlone often had to repeat to himself, when sanity and detachment threatened to break through his obsession.

He had to begin repeating it now.

He came into her presence and stood with his head bowed. Although the room was almost completely dark, he did not want to let his eyes pass across the face that was not there.

*It was worse than killing*, he said to himself. *That is why I must hound down Luis Nevada*. His mind was still spinning from the impact of the information Knard had given him.

The voice like claws in acid, breathy and inhuman, came to him.

"You must *not* have failed," it said. "Tell me about it."

Athlone hardly heard. He was struggling to order his thoughts coherently, but they contained so many impossibilities. *Consider the facts*, he told himself. Consider that before him, supported precisely by shaped pads and air cushions, Allyn Vage rested in a sitting position on a structure half chair, half box, the base of which was a pedestal three feet on a side containing the rho function field perceptor Athlone had

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to fear because he did not understand it. She did not—could not—move. If there had been light, her inflated body would have seemed to glisten: all of her, her desirable thighs and the breasts that had been so firm, the flat, muscular belly—

Athlone chopped off the mental inventory because of its overtones of despair. No one saw her in the light any more, of course, except Knard when he was checking her slow progress towards recovery. But Athlone had seen her, twice, before she was sufficiently improved to give orders; he had also seen other cases in personalized cocoons. That was how he knew of the wet glistening. But he had never seen another case as grave. Perhaps, said Knard who ought to know, there had never been such a grave case in medical history, that survived.

Above this ghastly naked parody-body, there was what seemed to be a face that did not move. It was a mask, and its eyes were closed. It rested on a shaped support holding its chin, through which circulated a flow of nutrients and tissue regenerants.

But behind the mask was a brain, and the brain had not been physically injured in what the courts had ruled to be an accident, what Athlone declared because Allyn said so, was in fact an attempt at a brutal murder.

That brain could speak through attachments to a special voder device; the vocal cords had been damaged. It could hear, similarly, through a moving coil system stimulating the auditory centers. Likewise, it could perceive in a fashion even Knard confessed he did not totally understand, thanks to the miracle in the box beneath the chair.

Bit by bit, the ruined body would grow again; its organs would start to function, its withered muscles would eventually respond to the orders of the brain. When? Knard had said offhandedly, right at the beginning, "One or two years. With luck. If you adhere to a cult, I should recommend prayer."

Athlone had no space in his mind for a cult, though. He had his own dedication: the destruction of Luis Nevada.

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He thought: one or two *years!* And realized fatalistically that he would not have to endure more than a year of his personal torture, at most. If within a year and a day of laying his case against Nevada, he had not secured revenge, it was over; if Nevada got out of reach before that—secure in Lyken's franchise, besieged but not surrendering, or worse yet, dead without the hand of vengeance having touched him—it was over likewise. And so was Kingsley Athlone.

He was tempted to think that that was mere romantic maundering. A griping in his guts contradicted him. To him, the Allyn Vage that had been, the Allyn Vage he was striving to bring back, meant more than his life itself.

When he came out of Allyn's room again, he was shaking from head to foot. Knard glanced up from his great desk, and without a word dispensed a pill into a measure of water. He brought it to Athlone and held it out.

"What is it?" Athlone asked wearily.

"A trank. Just a trank. Better take it."

Athlone hesitated; then he seized and swallowed it, and handed back the cup. He said, "Knard, the power of that gadget of yours terrifies me."

"The perceptor?" Knard put both hands on the cup and held it before him like an offering. "I can only tell you not to fear it. I can only say that it's just a field in a box, a rho function field, connected so as to provide sensory data to the patient, and used to counteract the sense of isolation from reality which always used to affect cocoonees. It's just an analogue of reality—nothing more. And the longer the patient uses it, the more accurate the data yielded."

"How the hell can you use something you don't understand? That's what shakes me! And if you of all people don't—"

Knard shrugged. "Five years and the experience of a dozen or so cases isn't all that much to go by."

Athlone gave him a strange look. He said, "Knard, something just hit me. You say we've had it only five years?"

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"That's right."

"But I didn't think. . . ." Athlone's voice tailed off uncertainly; just in time it occurred to him that he might be going to insult Knard, and he didn't want to. Knard, though, did not seem to realize. His voice betrayed wry sarcasm as he replied.

"You were going to say: you don't think there's been much progress in any field since Tacket."

Athlone nodded. That was roughly it.

"Well, you're damned right!" said Knard with unexpected emphasis. "There's been change, but no progress. I'd like to lay claim to enough originality to have invented the rho function field myself, but I'm as secondhand as anyone in our lazybones world. All I did was figure out how to use it to advantage."

"You mean," said Athlone painfully, "you mean we *imported* the idea?"

"Of course we did."

Athlone felt sweat prickle on his forehead. He had the impression of being on the verge of a terrible but significant discovery. "But—who brought it in, then?" he choked out. "Whose franchise did it come from?"

"Ahmed Lyken's," said Knard shortly.

"The hell you say!" Illogical, apparently groundless, fear started to blossom in Athlone's guts, like a firefall. He repeated, "The *hell* you say!"

## 6

THROUGH THE whole structure of the franchise system the contradictions crawled like termites—invisible to the super-

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ficial view which was all that the general public was permitted to gain.

For example, the concessionaries bound themselves to rigid rules—ostensibly to reassure the public that irresponsibles could never again bring back a White Death from one of the sister Earths. Not one of them gave more than lip service to this ideal. All the concessionaries, and most especially the twelve who were also Directors of The Market, regarded the rules as a sort of *code duello*—if they had not existed, they would have been compelled by the resulting anarchy to spend more time fighting the competition openly than making their legitimate profit.

As it was, most of them divided their attention between finding out how they themselves could stretch their self-imposed bonds, and taking action against colleagues who had stretched them already.

The first concessionaries who took on Tacket franchises and rescued their parent world from famine and war by turning it into a middleman's planet were justified in demanding some protection against the then vigorous opposition: "Travel with Tacket now—burn with Tacket hereafter!" And the cultists limped along the streets, crippled by the White Death.

They got their protection, and they made it absolute. When the cults' influence declined, when prejudice against "imported" goods dwindled to vanishing point, they would not give it up.

At first the concessionaries had a sense of mission; they felt they were rescuing their world from disaster. Bit by bit all that waned away. Colleagues became rivals. A franchise became simply a mine of wealth. The principle to be followed became: co-operate when necessary, compete when possible.

Lyken had not co-operated enough. Now he was being driven down. And his rivals of yesterday, his colleagues of the day before, prepared to become his enemies of tomorrow.

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Unaware of the hour of decision that had come upon them at noon the Directors of The Market met together later in the day to consider an hour of decision they had set themselves: not noon-for-doom, but midnight-for-fight.

They were dignified men. Some had scarred faces. Many had beards. All of them were richly clothed, and all had resonant voices which seemed to have frozen into the tone used for giving orders. If they spoke, they were almost always to be obeyed at once. The rule failed only at times like this, when they met together as equals and Clostrides sat at the head of their council table and controlled them like a charioteer driving wild horses.

One bodyguard and one aide stood behind each chair. Each chair came from one of its occupier's franchises—these men were powerful and none commanded less than three of the sister Earths. In a throne of ivory Dewitt Yorell sat wearing robes of white and red, a cap of platinum links on his almost bald head; he was the senior of them all and controlled five worlds, the most of any of them.

When they were all assembled and had exchanged cold greetings, Yorell commenced the proceedings with a question to Clostrides.

"How did he take it, Manuel? Do we fight?"

Clostrides leaned back lazily in his own chair; that one was handcarved on this original Earth, centuries ago—had to be, for to sit in an imported chair would have slighted all the concessionaries but the giver, and Clostrides could side only with a majority of the Directors.

He said, "He refused to yield—which was of course what we anticipated. However he had second thoughts; he said that he would exchange his franchise for another of equal value. But I think I was correct to deny him this."

In unison, the assembly grunted approval.

"When I did deny it, though," Clostrides pursued, "He said that in his view that implied we were lying. He said that if all

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that concerned us was the fungus he had allowed to slip through on that grain consignment, we would be satisfied with closing his franchise. Anything else he construed as theft."

Amusement showed on the Directors' faces.

"This fungus, now!" said Yorell. "It's an ingenious story for the public. Are we certain it will stand up?"

Clostrides shrugged. "The fungus is real and exists. It was in fact isolated from grain imported by Ahmed Lyken. True, it's excellent grain; true, the fungus will flourish on the grain and nowhere else. But we allowed judicious amounts of the infected grain to be sold, and according to my information we can expect independent reports of it to start arriving tonight. Public alarm, suitably fostered, will do the rest. Oh yes, the story will stand up."

"And even if it doesn't, who cares?" said Hal Lanchery in a bored tone from the lower end of the table. He was the youngest of the Directors, and very brash. He had been lucky rather than skillful to escape the same treatment as Lyken was now to get, so rapidly had he come up and so many corners had he cut on the way. Others at the table shifted in their chairs, pointedly expressing annoyance. Clostrides hurried on.

"I think, therefore, we can go ahead as planned. As to affairs at this end, we will of course cut Lyken's power at midnight and break the seals on his Tacket numbers. It takes about six or seven hours to discriminate down to a new number. The portals should open at about dawn, therefore."

"What has Lyken got to offer against us?" Yorell said. "Who's he been buying arms from, for instance? Is he recruiting?"

"Yes, he is." Clostrides glanced at papers before him. "I advised all his known suppliers that the extent of his credit might not be good after today, but I'm sure he had substantial funds and will convert all of them into armaments. Oddly enough, I didn't get the impression that he'd been expecting



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this showdown. I find that reassuring. As to recruiting, he's already got agents on the streets—so fast, in fact, that I suspect he must have called from his cruiser to order them out before he actually got back to his base from here this afternoon. The number they sign up before sunset will probably be rather small, but I've arranged to handicap him this evening, when he'll be making a maximum effort."

"How?" Yorell put in.

"There will be rioting in the vicinity of his base. I anticipate considerable interference with all traffic, including Lyken's."

Next to Hal Lanchery, Jorge Klein looked up abruptly. "At what time?" he snapped.

"From about six-thirty or seven, onward."

Klein turned to his aide and gave a brisk order; the aide nodded and left the room.

"Apologies," said Klein in a brittle tone. "I have a consignment which looters would find attractive routed through that area this evening. I'll have to change the schedule."

"What sort of consignment?" inquired Clostrides, not for himself especially but because he could read a desire to know in the faces of all the other Directors.

"Guns," said Klein, biting the word off short.

Hal Lanchery was looking impatient, and Clostrides passed sleepy eyes across his face before speaking again.

"We have an interesting proposal which was put to me yesterday to consider," he said. "Hal—maybe you'd describe it yourself?"

"By all means!" said Lanchery, and sat upright. "Now as things stand, we can assume that Lyken will use every last moment up to midnight to get reinforcements through to his franchise. No matter how we handicap him, we can bank on his assembling a respectable army. We can also bet that between midnight, when we cut his power, and dawn, when we get our own portals open into the franchise, he'll have time to deploy to very good effect. It takes time to move the attack-

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ing forces in, and what's worse, the portals are conspicuous and vulnerable while they're operating. What we need is some way of confusing Lyken's defenders while we're moving in, and if possible also of thinning out his cannon fodder simultaneously.

"Now as you perhaps know, in one of my franchises there is an interesting culture called the G'kek." Lanchery glanced along the table. Understanding had already begun to dawn on several faces, and Clostrides was nodding approval. Lanchery leaned back and expanded his proposition.

"The G'kek, are semi-nomadic, rather bloodthirsty, and they're capable of truly astonishing feats with wild animals. They're also exceptionally well provided with animals to demonstrate their powers on. I propose that the first wave of our attack should be a large contingent from the G'kek, together with a representative assortment of dangerous animals. It won't cost anything except power, and it will very effectively tie Lyken's defenders in knots while we move in."

He looked around for approval from the other Directors. A few of them were nodding; others looked dubious. Yorell voiced what seemed a common objection.

"Transporting human beings from franchise to franchise is highly dangerous," he said bluntly. "What's more, we know a lot less about animal sickness than we do about human sickness. I could imagine a veterinary equivalent of the White Death coming through with the wild beasts."

Lanchery shook his head. "As to the danger of bringing the G'kek through, it's negligible. I wouldn't suggest it if they were a high culture. They're superstitious barbarians, in fact, and won't understand a thing. And they'll be very glad to be sent back afterwards. They just have this fabulous power over animals, and it includes the ability to tell a sick beast from a healthy one. I'm certain we can weed out the sick ones before driving them through the portal."

Jorge Klein grunted. "The idea's attractive," he said cau-

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tiously. "Anything which thins out Lyken's cannon fodder is attractive."

"But—?" prompted Clostrides. He'd seen most of the objections to Lanchery's scheme, but if they were going to come out he preferred them to be voiced by the Directors, not by himself. He sided only with majorities.

Klein's objection was logistical, and well-founded. Lanchery countered it. He countered others, and they spent almost an hour working their way towards acceptance. No one voiced the strongest objection of possibility that Lanchery would lose his opportunity not to move in the savage G'kek, but to move in forces of his own, skilled, well-armed and highly trained. Clostrides wouldn't have put it past him. But there was no sign that the other Directors suspected that.

They reached agreement ultimately, and turned to the last, and most difficult problem: assessment of the geography facing them. From the nature of nearby franchises, they could extrapolate to a limited extent, but the coarseness of the discrimination their portals were capable of—dictated by nuclear "noise" in the atoms of the matter of which those portals were constructed—prevented a very close approach, and actual penetration into Lyken's franchise was not possible until the seals were broken at midnight. That system was foolproof; the Directors were all aware that if it had not been, their rivals and colleagues would have tried poaching. Any one of them would willingly have tried poaching. Likewise, every concessionary kept his secrets well—hypnolocking his employees' minds, planting false and misleading rumors, inventing ingenious and wildly inaccurate cover stories about the nature of his franchise.

Planning their assault, Clostrides reflected, the Directors were less like generals than like blind men fumbling their way across strange rooms.

He had a vision of a vast balance swinging over them as they argued and expounded. On one side which was success,

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represented by Lyken's franchise and the hard-earned knowledge of its resources which reposed in Lyken's base there, and on the other, failure—a successful resistance by Lyken's defending forces. An outsider might have guessed that Lyken did not stand a chance against the united forces of the Directors; none of themselves shared that illusion. They knew too well how slim a margin separated them from failure; their franchises were profitable, true, but they also were demanding, calling for vast staffs, armies of skilled technicians, equipment costing millions, and more, with the erratic behavior of an artistic temperament. In effect, they were gambling, although they weighted the odds they could never be sure of winning.

Clostrides had to side with the majority as always. He did not like to think what would happen if by a miracle Lyken held out.

### 7

JOCKEY HOLE SAT in his usual place, behind the huge one-way glass frontage of the Octopus Bar, and watched darkness move in on his manor. Opposite him was Gaffles, quiet and patient. When Jockey was cogitating, and especially when he was looking out along Holy Alley, he liked silence.

His expression was thoughtful.

Jockey liked data. News, information, rumors—a well-spat string of any sort. Maybe it was due to Jockey and people like Jockey (there weren't many) that the yonder boys had adopted that figure of speech into their wide talk: "spit the string!" Because knowledge was power. Know everything

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about someone, and you made him dance like a puppet on the strings.

Jockey had knowledge the way his bodyguards had muscles—some he had, he hadn't even used yet. Quite a lot of it he didn't expect ever to use, because it related to people even as far up the tree as Manuel Clostrides and the merchant princes themselves. He didn't often call that stuff to mind; he didn't enjoy contemplating the gulf between him and them.

This time was different. He turned to Gaffles.

"Know? That number Curdy Wence—when he came in with his bit of string, I figured it was just curio."

Gaffles chucked his head. "But now—" he prompted.

"Now maybe I feel it might pay. Listen at this list, and see how you see it." Jockey began to tell items on his fingers, flicking them one by one. "About Lyken. Lyken's 'craters' are out drumming up power like never for years. Gold? There's a rumor running that something Lyken brought in was infected with the disease germ. Gold?"

"I got the rumor," put in Gaffles. "I also got that it was strictly from Tacket."

"We hear that," shrugged Jockey. "And who else? For the unmeasured ones, rumor is better. Next, we get that Athlone went to see Clostrides directly after Lyken left—and he comes out and fires his personal guard, Benny Mott."

(When that news reached him, Jockey had snapped, "Did you hire him yet?" And when the news-bringer's face went white, Jockey had cursed him fluently for all of a minute prior to getting a legman after Benny to offer him a Rate Two for whatever information Athlone hadn't had hypnolocked out of reach.)

"We know one thing certain about Athlone," said Gaffles.

"That all he's cared about these months is Luis Nevada? Gaffles, watch yourself. You're getting astute in your age. How do you read this, then? Suppose the number Curdy told

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us about—the dreg that wasn't, Lyken took into his cruiser—was Luis Nevada?"

Gaffles pursed his lips. "Jockey, you pay Curdy Rate One for just a curio? *You* saw this coming!"

"I surprise me sometimes," said Jockey dryly. He didn't let it show, but he really meant that. Even to him, a Rate One wasn't pennies; he'd gambled on a hunch in paying Curdy so well, and here was the reason, emerging hours later from his subconscious mind. It had happened before. It might happen again. *That* was what kept Jockey on top of the pile.

He went on steadily, "I read that they're getting set to dispossess Ahmed Lyken, the way they did Alld and Porter. They won't say so, they'll fill the newstapes with crap about voluntary liquidation. But I'll lay odds that Lyken's going to get chiseled out."

"You been warning off Lyken's cutters all day, too."

For Jockey nodded. He had been warning his valuable runners and agents to avoid the 'cruties, because Lyken was tough. He'd fight. Jockey was still capable of hero-worship, and knew he was only a big frog in a small puddle. Lyken was a man he could admire for being large in the biggest of all.

"It fits," Gaffles was saying. "Athlone's so far out of the class Clostrides belongs in, Clostrides wouldn't notice him usually. Jockey, you think this is safe to be left with a raw cub like Curdy Wence?"

"Not any more," said Jockey. "Get out after him, Gaffles. If he hasn't got anything, pick up where he's got to. I want to know what connects Ahmed Lyken to Luis Nevada—*fast*."

The feeling of buoyancy that had come with the Rate One—mainly due to having so much money in one piece, partly to having been given a big job by Jockey—didn't last long in Curdy's mind. Where in hell *did* you start asking? Who *was*

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in a position to know something that meant something to a man like Ahmed Lyken?

Someone he'd fired, maybe? But when Lyken or any of the merchant princes dismissed an employee, the best psychs available turned his hypnokeys for him. And those keys were nonsense phrases you could spend a year hunting for and never chance across. It was nearly foolproof. Curdy felt he was butting a concrete wall that way, and it was making him agitated. He slipped a fresh pad of trunks into his mouth.

Maybe the trunks did it; maybe it was the fact that he was just passing the Octopus Bar again. Lorrel, who ran the Octopus, had been one of Jockey's confidential aides while he was on the way up; he'd lost his hearing in some affair with a rival outfit while there still were rivals in the Eastern Quarter, and when Jockey came out on top he set Lorrel up in the Octopus as a kind of pension. If anyone knew—Lorrel would.

Curdy went in quietly. The bar was still almost empty, but this time Lorrel was there, behind the counter. Curdy went up and gestured for attention; Lorrel hadn't heard him come in, of course. He was *that* deaf.

Forming his words very carefully, exaggerating his lip movements, Curdy said, "Lorrel, I'm doing a Rate One job for Jockey!"

Lorrel's eyes widened. He said nothing. He never did.

Four hours later, as he started out of the Octopus, Gaffles turned on impulse and asked Lorrel, "Curdy Wence wasn't here, was he?"

"Sure he was," scribbled Lorrel on his magnapad, He could not hear his own voice; if he tried to speak, he only squawked.

It took Curdy some time to convince Lorrel that it was true. When the record was straight, he put his questions.

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"Lorrel, was anyone that didn't have his hypnokeys all turned right ever fired by a franchise outfit?"

Lorrel hesitated. Then he scrawled, "Jockey had one."

"Who fired him?" Curdy snapped.

"Ald and Porter. Before your time!"

Still, it had happened at least once. It was a line to follow. Curdy plunged on. "Know anyone fired by Lyken?"

"Lots. He's a hard number to keep satisfied."

The magnapad was crowding up. Lorrel wiped it and waited for a further question.

"All hypnolocked, so far as you know?"

"All solid," Lorrel wrote—and added, "Why?"

"I have to find out who might know something that would hit Lyken hard like concrete. Jockey's business, though!"

"Who you think you're talking to?" countered Lorrel and a scowl stamped deep across his face.

Later on, an astonished Gaffles said, "What did he want? Did you give him anything? Where did you send him?"

That was a bad one. Lorrel's loyalty to Jockey was complete. It took some smoothing over. But eventually Curdy was able to continue, "Look, Lorrel—you were once on the way up. You know what it'd mean to me to bring off a Rate One job for Jockey!"

*And you of all people don't stand to lose if I do,* he added silently.

Afterwards, Lorrel scribbled—as he had for Curdy's benefit—a single name: Erlking. Curdy had to ask who that might be; Gaffles didn't, and he moved at once.

At the time when Curdy set out from Holy Alley, things hadn't really begun to build up in the Quarter. Lyken's 'cruiters were out, as Jockey had warned him—teams of six to eight were touring the streets in vehicles fitted out as com-



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bined recruiting stations and paddy wagons, with blaring speakers on top turned to maximum gain. They were offering Rate Two per day—which was ridiculous—for short service employment, no guarantee of continuance but a minimum of ten days' pay promised. The dregs, used to getting by on their public allotment of less than a quarter as much per day, were falling over one another to sign up; those who hung back undecided lost their chance because the wagons were full and moving on, signing contracts by the dozen as they got under way. But nothing else marked the day as exceptional.

By the time Gaffles left the Octopus, however, the city was coming to life for the night. The Pleasuredrome had its drummers out for the new pageant, but the 'cruiters were still shouting them down; now, though, they hadn't got things all their own way, for the cultists were after them. Wherever a recruiting wagon halted it was sure to be followed within moments by a cultist outfit with still more powerful speakers, bellowing about the White Death and the horrible fate in store for anyone meddling with Tacket's Principle.

The situation was getting ugly; Gaffles knew that before he had gone half a mile. He had never seen cultists out in such numbers. Someone must have tipped them off. And that suggested that sooner or later they were going to come to blows with the 'cruiters.

Passing one of Jockey's dependables, Gaffles paid him twenty to run a warning to Jockey at the Octopus. Warnings might not help, but he could do no more at the moment.

*Erlking*, he was thinking. *Yes, of course!* Even though there had never been a suggestion that Erlking's hypnokeys had ever been disturbed, Lyken's last Remembrancer was a very, very logical person to ask first.

Curdy was working under handicaps; he knew a fair amount about the extent of Jockey's organization, but Gaffles knew it all—knew who to ask, where to find them. When he left the Octopus he was four hours behind Curdy; when he

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was given Erlking's last known address, and went there, he was only forty minutes behind.

This was a shabby lodging block on the fringes of the Quarter; in a small office in the basement, a sour-faced woman, who probably spoke with a higher-ranked accent than most of her lodgers, answered his questions.

"Erlking moved, just ten days ago. He had money from somewhere, paid his back rent, and moved."

Gaffles grunted. He'd half expected that. People like Erlking were rootless. He said, "Where to?"

The sour-faced woman gave an expressive shrug. "I didn't ask. Why should I? He'd never had any mail, not in four years."

"Has anyone else been around asking for him today?"

The answer to that cost him another twenty; he paid with good grace, and the woman softened slightly. She nodded.

"A yonder boy, forty minutes gone. I told him no, too."

So Curdy had got this far, anyway. Not bad for a first job. You had to hand it to Jockey, Gaffles reflected. He knew what he was betting on. But strictly that wasn't the important point. What did matter was that Erlking had gone; he might have left the Quarter, even. And scouring the city for him tonight was going to be very tough work.

He was turning to go when there was a beep from the outside annunciator, and the landlady switched on. A gruff, familiar voice said, "The law! Open up!"

Athlone's voice.

Gaffles made his mind up quickly; he thrust another twenty at the landlady. "I'm after rooms," he said. "I want to hear this if I can—okay?"

The landlady made the money vanish, and triggered the outside door release. She didn't say anything. They waited in silence for Athlone and his companions to come in.

Athlone wasted no time. He glanced interrogatively at

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Gaffles, not recognizing him, and the landlady spoke up. "He came about rooms, but we don't have any."

"You've got a room free all right," said Athlone heavily. "You just don't know it yet."

The landlady looked blank. Athlone gestured to one of his subordinates, who produced a picture and gave it to him. He thrust it under the landlady's nose.

"Is that one of your tenants?" he snapped.

The landlady nodded, glancing from the picture to Athlone's face and back again, nervously. "That's—that's Gower in number ninety. Has he done something?"

Athlone didn't answer directly. He took back the picture and grunted. "Want to search his rooms," he said. "Which way?"

Gaffles hardly heard the landlady's answer. He'd caught one quick glimpse of the picture, and things had suddenly begun to make sense.

It was a picture of Luis Nevada.

## 8

FOR REASONS that outsiders were ignorant of, Ahmed Lyken had his office low down in the great tower dominating the complex of buildings which formed his base of operations. To one of his rivals, the knowledge might have been significant, or simply an example of eccentricity. Usually, the merchant princes preferred to look down on their domains, and Clostrides was copying them when he looked down on The Market.

Looking through the window-wall of the office, Lyken could not see much of what he controlled. But he could hold it in

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his mind, and what he saw there pleased him. It had doubled its size since he took on his franchise. When he won, it would double again. He promised himself that.

Somehow, it was no longer quite as easy to think "*when* he won." "If he won" kept creeping back.

He turned as a casual beep sounded on the door speaker, and the panels slid back to admit his baseman, Shane Malco, his hands full of documents, his face set in an expression of defeat. Lyken had his answer before he asked his question; he uttered it nonetheless.

"Did you get him?"

Malco shook his head. He dropped his document on Lyken's huge desk and stepped back. "That's the finance and equipment report you called for," he said parenthetically. And shifted to the main subject.

"We got the address where he was last living, and went to it. It was a dreg's lodging block on the edge of the Quarter. The team I sent spent almost an hour working the landlady over. All they got was that Erlking got money from somewhere, enough to pay off his back rent, and moved out. He left no address."

"Sure? Beyond doubt?"

"There isn't room for doubt." Malco passed a tired hand across his face. "You shouldn't just have fired him, Ahmed. You should have—"

"Shot him?" interrupted Lyken with deceptive gentleness. Pensioned him off in the franchise? I hope you were going to suggest the latter, Shane. Erlking had given me long and good service, and I wouldn't have killed him off. Know that, Shane?"

Malco licked dry lips and nodded. He said, "But you're staking so much on this place Akkilmal!"

Lyken shrugged. It cost him a lot of effort to make the shrug casual. "He was properly hypnoed," he said shortly. "The fact that one of his locks was opened was a million-to-

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one chance. And it didn't seem to have been opened very far, to judge from what truth serum dug out of Nevada's mind. What have you done with him, by the way?"

After a pause, Malco said, "Nothing—yet. What do you want done with him?"

"Was his money good? Did you get the half million?"

Taken aback, Malco nodded. He pointed at the documents on the desk. "You'll find it there, under 'contingencies reserve,' " he said. "It's good, all right."

"Then take him through to the franchise, the way he asked to be taken," said Lyken, and gave a curiously bitter laugh. "No one can say I don't keep my bargains."

"Will do," agreed Malco.

"What else are you doing about Erlking?"

"What can I do? I've got all the agents I can spare out scouring the city for him. But it's getting very difficult."

"Trouble?"

"I came mainly to tell you. Rioting. Started a few minutes ago. Several of our 'cruiters have been set upon by gangs of cultists. All the avenues leading to the base have been effectively blocked by crowds. I suspect that some of the cultists *aren't*, if you get me. They're trained rabblers. Someone we took in for questioning says he heard rumors of our having imported a new strain of the White Death. He said he didn't believe it. I think he half did."

"I wondered how long they'd wait before turning that one loose. Damn that grain fungus! It's given them just the opening they needed."

Malco said nothing, but waited for instructions.

"Give it half an hour," said Lyken suddenly. "If the police haven't cleared the streets by then, kidnap 'em. I'm going to get my twelve thousand through before midnight come hell or high bailiff!"

"You think Clostrides is behind it?" Malco prompted.

"Who else?"

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Lyken turned one more time to stare through the window-wall. While he had been talking to Malco, the lights had come on all over the tangle of buildings. Scarcely aware that he spoke aloud, he said under his breath. "*Twice as big!*"

"What?" Malco looked confused.

Lyken laughed again, this time without sounding bitter. He said, "Nothing, Shane. Can you handle things on the lines I indicated—for say two or three hours?"

"Well, I *could*, I guess, but—I"

"Carry on, then." Lyken moved towards the door. "I have things to straighten out in the franchise itself."

"Are you going to Akkilmar, perhaps?" Malco asked after a pause.

"That's right."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Ahmed. That's all I can possibly say. I just hope you *know*."

*So do I.*

The thought kept wriggling, naggingly, through Lyken's mind, like a worm. For a long time he had expected a show-down with the Directors; he knew well enough that he was not liked, that his franchise was too successful, that he had taken a larger slice of the available market than any other concessionary except the Directors themselves. Fair enough. It was in the rules, the unwritten rules. And he had banked on two things to protect him.

One was implicit in the fact that he had his office low down in the main tower of his base, and the portals through to the franchise on floors high above. You could never predict the geography—or the geology—of a Tacket franchise, and although you would go through and see the sun or the stars unchanged, at the same angle above the horizon as they were when you set out, you could not be sure of the ground underfoot.

In Lyken's franchise, a naked pillar of rock almost a thousand feet high and two hundred feet thick coexisted with his

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home base. His trading station perched on this pillar like the eyrie of an eagle, and it was invulnerable. The Directors would not be satisfied with simply closing his franchise. They wanted it—operating. And to save them from having to re-explore it expensively, bit by bit, they would also want the precious data stored in the trading post.

That was one kind of insurance he had. And Akkilmar was the second.

He was not absolutely sure, because you could never be sure about what some other franchise might hold, but he was almost sure that nothing like Akkilmar existed in any other franchise but his own.

The first time he had seen the place, he had been misled by appearances. It was a sizeable small town, a long way south of his base, in a subtropical area and close to the sea on which it largely depended for food. It had been reported numerous times by scouts, and accurately described: a town of wooden buildings, with streets as smooth and green as good lawns, well populated by tall people whose complexions ranged from copper to gold, apparently without mechanical aptitude—even without the wheel. There were few civilizations in the franchise at all, on this continent; the Old World, as usual, had a near monopoly.

Therefore it had gone long uninvestigated. Lyken had to repress a shudder when he thought how nearly he had overlooked the place altogether.

Once, however, a scout had been lost while exploring natural resources—his heli had been struck by lightning during a storm, and his locators were out, so they had to search for him over thousands of square miles. Someone dropped in on the people of Akkilmar, to ask if they had seen the scout. They had not, they answered gravely, but they knew where he was and gave directions.

The scout was within a mile of the spot they indicated, and after that Lyken looked into Akkilmar. He had no cause to

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regret the decision. Except, perhaps, that the people there made him feel inferior.

Once his attention had been drawn to the place, he did not take long to realize that he had perhaps the most amazing and valuable prize in any known franchise: a society that by some process other than scientific logic, by intuition or direct perception, had arrived at scientific principles. And could make them do tricks.

He had, even now, only a vague picture of what they could achieve. He had had nothing commercially useful out of them apart from the rho function field perceptor—and to date, no one had succeeded in making that work except for cocoonees cut off from the outside world. He had visualized it being employed as a kind of transmitterless television, and it was fairly certain that in Akkilmar it was used as such, but no normal person who had tried it had succeeded in interpreting its data properly. It would take a long time to understand Akkilmar's nonscience. But it existed, and it was powerful.

He was playing a hunch in hoping that it was powerful enough.

The sages were waiting for him when his heli sliced down out of the evening sky and purred to a landing on the level sand of the beach. They might just have come out to sit and watch the sunset, but Lyken felt that was not so. They were waiting for him.

They were such a *friendly* people! As he came towards them over the sand, Lyken remembered how he had had to press them to accept anything in exchange for the perceptor. They had agreed at last to take some musical instruments, and nothing more.

They exchanged greetings, and indicated that he should join the group. It was in the form of a shallow horseshoe, facing the sunset; the place they assigned to Lyken was in the opening of the curve. They *had* been waiting for him When



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he sat down, they were facing him without having had to move.

He had never been able to establish which of them was a leader, or indeed if they had a leader at all, and while turning over in his mind what he had to say he wondered which of them he should address his appeal to. Before he had decided, a plump man with a perpetual smile, whom he had met before, cleared his throat and spoke up.

"Beware of Allyn Vage," he said pleasantly.

The others chuckled, a rippling, rich sound. Bewildered, Lyken shook his head. There was no possibility of his having misheard; the people of Akkilmar had learned the language of the intruders on their world with astonishing speed and perfect accuracy. Allyn Vage. A name. It meant nothing to him, and he apologized and said so.

"Never mind," said a woman sitting next to the man who had spoken. Her hair was going gray, and her almost bare body suggested that she was childless. There were rather few children in Akkilmar, and that was another unsolved problem about this culture.

"We know why you have come," said a man sitting on the first speaker's other side. "Of course we will help you. You have been friendly to us, when you might have been brutal and exploited us through your strange powers. Go in peace and we will follow."

Lyken had not been prepared for this; he had expected a long discussion and a hard task of persuasion. Taken aback, he glanced around the assembly.

"But how do you know?" he demanded. "How do you know what I want?"

The first speaker put out his hand and scooped up some dry fine sand from the beach. Letting it trickle between his fingers in a thin stream, he traced a symbol with it. All of them chuckled again.

"Gol" said the first speaker, and to his own amazement

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Lyken found himself obeying. It was much later, when he was almost back at the trading post, that he was able to ask himself why.

### 9

WHEN GAFFLES came back to the Octopus, he found Jockey de-briefing a group of runners—yonder boys with tinted hair and jackets as wide across the shoulders as a cruiser's nose. He cued them with a straight forefinger, hearing each of the runners out before shifting the finger like a clockhand. Gaffles whistled sharply at him; he glanced up, read the look on his aide's face, and dropped his hand abruptly.

"Out!" he said. "Come back in three minutes."

The runners got up and scrambled out of Gaffles's way with a clatter of high boots. "You caught up with Curdy?" Jockey demanded when they had gone.

"Got close behind him. But I broke off. This was too hot to hold on to." Gaffles dropped into a seat and recounted what he had found out, about Nevada having lodged in the same block as Erlking.

"That's good clean long string," said Jockey approvingly. "Where's Erlking? You find him?"

Gaffles shook his head. "He moved. He had money from someone and didn't leave an address. And it's going to be hell scouring town for him tonight, no free fall about that. It's *rough* out there!"

Jockey plucked at his lower lip, dubiously. "I heard. I was just getting the breakdown when you showed. But if he's

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going to be useful, we've got to get him *now*. Lyken will have had it from Nevada that Erlking's hypnolocks aren't fast—if Nevada did get his news from Erlking, and that's most likely. Lyken will go after Erlking and drag him through into his franchise, or just blot him. That's what I'd do on his spot."

"You can add a fact to your breakdown," said Gaffles. "I came through a bad riot on the way. The police are taking in four 'cruiters to every cultist, where they can. I heard, too, that sometimes they're turning cultists loose on the quiet, running 'em around the corner and tipping 'em out the paddy wagon."

Jockey grunted. "There's a knot here," he said. "Unless Athlone is plain blind, he may have got the news about Erlking. He was right in the lodging block, you said. He saw Clostrides this morning, recall? Then the news may get to the Directors as well, and that'll mean two parties we have to get to Erlking ahead of. Gaffles, go through to the Venus, will you? You'll find about thirty runners hanging around. They're tonight's strategic reserve. Get them out after Erlking. Promise them the moon if they find him ahead of the competition."

It was a blow to Curdy Wence to get so close to Erlking and then to lose the trail. He paid the landlady of the lodging block fifty, and she still didn't know Erlking's new address, so either she was telling the truth or someone else had got to her first. Curdy wanted to assume the latter—there was something peculiar about her reactions, he thought—but on his first Rate One job he didn't want to get involved with a beating-out. There were plenty of pugs around who could beat out the news, but Curdy thought it was unsophisticated. Philosophically, he went back to his previous method of procedure, which, in this Quarter where everyone knew about Jockey Hole, worked tolerably well. Frown to look older;

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hand in side of jacket to suggest a weapon; relaxed tone to indicate absolute confidence, and—

"I'm from Jockey. He wants a man called Erlking. Used to be Ahmed Lyken's Remembrancer. Where is he?"

And the answer would take the form, "Sorry, I don't know. But cuddy! Try so-and-so. He should know, I guess."

He could tell that the technique worked because after a further half-dozen calls he started to have people giving him Erlking's old address, the one he'd moved away from. And he kept on getting more numbers to try.

What he didn't know was that after seven calls the half-hour waiting period laid down by Ahmed Lyken expired. And after eight calls he walked around a corner into the arms of a 'cruiter who picked him up, clobbered him, and slung him in the back of a wagon, which then had its full load of involuntary recruits, and took off howling down a sidestreet with police in full pursuit.

The 'cruiter who picked Curdy up knew his business; his clobbering was scientific and precise. Not so hard as to leave a lasting ache and incapacitate him for the work he had to do tomorrow; hard enough to stop him from being any kind of a nuisance on the way to Lyken's base. He woke up before the wagon actually got there, but his head was ringing like a bell and ached abominably, and he could barely get his eyes open. During a few seconds of consciousness he viewed the dark interior of the wagon, saw the lights of a street through the rear opening, heard groans from all around him, and felt a heavy limp weight—the weight of an unconscious body—across his legs and feet. Then he lapsed back into the dark.

He regained consciousness a second time when his shoulder was seized and shaken violently. This time his head was clearer, and his eyes focused at once instead of after two false attempts. He saw a pug in Lyken's company uniform, his cap tipped back on his shaven head, leaning over and saying something as though through a long, long pipe. The gurgling

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words sorted themselves out in Curdy's muddled brain, and made sense.

"On your feet, yonder boy."

He didn't move. He said, "What?" And felt that the limp weight on his feet had gone. Beyond the opening in the back of the wagon he could see that there was a large, lighted yard, with people milling about. Someone was shouting orders over an amplifier.

"Yurd mel!" the pug growled, and reached for Curdy's shoulder again, intending to pick him up and throw him bodily out of the wagon.

Curdy waited till the pug was off balance. Then he swung his feet, quickly and together, to the floor, and bounced upright. It was good and measured, all smooth and falling free.

Taken aback, the pug blinked at him. He chose his insults carefully, and said, "No Tacket-loving company pug tells *me* what to do, gasbrains."

The pug's face twisted with rage, and he clawed a baton loose from his belt where it swung on a long thong. Curdy kicked his wrist before he could raise it out of reach; in the same moment, before his foot dropped back to the floor, he caught the end of his whangee stick and pulled it out of the side of his boot. He cracked it across the pug's face.

The pug would have brushed aside a punch with a closed fist; the stinging pain of the whangee stick made him grunt and close his eyes, cursing foully. Behind him, another captive slumped on one of the racks stirred and groaned.

But Curdy had no time to think of rescuing anyone but himself. He seized his chance while the pug was distracted by the pain, and spun round, intending to jump over the back of the wagon and run off.

There was a man waiting for him as he jumped, who shot out a leg to trip him and helped him on his way down with a shove in the small of the back. Curdy went sprawling on hard concrete pavement.

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"A yonder boy with skill and guts!" said the man who had tripped him in a sarcastic tone, bending down and snatching Curdy's whangee stick from him. Curdy feigned a grab for it, and instead dived for the speaker's legs, but just in time the man stepped back. There was the snicking sound of an energy gun being cocked, and Curdy looked up, his heart sinking, to see its snub muzzle in the man's hand.

After that, there was nothing to be done.

In the big bright yard there were at least a dozen paddy wagons being unloaded. Uniformed teams were ordering the occupants out, and, if they were unwilling, dragging them. Curdy felt he owed it to his self-respect to be dragged, but the energy gun lined on him convinced him otherwise. The man wielding it made him stand to one side while the other captives from the wagon which had brought him in were assembled in a rough line. Then two pugs came up, one bearing an armful of clinking chain, and Curdy saw how things were to be arranged.

The pugs paid out the chain in front of the line of captives. Attached to this chain at intervals were shorter chains each terminating in an oval metal ring. The pugs picked up the rings one by one, seized the right wrists of the captives, and snicked the rings on like handcuffs. Curdy was the last to be treated; when the others had been secured, the man with the gun motioned him into line, and he submitted, seething. There were a couple of empty rings still; as the line of captives was herded across the yard, with the two pugs hauling on the front end of the chain, these rings clanked on the ground behind Curdy like insane tambourines.

On the opposite side of the yard was a travolator leading into a lighted tunnel. There was no hint where it might lead. As Curdy's group approached, another group was being loaded on. The chain binding them was locked on to a hook on a belt moving at the same speed as the travolator, and they

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had to go with it like a team playing pop-the-whip, staggering as they were dragged forward.

What in Tacket's name had driven Lyken—Lyken of all the merchant princes—to such desperate measures? Curdy's head spun as much with the problem as with the aftereffects of the blow he had received.

His group was just about to be hooked on to the conveyer belt and dragged on to the travolator, when a man to whom the pugs gave respectful salutes came out from behind one of the empty paddy wagons. With him were two more pugs, struggling to control a wide-eyed man in a brown coverup, who shook and struggled, uttering little moaning cries.

"Hook this one on with the others," ordered the newcomer, his voice sounding tired and strained. He jerked a thumb at the man in the brown coverup. The pugs grinned and nodded. In a moment, their struggling victim was chained behind Curdy, and the whole group was being snatched forward on to the travolator. Dimly, there was a sarcastic remark from the newcomer.

"You're getting where you asked to be taken, you fool!"

Curdy had visions of the wide-eyed man causing trouble on the travolator, and as soon as they were on it and steady on their feet, he turned to him and prepared to warn him to keep still. But a shock of recognition prevented him.

"But—but you're the man who spoke to Lyken outside The Market at noon!"

The other didn't seem to hear. Instead of struggling and pulling on his chain as Curdy had feared, however, he began to curse. It discomfited Curdy to hear such fluent obscenity in an accent with status to it. Some of the other captives, who seemed to have been shocked into numb acquiescence by the fate that had overtaken them, half-turned and looked incuriously back.

The travolator began to spiral upwards at a steep angle, so that they almost slid backwards on its rough surface. The

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man behind Curdy stopped cursing and began to shout in a high, hysterical tone.

"Do you know what's happening to you? I'll tell you! A bastard called Lyken wants us for cannon fodder! They're throwing him out of his franchise, and it's more than time—he's a cheating lying filthy Tacket-loving scoundrel who lies and smiles and isn't fit to *breathe!*"

Someone higher up the line cried out in an anguished voice. Curdy felt fear go through him like a frozen wind.

"I want to get hold of Lyken and pull off his fingers!" The man behind him screamed. "I want to put oil on his beard and hear him yell while it burns off his face! I want to—"

"Shut him up, can't you?" bellowed a voice from higher up. Curdy gulped. The raw savagery in his neighbor's tone was churning his guts. He hesitated. Then he bunched his fist.

"If you don't stop it," he said in his roughest manner, "I'll break your nose for you."

The man stopped, crouching a little against the rise of the travolator, and stared at Curdy with tear-bright eyes. "I'm Luis Nevada," he said inanely, in a voice that had dropped suddenly to a conversational level.

Curdy answered him with a grunt, and there was silence for a while, until the travolator flattened out again, and they emerged into a great hall. One by one they turned and stared at what they saw there. They all recognized it. Pictures had been published often enough. It was a Tacket portal in full operation.

"What did I tell you?" howled the man behind Curdy. "Rot Lyken's soul in hell!"



IN THIS, the latest of Hal Lanchery's three franchises to be opened up, the traders' domain was within an island of green forest surrounded by open plain, thickets of shrubs and wide, meandering streams. Tonight was clear and rather bright, with a very white quarter-moon in the sky.

Under a tall tree, surrounded by his aides, Hal Lanchery finished briefing Fearmaster through an interpreter. Fearmaster was tall, muscular, and courageous. But when he was with the traders, he showed fear. He could not help it. And it was better that way.

Lanchery had taken this franchise for the sake of its furs and skins, which were superb and plentiful. It had not at first occurred to him that the G'kek's mastery of wild animals could be put to use. He shifted in his chair as he thought of how the idea had come to him, and felt a stir of uneasiness, wondering if he was doing right or not.

He was in his way a handsome man—lean, young to be of such eminence, with a fair beard. Most of the merchant princes wore beards, and their followers also, because of the aura of frontiersmen which hung about them. Not that there was much of the pioneering spirit in franchise work. Sometimes, though, an ugly look would cross his face, and it would seem suddenly savage, barbaric.

Fearmaster, skilled in reading nonverbal communications, saw such a look now, and gave a grunt as though he had been struck in the belly. Lanchery came back from his private thoughts and snapped at the interpreter.

"Well? How's it going? You've been talking a long time."

The interpreter shrugged. "I had difficulty making sense of something he said. It seems they're developing taboos against referring to our equipment directly—they use circum-

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locutions which get harder and harder to follow. But as I understand it, they're doing all right with the animals. Only the portal we're setting up smells so strongly of man and of electricity they doubt whether they'll get the beasts right up to it."

"Ask him if there's any way of covering up the smell, then."

"I did. Apparently the portal will have to be smeared with bruised leaves and animal droppings. Then it might not be too bad."

"Get him to attend to it, then. Or if he doesn't like the smell himself, get him to show the technicians the right sort of leaves and so on."

The interpreter rattled off the order; Fearmaster bowed and darted away among the trees, glad to be off. When he was gone from sight, Lanchery rose, sighing heavily.

"I'm going to walk round the perimeter by myself for a while," he said. "I want to think over the plans. I'll be back in a quarter-hour at most."

This was definitely the most pleasant of the trading posts he operated, he reflected. It was all set among trees; much of it—the portals themselves, and all the technical stuff—was underground, buried in the slowly rising hill on which the patch of forest grew. At ground level, it was possible to be quite alone among the trees, seeing no one, hearing practically nothing but nature's noises. And yet there was no danger of intrusion because of the heavily guarded perimeter.

Correction. Almost no danger of intrusion. There had been one intruder. But he found it ridiculous to think of her as a source of danger.

A bluish glimmer shone between two of the stark black trunks, and by its light he caught sight of *her* face. Forgetting everything else, he dashed forward calling out her name.

"Allyn! Allyn!"

And she was there again.

The bluish glimmer came from the substance of her clothes:

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a cloak with a high stiff collar that framed her head like a numbus, a tunic and slacks which as they glowed seemed to pour liquidly around her body and legs. She turned slumberous-lidded eyes towards him, but otherwise remained immobile.

Lanchery felt a stab-like pain go through him—not for her beauty, though her face was lovely and her body was very shapely under its blue luminous garb. Yet women far more beautiful clamored to offer themselves to merchant princes like Lanchery, and he enjoyed that fact well enough. No, the cause was not to be found in physical beauty.

He halted, paces from her, when he would have gone forward to touch her and confirm that she was really there, because the stab-like pain paralyzed him. He heard his breath rasping in his throat, and felt that his heartbeat had accelerated madly. Giddily he fumbled for words.

"Did it work, Hal?" said that husky voice which could raise the hairs prickling on his nape, which seemed to tingle down his spine like a blast of iced water. "Did they agree?"

"Uh—oh—" He cursed himself and his stumbling tongue. How could any woman reduce him to this trembling state of self-consciousness, like a child? He drew a deep breath and made his voice steady by force. "Yes, Allyn. They agreed. And everything is going very well."

"You understand what's at stake, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. It's a considerable prize."

A throaty chuckle, somehow sounding almost eerie. "Don't you believe me, Hal? Don't you believe that you'll get Lyken's franchise if you do as I say?"

"Yes, of course! You've shown me how it can be done. By the time Lyken loses out I'll be in an impregnable position. But—"

"Yes?" Gently prompting him, the single word seemed to caress the air, and he shuddered. But he let the questions come in a rush.

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"But why do I trust you, Allyn? I don't know who you are or where you come from or how you come to be in my franchise!"

She chuckled. "You trust me because I'm trustworthy, Hal, that's all. It's your instinct guiding you. Your intuition. And why shouldn't you rely on that guidance?"

The words actually said nothing much, but warm confidence flowed into Lanchery as he heard them, as though injected drug-like into his veins. He licked dry lips.

"Will you stay?"

"No, I won't stay."

He flung his hands wide, helplessly, and spoke in a beseeching tone. "Allyn, Allyn! How long must this go on? Coming and going like a phantom, you haunt me! I think of you every waking minute and when I sleep I dream about you."

Without seeming to move, Allyn had glided forward like a will-o'-the-wisp. Now she was close enough for him to reach out and touch her. He could not. His hands and arms froze; only his heart seemed to respond, striving to leap out to her.

Soft and light as a breeze, yet as electrifying as a lightning bolt, her lips brushed over his. His eyes closed. He poised for a moment on the brink of some unimaginable abyss, glorying in the fear that he might fall.

When his eyes opened again, she was gone.

Jome Knard found it best to think of other things when he was making the nightly check of his patient's cocoon, nutrient supplies, regenerants, and perceptor. There was never anything wrong; he had allowed a margin of error wide enough for any contingency, so he could permit his hands to get on with their job, his eyes to get on with theirs, and think of other things. He had to. He could *feel* the hatred in the room if he did not distract himself.

He dared not extirpate that hatred. Not yet. In the first

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weeks after the fire, when life hung delicately in the balance, that hatred had provided Allyn Vage's only impulse to live. She had reconstructed her personality around it. It would have to wait to be eliminated—when the cocoon was removed, and she could walk again, and see the world with eyes instead of sensing it through the half-understood rho function fields of the perceptor . . .

Now that Nevada was supposed to be in Lyken's franchise, immune to revenge, immune to Athlone's pursuit, what would that do to his patient's sanity?

How did she know about it? Athlone would have lied about it if that had been possible; thanks to the perceptor, it wasn't. But Athlone would have lied because he had to, and being deprived of the chance was damaging him, too. Knard had watched him almost as closely as he had watched Allyn over the past months, and he was achieving depths of self-abnegation which Knard would hardly have believed possible for a modern man. In the beginning, he had assumed that Athlone simply loved Allyn—that accounted for his interest in her survival, for his desire to see Nevada tried again and condemned. Moreover, Allyn had been beautiful, and would be beautiful again. Knard knew that; he had studied her pictures when programming the computer that supervised the regeneration of her body.

Of love, Knard had a detached view, having witnessed in his patients its damaging effects as well as its valuable ones. Nonetheless, love was essentially sane and human. The thing that whipped Athlone slave-like down his path of self-destruction was neither. It was simply an obsession.

How would the frustrating of his self-imposed mission of vengeance affect him, then? And Knard checked himself there, a cold shiver moving down his back. The term "self-imposed" had come automatically to mind. When it came, he found himself questioning whether it was right.

He looked at Allyn, cocooned on her pedestal. She had no

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sense of touch, pain or position—those nerves would take a long time to grow back to full functioning. She would have forgotten what it was like to be hungry or thirsty, or to need to eliminate, because all that was taken care of. It was insane to think of her wielding influence over Athlone.

Knard kept thinking of it, nonetheless. Even when he went back to his own room and stared out, as he often did, at the night lights of the city, for tonight the city reflected the troubled surface of his mind. It was being tortured, as he was.

The Battle of Lyken's Franchise began long before the official foreclosure at midnight. Lyken's decision to switch to kidnapping instead of normal recruiting took by surprise both the police and those of the cultists who were not cultists but *Agents provocateurs* planted by other concessionaries. The effect was to coagulate the rioting into formal fighting, and for that Lyken's men were better trained and better equipped. It also frustrated the police, whose strict orders were to interfere with recruiting rather than with rioting.

By nine the avenues were being barricaded with wrecked cruisers and building materials, and the first bodies were being taken off the streets.

By ten energy weapons were being used, in addition to clubs and gas guns. The story about the fungus which had been brought in by Lyken's team on a consignment of grain was given official currency on the newstapes. A good number of genuinely fanatical cultists now joined in with the intention of starting a genuinely fanatical riot.

They were considerably too late. While energy bolts were sizzling down the avenues their banners and protective incantations were out of place. About a thousand of them provided supplementary cannon fodder for Lyken, which was not unwelcome because by now he was losing about thirty per

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cent of his raiding teams and not getting very good returns.

About the same time, too, refugees started to move out of the Eastern Quarter into the Northern and Southern Quarters, further hindering the attackers. Along Holy Alley the yonder boys assembled to jeer at and stone the refugees, knowing they would come creeping back in a day or two, ashamed of themselves.

By eleven Lyken had reached his target of twelve thousand cannon fodder. The roofs of the buildings comprising his base were serving as fire posts to enfilade the avenues nearby. The first explosives had been used, and the casualty list had topped the hundred mark.

Between eleven and twelve the technicians responsible for discriminating down to Lyken's Tacket Number and locating his franchise completed their preparations and turned their machinery on to warm up.

And at midnight precisely every building in the complex that was Lyken's base blew up with a thunder of collapsing stone.

Where the white tower juts checkerboarded with light out of the unsleeping city, technicians turn with thoughtful expressions to the newly unsealed numbers locating Lyken's franchise. They study them. They have already fed power to their machines. Six or seven hours' work, and they will have opened a portal to the world which was sold to Ahmed Lyken with its animals, its vegetation and even its people. Then they will strive to take it away from him.

This is not right, say some of those who subscribe to the cults of this city; there is One, they maintain, who has power to say to a man, "Have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." They say it is arrogant of man to do this; nonetheless, the Directors ready their angels with flaming swords to drive Lyken from his Garden of Eden.

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Some of the technicians have heard that Lyken has blown up his base. This is singular, unprecedented. They nod over the news and go on working.

Where the wind leans mightily against the redwood tree, in the land of the people called G'kek, strange sounds pierce the night. Fearmaster crouches by a forest trail and listens to them, his entire body seeming to become an ear. He is thirty-four years old, strong, tall, brave, besides being possessed of skills in leadership and organization beyond any other of his nation. Therefore the nation follows him. He has slain catamounts and ridden wild buffalo; he has defied the elements even to the god voice of the thunder. Therefore the nation reveres him.

Yet he can still tremble. He does tremble when he thinks of those who come with a leader called Lanchery. Possibly they are gods greater than the thunder gods even though they scorn propitiation. Any sensible man would obey their commands.

But he does not understand what they are making the people do. Gods, he knows, are capricious and unpredictable, and truck with them is best left to the experts. Yet he is the expert among his nation when it comes to Lanchery and his followers.

The penthouse apartment where Jome Knard now sleeps fitfully is too far above the clamorous rioting streets for much of the racket to have reached it. The thunder of Lyken's base collapsing into rubble makes its fabric rattle. Barely below the surface of sleep, Knard turns a little on the air cushion which is his bed, and the bed adjusts with tireless automatic precision to his altered weight distribution. The noise of the explosion blends into the dream which is disturbing him.

Allyn Vage does not sleep in her cocoon. There are no fatigue products in her bloodstream—they would hinder the



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never-stopping process of regenerating her body. Only her energy is somewhat debased, artificially, to conserve the subtle unconscious rhythm of night and day; this is necessary from a psychological point of view, to assure a further link with reality in the isolation of her mind.

Beneath her seat, the perceptor supplies her with news. She has often found it impossible to describe to Knard the sensation of using the perceptor. The closest she has been able to come is to say that she experiences a series of white or colored threads, having personal associations and extending through a grey medium as dense and resistant as deep water. Somehow the threads parallel reality, or reality parallels them.

But the inability to describe what she experiences troubles her not at all. *She* knows about it, and that is enough.

And it is possible, she has found, to play on these threads as on the taut strings of a musical instrument. Twang one here, and the vibration continues along it. Other threads with which it comes in contact resonate in sympathy, more or less. A great deal of control is possible. She has not said anything to Knard about that.

Luis Nevada faces, shaking and cursing, a new world, into which he bought admittance without knowing what he was doing.

Curdy Wence faces the same world, chewing on another pad of trunks, as measured as time in spite of the situation he has got into. He feels exceptionally proud of himself. He doesn't waste time hoping, or worrying. He plans.

Kingsley Athlone sweats in his police cruiser, his jacket unbuttoned and his face grooved with a giant scowl, which is so deep it seems it will be permanent. The radio crackles with news of the violence abroad in the city, and he barks orders and sweats anew. He thinks less of the forces under his command than of the man he has hunted for weeks and

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months and who is now laughing at him from beyond the Tacket portals—immune to revenge, immune to anything.

His search of Nevada's lodging was fruitless, he recalls, and damns Clostrides. He damns the call which fetched him off Nevada's track with news of the rioting. He damns his own self-preserving desire to interfere, which led him to order his policemen to hinder the 'cruiters instead of the cultists. Even that far his need for vengeance was driving him! Even to such an overt act against Lyken who had snatched Nevada away!

Of course, if Lyken lost out, no doubt Clostrides would be grateful for the assistance. But what difference would that make, if Nevada did not survive?

And by now it must be known to hundreds, if not thousands, of people, that the police had orders to concentrate on the 'cruiters and let the cultists be when possible. That alone made this extended rioting possible.

Athlone shivers in spite of sweating so much. There will be complaints, inquiries, investigations. All he can do now is clear up the mess he permitted the rioters to create.

He barks further orders, and the fire of the fury begins to flicker out.

Jockey Hole knows about the police's orders. He has known for hours. He thinks that Clostrides probably gave the orders to Athlone at their interview. Anyone else would have assumed that automatically. Jockey only entertains it as a possibility.

From his nighttime headquarters at the Octopus Bar on Holy Alley, he reaches out and feels the city's feverish pulse. His eyes and ears are everywhere in the Quarter. So far the all-important string has not fallen into his grasp.

High in the white tower of The Market, the Directors meet for the last time before the invasion. Two things trouble them particularly. By blowing up his base, Lyken has cut himself

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off from the world, and that is unprecedented. Other concessionaries in the past have fought to hold what they had; all of them have fought on both fronts, and some of them have held out for the necessary length of time.

And Hal Lanchery—always brash, always eager and defiant—tonight is glum and speaks only in harsh monosyllables.

The Directors are very rich, probably as rich as any man has been in history. Yet they know they are not *sure* of defeating Lyken. Their wealth lies in a slender margin of profit on a truly gigantic investment. They can afford to fight Ahmed Lyken only until the drain on their resources is greater than the continued profit. Therefore, the victory must come swiftly, or it will be pointless. Likewise, there must be something to show for it: there must be Lyken's franchise in operating order, or else they will have wasted their man power and money to gain something no better than a raw, undeveloped franchise for which they could have bought the rights cheaply.

Lyken's strange action, and Lanchery's gloom, make the Directors feel that the balance is swinging the wrong way.

Ahmed Lyken has made his choice. There is no longer any point in wondering if he is correct to place so much trust in the secret of Akkilmar, or indeed whether Akkilmar is still a secret. There is no stopping things now.

CURDY WAS running low on trunks; he felt the raw saw-edge of nervousness cutting through his armored mind, bit by bit, but he didn't know how long his supply would have to last,

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so he dared not chew another pad yet. About the time the group of captives he was with was driven through the Tacket portal into the franchise beyond, Nevada's moaning had got on his nerves much too much, and he had slipped the hysterical man a couple of pads. They had worked, all right. Now he sat in the pew-like seat beside Curdy, his face long and blank, his fingers toying nervously with the chain that was still ringed to his wrist, but not crying any longer.

What they had been through, it occurred to Curdy, had a lot in common with being processed in a factory. A *lot* in common!

Obviously, Lyken had a system set up and well drilled to cope with such a situation. It started with the kidnapping of people off the streets; it went on with the near-automated precision of the chaining up and the conveyer belt delivery of the chained groups to the Tacket portals. It was at that stage—in the hall where the portals stood—that most of the captives who were going to break down, did. Curdy had decided he wasn't going to, but with Nevada howling close behind him and a bunch of other hysterics a few yards ahead, he had had a tough time. The tranks he had slipped to Nevada were a sort of insurance against next time.

He kept himself calm partly with tranks, partly by thinking of problems Lyken must be facing. That was useful; he might exploit one of the problems and get away. Curdy was determined not to yield easily. He'd almost got away from the pug who woke him in the paddy wagon on delivery at Lyken's base; only the officer with the energy gun had stopped him. There would be another chance, for sure—even if it was the other side of the portal. He wasn't sure about the technique of dispossession of a concessionary, but if that was what was going on, it seemed fairly sure that he'd get an opportunity to desert to the invaders.

There was one of the problems he was turning over in his mind. He'd heard cries and curses from ahead of him in the

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chained line of captives which suggested that one or two cultists had been brought in among the rest. How did Lyken expect to keep cultists loyal, especially under these circumstances? What earthly good would they be, hysterical with fear at having been taken into one of the abominable Tackett worlds?

But that problem didn't last very long. He found out its answer directly after passing through the portal.

That was an experience he'd expected to find shattering. In spite of everything, his heart had pounded and his breath had come and gone in gasps as his chained wrist led him towards the portal, which shimmered slightly like a vast soap bubble stretched on a wire frame. Yet when he passed through, with Nevada hanging back frantically behind him and screaming, he felt nothing at all. The temperature dropped a couple of degrees; the sounds he could hear changed and became less shrill; there was a vaguely alien smell in the air. Otherwise he might still have been where he was before.

On this side, Lyken's men were tired and too busy to be irritable. The mechanical nature of the processing got more and more marked. The chained groups were drawn through another room, past pugs who grabbed each captive in turn and presented him to a man in white wielding a high-pressure injector. A blast from the instrument stung the captive's back. That was all. When Curdy got his dose, he judged that he had been given a wake-up shot and maybe some intravenous nourishment, because he felt suddenly more alert and vigorous. Probably there was a tranquilizer in the mixture as well—at any rate, the hysterical cries dropped off rapidly once the captives passed the injector.

In another room, next door, they were presented to a second operator, and this one made them gape with astonishment, almost forgetting their plight. Curdy had never seen anyone like the woman presiding here. She was barely half-

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dressed, but not to show off her beauty, because she was middle-aged and skinny. She wore a kind of short wrap and a large number of bangles, necklaces and girdles of beaten copper and silver. Her hair was graying.

Beside her, on a long bench, were arranged a number of boxes with handles on top, made of black wood. She held one of the boxes by its handle; when the responsible pugs grabbed a captive passing before her, she banged this box hard; the impact made Curdy's head swim. When the last of a given group had been treated in this way, she handed the box to the pug in charge and took up another one for the next group. There were hundreds of boxes. Curdy tried to estimate how big a force Lyken was going to have while thinking to work out what the boxes were for. With the second problem, he got nowhere; with the first, he arrived at a number somewhere over ten thousand and had to whistle silently.

But so much the better. The more kidnapped victims Lyken had to cope with, the better the chance that an individual might slip away without being noticed.

After that, the rush stopped for a while, and the chained captives were led into a room lined with pew-like benches, each just long enough to hold one group on a chain if they squeezed up close. There were fifty or sixty benches altogether; all but a few were full. Around the walls, pugs carrying black boxes lounged and chatted, sometimes turning the boxes over idly in their hands.

Suddenly, there was a commotion, and a man dressed in a fashion similar to the woman issuing the black boxes appeared in the center of the square of pews. Curdy hadn't seen him enter the room. A gasp of astonishment to which he didn't contribute implied that maybe other people hadn't, either.

The man held up an arm that jingled with a heavy load of metal ornaments, and spoke in a ringing voice.

"You'll have your chains taken off in a moment! You'll be

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taken to the magazine and issued with energy guns, gas guns, or other weapons. And you'll be taken outside and given a post to defend—maybe here in the neighborhood, maybe five or ten or twenty miles away."

Curdy began to sit up and take notice. This was better than he had hoped for.

"But you're still going to be chained!" said the speaker. He signaled to one of the pugs carrying a black box; his choice at random happened to be the one in charge of Curdy's group. "You've seen these boxes. You've wondered what they are for. I'll show you."

He took the box by its handle, and stared at it fixedly. For a long moment, nothing happened. Then Curdy was jolted to his feet by a sudden voiceless order that seemed to explode inside his skull.

*Turn to the right.* A second explosion. Curdy turned, not wanting to, not knowing why he obeyed. He saw that his companions were doing the same.

*Turn to the front. Walk on the spot. Stop. Sit down.*

It was over, and his head was still ringing with the echo.

"Try it." The man in the center of the room handed back the box to the pug in charge, who grinned delightedly. In a moment, there were more explosions, this time shattering and dizzying.

*Stand up. Wave your arms. Stop. Hit the guy next to you. Sit down.*

The orders were coarse, violent, brutal, direct. They were the way the pug looked to be.

"Enough," said the man in the center. Curdy slumped into his seat again.

"You're chained," the words hammered at his skull. "You will obey your orders because you have no choice. Go and collect your weapons now. And remember that you can use them only as you are ordered. Don't even think of mutiny—it isn't possible."

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He folded his arms and stared around as though seeking a challenge from his audience. None came. Curdy felt a wave of sick dismay batter down the defenses raised by his trunks, and saw the hope of escape and desertion float away on top of that wave.

In the chamber, hollowed from the heart of the pillar of rock on which he had placed his eyrie, where he had set up his operations room, Lyken sat with the fat, bald, jolly-voiced sage from Akkilmar who had been the first to come to the trading post and bring news of what Akkilmar was going to do to aid the defenders.

Opposite them, feeling out of place because his responsibility—looking after the home base—was gone, Shane Malco sat scowling. Lyken cast a quizzical glance at him.

"You don't look happy, Shane."

"I'm not. I'm worried."

"You haven't any reason to be."

Malco gave a distrustful look at the sage from Akkilmar, tossed a mental coin, and decided to speak regardless. He said, "I think you're gambling recklessly, Ahmed. I don't know what's come over you."

The sage drew his eyebrows a little closer together, but said nothing. As Malco had done, Lyken glanced at him before speaking.

He said, "You've never been through into the franchise before, have you, Shane?"

"A few times, to look at merchandise and to attend conferences. That's all."

"All right. Therefore it's understandable that you should have doubted my faith in Akkilmar until now. Why do you still doubt it, when you've seen what these people can do?"

The sage smiled like a sunrise, exposing perfect and very white teeth.

"I don't doubt that they can do it," said Malco slowly. "I've



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seen these black boxes and how they can give control over even the most recalcitrant cultist, turning him into a useful amateur soldier. I've seen what can be done with the rho function field perceptor by people who properly understand its workings and don't just relegate it to a sort of prosthetic for incapacitated cripples. No, I don't doubt what the people of Akkilmar can do. I want to know why they're doing it, that's all."

The sage spoke for the first time. He said, "Are you suspicious of us?"

"Frankly, yes," said Malco with a weary sigh.

"Your leader is not; why should you be? Malco, your leader has treated us well. He has not disturbed our traditional way of life, nor tried to rob us, but has always dealt with us courteously and kindly. If there are men who wish to take away his legal rights, they must by contrast be his opposite. And we do not want them in this world of ours."

"I want to know much more than that," Malco answered. You've got powers which I have to confess are amazing. You've got techniques we ourselves can only use, not understand properly. But up till now, you've kept them to yourselves. You've had no interest, or so you gave us to think, in anything except your 'traditional culture'. You seem perfectly capable of defending it against anyone who comes—whether Lyken or Yorell or Lanchery or whoever of the Directors steals the franchise."

The smile on the sage's face melted into a frown, and he got to his feet. "My people do not like to have their sincerity questioned," he said booming. "If you wish, we will return to Akkilmar and leave you in peace. We attempt to aid you, and we are scorned. So be it!"

Lyken got hastily up. "No, no!" he said in a voice that made Malco turn startled eyes on him, it was so uncharacteristically pleading and dependent. "Malco does not speak with author-

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ity. I will reprimand him and he won't say anything of the sort again!"

The sage appeared to relent; he shrugged, and sat down again with a quick nod.

"Shane, are you out of your mind?" Lyken demanded, swinging around. "I think you'd better apologize, right now!"

Malco hesitated. "If I'm wrong, I apologize with all my heart," he said eventually. "But—Ahmed, listen to me. I grant you that Akkilmar has turned out to be all you expected, with its mysterious powers and techniques, and I grant you that they've turned out to help us in force. Can I just remind you, though, that you were saying before that Akkilmar was a secret of this franchise, and that you assumed the secret to be well kept when you made your gamble.

"Well, we don't know if it's been well kept, do we? Nevada knew about Akkilmar, because Erlking told him. And you didn't catch up with Erlking before we blew up the base! The base gone, we haven't a hope of getting at him now—and anyone else might!"

"Your beloved home base—" began Lyken.

"I know it had to go, in case someone found out that the portals were on the upper floors and guessed that the terrain in this franchise is mountainous." Malco spoke wearily.

"Damn it, then! I left instructions with the agents looking for Erlking to kill him if they found him too late to bring him through to the franchise. I couldn't do more. And anyway, now that I've seen what our friends from Akkilmar can *really* do, I'm not at all sure that it makes any difference whether Akkilmar is a secret or not. They're too powerful."

"That's *exactly* what troubles me!" snapped Malco, and got up and walked away.

The sage watched him go, his round face in a serious expression. He said after a pause, "I think your aide might well be subject to a black box?" And turned to Lyken with one eyebrow raised interrogatively.

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"No," said Lyken curtly. "Malco's a good and reliable man. He just worries more about me than he does about himself. He's perfectly loyal, and the last person I'd want to be 'black-boxed.'"

"As you wish," shrugged the sage, and managed to convey in the three words his opinion that Lyken was a foolhardy incompetent, unable to recognize danger when it stared him in the face. There was also a subtle suggestion that if it had not been for the aid he was getting from Akkilmar, he would have gone under long ago.

That last suggestion left Lyken uncomfortable—because he himself was almost beginning to suspect it might be true.

### 12

THE SHOCK of the explosions at Lyken's base seemed to act like the shock of cold water to the rioters. It seemed that for the first time it occurred to many of them what they were actually doing; they saw clearly the barricades in the avenues and the scars of the energy bolts, and heard the cries of the injured. Almost shamefacedly, the rioting died away.

Nonetheless, it was a huge task that faced the police as they wiped up the mess, and as they came back in small groups of one or two cruiser loads at a time, to their headquarters, the rumors began to run.

In the night watch room, surrounded by the flickering tell-tales which plotted—among other things—the location of the cruisers out on street patrol and the site of suspicious events reported by nosy officers, Technical Sergeant Lofty Ingle was

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one of the last that the rumors reached. He had been alone since the start of his shift. He was four inches under regulation height for general duties; it didn't stop him from being a good forensic electronics man.

He was staring absently at the huge grid-lined screen on which in theory illegal application of Tacket's Principle anywhere in the Quarter would show up when it happened—it had not happened since he joined the force, and he thought gloomily that it never would—when Sergeant Carr came in, limping slightly and with dressings on his scratched face. Carr was the duty general service sergeant, Ingle's partner for the night watch.

Ingle glanced up at him and pursed his lips. "You look 'to have had it rough!" he said.

"Rough!" Carr tried to curl his upper lip into a sneer, but it was puffy and the attempt made his face twist up in pain. He hooked his foot under a chair, dragged it towards him, and slumped into it. "Rough!" he repeated sarcastically. "You could say that, I guess. One day, one sweet day, someone's going to loose off his gun, and just by accident that bastard Athlone is going to be in the way of the bolt. And I won't be weeping at his funeral!"

Ingle took a chair for himself. "Spit the string!" he invited. "I didn't get a grip on it yet."

Carr looked disgusted. "Listen!" he said. "It's one thing for him to cherish this pet hate of his and hound that number Luis Nevada. I'm not saying Nevada did it, I'm not saying he didn't. That's one thing, Lofty, and no one can say I'm not trying to be fair. But when he—"

He almost choked with the violence of his rage, and put his hands up in the air before him, squeezing them together as though around a human throat.

"That riot tonight!" he exploded. "We'd have had it canned and labeled inside a couple of hours—by nine at latest. But oh no! It seems that Luis Nevada managed to get himself

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invited into Lyken's franchise, where Athlone can't touch him. So what does Athlone do? He takes advantage of his rank, and he orders us to foul up Lyken's 'cruiters and turn the cultists back on the street. Can you wonder that Lyken's men got nasty when they saw what we were doing? Can you wonder they started shooting? So we get a mess swilling through the whole blasted Quarter and a casualty list longer'n my arm!"

Ingle didn't say anything. Carr ploughed on.

"I don't mind the fancy woman he keeps. I don't mind him going after Nevada. But I mind like hell when he gets us poor bastards fouled up in his private quarrels!"

And then, as suddenly as it had burst out, his rage drained away, and he sighed, passing his hand gingerly over the dressings on his face. He said, "Well, there'll be an investigation, shouldn't wonder. He went too far this time. Let his head roll.

Sightless and immobile within her cocoon, Allyn Vage had become so dependent on the rho function field perceptor that when the sound came to her without warning she tried at first to dismiss it. Everything in the exterior world—visits by Athlone, the comings and goings of Knard and the servant—was reflected in the weaving threads within the grey world of the perceptor. Heavy footsteps with nothing to foreshadow a visitor within the perceptor was wrong. Illogical.

But she could not dismiss the click of the door latch when it snapped back. She could not dismiss the characteristic hissing of the room lights as they started up, and their sixty cycle hum once they were on. Her artificial hearing was extremely sensitive.

Bewildered, she fired a harsh question through the voder that served her for speech.

"Who is it? What are you doing here?"

Frantically, she searched the perceptor; Knard lay in his

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room presumably asleep, the servant had gone home, Athlone was out clearing up the riot. Someone else had come into the room. Someone else was looking at her in her obscene shapeless cocoon. Someone whose coming had not been foreshadowed to her. It was as though he were worse than invisible.

A vague stirring of fright began within her mind.

The same heavy footsteps which she had heard in the foyer now advanced from the door; five paces, halt. The stranger would be facing her, looking at her, seeing her. Allyn felt suddenly terribly cut off without her eyes and hands. The isolation which the perceptor had staved off all these months began to etch its way into her like acid. For if this man did not show on the perceptor, was everything she had sensed and achieved through it no more than a fantasy of her lonely brain?

There was a fat chuckle from in front of her—a masculine chuckle, not pleasant.

“So that’s who you are!” said a thick voice on the verge of wheezing. “A solitary blind cripple! We were beginning to wonder.”

“Who are you?” Allyn wished that the voder could reflect the violence of the emotion she felt; its breathy artificial voice, though, was capable of only a narrow range of changes. “What do you want?”

“I came to take a look at you,” said the thick voice, and dissolved into another chuckle. “As to the first question—why, yes, I’ll tell you. I’m one of the people you got your perceptor from, of course. Didn’t that occur to you? You’re all worked up because you didn’t sense that I was coming, with your perceptor. Why, then, what’s more logical than to conclude I must know more about its workings than you do?”

Allyn started to activate the voder, and changed her mind. It gave a kind of grunting squawk as commands crossed in its circuits.

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"I have to admit," the thick voice continued, "that you've acquired a good knowledge of the perceptor's abilities. We called it a perceptor, of course, to mislead you. It does a great deal more than just perceive things!"

"I know," whispered Allyn.

"You think you know," corrected the thick voice. "So you thought you'd take a hand. And it's true to say that we were concerned about you—so much concerned that I came to take a look, as I said. What do I find? I find a cripple! Well, we don't have anything to worry about after all. Because all I need to do is kick in the sides of your perceptor, and the fields will be destroyed. Even if they give you another one, it'll take you as long again to get adjusted to the new fields that come with it. Understand me?"

"You wouldn't!" The words were wrung from Allyn in a kind of moan.

"Perhaps I won't. Not this time. After all, you're a helpless cripple. So this time I'm only going to tell you to remember that you're a cripple, and act like a cripple, instead of trying to take a hand in things too big to concern you! You're going to stop your meddling, and you're going to stop it now. If I see any sign that you've started again, I shall come back—and I can come back whenever I want, without giving any warning—and I shall do just as I said. Do you understand?"

Allyn was desperately twanging at the string which was Jome Knard, driving him to wake up, driving him to hear the thick voice in the room next to his. She said, "Yes! Yes, I understand!"

It was working. She could sense that Knard was waking up.

"Goodbye for this time, then," said the thick voice, and added a final sinister chuckle.

The footsteps crossed the floor again. The lights went out. The footsteps continued into the foyer and stopped. They crossed with the lighter, well-remembered steps of Knard as he came from his room and into hers.

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"Are you all right?" Knard's voice came out of darkness, and as though she had suddenly been given sight again Allyn knew thankfully that reality and what she knew from the perceptor did correspond.

She said, "Someone has been here, Jome. Someone came in and threatened to wreck my perceptor. Didn't you see him in the foyer?"

"I saw no one," said Knard uncertainly.

"Someone was here." Allyn heard her artificial voice steady and level; there were some compensations in having to use a voder, after all. "He said he would come back. Set some alarms, Jome. I dare not be surprised like that again."

But she could tell from his answering silence that he did not believe her.

Strictly, the Tacket detector was Ingle's province, not Carr's. But the sound of the alarm shocked Carr immensely. He said, "Lofty! Aren't you going to check that?"

"Why?" Ingle didn't raise his head. "It's bound to be Lyken's outfit, as usual. That's the only place we ever get a Tacket signal from in this Quarter. And Lyken's authorized."

"Didn't the news get to you?" said Carr. "Lyken blew his base up! Nothing was left but rubble!"

The words jolted Ingle upright like an electric shock. He mouthed the beginning of an answer; before it started to make sense, he had dashed across to the detector to isolate the fading green blip on the co-ordinates of the grid.

"But that means it's a strike!" he said vacantly. "And I never heard of a strike in all the time I been here! By Tacket's Expeditions, it is a strike! It's at least a mile from Lyken's base, in any case!"

Incredulously, because people simply didn't meddle with Tacket's Principle without authorization, Carr came and stood by Ingle as he fed the co-ordinates off the grid into a small computer which would convert them into a street address



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and a height above ground level. The computer took only a few seconds before coughing out its square of printed plastic with the information on.

"Yah—no, that's impossible!" said Carr, and snatched the square from Ingle almost before he'd had time to read it. "And yet it is!" A sort of unholy joy came over his face.

"What's hit you?" demanded Ingle stupidly.

"The address, Lofty! The address! And the height above the street! That means the penthouse, around there. Don't you *recognize* the address?"

Ingle shook his head.

"Why, it's Athlone's lovenest, the place where he installed Nevada's wifel Don't you understand? This gives me the perfect excuse to pay back Athlone for some of the hell he put us through tonight!"

Ingle's face went slowly white. He started to utter objections, but Carr cut him short.

"The hell with whether he's vice-sheriff or not! We got a strike on the Tacket detector, and I'm going down there right this moment to raise as much hell in Athlone's boudoir as I possibly can! Get the duty squads round there—fast! Get orders to the radio room! Lofty, this is worth everything I went through tonight to square the accounts with Athlone!"

### 13

THE MORE comforting the illusion of power becomes, the more disturbing it is to find it limited. That check-and-balance proposition was presenting itself more and more squarely to Clostrides as the night moved on.

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Power. The high bailiff of The Market had it. That was never disputed. Men spoke the name of Manuel Clostrides with respect and admiration. In particular, they admired the skill with which he dominated the situations created by the tempestuous clash of personalities between the Directors.

And that was true, so far as it went. Tonight, Clostrides knew it had not gone far enough.

He sat alone in his huge office atop the Market's tower, and moved his hands across the arms of his chair as though he were fumbling for his reins of power. As though, one by one, they were becoming greasy and slipping away.

He had a sensation that a world which he had painfully mastered, had learned to know in all its intricacy, was changing faster than he could adjust.

Pragmatic, possibly dogmatic, but capable of rapid decision and untiring control over his troublesome Directors: that was the way he was accustomed to regarding himself. He had never thought twice about the notion of premonition—although occasionally he had cracked a passing joke about it, saying how useful it would be to him to possess such a power. Now he had a premonition he could not pin down: a foreboding aura in his mind.

He could only side with a majority in administering The Market. He therefore had every interest in assuring the fall of Ahmed Lyken, and the victory of his rivals. Yet at their final meeting before the showdown, he had said nothing of the word Nevada had spoken to Lyken, the name which had so strangely affected him: Akkilmar!

Again, why? To retain for himself a potentially valuable secret? To guard his ascendancy over the Directors? But even assuming knowledge of Akkilmar to have value, how could it be of much use to himself alone? The echoing questions tormented him.

The hours were passing. Some time around dawn, probably, the technicians would open the portals into Lyken's franchise

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and the invasion would commence—with it, a long-drawn-out war of attrition rather than savagery. It would be won and lost not by a clear-cut single victory, but successful hampering of the opposing side. If Lyken could render the invaders' beachheads untenable except at prohibitive cost, he won. If the invaders made his continued possession impossible, he lost. No more than that.

The signal for an outside call went up on the communicator panel. His voice tired and spiritless, Clostrides activated it by vocal code, and the face of one of his aides appeared on the screen.

The aide said, "Progress on the Akkilmar question, Bailiff."

A cloud seemed to blow away from Clostrides's mind. He shot a glance at the clock. 2:10 A.M. Not bad, all things considered. He said, "Well?" And tried not to let too much excitement show.

The aide glanced at notes out of sight below the screen. "We decided to follow Nevada's trail back," he said. "It got us as far as a lodging block mainly used by dregs, where he'd been living under an assumed name. Here's where coincidence goes too far. Another of the tenants—until a week or two ago was a man called Erlking, who used to be Lyken's Remembrancer."

Clostrides jerked forwards in his seat. He said hungrily, "You got him?"

"We're after him, Bailiff. He'd left without giving a new address, but we're after him. Only thing is, it's been hard going because of the riots. The police finally got them under control just a little while back. But Bailiff! I think you should know that other people have been on the same trail—at least one and maybe two after Erlking, as well as two looking for Nevada!"

"Who were they?"

"Athlone, the vice-sheriff of the Quarter, came asking for Nevada and searched his rooms. There may have been some-

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one else; we aren't sure. And a man came looking for Erlking, and before him what sounded like a typical yonder boy on the same errand."

"Lyken's people?"

"We think so, Bailiff. Frankly, I don't see who else can be so interested."

Clostrides frowned. "Do you mean to say you haven't caught up with Erlking yet? When there are so many other people after him who may get there first?"

The aide looked uncomfortable, but contrived to sound reassuring. "Not quite, Bailiff. This has been sheer luck, and I don't think the competition can have had so much of that. We got news from one of our contacts in the city police who's been out tonight on riot duty. The wagon he was with picked up a load of cultists who were attacking Lyken's 'cruiters. They turned the cultists loose again later—they seem to have had orders from somewhere, maybe from Athlone, rumor says—anyway, though, we're almost sure that one of the cultists was actually Erlking."

Clostrides pursed his lips. "What are you doing now?"

"Going after all the cults in the city. Most of them are holding big meetings on the street and elsewhere, now they've been driven off from the area near Lyken's base. I should imagine they'll want to parade someone like Erlking, who's been into a Tacket franchise and has reformed, or seen the light."

"When you catch up with him," said Clostrides urgently, "get him to me at once! Hear?"

Right, Bailiff!" said the aide, and broke the connection.

Things were reverting to normal along Holy Alley. Gaffles was on his way back from a short survey of the locality when he encountered something that wasn't quite as normal as the rest, however: a cult meeting on a corner. It seemed to be just starting up. There was a speaker with amplifiers, on a

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plinth beneath a larger than life-size statue in wood, the head of which was so covered in nails that you had to guess it was meant as an effigy of Tacket. There were tract sellers and testifiers and peddlers selling nails to be driven into the statue. Gaffles went around the outskirts of the group the speaker had attracted—about forty or fifty people, mostly yonder boys with their girls, laughing and jeering.

He was almost past when a hand tugged at his arm. "Nail for Tacket, cuddy? Nail for Tacket?" a whining voice implored him.

He shook off the grip without glancing down. The voice wheezed, tinged with a chuckle, "Nail for Tacket, Gaffles?"

At the use of his name, Gaffles did glance round at the importuner. Recognition dawning, he said, "Fleabite! How long since you were brought to salvation, then?"

The nail peddler was a twisted, shabby man, with an enormous stupid grin across the big round face which topped his scrawny body and spindly limbs. No one ever called him anything except Fleabite; he had been around the Quarter since anybody could remember.

Now he gave a conspiratorial leer. "Buy a nail and I'll tie string to it," he said, little above a whisper. "Cost you twenty!"

"A long piece of string?" said Gaffles skeptically.

"I hauled in a bit myself the other hour," Fleabite shrugged. "If Jockey's looking for someone called Erlking, it's his string I have."

"Give me the end of it, and you'll get your twenty." Gaffles took out a wad of crisp cash invitingly. Fleabite's eyes almost snatched it away.

"And me having to sell nails for a two-faced cult to get—ah well. Listen, Gaffles. Your Erlking number turned cultist—not with this lousy crew, but with one of the biggest. In fifteen minutes they're holding a meeting in one of the small halls of the Pleasuredrome. Cults are doing this all over because they

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want to make a profit on the riots. Know who's the star example? The reformed Tacket-lover himself, see?"

"Twenty you said, twenty you get," Gaffles said promptly. He thrust the money on to Fleabite's tray. At once the man's high whining voice resumed its normal tone.

"Take your nail, cuddy! Take your nail!"

"It's for Tacket, not for me!" said Gaffles loudly, and hurried down the street.

Jockey was, as always, in the Octopus Bar, and for once not surrounded by his eyes and ears. Gaffles dropped into the seat next to him, and passed on the news.

Jockey grunted. "I surprise myself," he said. "I just was through telling twenty yonder boys to interest themselves in that same meeting. Suppose you make it sixty, huh? And go along yourself. I want Erlking fished out of the middle of it intact. Let's see where to put him. No, leave it to you. I shouldn't try getting him out of the 'drome, though."

Gaffles grinned slowly and got to his feet.

It had to be done quickly. He just made it. With three minutes to go before the start of the meeting, he stood in an aisle of the hall in the Pleasuredrome, surveying the audience and listening with half an ear to one of Jockey's dependables.

The hall was one of a dozen under the gigantic dome of the Pleasuredrome which the proprietor let out to private showmen for live variety, animal shows out of the Tacket worlds, and so on. There were benches in a horseshoe shape around a low stage, enough for about a thousand people. The place was unexpectedly full, that was true. The 'drome was a good venue, and this was a good time, when people who had spent most of their cash and didn't want to go home yet could be drawn in for something free of charge. That was what most of the audience seemed to be here for, anyway—most of them young, a lot of them heavy with drink or drugs, not a few couples petting all over the benches. How the hell would anyone expect to sell people like this a serious

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message? Maybe the cults were satisfied to put up with what they could get, and this was the best they could get.

He cut short what the other was saying. "I spoke with the boss, Tad. He'll play. Now I'm going out around the stage to the back. He's fixing it with the lighting crew to shine a green light on Erlking when he shows, right? You see that light, you start a distraction, gold? Somewhere at the back, where you've got a bunch of a dozen or so all together, gold? The numbers planted in the front row move on to the stage, gold?"

"All gold," confirmed Tad. He was old for a yonder boy—past twenty, possibly, but still dressed and mannered like a typical specimen.

"Now make this real measured!" said Gaffles warningly. "I want Erlking delivered in back of the stage intact and unbeaten, gold? After that I'll show you where to take him. Let the row in the hall cool off; let 'em finish the meeting if they can. That's it, Tad."

"It's free falling all the way," said Tad with confidence.

"You see to that," said Gaffles, and made for the side door of the hall.

He glanced back once more over the audience before going out, and a tiny frown creased his forehead. Among the audience there were two small clusters of people who didn't fit his assumptions about why the 'drome's customers had come in to hear the speakers. There was a line of six pugs not far from the front, who sat expressionless, like dummies. They were already staring at the stage although it was empty.

And besides them, he was puzzled by a group of eight or nine in the same row near the front but at its opposite end. They looked too well off to care about the cult. They didn't look as though they had ever denied themselves anything on principle, least of all imported goods. Their gaze likewise was fixed on the stage.

Gaffles hesitated, wondering whether to warn Tad about

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his impression. But weight of numbers was on Tad's side anyway, whatever the interest of these problematical intruders might be. The pugs might be here out of sheer stupidity; the other group might have come to argue, or jeer. He shrugged, seeing that the speakers were coming out, and went behind the stage.

### 14

HE CAME to the place he had been shown, and found the proprietor of the 'drome waiting for him: a fat man with fair hair, well but soberly dressed, chewing nervously on a stick of some euphoric preparation which scented the air around.

Gaffles grunted to him, pulling himself up into the high chair which had been placed so he could see between the hangings behind the stage and view the meeting's progress. His first glance showed that the arrival on stage of the speakers had hardly disturbed the audience at all; half of them hadn't even noticed.

"If there's damage?" said the proprietor below him, tilting his head back.

"We'll cover you," said Gaffles, not looking down.

"You're promising?" the proprietor persisted.

"Look, if you're scared of damage costing you, why let a hall to a cult anyway? Where there's a cult there's apt to be trouble."

"Yes, but—" The proprietor chewed his stick feverishly. It seems to have been worse out there with the riots than I heard when I said okay to hold the meeting."

"The rioters have gone home with busted heads," said



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Gaffles shortly. "People in there are your own customers, most of them. If they're not drink-silly they're drug-silly. Now stop distracting me. If this thing gets out of hand because I'm talking with you instead of making it measured, you won't like the *real* trouble you'll get."

Sighing, the proprietor stepped away. He turned back once to say, "When you get him, take him where I showed, gold?"

"Gold!"

Gaffles studied the onstage scene. A burly man with a huge voice reinforced by amplification had managed to attract the attention of most of the audience by now. A white light played on him from somewhere in the arch of the roof. He was saying:

"—couldn't have been a clearer warning of disaster than the White Death which left me the cripple you see today!" He didn't look like a cripple. Someone called out in the body of the hall, but faintly.

"Disaster!" the burly man thundered on, beginning to rock back and forth so that some of his words were not caught by the pickups. "Written in the stars for those who know how to read them . . . certain things with which man must not meddle and that was why the White Death afflicted . . ."

Gaffles felt that this could go on for some time. He took his eyes away from the gap in the hangings and looked behind him. The four small halls under the main dome were disposed around a third of its outer circumference; the rest was occupied in equal proportions by the arena where the proprietor ran his own big shows, the pageants and spectacles, and the smaller concessions like the bars and private rooms. In the center, behind Gaffles now, was a web-like tangle of gangways corridors, travolators, storerooms, control rooms, special effects labs. dressing rooms, animal cages and a dozen other necessary offices.

In there, the proprietor had said, Erlking could be kept

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out of sight for as long as was needed; if people came looking, no matter who, Erlking could be moved out of their way through the maze and kept at least a jump ahead.

Gaffles hoped it would work. He wasn't absolutely certain why Jockey was so set on getting hold of Erlking—a string leading to someone as exalted as Lyken was generally pretty well useless—but he had his reasons, for sure, and Jockey's reasons were always good ones.

He looked back through the hangings. The burly man's introductory speech was almost over. He was vilifying the name of Tacket, and his frequent use of it was producing catcalls and laughter from the youths and girls in the audience to whom Tacket had never meant anything except a rather vague obscenity.

Suddenly a group of colored lights came on in the room. Each one picked out an individual sitting on the stage. Gaffles could not see any of the targets clearly, but one of the lights was green, and he could indistinctly discern the outline of a man within its beam.

Time for action!

He thrust aside the hangings to give himself a wider field of view. By shielding his eyes with his hands, he could see past the spears of light on the stage into the body of the hall.

On the right, near the back, a commotion had started. Someone was standing up on the benches, shouting incoherently and hurling handfuls of smoke powder from his pockets. Two other figures got up near him and began to scream hysterically. The audience's attention at once moved from the stage to this new and far more interesting show.

About a quarter of a minute passed, within the space of which Gaffles managed to glance rapidly at the two groups in the audience which had puzzled him—the pugs and the prosperous ones. He saw from the corner of his eye that Tad had signaled the yonder boys ready in the front rows to storm the stage and carry Erlking off.

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He poised to get down from his chair. And there was the blinding flash, followed by a reek of ozone, indicating that an energy gun had been fired.

At once Gaffles was filled with blind anger—had he or had he not told Tad to make this *measured*? But it vanished swiftly in the same moment as he realized that the gun had been fired from the point where the pugs were sitting.

Screams—real ones, of genuine terror—began to boil up through the hall.

The gun fired again, and its bolt seared into the roof over Gaffles' head, splashing on the hangings and ripping them apart like a red-hot sword. The hangings crashed to the floor and began to smoke and melt. Gaffles dropped from his chair and charged forward onto the stage.

The cultists waiting to speak, and the burly man, were too thunderstruck for the moment to cause any difficulty. Gaffles ignored them. The yonder boys who should have come swarming up over the edge of the stage by now were still trying to do that. But the group of pugs had decided to stop them, and were each coping with about three of the boys. A panicky movement towards the entrances was surging up like a tidal wave. About the only people present who were not touched by it were Jockey's boys, near the back, who were involved in their own side-issue—a lot more smoke powder had been thrown, and the air was getting thick and murky—and the prosperous ones, who seemed to be conferring together.

The energy gun fired a third time, wildly, and snapped a bolt over the stage. Briefly, a section of the wall glowed red-hot, and the hangings which had fallen burst into flame, sullenly. Then the pug wielding the gun was rushed simultaneously from behind and both sides by three of the yonder boys, and went down howling under violent blows from their whangee sticks. When they got him down, the boys stamped

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on his wrist to make him release the gun. Unless someone else was that well armed, there was no further danger.

The prosperous ones now came to a decision, rose from the bench where they were sitting, and came scurrying forwards to the stage. The green light still played on Erlking. Gaffles saw suddenly that they were heading for him and no one else.

The cultists were still cowering back in their chairs. He could expect no assistance from them—and didn't much want it, anyway. He threw back his head and bellowed, "Tad! On stage!"

And went forward prepared to fight.

Gaffles had had a harder time on the way up, he sometimes had said, than Jockey Hole; not having all of Jockey's gifts he'd been compelled to fight more. He was still good at it. He ducked forward as the first of the newcomers lifted his foot over the edge of the stage, caught his ankle, and heaved. The man flung up his arms and went hurtling backwards coming to rest with a crash against the front bench. The man just behind him was bowled over by the impact.

Next in line, the third oncomer made the mistake of trying to come onto the stage fighting. He'd never heard that fighting uphill was hard work. Gaffles seized him by the wrist and hauled him forwards; he lost his footing and sprawled headlong. Then Gaffles rolled him over and trod on his solar plexus, leaving him doubled up with agony and incapable of interfering for a good couple of minutes.

By now, Tad's boys had disposed of the pugs, who were lying draped over the benches in limp sack-like postures, and were turning their attention to the stage again. Gaffles called out urgently, and the remaining members of the prosperous group were at once tackled by twice their number. That left only the basic problem to attend to.

Gaffles spun round and made towards Erlking. The green

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light was still on, though by now smoke from the burning hangings behind the stage and the powder the rioting boys at the back of the hall had thrown was clouding the air and making eyes sting and noses smart. He dropped on one knee beside the former Remembrancer, his heart sinking.

The first bolt the armed pug had fired must have struck very close indeed to Erlking. It had melted away one leg of the chair he sat on, and he had then fallen right into it. His clothes smoldering, his pasty, loose-lipped face inert, he lay slumped on the floor.

"Tad!" shouted Gaffles again. At once the yonder boy came scurrying. "Help me get him back stage—and handle with care!"

The burly man who had opened the speeches seemed suddenly to come to life again. He started forward.

"Hey!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing? Were you responsible for breaking up the meeting? Take your hands off that man! I'll demand an accounting of this—"

On the last word he made the mistake of grabbing Gaffles' arm. Gaffles didn't feel in a mood to make long explanations. He butted the burly man in the wind as he pretended to get to his feet; the burly man sat down violently, making a sound like "oof!"

No one else attempted to interfere as they picked up Erlking carefully and carried him across the stage. In front of the burning hangings they paused; Gaffles exchanged a glance with Tad and said, "Don't waste time on the way through, gold?" Then they rushed across the sullen blaze and were backstage.

The proprietor was there, his euphoric stick forgotten, his face a mask of misery and anger. He called out as soon as he saw Gaffles.

"You said there wouldn't be any damage—!" he began.

"Go travel with Tacket!" snapped Gaffles. "The firemen

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and the law will be here in nothing flat! Get me to the place where we store this number Erlking—fast!”

The bluster went out of the proprietor with a rushing sigh, and he pointed into the mouth of a travolator tube almost facing them. “Up there,” he said wearily. “Second level, gold? Go along the walkway from there and enter the second room. It’s a lighting control booth. Under the control panel there’s a concealed cavity. Lay him in there for now. I’ll see to the law. But Gaffles! If he dies on the premises, I don’t know anything, gold?”

“He’d better not die!” Gaffles said shortly, and nodded Tad forward again.

They humped their human burden into the control room and found the concealed cavity’s door standing open, as the boss had promised. Gently they slid Erlking into it; it was long and wide enough for him to lie comfortably enough. He was regaining consciousness, though, and moans passed his limp lips.

“Tad, get someone to get the news to Jockey, gold?” Gaffles said quietly. “Likewise, get the string about the pugs and that other crowd who started after Erlking.”

Tad nodded. His gaudy jacket was soiled and torn from the fighting, and his face was bruised. “How bad do I say this number is?”

“Most bad,” Gaffles grunted. “Move, now!”

He occupied himself, while Tad was gone, with cutting away the burnt fabric from Erlking’s wounds and making him lie as comfortably as possible on chairs and drapes. There was no more he could do without regenerants; Erlking’s chest and belly were badly scorched, and so was his right arm.

Tad came back, grunting from the effort of running. “The news went to Jockey,” he said. “And we already pieced together who the other interested parties were. The pugs were from Lyken—ordered to shut Erlking’s mouth. And the other

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crowd was on the staff of The Market. We got a long, thick string this time!" His eyes were bright with excitement.

"It's fraying fast," said Gaffles morosely, looking down at Erlking's lax face.

### 15

WITH A presence of mind Gaffles had not looked for, Tad had in fact done more on his return trip to the hall than to send someone after Jockey and ask a few questions. He had arranged for the pugs and the prosperous ones to be carried backstage and hidden away as Erlking had been hidden in the bowels of the 'drome. For a few minutes before the arrival of police and fire services, the web of gangways and corridors was alive with people; Gaffles felt a twinge of nervousness for fear they might take too long over hiding the captives. But everything turned out in their favor.

Relieved, he waited for Jockey.

To look at Jockey no one would have guessed he was concerned about anything that had happened tonight. His dark coat and breeches were appropriate to the calm composure of his face; his voice, too, was as level as usual even after he had seen Erlking's injuries.

"Has he talked yet?" was his only question to Gaffles.

Gaffles shook his head. "He's barely conscious. I think he's pretty bad, Jockey."

Jockey dropped on one knee and reached into the cavity, his thin fingers seeking Erlking's pulse. It was irregular, and his breathing was very faint. He rolled back one of the injured man's eyelids with professional gentleness. Then he stood up, dusting his hands.

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"We can't move him out of here till the law is through," he said. "But he'll have to be shifted soon, and doctored. That must be close to third-degree burning he has."

He glanced at Tad. "How about the numbers you took in?" he inquired.

"Stored in various places," Tad was beginning, when the door of the control room opened and a yonder boy put his white-tinted hair in, to speak gaspingly.

"Law!" he said. "Working this way. Figure you best not be here when they look in."

Jockey reached out thoughtfully and shut the concealing panel over Erlking. "Take me someplace where they've been already," he said. "I want to talk with some of the pugs and the numbers from The Market."

They slipped noiselessly from the room, leaving no sign of their presence and made their way through the weaving maze of corridors and travolators out of sight of the police. In a room piled with scenery and costumes, Tad showed them two pugs bound and gagged in a wooden crate. One of them was moaning painfully.

"That's the one with the gun," Tad explained. "We busted his wrist to make him let go."

Jockey nodded. "Open his mouth," he said.

But it was clear after only a few moments that the pug had his mind thoroughly hypnolocked, and if one of them was, they all were proof against questioning. Jockey shrugged.

Again they stole through the 'drome, avoiding the police without difficulty, dodging from level to level and room to room. The men from The Market had been put away in the animal cages, wrapped in dark sacking against a prying eye. No better luck, however, was to be had here. They had not been hypnolocked, but Jockey decided at once that when they said they were only under orders to capture Erlking and didn't know why, they were probably speaking the truth. Again, he shrugged.



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"That leaves Erlking," he said. Gaffles nodded.

"Do I send for a doc?" he proposed. "We could rout out a dozen if we had to—"

Jockey's upraised hand interrupted him. "Not just *a* doc," Jockey said. "*The* doc. Erlking's too important to be risked. Gaffles, go get me the number one. Get me Jome Knard."

Gaffles had thought he was used to Jockey's ambitious ideas. This was one ahead of anything before. He said dubiously, "But he's—"

"He's the top in his line. He cures burnt people more than anyone. These days he isn't in regular practice, Gaffles. He lives in Athlone's penthouse and looks after Nevada's wife. Go get him. Handle him gently. But bring him to the Octopus not later than a half hour from now. Gold?"

*One of these days, thought Gaffles a trifle sourly, that Jockey will look so far above him he'll bust his neck.*

True enough, a patient treated by Jome Knard had the odds on his side. But Knard was a name in his line; he was one of the dozen medical men to whom a concessionary would take an important aide injured in exploring a new franchise. He wouldn't look at minor cases. Anything short of rebuilding three-quarters of a corpse into a living person was too undemanding to be worth his notice.

Even if they succeeded in getting him to Jockey by force, how in hell would they make him co-operate?

But that was Jockey's worry.

Gaffles's attention was snatched back to the present with a jerk. He had spent ten minutes assembling a small team of talented operators—a young lock-artist, a reliable ex-pug whose brains hadn't been battered silly before he quit, and a getaway man—and they had piled into a cruiser belonging to Jockey and headed for Athlone's penthouse. What had arrested Gaffles's attention was a cry from the driver.

"The law got here first!" he exclaimed.

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Gaffles stared, and saw two police cruisers drawn up outside the entrance to the block they were making for. He craned his neck back and stared upwards. On the street side, the penthouse was set back, but he could just see around the corner of the roof—and what he saw was lighted windows. Not one other light except on the emergency escape levels was to be seen.

"We go on," he said after a moment's reflection. "But we play it real measured, gold? Drop us around the corner," he added to the driver. "We'll go in slow, on foot. Keep on around the block a couple of times. Don't come too close. When we need to be picked up, I'll flash the room lights on and off."

"And if there are too many police?" the driver countered.

"Then we'll have to come back down without noticing and wave to you on the sidewalk," said Gaffles sarcastically.

Around the corner, they got out, and walked back unhurriedly to the entrance of the block. The police cruisers were empty, even of a driver, and that was reassuring. It wasn't a major raid, just a routine inquiry. Though what was the law doing investigating its own vice-sheriff?

"I heard rumors," said the lock artist in a low voice. "I hear the law got angry with Athlone for telling them to let the riots brew up tonight, 'stead of icing them straight off. You think we're going lose cuddy Athlone?"

"Who knows?" grunted Gaffles.

The outer doors were opened easily—there were a hundred locks like this one in the lock artist's past experience—and after that there was nothing to stop them using the elevator. Not even a guard in the foyer. Gaffles began to feel disturbed.

"This elevator probably opens straight into the penthouse," he said as they got in. "Now we stop at the penthouse level and listen, gold? If we pick up more than a couple of voices,

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we go get more forces. If we don't, we risk a quick look. If we've only got what we can handle, we move in. Gold?"

The others nodded. The ex-pug balled his fist and kissed its knuckles with a grin.

And everything went wrong.

They stopped the car at the penthouse level and listened. There was a barking voice redolent of status, which Gaffles guessed to be Knard's, complaining of the intrusion and voicing threats. There were sharp voices, with coarser accents, shouting insults about Athlone, who was presumably not present. There were noises of furniture being shifted, as though a search was in progress. Gaffles had just decided that there were too many police to be coped with, when the elevator door flew open, and he found himself confronting an astonished-looking sergeant.

There was nothing to be done except move in.

He pushed the sergeant backward with a flat-handed blow on the chest, tripping him at the same time, and fell on him. He fell in order to get out of the way of the ex-pug, who came over him with a bound, yelling savagely, and went for another policeman who was one of three struggling with a heavy electronic desk in one corner of the foyer. He disposed of that one and turned his attention to both the others together.

But the lock artist, still in the elevator, proved to have had more foresight than Gaffles himself. He calmly took out of his pocket a flat gas grenade and hurled it across the room, before closing the elevator doors on himself and going down.

The room whirled around Gaffles, and he slumped on the sergeant's prostrate body.

When he awoke, he found the lock artist had completed the job of tying up the police, and had turned on the air conditioner to full blast to clear out the gas. The anesthetic effect was short term; within seconds of waking, Gaffles was on his feet and fully recovered.

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The only other persons still free to move were the ex-pug and Knard himself, who was shaking his head dizzily in an armchair.

Gaffles went over to him. "Are you Dr. Knard?" he asked.

Knard raised a puzzled face. He said, "Yes, I am. I don't know who you are or what you're doing here, but"—and he looked around at the roped policemen on the floor—"I certainly approve of what you've done! It's exactly what I'd have liked to do if I'd been able."

Gaffles grinned. Their relations were off to a good start, at least. He said, "What were they after, then?"

"They came battering in here with some incredible accusation about unauthorized application of Tacket's Principle." Knard got to his feet, frowning. "Of course, they must have just been using that as an excuse, because they didn't act as though they took the idea seriously, and when I threatened to complain to Vice-Sheriff Athlone, they almost screamed insults about him."

Abruptly, he seemed to recollect something. "One moment!" he said, and hastened into a room leading off the foyer. Gaffles made to follow him, and then checked himself as he caught a warning look from the lock artist.

"What's in there?" he demanded under his breath.

"The woman. She's cocooned, and it isn't pretty. If all the parts of her that are covered were burned, she ought to be six feet underground."

"If he managed that," Gaffles commented respectfully, "he can fix Erlking easily!"

They waited impatiently. Some of the police began to recover and complain loudly; accordingly he threatened to kick them silent, and they shut up. They seemed bewildered, especially the sergeant he himself had knocked down.

Knard returned, sighing heavily with relief, and after switching off the lights in the room he had left and shutting its door, said, "My patient is all right, I'm glad to see. I think

there will have to be investigation into this affair. Thank you very much for your assistance, Mr.—?”

“Gaffles,” he supplied. “But—I’m afraid we want more than just thanks, Dr. Knard. We need your help. We have a man called Erlking, used to be Ahmed Lyken’s Remembrancer. He was burned with an energy bolt, and he’s pretty bad. But this number Erlking, you see, is kind of important. He’s got to stay alive, because he knows something about something that Lyken thinks is very important, and Clostrides of The Market is after him, and maybe other people, too. You’re the best in the world—so we came to get you for him.”

He was prepared for expostulations and objections from the doctor. Instead, a peculiar expression crossed his face. He said, “How long ago was he with Lyken, then?”

“Four or five years, I guess,” said Gaffles, taken aback. Knard nodded almost excitedly.

“And what does he know that’s so important?” he demanded.

Again, Gaffles felt at a loss. “We—uh—we’re not so sure,” he said. “It’s just that we think his hypnolocks have slipped a bit. Yesterday Nevada, this same Nevada that’s married to your patient, said something to Lyken which—”

“I know about that,” interrupted Knard, and added something which meant nothing at all to Gaffles. “If he was with Lyken five years ago, that means . . .”

Gaffles hesitated. “Will you come?” he said at last, vaguely surprised that he could put the question so straightforwardly.

“By all means,” said Knard briskly, and went to collect his gear.

KNARD SEEMED not to notice either the way he was taken or where he arrived; he seemed to have put his mind into suspension for the time it took to bring him face to face with Erlking. They had taken the former Remembrancer to the Octopus and installed him in Lorrel's own bedroom behind the public rooms. Jockey, Tad and two more yonder boys were with him.

Jockey had been bending over the bed, watching Erlking's mouth move as though trying to read his lips, till the moment the door opened to let in Gaffles and Knard. He straightened and turned, and asked a quick question with his eyes. Gaffles gave a nod in answer.

He said to Knard, "This is Jockey Hole. He runs things."

"I don't care who you are," said Knard. "Is that the man? I think you'd better get out of the room."

He started forward, raising his medical bag and unzipping its top. Uncertainly, Gaffles looked to Jockey for orders. Jockey did not answer him.

"Dr. Knard," he said in a soft voice, "I don't think you understand what's at stake, do you?"

"A man's life," said Knard shortly, and rolled back the covers from Erlking's body. He drew his eyebrows together in a brief frown.

"If that was all, you wouldn't have come," said Jockey.

Knard shrugged, and began to draw on sterile gloves from his kit. Not looking up, he said, "He's not too badly burned. Someone had better get me a supply of plasma-substitute, and a yard of ersatz skin, and a pound of number one tissue regenerant. Quickly!"

"Tad!" said Jockey, without emphasis. "Get it from the med supply house on Hundred Third."

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"They're not on round-clock watch," said Tad doubtfully.

"Get it anyway. The lock artist came back with Gaffles; he'll help. Don't be long."

Tad nodded, grinning, and went out. Knard took antibiotic powders from his kit and began to dust them over the exposed flesh.

"Dr. Knard," Jockey said again. "Let me put some facts to you."

"Every time you breathe out you spray a mist of germs in the air," said Knard abstractedly. "If you want Erlking to live, you'd better leave."

"He doesn't have to last permanently," said Jockey. "In the state he's got to, death might be a mercy. Not the burning, I mean—just in his mind. He's the former Remembrancer of Ahmed Lyken, and some of his hypnolocks have slipped."

"Yes, Mr. Hole," said Knard with considerable patience. "I know. He was Lyken's Remembrancer at the time when he imported the rho function field perceptor. That perceptor is the work of an advanced science, not of a primitive village culture."

Jockey's face went suddenly fish-belly white, and his jaw fell. A look of utter incredulity replaced his usual calm expression. He said explosively, "So that was it!"

Knard glanced up, startled. He said, "What?"

"Look! Erlking roomed in the same block as Nevada. You know about Nevada and Lyken yesterday? You got it from Athlone, maybe? Gold! Then Nevada got his big news from Erlking, for sure. I wondered what it could be—this about Akkilmar. It—"

Erlking's eyes suddenly opened, as though the lids were on spring catches. "Akkilmar," he said thickly and with difficulty, "is a small town of timber buildings near the sea and its inhabitants depend mainly on fishing. They are friendly and peaceably inclined to us. They have extraordinary abilities. *Aaargh!*"

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He threw his arms wide in the air, and groaned like a man in violent pain.

Knard stepped back from the bed, peeling off his gloves. He sighed. "I don't know anything about you, Mr. Hole," he said. "But you're perfectly right, of course. You've come to the right place with your problem. I've never yet met a hypnotist I couldn't pick, though it may take an hour or two. How long do you think we've got?"

"Till dawn, at most," said Jockey cryptically. "About an hour or two."

"And where do we take the information when we've got it?"

Gaffles switched his eyes from one to other of the speakers in bewilderment.

"Manuel Clostrides is interested," Jockey said. "I think we go to him."

"Fair enough," nodded Knard. "Now I do want you out of here. I'm going to use some tricks which it would be much better to keep secret."

Jockey nodded after a fractional pause. His eyes still on Knard, he said, "Gaffles, go locate Clostrides for me. Get word back. We're probably going to have to take Erlking to him, rather than the other way about."

An incoming call was signaled. Clostrides, his eyes going to the wall clock and noting that it was now almost four, spoke in answer.

It was the duty guard in the main foyer who appeared on the screen, his brows knitted, his voice uncertain. He said, "Bailiff, we have some numbers down here who insist on seeing you. One of 'em says he's Dr. Jome Knard, and he says that a number they have with them in a cripple chair is someone called Erlking who used to be Lyken's Remembrancer."

"How long have they been trying to get to me?" said Clostrides, not betraying his emotion by a twitch of a muscle.



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"About a quarter-hour, Bailiff."

"You're out of a job. Collect your pay and get off the premises. And send those people up here now!"

He blanked the screen with a curt command, and got up from his chair.

The first arrival was Knard; behind him, steering a powered wheelchair in which a lax-faced man half covered in ersatz skin moaned faintly, came Jockey, hesitant, unsure of himself in this world he did not know.

"Don't let's waste any more time," Clostrides said. "Sit down and tell me. What is Akkilmar?"

Jockey checked in mid-strike and then went on towards a chair, leaving Erlking in the middle of the floor. His eyes enviously studied Clostrides' face.

"Akkilmar," said Knard as he sat down, "would appear to be the outpost of a rival civilization which is also exploiting the Tacket worlds, and which proposes to use Lyken as a means of exploiting ours also."

Clostrides didn't say anything, but he closed his eyes.

"You could have this from Erlking directly," Knard went on. "But it comes out rather incoherently. I've managed to open about a hundred of his hypnolocks, but I hadn't time to do a thorough job.

"It all revolves around the rho function field perceptor. There must have been a reason why Lyken didn't put two and two together when he was given the perceptor, which is plainly the product of a highly developed science. I think that reason can be defined this way.

"Wherever the inhabitants of Akkilmar come from, they have some sort of mental discipline which permits Tacket travel without the use of mechanical aids. This has drawbacks as well as advantages. They have probably conducted extensive exploration of Tacket worlds distributed around their home world, much as the franchises we have explored are distributed around ours. There is a theoretical infinity of

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such worlds, of course, and the fact that they coincided with us on Lyken's franchise was several million to one against, at least.

"But having coincided, and having sized us up as rivals to be overcome, they created a phoney culture of a superficially primitive nature; Akkilmar. They contrived to make its disguise convincing by hypnotic techniques similar to our own. Alone among the staff of Lyken's franchise, Erlking had his mind so crosshatched with interlocking associations that it was impossible to erase every clue leading to memories of Akkilmar's true nature.

"But, of course, hypnosis has limitations, such as the need to bring your subject under your control first. They seem therefore to have bided their time, sitting peacefully in their 'primitive village' and talking about their traditional culture—invented for the purpose to create a fog of mysticism around their manifest achievements—while manipulating influential individuals towards the current crisis.

"Now the perceptor is important here again. I have long suspected, and I think I now have proof, that it's a true analogue of reality. Don't ask me to verbalize an explanation—all I can tell you is that rho function field math indicates interaction between the field and reality. How else could a lot of meshed forces in a box reflect outside events? And it follows that if you can control the rho function fields, you can control reality."

"What?" Clostrides jerked forward in his chair.

Knard nodded, his high forehead gleaming with sweat. His voice grew thin and dry.

"Giving us the perceptor, which we then imported into our own world, permitted them to deduce from the reality the fields reflected what was happening. They must have techniques permitting them to use the perceptor with extraordinary accuracy in ways we can't achieve; it's no good to us unless some accident has cut us off from most of our normal

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sense data, which otherwise masks the information the perceptor supplies."

"How about your patient?" said Jockey quietly, into the pause which followed Knard's last word. The doctor nodded.

"This man here," he said to Clostrides, "this man Hole has some kind of gift—I don't know what. He can deduce what's important from evidence that doesn't give grounds for logical proof. He's got a knack of following hunches. He oughtn't to be where he is."

Jockey shrugged and looked away.

"About my patient," Knard went on. "Tonight she was visited by someone who didn't yield a trace in the perceptor fields. Someone from Akkilmar, that implies. And within a few minutes, the police arrived saying that unauthorized Tacketing had been detected in our apartment."

"But—" Clostrides wiped his face with a large handkerchief of imported silk. "But why are they so interested in your patient if she's merely a subject who happens to be using a perceptor because she's crippled?"

"As I see it," Knard said, and shivered a little, "she's learned how to manipulate the field and control reality. After all, she's used it for a longer time than my previous patients, and she's driven by a more burning need. She wants revenge on her husband, Luis Nevada."

"Who is, of course, in Lyken's franchise." Clostrides put his hands together, linking the fingers, and then pushed them hard away from him so that the knuckles cracked. The gesture seemed to boil away some of his tension.

"In effect, then," he said, "when the invading forces go into Lyken's franchise to repossess, they will be confronted with the achievements of the science of Akkilmar, and not Lyken's forces only. The rho function field can't exist in isolation."

"I don't think it does," Knard confirmed. "Erlking witnessed the contacts with Akkilmar that took place before the

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staff of Lyken's franchise was hypnolocked against overmuch curiosity, or whatever was in fact done to them. Hints we've got from him so far indicate some technique of mental control, something associated with what he calls black boxes. That won't be all."

"I beg to differ," said a wheezing voice from the far end of the room. "That will indeed be all."

They all snapped their heads around to stare at the speaker. He was a fat man with a round, smiling face, dressed in a short shift and many metal bracelets and ornaments. There seemed to be no way in which he could have entered the room, for the door had not been opened.

Clostrides spoke chokingly. He said, "Who—?" And got no further.

The fat man walked forward unhurriedly. He said, "I come from Akkilmar, as a matter of fact, in order to tell you that you have woken up to the true state of affairs—fortunately for us—just that much too late."

He smiled at Clostrides, secure in his triumph. Meanwhile, without hurrying, moving in as natural fashion as possible, Jockey Hole drew a knife from the side of the high boot on his right foot and stood up. He put his arm smoothly around the fat man's shoulder and opened a second smile in the fleshy folds of his throat.

While the others were still staring thunderstruck, he said as calmly as though nothing had happened, "We haven't much time now, you know. We'd better do something."

### 17

ONE PHRASE kept turning over and over in Curdy Wence's head, until he had almost forgotten what it had originally meant.

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*Spit the string, spit the string, spit the string . . .*

He was on a string. He was on more of a string than he could have ever imagined.

So long as he remained still and placid, he was normal. He could feel his body taut and vigorous within his warm clothes. He could feel the solid substance of the meal he had been given. He could feel the weight of his gun, and its cool hardness. He could see the darkness around the concealed fire post which had been assigned to him—a sort of revolving pallet beneath a mushroom-shaped dome of armor, camouflaged with vegetation. They had been told that no attack was expected before it was light. To Curdy's strained imagination, the darkness seemed to be lifting and coming back by turns. Shadows of trees began to move over the ground. The quarter-moon had set.

He could hear, too, strange night noises which all his attempts at calm could not make familiar. This countryside was rocky, patched with trees, shrubs and bushes, networked with streams and ravines, and now sown with fire posts. The invaders might come from anywhere, from wherever their portals had been set up on their worlds of departure.

He had a weapon. He was fed and had been invigorated with drugs. Only the string binding him prevented him from deserting to the enemy the minute they appeared.

He had tried it out. Probably everyone had tried it out. And the pug in charge of this detachment, with his little black box, had told him to stay where he was! The echo of that shattering command within his head still made his skull ring when he thought of it.

There was nothing to be done except obey.

Behind him, Nevada shifted on his pallet and moaned. Curdy snapped at him to shut up, and he did, but continued to whimper like a dog in misery. Nevada was a hell of a partner to have been allotted to him, thought Curdy.

Maybe dawn would come soon, and the attack. He didn't

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want it to come. But he didn't want to sit here listening to Nevada's complaints and the noises of the night. He wanted out. That was all.

Hating both worlds, Curdy sat cradling his gun and watching the shadows outside the fire post come to life and crawl about the ground.

Lanchery had managed an hour's sleep before the message came through from Clostrides, and was getting into his battle-armor when it arrived. The messenger excused himself for intruding on grounds of urgency, and thrust the document into Lanchery's hands before disappearing.

He threw it on a table and went on dressing as he scanned it. With one boot on and the other in his hand, he recognized its full importance and forgot what he was doing. Still holding the boot, he sat down and began to read it closely. He was so engrossed in its astonishing news that he failed to hear the door softly open and close.

But he heard the voice.

At once everything else was driven out of his head, and he jumped to his feet. He said in a breathless voice, "Allyn! What—?"

His heart felt as though it was spinning within his chest.

The faint electric-blue glow of her clothing was luminous even though the room was lighted brightly, he saw. It seemed to cling dripping to her hand, as she raised it to her lips and signaled silence.

"I know about that," she said, pointing to the document on the table. "Ignore it!"

"What?" Lanchery's jaw dropped. He knew he looked ridiculous, but all his vanity and all his desire towards Allyn could not stop him from showing his amazement.

"I said ignore it!" Allyn's voice was no longer cool, but savagely intense. "It's a lie. A plant. Lyken left behind his old Remembrancer, Erlking, with his hypnolocks not fast. Do

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you think he'd have done that without a purpose? Of course not! He left him for the specific purpose of having him fall into Clostrides's hands with this garbled story about a secret power and an intruding civilization. You can be sure that Clostrides doesn't believe it. You can be sure, too, that none of the other Directors have had such a message. They're all jealous of you, *you* know that."

Lanchery felt completely helpless. He had accepted Allyn's advice blindly before; he felt driven to do so again, by the same irresistible illogical force that had gripped him since the first time she appeared miraculously within his franchise—against all laws of nature, so it seemed.

But this time his better judgment was struggling to revolt.

Before he could voice objections, Allyn had gone on.

"Did they accede to your suggestion that the attack open with your fist blow? Only after a long argument! And why did they argue against such a sensible plan? Because they were jealous, and thought you might get an advantage over them by entering the franchise first, of course."

"Oh, I could hate you, Allyn, because you make me feel indecisive and the sight of you drives everything else from my mind!"

"Will you ignore that message?"

Lanchery hesitated. "I don't know. I haven't finished reading it. And how do you know what's in it, anyway?"

Allyn hesitated. She said at length, "I've found out how to use a rho function field perceptor."

Lanchery felt behind him for his chair and lowered himself into it. He had to. In common with most of the other concessionaries he had had high hopes of the perceptor's possibilities, but they had proved unfounded. He said nothing.

"If you will ignore this message," said Allyn at length, "next time I come—I will stay."

It was frank bribery. But Lanchery's head whirled, and he put his hand on the table without looking. He gathered up

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the message from Clostrides, crumpled it, and held it mutely out towards Allyn. As she took it, the tips of her fingers brushed his hand.

She smiled, turned, and went out of the room.

She had barely closed the door when Lanchery was struck by the patent insanity of what he had done. He leapt to his feet and started after her. He flung wide the door and crashed full tilt into an astonished member of his technical staff.

The man stepped back, babbling apologies. Lanchery cut him short.

"Did you see a woman go by here a moment ago?" he snapped.

"No, sir," said the other. "No one at all. Uh—we've had a report from The Market, sir; they've discriminated down to Lyken's Tacket numbers and we're reconnoitering the terrain now. Dawn is in half an hour; we should be able to launch the attack then."

What the hell had been in Clostrides's message? A counter-order to the attack? Lanchery felt resolution harden within him.

"Good," he said. Mechanically he went back to where he had let fall his other boot and began to draw it on.

"Good," he repeated. "Go ahead as planned. Say I'll be out to supervise the attack in a few minutes."

The man nodded and withdrew. When he had gone, Lanchery began to curse himself in a searing stream of obscenities.

The cord holding Sergeant Carr's wrists had been very well tied indeed. He had worked on it until he had chafed the skin away; then the slow ooze of blood had made the cord slippery, and now it was inching up over his hands.

At first, when they had been abandoned in the penthouse, the policemen had shouted angrily and snapped at one



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another—"Who the hell were they? Why didn't you do something?"

But for some time past there had been no sound except grunts of effort as they struggled to loosen their bonds.

Feeling as though red-hot bracelets had been clamped on his raw-rubbed wrists, Carr slid the cord the last inch and found that he could bring his hands apart at last. He sat up, his arms and shoulders prickling with the returning circulation.

"I'm loose," he said gruffly. "Wait till I untie my legs and I'll attend to the rest of you."

The grunting of his companions subsided. Stiff-fingered, he fumbled loose the knots at his ankles and got unsteadily to his feet. His issue knife had been taken from him as well as the others. Rather than waste time laboriously unpicking their knots, he went in search of the knives and in the end discovered them thrown out of sight in a corner behind the racks of data tapes surrounding Knard's electronic desk.

He was bending down to slash at the bonds of the first of his companions when there was a high hysterical cry from the room where Allyn sat cocooned. It was a man's voice, shrill with anger—not a woman's. And anyway Allyn Vage had no voice of her own, only the breathy voice of the voder.

Carr jerked upright. He said, "What in—?" His eyes swept the group of prostrate police, counting them. Everyone that had come with him was present.

The shrill angry voice said, "You were told what would happen if you interfered again! I'm going to smash that perceptor and leave you senseless as well as crippled!"

Carr shifted his knife to a fighting grip and charged forward, hurling the door of Allyn's room aside. Panting, he stopped short in the entrance.

The sound of the door sliding back had startled the intruder, whose head had jerked around to face Carr. His expression was savage with rage, and a stream of saliva had run from the corner of his mouth. He was thin and wiry; he wore

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little except quantities of metal ornaments at wrist, neck and waist. He grasped in one hand a metal bar, wielded like a club, which was poised for a crashing swing against the side of the box housing Allyn's perceptor.

Allyn was absolutely immobile. It was only with an effort that Carr reminded himself of the living human being within her featureless cocoon. The voder was silent.

Carr was so taken aback by the sight of the wild man with the club that for a long few seconds he could do nothing more than stare. The instant he recovered himself, he threw himself forward again, knife in hand.

And he fell through thin air, crashing on the floor.

Not understanding, wondering if he had gone suddenly insane, he picked himself awkwardly up again. As he did so, the voder came to life.

"Did you see him?" the breathy voice demanded.

"What? Yes, I saw him." Carr straightened and turned to face the mask covering Allyn's head. "But he vanished! He vanished into thin air when I tackled him! Who in hell was he, anyway?"

"Listen carefully to what I'm going to say," Allyn told him. "Memorize it! Then get word of it to Manuel Clostrides at The Market. Leave me a guard. Others like the man who was here can come and go as they like. They can travel between the Tacket worlds without using a portal."

"So it *was* a strike that showed on the detectors!"

"Possibly. Now listen. You must tell Clostrides on no account to try and stop Lanchery's attack. On no account! And if he wants to know why, this is what you must tell him . . ."

DAWN BEGAN to stain the sky. The great office on top of The Market filled and emptied incessantly as people came and went. The communicator panel was never dark for more than seconds together. In the midst of chaos Clostrides sat with his face growing haggard, but his voice still crisp and authoritative.

"From Dewitt Yorell, Bailiff," said a messenger, handing across a signal slip. "Demanding to know what is the reason for postponing the attack."

"Still no acknowledgment of your message from Lanchery, Bailiff," said another messenger, briefly, turning and going almost as he spoke.

"From Dr. Knard, Bailiff," said a third, proffering a small sheet of paper with a few cryptic numerals on it. "He's got the co-ordinates of Akkilmar out of Erlking's mind, he says."

Rapidly Clostrides scanned the numbers. He said, "That's fortunate—Yorell has a portal operating within a few miles of there. Now if we could put an invasion force through that! But what the hell can I use for troops if the Directors won't play?"

Sitting inconspicuously at the side of the room, Jockey Hole stirred. "What's the problem, Bailiff?" he said softly.

Clostrides shrugged. "The Market's staff can't cope with an invasion, that's all. I've told the Directors to call off their attacks until we know what Akkilmar represents and how great a danger we'd be walking into; I also asked them to put troops at my disposal. They won't. They're scared-jealous of me and of each other, especially of each other. Let's face it: whether the Akkilmar people manipulated them or not, what they're after is Lyken's prosperous franchise, and each one

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of them is hoping he'll be able to establish a decisive foothold there and squeeze out the others."

"But you just need manpower? That's all?" Jockey pressed. Clostrides nodded.

"How would a couple of thousand yonder boys suit you, all tough 'as Tacketing and so bored they don't mind what they do?"

Clostrides stared at Jockey with astonishment. He said, "Who *are* you, anyway, Hole?"

Jockey gave a faint grin. "I sort of run some things in the Eastern Quarter," he said. "I have spoons in a lot of dishes. How else do you think I got Erking away from both Lyken's men and yours? It's a good organization, though I'm saying so. I made it that way. Do you want my boys?"

"Do I want them? You produce them, I'll use them. Two thousand—you're sure of that many?"

Jockey spread his hands. "It may be two, it may be ten. Two is free falling on an hour's notice."

Clostrides spun in his chair and barked at the communicator panel, catching it between calls. An aide appeared on the screen, looking up wearily from his desk.

"Inform Yorell that we're requisitioning the use of his Southern-K Portal," Clostrides ordered. "And I want transport and weapons for two thousand men on—where shall I have the transport assembled?" he interrupted himself, with a glance at Jockey.

"I'd sort of like it in East Hundreth Street," said Jockey. "They call it Holy Alley—after me. That's where most of my boys hang out."

"A hell of a lot one doesn't know about this city," said Clostrides, and finished giving orders to his aide.

From a pale smear in the east, the dawn spread until more than half the sky was blue. In the bowels of the rocky pillar where Lyken had his operations room, only the clock reported

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the arrival of day. Around the room, the squat bulk of Tacket detectors searched for the first signals indicating the importation of mass into the franchise and found nothing but fugitive hints.

Shane Malco said, "What can be *keeping* them?"

Lyken raised his drawn face, on which the hours of waiting had etched their traces, and said, "You *want* them to come?"

"They're going to anyway, aren't they?" said Malco. His edgy voice was louder than he had intended; technicians working around a three-dimensional map of the area, ready to plot the attackers' breakthrough points, looked up briefly.

"There may have been a hitch," Lyken pointed out sourly. "If there is, that's all to the good from our point of view."

"Is it?" Malco was beginning, when one of the mysterious men from Akkilmar crossed the room at the far end, swept the people present with a curious, searching glance, and went out again. Lyken followed Malco's gaze and guessed the reason why he said nothing further.

"What have you got against Akkilmar, Shane?" he demanded.

Malco shrugged and half turned away from his chief. "Nothing," he said after a pause. "Except that—Ahmed, if you located these people more than five years ago, why have you never made anything out of them until now? I didn't know of them, and I was your baseman!"

Lyken spread his hands, but they shook noticeably. He was struggling perhaps with growing anger. He said curtly, "They had nothing much to offer—only the perceptor, which we couldn't use properly. They were never a proposition for trade. They never bothered us, so we never bothered them."

"You're too astute to say things like that and mean them, Ahmed," Malco replied. "There's a reason beyond that, and I'd give a lot to know what it was. Shane, have you any idea how many of these people there are going around the

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base now, with *carte blanche* to open whatever doors and pry into whatever secrets they feel inclined?"

"That's not quite true," said Lyken, making himself sound patient to the point of exaggeration. "But as for how many there are—well, I don't know. A dozen or two, perhaps."

"You think so? I've been around the base a few times I did a tour of the fire posts as well. There aren't less than a hundred people here from Akkilmar. Maybe twice as many."

Lyken didn't answer except to shake his head.

"Ahmed, that's not good enough!" Malco lost his temper at last. "I think these men from Akkilmar have duped you—blinded you! I think they've been stringing you along for who knows how long, and now they've tied the string tight around your neck."

"I'm not going to take that, even from you," said Lyken in a voice like ice. "Go away, Shane. And don't come back."

"If this goes on, I'll have nothing to come back to!" Malco flared, and spun on his heel. He had taken a step forward before he saw that one of the men from Akkilmar had come silently up behind them on bare feet, and was standing facing him now with legs a little apart, fingers curled over like claws on the ends of his relaxed but poised arms.

The newcomer said very coldly, "There has been a betrayal."

"What?" said Lyken. The newcomer fastened his eyes on Malco's face, and did not look away as he continued.

"Our leader has been killed. There has been interference from your world, and one of us who went to rectify it has been ambushed by policemen. Who has spoken of us, Lyken?" Still his eyes did not wander from Malco's face. Uneasily, Malco met the gaze with as much steadiness as he could.

"There is one of your staff, who is in your confidence," said the man from Akkilmar, "who was not here before—whom we have not learned to trust!"

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"Shane, Shanel" said Lyken sorrowfully. "How could you do such a thing?"

Thunderstruck, Malco felt his jaw drop. He stammered, "Ahmed! You're not going to swallow a baseless accusation with no evidence like that! Are you?"

Lyken said nothing.

"What have these people done to you?" said Malco, stepping slowly backwards, away from the man from Akkilmar. His voice was dead, drained of emotion. But he uttered the question because he had to.

There was no answer. From a nearby door, two more of the men from Akkilmar appeared, and one of them held in his hand a black box like those which had made their kidnapped cannon fodder into invariably obedient soldiers. Malco's eyes fell on the box with horror, and his mind raced like a machine suddenly opened out to maximum power.

He said, "Ahmed! Just a moment! Just a moment! Did you hear what this man said? He said that someone from Akkilmar went to deal with interference from our own world. He was ambushed by policemen. There are no policemen here. Ahmed, we have no portals open to our own world since we blew up the base. Don't you see what that means? It means they went by some other portal! It means they must be collaborating with our enemies!"

Lyken's turn to be thunderstruck, Malco noted with grim relief.

But before Lyken could speak, the man from Akkilmar had gestured to the new arrivals. The one carrying the black box shifted it deftly from left hand to right and brought it up with a bang against Shane Malco's forehead. Almost in the same smooth movement, he rapped it against Lyken's face also.

The one who had accused Malco said, "Now it is necessary to control you also. We need only await the arrival and

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defeat of the invaders, and we shall be able to send whoever we wish under our control into your world."

To Curdy Wence, city-bred, as to the other involuntary soldiers defending Ahmed Lyken's base, this wild, rocky country was alien and incomprehensible. Even to those in command who had worked in the franchise for perhaps years, there were still strange things aplenty, which they had never taken the trouble to look into.

Therefore when Curdy Wence saw the brown figure move among the rocks, he did not fire at it. He tensed, because he was under orders to react to the sight of a man moving towards his fire post, and he brought up and sighted his gun. But a sharp order made his brain reel, bludgeon-like.

"That's not an invader! That's a wild man! He's naked and savage."

Curdy lowered his weapon uncertainly. The invaders would come with guns, wearing battle armor against energy bolts, and they would not move in such a casual fashion among the rocks. These must be local inhabitants, going about their ordinary business. The man he had caught sight of carried what appeared to be a pointed spear.

But he didn't look like the scout of an invasion force.

Curdy's vague guess that he might have been a hunter was borne out a few moments later, when a mob of wild pigs came grunting and squealing over the lanes of soil deposited among the rocks, pausing to burrow for a root here and there. The group consisted of a huge boar, who looked to Curdy at least as big as a man, with sows and some young ones already almost fully grown.

They moved around the fire post, skirting it forty or fifty yards distant. Abruptly Nevada caught sight of them, and his fevered mind must have acted before he could be slapped down by the searing mental command which had stopped



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Curdy. He jerked up his gun and launched a bolt at the nearest of the pigs.

"Fool!" Curdy spat. "You're not meant to waste your charge on *animals!*"

The bolt had splashed on a rock within feet of one of the young ones, scorching its hide and singing away its coarse coat of bristles. At once the air was hideous with squeals like men being tortured.

Like lightning, then, the brown savage reappeared from among the rocks. He threw back his head and voiced a squeal indistinguishable from that of the pigs; then he flung himself forward and raced towards the fire post as though the rocky ground had been a smooth athletics track. He gathered himself in a vast leap and soared straight over its mushroom of armored roof.

Nevada was too dizzy from the mental blow which had followed his wasting of a valuable charge on a mere animal, or panic would certainly have made him shoot the wild man down. But neither he nor Curdy—looking half-backward over his shoulder because Nevada was facing the pigs at the moment, and he had not revolved the fire post's turntable base—had time to react before the boar had lowered his head with its tusks like battering-rams and hurled himself screaming forwards.

The edge of the armored mushroom came to two feet from the ground; then there was a gap, then a low parapet on which the occupants would rest their guns to sight them for long distance shots. The parapet was only of native wood. The boar's impetus smashed it down; the huge hoofed body slammed against Nevada's head, jerked it back, snapped his neck like a dry stick, hammered Curdy Wence flat with concussion and two broken ribs—and was gone like a tornado.

THEIR FACES already reflected their weariness, and it was only the beginning. With every additional fact, it looked more as though it was going to go on for a long time. They would have to start drugging themselves awake shortly.

The realization flashed briefly over Clostrides's mind as he heard Sergeant Carr out. Knard was listening; so was Jockey Hole. The sergeant was a simple policeman and hardly understood the significance of what he was saying, but he had memorized his message well, and it made sense to his listeners.

"She said to tell you that the perceptor is an analogue not just of one reality, but of all realities. It doesn't depend on matter, so its fine discrimination depends only on the practice you have in using it. After a long time you get to control it—first you influence people to set events in train that you desire, and in the end you can impose yourself on it so strongly that you can sort of create yourself in another Tacket world. She said she'd done it. She said she had been to Lanchery's franchise and told him to disobey your orders."

"What?" Clostrides jerked forward.

Carr gave a dogged nod. "She said to explain to you that she suggested the idea to Lanchery in the first place. She said the idea is that the people from Akkilmar will be looking for an invasion of soldiers with modern armor and energy guns. What they'll get will be animals they can't control, and savages with spears that the defenders will take at first for local natives out hunting. She said to say it's bound to work."

"But—" Clostrides began. Knard raised his hand.

"I'm beginning to understand a lot of things," he said. "What has happened here is that Allyn has been driven by her desire to revenge herself on her husband to explore far

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more of the potentialities of the rho function field than anyone else has outside Akkilmar."

"That's about what she said," Carr confirmed. "And she said that any perceptor reflects all other perceptrors, too—that's why the people out there gave the perceptor to us, just to have some in our world. That was all they needed to know what was going on here. Seems it's easier, she told me, than doing it without—though that's possible."

"But if they can come and go between the Tacket worlds as they like, they could just invade us and wipe us off the map." Clostrides had to wipe sweat from his face.

"They don't think in terms of invading us and wiping us out. They've schemed this attack on Lyken to get a large number of us under their mental control. They work like that, always at a distance, manipulating people and sort of inching them into the right actions to give what's wanted as a result."

Clostrides folded his hands tightly together, making him hurt himself. He thought of being a puppet, moved as though by strings from a distance. He found the idea loathsome.

"She said, too," Carr went on, "that they felt superior to us because we haven't their mental disciplines, because we have to use portals to get from one Tacket world to another, and all like that. She said they knew she was taking a hand, right from way back—and they even told her they knew, sort of. Or let her guess it. But they thought so little of us—I mean, like they'd already given us the perceptor and been sure we couldn't use it properly—they were sort of patronizing, and treated her like a kid playing a game for grownups. It wasn't till they got wind of her having been to Lanchery's franchise and interfering there in some way they didn't know about that they got to taking her seriously."

"Was that all?" prompted Clostrides.

"Just about. Except that she said she didn't care about getting back at her husband any more, and maybe it was an

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accident that burned her, not a try at murder. She said it was because her beauty was all burned off."

Knard breathed a gusty sigh of relief. Clostrides shot a keen glance at him.

He said, "Well, one thing is clear. We've got to start taking Allyn Vage seriously, if she's really so skilled with the perceptor now."

"Was she all right when you left her?" Knard demanded of Carr, who shrugged and nodded.

"I guess so. I left a guard in case one of these characters who spring from nowhere turned up again. And she showed me what to do to her—her gadgets, the medical things she's all done up in."

"She what?" said Knard, in a chill voice like a sudden death knell.

Carr looked bewildered. Like I said. She explained I had to turn a stopcock and pull a couple of switches—said it was to wake her up properly because she was kind of low at night—"

Knard stood up with his face white as paper, his hands suddenly clenching, and took half a step forward. He barked at Carr, "Don't you realize what you've done, you fool? If you turned a cock and pulled two switches, you turned off her nutriment supply—her blood-flow, her *heart!*—and you turned off her perceptor!"

Carr's mouth worked. He shrank back from the threatening glare of the doctor, and tried to speak. Only the rushing sound of exhaled breath gave form to his words. He said, "But she *told* me to do it . . ."

"Does that mean that—?" began Clostrides, and could not finish. Knard moved slowly back to his chair and sat down again, like a zombie, without conscious intention.

"Allyn Vage, then," he said, "is dead. Any more ideas?"

Into the pause which followed broke a call on the communicator. His face lowering, Clostrides answered it, and the

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harassed aide whom he had earlier instructed to assemble the weapons and transport for two thousand appeared on the screen.

"We got our forces down to Yorell's Southern-K Portal, Bailiff," he said in a lifeless voice. "Personnel in charge there refuse to let them through without Yorell's personal authority. Yorell sent back a reply to our requisition which I don't think I ought to repeat. What do I do now?"

Clostrides frowned with the effort of having to shift his attention. That was new to him. He could never remember having felt like this before. Nor did he usually have to look about him—look at people who were not even his comparative equals, the Directors of The Market—for guidance in a decision. He thought suddenly he was getting old.

"Do we go ahead, in view of what we know now?" he said. It cost him a great deal to ask that question.

Jockey stirred in his seat. He said, "If I've untied the string right, Bailiff, we're scared that maybe people involved have been sort of prodded into doing what the numbers at Akkilmar want. Gold?"

Clostrides gave a heavy nod.

"This I tell you, Bailiff," Jockey went on. "Whoever got prodded, it wasn't my boys or me. We're down the bottom of the pile. We're the dregs of society. We're the half that lives on a pension and what we can graft off the pleasure pads and the rest of all that. If these numbers at Akkilmar feel all superior to you and Lyken and whoever else, they won't notice the yonder boys at all. You use my boys, Bailiff. Get me a line to Gaffles at this place of Yorell's where they're being sticky. Let me tell him how to make it free falling all the way, gold?"

Why he did what he did next, Clostrides did not know until it was over. He got out of his chair. He stepped aside from it, and indicated to Jockey Hole that he was to take his

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place. There was a long silence. The aide stared out of the screen, bewildered, waiting for orders.

"Gold!" said Jockey at last, and moved to the chair. He closed his eyes for a moment, as though feeling the aura of power which came from it, then snapped them open again and barked at the man in the screen.

Neither Gaffes, who was in command as far as it was possible to command this wild force, nor any member of the two thousand-strong gang of yonder boys that swarmed into Yorell's southern import center knew very much about what they were doing or why. They knew they were doing something, and it seemed to be something important. That meant a lot to them. Down on the bottom of the pile where they came from, there wasn't anything important to do, except what they made important for themselves. They could run for Jockey Hole, the biggest frog in their little puddle. That was as close to real importance as they could get.

Jockey knew that. He'd been where they still were; he knew better than they did that he had never got very far away from there. He had told Gaffes that because of this the two thousand would not be a simple rabble—they might not take strict orders or accept much discipline, but they would act in concert and they would get things done the way they thought best. His final order was as straightforward as the rest.

"Turn 'em on and let 'em run!"

They had never handled anything more deadly than a whangee stick or a knife, most of them. Now they had gas guns and some energy guns. One bolt was fired, and that was for a purpose, in the storming of the high blue citadel which housed Yorell's Southern-K Portal. Two hundred out of the two thousand set to work preventing interference while a group of amazed and worried technicians, who had come down from The Market with instruments calibrated to locate

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Lyken's franchise, zeroed in the portal on the right world among thousands.

There were qualms when the yonder boys saw the soap-like film stretch before them, leading into the alien world; city-nurtured, all of them, they distrusted the country before them. They paused, crowding the great hall into which Yorell brought the trade goods from his franchise by the hundred bales or the hundred tons at a time, and wondered again about what they were doing.

Across the hall, Gaffles caught the eye of Tad, who had helped him capture Erlking in the fight at the Pleasuredrome. He curled his lip with a hint of a sneer, as though to imply, "Yellow!"

Tad went through, and the rest went after him in a stream a half-mile long.

They tramped two miles, and there the determination almost had time to leak away. Somehow it lasted out. And they came to Akkilmar, a town of wooden buildings with grass between them as smooth as well-kept lawn, close to the sea. On a rise overlooking it, there were woods, among which Gaffles mustered his forces and enjoined them to utter silence. It seemed that the woods breathed, but that was all.

Cautiously, accompanied by the technicians who had made their arrival at Akkilmar possible, he crept forward to the very edge of the woods, and from a hiding place behind a thick clump of bushes studied the town with binoculars.

There were some people visible, moving about among the houses, who wore little more than metal ornaments and seemed as primitive as any aborigines on any known Tacket world. But these were few. Far outnumbering them, men and women, wearing elaborate harnesses of dull gray over drab costumes so bulky that Gaffles guessed instantly they must be armored, gathered in the grassy lanes. Around them, these people had weapons girded. Some of them were attending to huge ovoidal devices of shiny wire which they set spinning

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on blocky cubical pedestals. Others were assembling loads of square black boxes on platforms which hummed above the ground and could be moved from place to place by operators walking behind and touching them lightly to steer them.

Beside Gaffles, the technician who was nearest drew in a sharp breath. He said, "Those are no savages!"

Gaffles shook his head. "They're the enemy," he said. "I think—"

Abruptly one of the platforms loaded with black boxes rose from the ground at a steep angle and began to soar towards the north. There was the spitting hiss, from somewhere along the edge of the wood, of an energy gun, and the bolt it launched struck the flying platform squarely, like a clay pigeon, and melted it into a fiery ball.

Gaffles checked what he had been going to say. He cursed under his breath, and regretted it. There was nothing to be done now except one thing. He threw back his head and gave a tremendous yell.

He shouted, "*Fire!*"

## 20

IN THAT PART of his mind which had not been too badly battered by the repeated mental hammering of the men from Akkilmar, Shane Malco was tempted to say aloud "I told you so."

But Lyken's haggard, pitiable face prevented him. And after all, with the powers these strangers possessed, who could resist? Visions tormented him of worse than puppet armies: of millions "black-boxed" into unquestioning sub-



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mission. No one who gave much thought to it could find his own world's middleman society attractive, with its sub-structure of dregs and its superstructure of vicious rivalries. But in comparison, it was paradise.

He licked his lips and looked about the operations room. The staff present seemed more like wax dummies than men who breathed—even down to the man from Akkilmar who sat at the side of the room with his black box on his knee, waiting.

There was a risk of more mental punishment if he even spoke, he knew. But there had been silence for perhaps an hour now, and anything was preferable to the isolation of silence.

Licking dry lips, he said, "Ahmed, what do you suppose has happened? Do you suppose the attacks have started?"

Lyken gave a weary shrug, and made no answer.

The silence closed in again like fog. More minutes dragged by. Then one of the room's doors slid aside, and a man entered with the now familiar expression of one who had been "black-boxed"—bitter, resentful, but hopeless. Malco shifted in his chair to look at him; even Lyken looked up.

The newcomer crossed the floor and stood before the man from Akkilmar. He said in a dull voice, "There has been a message."

The man from Akkilmar nodded. His face was expectant but not at all eager.

"The wild men and animals have destroyed all the fire posts except three on the southern side," the messenger said, and a spark of enthusiasm enlivened his dull voice for a moment. "The supplies and reinforcements from Akkilmar have not come. It is believed that Akkilmar has been destroyed."

The impassivity of the man from Akkilmar vanished in an instant. He got to his feet slowly, his mouth working. After a moment, he spoke hissing.

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"You lie!"

"I can't lie," said the messenger, and gave the words a weight of somber satisfaction. "I've been treated with one of your black boxes."

The man from Akkilmar made as though to raise the box he himself carried and smash open the messenger's skull, savagely. Slowly the meaning of what had been said penetrated Malco's mind, and also Lyken's. They exchanged wondering glances, hardly yet daring to hope.

"What else?" said the man from Akkilmar, his teeth together, his hands closing into fists.

"That—" the messenger began, and was interrupted by the shrill clanging of alarms. The technicians around the room, startled into life, began to move, scanning their Tacket detectors. They too had been shocked from their lethargy by the news; now, as they saw what information the detectors had to yield, they dared to smile.

The man from Akkilmar tapped his black box, and one of the technicians gave a sudden groan.

"What happens?" came the barking question. The technician had to put out one hand and find support, but his sweating face revealed the triumph that he felt.

"The attack has finally started," he said grimly. "There are portals opening all around the base, and it looks as though mass by the thousands of tons is being shifted in."

Another door opened, and a woman in the costume of Akkilmar came panting in. She rapped out something to her companion in her own language, and he hesitated for a moment. When he answered, although his words were incomprehensible, it was plain that he was spewing angry oaths. He closed both hands on his black box.

A rush of pain like boiling water swamped Malco's mind, Lyken's, the minds of the technicians, and hurled them into unconsciousness. The last thought that Malco carried with him was a notion, too sharp to be an illusion, that the man

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and the woman from Akkilmar had vanished from where they stood.

"We can't stop it now," said Clostrides, and his voice was doom-laden. "Once the other Directors found out that Lanchery had gone into the franchise as planned, and once they knew that we'd put a force through Yorell's portal near Akkilmar, no amount of arguing or pleading or anything could have held them back. So the men of Akkilmar get their victims anyway."

From across the room, in the chair to which he had returned, Jockey Hole looked at the high bailiff curiously. He said, "Bailiff, you still got your string knotted?"

Clostrides gave him an uncomprehending glance.

Jockey shrugged. "I read this different," he said. "Why worry any more? Lanchery got in his attack, the idea being that these numbers couldn't control animals and anyway they wouldn't start worrying about them till too late. We got in our attack at Akkilmar, and like I said these numbers wouldn't have paid any attention to dregs like my boys, gold? I'll lay on one thing—the way it finally was set up, it's going to be free falling now all the way."

"If the attack on Akkilmar served any purpose," Clostrides said heavily, "and if the defenses were wiped out by Lanchery and his wild beast show . . ."

Jockey leaned back in his chair, apparently quite relaxed and unworried. He said, "To me, Bailiff, it all smells sweet as roses now."

The signal for an outside call came from the communicator. Clostrides answered it. A youthful face appeared in the screen, muddy, scratched, but grinning. A hesitant voice said, "Uh—I sort of wanted Jockey Hole."

Jockey got up and moved into screen range. He said, "Tad, how was it?"

"It was free fall all the way!" said Tad with enthusiasm.

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"We got them by surprise. They were moving in all kinds of supplies and a lot of armored people, too. Real army, looked to me. And machinery, weird! So we just naturally burned 'em out. Jockey, that's to be seen, all gold! We put four million megawatts into that town, Gaffles said afterwards—houses all wood, burned like a bonfire, and these weird gadgets which were maybe weapons just caught one bolt and began to go off like crackers. We rushed 'em after—captured maybe four hundred on the way to frying. Lots of 'em just disappeared into nowhere, so we cracked the others on the head and now we're pumping stuff into them to make them sleep and good."

He brought his right hand into screen range and looked at it thoughtfully; it was wrapped in bandages.

"Lose anybody?" said Jockey, nodding towards the screen.

"Not so you'd notice, boss. A few. We did more hurt to ourselves than they managed, though."

Jockey glanced at Clostrides and lifted an eyebrow questioningly. The high bailiff leaned back, closing his eyes.

He said, "All right. All we can do now is what you said yourself: turn it on and let it run."

Curdy Wence tried to move. Fiery pain lanced his chest; he desisted. He forced the lids back over his eyes, feeling a vast ache within his head. Someone was bending over him. It was a man in a company uniform he did not recognize, carrying an energy gun on a sling behind him. His expression was one of wonder.

He said, "What hit you? You're not a Lyken man—you must be one of the poor bastards he kidnapped in."

The edge of pain in Curdy's head lifted a little, just enough to allow memories to ooze out. He said. "That's the way it was. Bastards."

"What hit you, though?" the man persisted.

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Curdy found the right word, and forced himself to utter it. He said very thinly, "A pig."

"A pig! Cuddy, what *has* been going on around here? Already I found a number with a broken leg said he'd been kicked by a horse, and a whole damned fire post caved in with the craziest animal you ever saw lying dead in the middle—thing musta weighed a ton, with horns and a man all round its shoulders."

Curdy let slip his hold on consciousness and drifted into the comfort of darkness again.

The hands on the clocks throughout The Market were moving up towards their meeting at noon. Once more an outside call was signaled; buoyed up more by the news of unlooked-for success than by the artificial invigoration of the drugs he had taken to alert his mind, Clostrides answered it.

The face of Dewitt Yorell, with a look like thunder, appeared on the screen. He said in a frosty voice, "Manuel, you have a lot to answer for. I'm calling a meeting of the Directors to investigate the stories you've been spinning us. Your double-dealing has failed. You're through."

Clostrides said, "Really?" He made the word a self-confident drawling sound.

"You have no call to look smug," said Yorell, but his assertiveness had already diminished.

"I think so," murmured Clostrides. "But explain!"

Yorell drew a deep breath. He said, "I don't know what conspiracy you and Lanchery involved yourselves in, but we're not standing for it. We held back our attack on the strength of the extraordinary story you fed us—fed all of us but Lanchery! When we finally realized you'd played us for fools, and sent in our forces anyway, we found Lanchery just about in sole possession and no trace of this mysterious superrace from wherever you dreamed up to mislead us!"

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"I think that gives me every reason to look smug," said Clostrides frigidly. "What are you doing now?"

"Making sure your plot with Lanchery falls down!" barked Yorell. "We have Lanchery himself in custody, and we're clearing out his forces."

"You are an incompetent blockhead, Dewitt," said Clostrides. "You're incapable of seeing anything but your own profit and loss, aren't you? I think you'd better change your mind very quickly, before the forces of Akkilmar can recover from the damage we inflicted and return to the attack."

"I've had enough of that," said Yorell shortly. "Stop deluding yourself, Manuel. As I already told you, you're finished."

Behind Yorell in the screen, someone moved into view. A woman. She seemed tall and attractive, and she wore a blue cloak with a high collar standing up behind her head. She reached out and tapped Yorell on the shoulder, her face impassive.

Yorell switched around as though he had been stung. He said, "Who are you? Who let you in here?"

The woman shrugged. "I let myself in," she said. "I can go more or less where I like, you know. My name is Allyn Vage, and I think you'll understand things more clearly if I explain."

THE DIRECTORS accepted the situation sullenly and with bad grace; they were not used to councils at which outsiders were

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present, even when the outsiders—such as one of Earth's leading doctors, and a man who could summon a private army of two thousand on a hour's notice, and a woman who appeared to be able to go wherever she liked—were outstanding in their own fields.

But Clostrides, to his own secret surprise, found himself welcoming the situation.

With a worried look on his face, Knard was hesitantly addressing Allyn. He was saying, "At first, of course, Allyn, I was suspicious of your reliability. After all, your venomous hatred of your husband . . ."

Allyn didn't look at him. She said composedly, "He did try to kill me, of course, in a very horrible and savage manner. The cause was simple jealousy. Had it not occurred to you that the perceptor might also confirm that for me?"

"We didn't understand what rho function fields could accomplish," Knard said self-excusingly. "I still don't."

"Luis is dead now, and what happened doesn't matter." Allyn waved one hand gracefully, dismissing the past. "And as to what the rho function field can do, I can only give you examples. I'm one. It's essentially a device for enlarging the potential of the mind, guiding and disciplining it. I found out by slow stages. But my hatred—which I no longer feel, but can't regret—served a useful purpose there, driving me when I might have given up.

"As you already know, the people of Akkilmar wanted perceptrons operating here to reflect our reality for them, to allow them to spy on us and manipulate events so that ultimately they could use our own rivalries and jealousies to overcome us. I reached a point at which I could impose myself on the reality within the rho function field so well that I could act a part in reality outside it. That was when I began to understand what the people of Akkilmar were doing.

"But I could sense the approaching crisis; I could sense the

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urgent need for a way to oppose the enemy which he could not control. And I presented myself to Hal Lanchery. I manipulated him as the people of Akkilmar had manipulated others."

She glanced at Lanchery, who scowled and crossed his arms as though ashamed of himself.

"I could do that much, When I learned that the people of Akkilmar could come and go between the Tacket worlds without depending on artificial aid, then I knew I would have to find some way of doing the same. I could not risk being incapacitated simply because someone smashed my perceptor. You see, it was by then clear that in the mind itself there must also be analogues of reality as precise as those in the perceptor, or more so."

Dewitt Yorell cleared his throat noisily, leaned back and stared at the ceiling.

"I had to drive myself to depend on the analogues in my mind, and there was only one way I could do that."

"To be afraid of death," said Clostrides softly, as though a great light had come to him.

"That was why I told the policeman to turn off the perceptor and the supply of nutriment that sustained my body in the cocoon."

"But—" Knard was almost spluttering with excitement. "That means, though, that the power of mind is literally unlimited—that a body can be created by mind!"

Allyn glanced at him. "You have to regard it this way," she said. "Physical and mental are conjoined and interdependent; you cannot have a mind discarnate, but it has to grow within a growing brain. Contrariwise, it appears to me, physical reality is a kind of sum total or common denominator of that which is perceived by consciousness. It is possible to act mentally on this physical reality so as to change not it itself, but the mode in which it is perceived. Do you follow me?"



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"Not yet," said Knard. "But we will. We will."

Hal Lanchery said, not looking at anyone, "Isn't that enough of this metaphysical gabble? What are we going to do about the important problem—these people out in some Tacket world or other where they've been doing all these things for ages, who came within inches of exploiting our very minds?"

He shot a hostile glare at Allyn on the last word.

Knard said diffidently, "We've been questioning the captives from Akkilmar, you know. We have, of course, to keep them half-dopey to prevent them disappearing from under our noses, but we've established a few important facts. Essentially, they do as we have done, but instead of simply trading, they exploit directly. They will occupy a productive Tacket world, establish domination of the inhabitants, and milk it. Contact with us indicated the desirability of having a highly advanced technological civilization to milk, as well as what they have already."

"And they fell down on their own assumed superiority," Clostrides said. "Is that right?"

"Not altogether," Knard corrected. "True, they were in part blinded because they had never encountered serious opposition. Also true, they made no allowance for the difference between their society—an oligarchy ruling a 'black-boxed' majority—and ours, so they never reckoned with Mr. Hole's yonder boys, or with Director Lanchery's animals and wild men."

"But—?" prompted Clostrides.

"But there was something still more important," said Allyn in answer. "Their view of reality was conditioned by their knowledge that they could manipulate it deliberately. Whereas we—" She broke off, and then continued in a changed tone.

"Who here believes in luck?"

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For a moment there was silence. Then Jockey Hole gave a self-conscious grin. He said, "Maybe I do."

"You should. You have it. Only it's not simple chance. It's the gift of extracting trends subconsciously from the analogue or reality which exists in all thinking minds. You were able, without knowing what you were doing, to set in motion a train of events leading to your capture of Erlking, then to your linking Erlking with Knard, and through Knard with me, and to the presentation of all the facts at once to the only man in a position to act on them: Clostrides there."

Jockey said in a serious tone, "I often said I could surprise myself. I guess I know how, now."

"Luck," said Lanchery in a sour voice. "What concerns me isn't luck. It's how to cope with the enemy!"

Clostrides nodded. He looked at Knard. "You've been responsible for interrogating the captives," he said. "Would you say they will return to the attack?"

"Very possibly," Knard answered. "The damage to their self-esteem alone suggests that."

"Then I'll say one thing that's got to be done." Clostrides took a deep breath. "The Market has got to go. The system behind The Market has got to go. By luck we succeeded this time. Next time, our bickering rivalries may really wreck our chances."

The Directors exchanged glances so obviously appalling it seemed to Clostrides almost funny. Yorell spoke for all of them, saying curtly, "Manuel, that's nonsense and you know it. For one thing—how do we know there'll be another time? It was an infinitely small chance that we contacted one another in Lyken's franchise; it'll be there, if anywhere, that we'll meet again. And now that the bastards have done whatever it was that they did to Lyken and his staff—"

Clostrides interrupted without apology. He addressed Knard. "Is there any hope of restoring their minds, do you think?"

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"Virtually none," said Knard shortly. "All Lyken's key men, and he himself, have practically total amnesia."

"Thanks to the black boxes?"

"As far as we can tell."

There was a moment of silence while those present reflected on the power of Akkilmar. Some of them had seen Lyken's staff while they were occupying his franchise; the sight had not been pleasant.

"One thing puzzles me," said Jorge Klein, who had sat silent during the previous discussion. "These people have such powers—why did they not simply make an open attack on us?"

Clostrides answered in a sober tone. "There are too few of them."

"What?"

"Too few," Clostrides repeated. "Representing, as they do, a thin layer of dominating individuals scattered among who knows how many worlds, all their power does not compensate for their lack of numbers."

"All the more reason to stop the nonsense about abolishing The Market," said Yorell gruffly. "If there are so few of them, and the odds are billions to one against their cropping up anywhere except in Lyken's franchise, all we need to do is police that one franchise. We could hold it co-operatively, perhaps."

"You don't sound happy about even that much co-operation," said Clostrides cuttingly. "Has it not been made clear that these people gained access to our own world, as well as to the one where Lyken had the franchise? Are you going to take the risk that they might come to one or other of the Directors, or to some other concessionary, and offer him secret advantages over the rest?"

"They show up on Tacket detectors, don't they?"

"You're prepared to allow your bases to be searched every time the operation of Tacket's Principle is recorded?" countered Clostrides.

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"You're still talking nonsense," Yorell retorted. "No one in his right mind—"

"Lyken did. But he wasn't in his right mind. Not when the people from Akkilmar were through with him."

"We know about that now. We can guard against it." A gleam of sweat showed on Yorell's forehead. "As for intruding into bases, I have a score to settle about the storming of my Southern-K Portal by this gang of wild youths, and I'm not going to forget it!"

"The attack that went through that portal prevented reinforcements from leaving Akkilmar," said Clostrides glacially. "That's all I care about. All you care about is that your portal was used. That's why The Market will have to go, and us with it."

"Repeating that won't endow it with sense," Yorell snapped. Clostrides's jab had struck home, obviously. "In any case, Allyn Vage has discovered the possibilities of the rho function field—she's here when she should be dead—that changes the situation completely."

"Do you *still* not understand?" said Allyn's voice, wonderingly.

All heads turned towards her. Clostrides said, "What do we not understand?"

"I've tried to explain that you don't alter reality through the rho function field. You only alter the mode in which it's perceived." Allyn sounded deliberately patient.

"Yes, but—" Clostrides began, when he caught sight of Knard's face. It had gone white; his mouth was half-open.

"You!" said the doctor chokingly.

Allyn Vage nodded. "Of course. I'm dead, don't you see? How could I possibly be here?"

And she was not.

They stared for a long time at the place where she had seemed to be. In their imaginations was the crashing sound

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of worlds collapsing, and around them the fabric of The Market seemed to reel drunkenly.

At last they began to look at one another again, and in their eyes fear of the strange new universe into which they had precipitated was naked to be seen.