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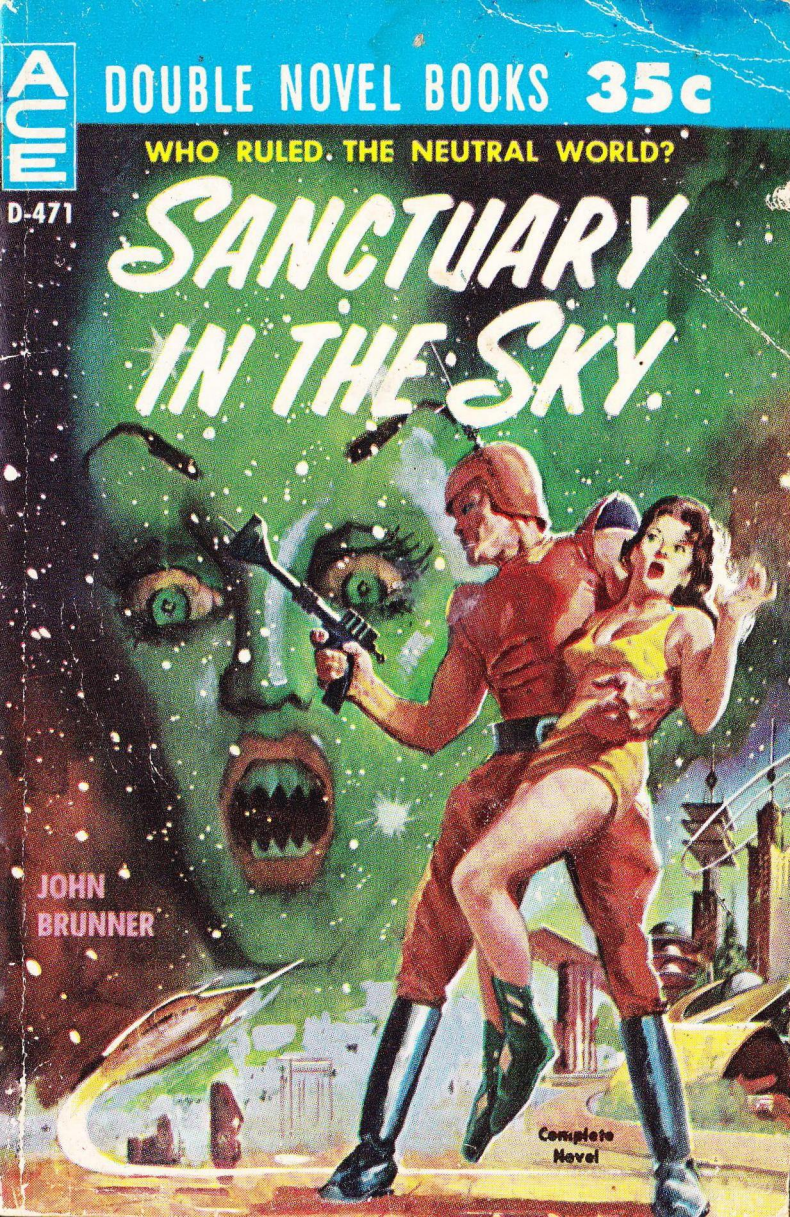
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WHO RULED THE NEUTRAL WORLD?

# SANCTUARY IN THE SKY.

JOHN  
BRUNNER

Complete  
Novel





## THE ISLAND BETWEEN WORLDS

A cold war among the stars was growing hotter by the minute. As Pag and Cathrodyne struggled for domination, a hot war threatened which would rend and annihilate whole planetary systems. The two master races would have consumed one another long ago, but for one single factor:

*Waystation.* It was a stupendous synthetic world, famed throughout this galaxy. For Waystation was controlled by a neutral people, and until the greater powers could seize this strategic wonder planet and ferret out its secrets, they were doomed to fretful inactivity.

But as a Cathrodyne vessel drew near to Waystation, the all-important balance of power stood in sudden peril. The ship in itself was routine. But on board was a stranger, a man of undiscovered race, who spoke too little, and, it appeared, knew too much. . . .

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## **CAST OF CHARACTERS**

### **Vykor**

A servant's life could crackle with excitement—when he served a double master.

### **Toehr**

A splendid figure of a woman, she filed her teeth dog-wise and locked her male pursuers in a cage.

### **Capodistro Ferenc**

What was this notorious jingoist doing with a woman from the enemy camp?

### **Ligmer**

As scientist and patriot, he was torn by conflicting loyalties.

### **Dardaino**

His priestly calling did not curtail a life of sensual exploit.

### **Captain Raige**

This cool little woman performed the hottest task in space.

### **Lang**

Was this strange, soft-spoken man no more than an adventurer?

# ***Sanctuary in the Sky***

**by**

**JOHN BRUNNER**

**ACE BOOKS, INC.**

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

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**THE SECRET MARTIANS**

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## I

FLICKING a speck of dust off his immaculate purple uniform with one hand, adjusting the set of his braided cap with the other, Vykor hurried around the corner of the first-class passengers' corridor and came within inches of knocking Capodistro Ferenc off his feet.

Belatedly, Vykor recognized him; belatedly, he stepped back and crossed his hands in front of his body, bending his head submissively. His mind seethed with indignation, but this was the proper way for a Majko to behave in face of a Cathrodyne—all the more so, since this Cathrodyne was an officer and used to instant obedience from subject races.

"Hahl" said Ferenc, making his dress cane whistle in the air. "And where exactly are you going, clumsy fool?"

"There is violet on the screens, noble sir," said Vykor. "I have to tell the noble passengers that we are about to break through into real space again."

"Ahl And you were not expecting this, I suppose?"

Vykor swallowed with an effort, and forced himself to keep his head lowered. He could see only Ferenc's highly polished boots, the legs of his breeches, and the tip of the dress cane as it tapped at the boots.

"I am stupid, noble sir," Vykor choked out. "But I was expecting it. I have been a steward on this run for thirty trips already."

"Then you should by now have contrived to arrange your duties so that you can carry them out at a safe walking pace, not charge around corners as though to save life." Ferenc put the cane under his arm and walked past abruptly, toward the observation saloon.

Vykor raised his head and stared after the tall Cathrodyne, whose greased hair fell in regular waves from the edge of his cap.

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*One day . . .*

He calmed himself forcibly, and wiped his face with the back of his long white gloves. It was perhaps just as well that Ferenc had decided against detailed inquiries. Vykor was late, nearly three minutes late, and it would be embarrassing to have to give the reason for this lateness to any Cathrodyne.

He shrugged his jacket more comfortably around his shoulders, and went down the corridor between the cabins. Number one was empty, of course—that was Ferenc's. He began with number two, on the opposite side.

"Steward, sir! There is violet on the screens. If you wish to witness break-through you should go to the observation saloon."

Two: that was occupied by Ligmer, the archeologist, a young and argumentative man from Cathrodyne University. The Cathrodynes and their opposite numbers, the Pags, held strongly differing opinions about Waystation, agreeing generally on only one point: Whoever had been responsible for its building, its present occupiers were in power illegally.

Three: a girl's voice answered hesitantly, thanking him. That was Mrs. Iquida, the Lubarrian woman, on her way to be reunited with her husband at Waystation. Usually, Vykor was obsequiously and obviously polite to Lubarrians on this route, especially when there were Cathrodynes around to see him doing it. But Mrs. Iquida hadn't given him much chance—she had hidden away in the her cabin most of the time, and when she did appear in the dining saloon she kept her reddened, tear-swollen eyes downcast.

She had come out of the cabin almost before Vykor had moved on, and he gave her an appreciative glance. Evidently the nearness of Waystation had lifted her cloud of misery; her eyes sparkled and there was a graceful lilt in her walk. Vykor was strongly nationalistic in his taste for women as in everything else, but the Lubarrian blond legginess in this case struck a chord.

He rapped at number four, rebuking himself.

There was the expected sharp, shrill, animal yelping, cut short by an order in an accent Vykor had not yet been able to place. That was Lang quieting the small black fluffy pet



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he took with him everywhere, even to meals, feeding it from his own plate.

Lang was the prize mystery this voyage. He was affable—even, one might say, approachable—for a first-class passenger aboard a Cathrodyne-owned liner. This made it sure that he was not himself Cathrodyne. He wasn't from the Pag side of Waystation, either; there was no one out there except the Pags themselves, the Alchmids, and of course the Glaithes. There were only four suns in a hundred parsecs in that direction, and the fourth was a pulsating variable and periodically scorched its planets clean.

Therefore he came from in-galaxy of Cathrodyne. And a long way in, too—so far that all Vykor's carefully placed hints had failed to locate his origin.

And this was positively awe-inspiring. Vykor's heart had pounded when he realized what it implied, and he had been unable to keep from sharing his discovery with other members of the crew. Of course the news had spread quickly, and now even the officers were deferential to him.

In theory, it was possible by transshipping from line to line to cover most of the known galactic worlds in a few years' traveling. But it had become accepted that no one ever traveled out of sight of his home sun. It wasn't a law of nature or anything, just a proven fact—no one felt the inclination to go much further, once he saw his own sun dwindling to a point on the edge of visibility.

This made Lang almost unique. Vykor had established beyond reasonable doubt that he hailed from no system visible from Cathrodyne, Majkosi, Lubarria or Waystation. And to have made such a trip excused even his annoying, yappy little pet.

Five: the priest, Dardaino—a fat man, not very likable, but probably no better and no worse than others of his kind. He preached the state religion of Cathrodyne, which was no longer alive on its home world, but which had been forcibly planted on Lubarria some centuries back and had its devotees there. Vykor suspected that Mrs. Iquida might be a lapsed follower; he had seen the priest succeed in trapping her into conversation at least once, where everyone else had failed.

And six: the Pag officer returning from the embassy on

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Cathrodyne, who had insisted on being given a cabin diametrically opposite Ferenc's. That was it. Vykor spun on his heel and made for the observation saloon by way of the purser's cabin, where he informed the purser that all the first-class passengers had been warned about break-through. The purser was an old hand; he had done more than a hundred trips, and the sight of violet on the screens provoked him now to nothing more than a sigh of annoyance at having his dice-game with the mates interrupted.

They were all in the saloon by the time he got there—even the Pag officer, who sat by herself in a corner far removed from the viewport, resplendent in a jewel-encrusted tunic and thigh boots. She tapped the golden basket hilt of her ceremonial sword with metallic fingernails.

The priest, Dardaino, had settled himself plumply into a soft armchair, and had tucked his yellow and white robe around him with as much care as though he were packing a valuable relic for shipment to a distant shrine. When he finished this complex task, he looked around at his companions and bestowed a toothy smile on Mrs. Iquida.

She was leaning forward and staring at the blue in the viewport, moving her lips as though willing break-through to be over so that Waystation would appear on the screens and in the port. She wore a plain Lubarrian wrapper of dark red, and sandals.

The only other person who seemed at all excited by the approach of break-through was the archeologist, Ligmer. He was keeping calm with an effort; his slim fingers drummed on the arm of his chair, and his eyes wandered restlessly.

Lang, by contrast, seemed perfectly in command of himself. He mechanically stroked the short fur of his pet as it rested in his lap, but otherwise was completely still and relaxed.

Ferenc's eyes switched in amusement from Ligmer to Lang. "It's plain enough which of you two has seen it all before," he said, and grinned at Lang.

Lang's luminous gray eyes widened just a little, and he shrugged his loose shirt back from his right arm. "You are mistaken, Officer Ferenc," he said softly. "I have not seen this Waystation, as it's called."

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"A figure of speech, sir. We speak of those whom nothing can impress and say, 'They've seen it all before.'"

Ligmer, becoming aware a little late that Ferenc's remark had included him, flushed and gave the officer a glare. "It may be sophisticated to pretend that one is not impressed by Waystation. But close consideration of it, and even a little knowledge of its amazing mysteries, reveals that it is always more, not less, surprising and impressive."

He crossed his legs, folded his arms, and fixed his gaze on the viewport, which was showing orange now.

"Noble dames and sirs," said Vykor discreetly, "break-through will be complete in a few seconds."

Ferenc had not previously been aware that Vykor was in the saloon; he recognized the steward's voice, and turned his head with a lift of one eyebrow to see where it came from. Before he had completed the gesture, Waystation was visible.

Whether Ligmer had meant what he said or had merely been justifying himself, the fact remained—he was right. Vykor had seen this same sight more than thirty times. It still brought a shiver along his spine, and a dryness to his mouth.

Waystation! Who had built it? Ligmer and others of his trade struggled to answer that question, and signally failed. How long ago? Same again. What for? Same again. But quite likely for exactly the same purpose as that which it served today.

Miles in diameter! A vast artificial planetoid, surrounded by freighters and liners and even light cruise-craft—a jewel glowing in the void from a thousand facets, like a well-cut diamond. A prize which many desired, and some had taken.

The ship had come up the arm of stars in which the Cathrodyne Federation held sway. Cathrodyne, Majkosi and Lubarria were its three worlds. Beyond Waystation lay the stars of the Pag Alliance—Pagr and Alchmida. Between the two power groups lay Waystation, and the people of Glai.

The Glaites had never claimed to have built Waystation. But they had found it first, and they had made very good use of it. Both sides—the Pags and the Cathrodynes—wanted Glai, with its rich textiles, high-yield rare earth deposits and advanced factories. But both sides wanted Waystation more—and the Glaites *had* Waystation.

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Impasse. Therefore the two great power groups had to bow humiliatingly before the dictates of the Glaites; therefore the subject races on each side looked to the Glaites as miracle-workers. And for all these reasons, Waystation was the focus of more potential trouble and violence than any single place in the whole troubled Arm.

Everyone knew that. Now, it was merely a question of time.

## II

THERE WAS a long silence in the observation saloon. It was finally broken by Mrs. Iquida, who sighed, so deeply and so loudly that the sound seemed to echo in the padded room. Ferenc glanced sidelong at her and snorted. It was obvious to Vykor what he was thinking—that it was wrong to go to so much trouble for a mere Lubarrian, a member of a subject race.

But the Glaites had requested it, and because the Glaites were the masters of Waystation, it had been done.

Iquida, this woman's husband, had been among the crew of a Cathrodyne warship that had tangled with a Pag battle-cruiser somewhere out along the galactic arm. He had been fished out of space in a survival suit, by a Glaithe freighter, and was now the subject of a long and complicated wrangle between the Pags—who claimed him as a prisoner of war—and the Cathrodynes—who didn't really care what happened to one Lubarrian more or less, but who weren't going to let the Pags get away with any sharp practice. Officially, of course, the Lubarrians—like Vykor's own people, the Majkos—were under Cathrodyne "protection."

The vast spheroid bulk of Waystation loomed closer and closer in the port. Vykor dragged his eyes away from Mrs. Iquida and glanced at the other passengers.

"You're right, Ligmer," Lang said in low, polite tones. "I

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can well imagine such a remarkable creation growing even more impressive. You are—uh—directly interested in it?”

“It’s my speciality,” said Ligmer shortly. “Archeologically, it’s the most fascinating single thing within hundreds of parsecs.”

“Archeology!” The exclamation, in sarcastic tones, came unexpectedly from the tall Pag woman officer in the far corner of the saloon. “A very fine, respectable name for a double-dealing profession!”

Ligmer craned his neck around in astonishment; when he realized who had spoken, he shrugged and spread his hands, as though to say, “What can one expect from one of them?” But Ferenc drew himself up rather stiffly.

“May I remind you, madam,” he said, “this gentleman is of my people. And it is a slur upon Cathrodyne to speak so impolitely of one of our scientists.”

“Scientists!” The Pag officer’s voice was rich with scorn. “Paid propagandists, who spend their lives trying to erect a structure of lies to prove that Waystation was built by your Cathrodyne weaklings.”

Ferenc’s face went dark, as though a storm cloud had passed across it. His hand fell to the long ceremonial knife he had in his belt.

Vykor was wondering whether he had better dive for an alarm handle and haul on it to get a Cathrodyne ship’s officer into the saloon, when Lang fortunately saved the situation by asking, in such an unassuming voice that no one could take any offense, “Is it not even known who built Waystation, then?”

The tension began to recede a little; both Ferenc and the Pag officer were plainly thinking, “Well, if the poor boob doesn’t even know that—!”

“We’re much more in a position to say who didn’t build it than who did,” Ligmer hastened to explain. A few drops of perspiration showed on his forehead; though he was himself argumentative by nature, he had a cool head and had never let himself be insulted during the acrimonious discussions he had had enroute from Cathrodyne with the priest and with Ferenc.

“What is its history, then?” Lang pressed.

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Ligmer shrugged. "Well, it was here before any of the people of the Arm achieved space travel, that's for certain. And it's so enormous, and so complex, that no one believes it was merely a waystation, although we call it that. It must have been either a gigantic interstellar ship, capable of carrying the population of whole planets, or a kind of permanent trading base for another race which inhabited the worlds of the Arm before mankind evolved."

Lang nodded. "It's impossible to date, then?" he suggested.

"Virtually impossible. The entire vessel is self-renewing, drawing on the radiation from the local suns and converting energy directly into every material element that is required. It had certainly been here for more than a thousand years before the Glaites actually came out of their system and visited it, because it had been observed telescopically—both from Glai and from Majko—over that long a period of time."

The Pag officer got to her feet with a slight clanking sound that indicated she had loosened her sword in its scabbard and forgotten to thrust it tight home again. She was a magnificent figure of a woman—with red-brown skin under which muscles rippled like waves in oily water, her lean legs lifting her powerful body and neck so high that her shaven head almost brushed the ceiling.

"You're a stranger," she said to Lang in what passed for a kindly tone among Pags. "Better warn you—never pay heed to what a Cathrodyne tells you. Chances are better than even that it's a lie."

"Were we not approaching the neutral zone, madam," said Ferenc thickly between his teeth, "I'd take pleasure in pushing that remark up your other end."

The Pag grinned, showing that her front teeth had been filed to sharp points. "If you were capable of that, Cathrodyne, I'd submit to you with pleasure, but neither you nor any other of your weakling race could manage it. To continue, stranger," she pursued, bending her savage-looking smile on Lang again, "there certainly wasn't another race. There was the ancestral strain of PAGR, more than ten thousand years ago, and they could have built Waystation. The Majkos couldn't"—she glanced around and jerked her chin toward Vykor where he stood discreetly near the wall—"as you can

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see if you look at that specimen over there. They're fit to be servants and laborers, like the Lubarrians and the Alchmids and, come to that, the Glaithes. One thing I can appreciate about the Glaithes: They're honest enough to admit that they couldn't have built Waystation."

Vykor was aware of an itching desire in his right foot. He wanted to bring his boot up—very hard—against the Pag's shapely posterior as she leaned on the back of Lang's chair and expounded her race's official propaganda. As she was standing, her thigh-boots and tunic afforded her no protection in that area.

But Pags could insult him till doomsday, and it would be no skin off his nose. They had the Alchmids to lord it over. It was the Cathrodynes that Vykor and all Majkos hated; Pags were incidental.

"All right," the Pag went on. "Rule out all these; rule 'em out on self-evident facts. Who does that leave? The ancestral Pag strain!" She straightened triumphantly. "Clear?"

By some remarkable trick that Vykor could not follow, Lang managed to give Ferenc a deprecating smile—to show that he had not swallowed the Pag's nonsense—without letting the Pag see it. There was a pause. Then Lang asked Ligner again, "And archeologically, does that ring true?"

"Hah!" said the Pag. "Catch a Cathrodyne archeologist admitting to the truth even when his nose is rubbed in it!"

Ligner glanced at her. "One of these days, madam, I hope someone will succeed in explaining the scientific method to you. I abide by it. Therefore I will say that it is a possibility—"

Ferenc almost exploded, and Ligner gave him a pleading glance.

"A *possibility*," he emphasized. "It's true—so I'm told, because the authorities on Pagr won't allow Cathrodyne students to inspect the relics—"

"And quite right, too. They'd take it as an excuse for wholesale spying operations," the Pag officer declared.

"Pleasel!" cried Ligner. "I'm trying to explain this to our distinguished traveling companion."

Lang blinked and waved a hand. "Distinguished?" he murmured. "Really?"

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"Oh yes!" said Ferenc. "You're from out of eye-range, aren't you? The chief mate said you were."

"Eye-range?"

"Yes; you're out of sight of your home sun, isn't that so?"

Lang laughed. "Well, as a matter of fact I am, and have been for some time. But I don't see that that's any special mark of distinction. Is it?"

"It only makes you unique among this ship's passengers; in eighteen hundred trips they've never had anyone on board who was out of eye-range."

"You don't say," murmured Lang, and stroked the back of the little black-furred animal that dozed in his lap. "Well, well—but you were kindly explaining about . . .?"

"Oh, yes." Ligmer gathered his thoughts with a frown. "I was saying that there are relics on Pagr which indicate a space-flying culture there some ten thousand years ago, but it isn't clear why such a culture—if it was capable of building Waystation, as the Pags claim—should have decayed again to a pre-spaceflight level. It must have done so, for by the time Pag ships came out again to Waystation, the Glaithes had been in occupation for twenty-odd years, and had succeeded in reactivating practically all of it."

"What happened to bring us down from our former glory is well attested by our legends and traditions," said the Pag. "Decadent *men* were our leaders then, and their grip was too weak to hold what they grasped. It was not until women established a firm rule that it proved possible to contain the vaulting Pag spirit."

"And the Cathrodynes?" Lang asked gently. "Do they not have legends?"

"Everyone along the Arm has legends about star-traveling gods," shrugged Ligmer. "This is why reputable archeologists disregard all claims to a final solution of the enigma."

"Noble dames and sirs!" said Vykor, clearing his throat loudly. "Please return to your cabins during the period when we match velocities with Waystation. Disembarkation may commence as soon after matching as you desire."

Mrs. Iquida leapt to her feet and hurried back to her cabin. The priest, Dardaino, who had been sitting aside from the discussion with a disdainful expression (the origin of



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Waystation, of course, was explained beyond question in the mythology of his cult), followed her, more slowly because of his greater bulk.

The Pag had remained frozen for a long time after what Ligmer had implied about her race's archeologists. Now she began to raise a bony fist, glaring down into Ligmer's face, her own lips drawn back snarlingly.

Ferenc got to his feet and darted to her side. Tall as he was, he was overtopped by inches when he stood there. "Be careful," he said warningly. "You will have me to answer to."

White-faced, Ligmer was shaping his mouth to speak, when Lang's velvet voice once more stroked their ears.

"Please!" he said. "Accept my apologies, and excuse me—I am after all an ignorant stranger, unaware of your local susceptibilities. It was unforgivable of me, of course, but if I might nonetheless beg your pardons . . .?"

Puzzled, the Pag and Ferenc both turned their stares on him. He smiled, and rose to his feet with a little bow, cradling his black-furred pet in the crook of one arm. Automatically, the others moved forward toward the door with him, and he bowed and gestured for them to precede him. They did so quietly.

Lang hesitated a moment when they had gone into the corridor, his eyes hinting at mystification. Before he himself followed them, he turned and beckoned to Vykor.

"Steward! Are they permitted to settle this argument by force when they get aboard Waystation?"

"No, distinguished sir," said Vykor. "The peace of Waystation has to be preserved by every possible means. Oh, I'm not saying that they might not reserve a wrestling-room for a couple of hours. But they wouldn't be allowed to duel with weapons. If the Glaithes permitted that, the life-expectancy of either Pags or Cathrodynes aboard Waystation would be only a day or two. They hate each other's guts; they insult each other as readily as breathe, and if they were kept in constant friction and allowed to slaughter each other, the result would be chaos."

"So the Glaithes keep order between them, do they? I'd have thought it was a tough job."

"Yes, distinguished sir. It is." Vykor had a powerful re-

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spect for Glaithes; so did all the three subject races out along the Arm. "Frankly," he added after a pause, "I'd give them, if anyone, credit for building Waystation. Since they manage to keep it a neutral world, I wouldn't put the rest of the job past them either."

### III

KEEPING WAYSTATION neutral in this tense situation was a triumph of delicate balance—like trying to land a ship on manual on an airless world. There had to be rules, inflexible rules; likewise, there had to be means of making the rules bend a little when necessary.

Captain Raige had served with the Waystation staff longer than all but a half-dozen other members of the personnel; she had become a past master at the essential techniques, including the use of unofficial channels of information. As always, she supervised the disembarkation of the passengers from the newly arrived ship; she scrutinized these, however, more carefully than usual. She couldn't have said why. It was simply because the atmosphere seemed tense, as though a storm were brewing.

Waystation was neutral in every sense—medically as well as politically, for example. Disembarkation, therefore, was not complicated by quarantine inspections, and the customs examinations were perfunctory. It was the fault of the Pags or the Cathrodynes—so the Glaithes reasoned—if illegal merchandise got off or on to one of their worlds; what happened at Waystation was none of their business.

Within a very short while of the ship's docking, therefore, the passengers would be free to mingle with the rest of Waystation's million-odd population—half of it the Glaithe staff, the rest transient. It was Captain Raige's job to know about all of them.

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Down the null-grav funnel from the ship they came one by one, to emerge blinking into the bright light of the main receptor hall, to stare at the ranked doors of the elevator system, the long chains of chairs on the horizontal conveyers, the steel and plastic and mineraloid interior of the most fantastic artificial construction they had ever seen.

They had questions: accommodation, transshipment dates, refreshments, local time, necessities and luxuries. The staff of receptionists—little sloe-eyed Glaithe girls in plain rust colored overalls—equipped them with maps, currency scrip, directions, tickets. Standing aside inconspicuously, Captain Raige watched them with her face composed and her hands folded out of sight in the loose full sleeves of her gown. Only her eyes moved noticeably, but her fingers were also busy, stroking memoranda into the touch-react keys of a tiny recorder covered by her sleeves.

The Lubarrian woman was the first to pass through reception. Raige had received special instructions about her. She was a factor in a complex profit-and-loss account, kept by the Glaithe at Waystation. Currently the Pags were smarting about some trouble that the Glaithe had put them to—a smack on the hand, so to speak, for attempting to interfere in the administration of Waystation. Accordingly, with scrupulous neutrality, the Glaithe had decided to put the Cathrodynes to similar inconvenience, making them bring this Mrs. Iquida out to Waystation first class on a Cathrodyne ship—almost unheard of, for a member of a subject race!

There would have to be another flea-bite to irritate the Pags again shortly. Raige sighed. One day she would be able to retire, and bring up the children that were waiting for her in the ovum blank on Glai—deposited there when she was first drafted for service in space. But it would be a good few years before that happened.

Meantime, there was a lot in common between bringing up children and keeping the peace between the two irascible “master races” of the Arm.

There was a priest—a Cathrodyne of the Lubarrian church. The name would be Dardaino; Raige didn't have to see his papers to know that. He was the replacement for the Waystation chaplain, who had died the other month. Someone

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would have to go and have a quiet discussion with him before he began throwing his weight around, if he proved to be more Cathrodyne than priest.

Two officers: a Pag returning from a tour with her embassy on Cathrodyne, and a Cathrodyne, formerly on the staff here but whose declared purpose now was to take a furlough, and who was almost certainly a spy. They ostentatiously avoided each other, going to reception desks at opposite ends of the hall.

A Cathrodyne archeologist, who had been here before as a young student. And a stranger, about whom nothing more than his name was known—Lang. With a small pet animal of some species which Raige had never even seen in pictures.

She kept her face stone-still, but she wished intensely that she could let her feelings show. There was nothing obvious to justify her apprehension; indeed, this was a routine kind of cargo, except for this stranger Lang. Yet . . .

Well, maybe Vykor would be able to clarify matters. She shut off her recorder with a determined gesture, and watched the last of the first-class passengers disappear toward their transit accommodation. The stewards would not be free for an hour or more yet, and there were steerage-class passengers also to be discharged here for temporary revivification and feeding up to normal. That too was her job. She moved noiselessly across the hall on sandaled feet toward the revival rooms.

For some reason, Vykor found himself in a frenzy of impatience as he went through the routine of clearing up after docking. Usually he managed to concentrate on what he had to do; this time, it irked him insupportably to have to clear the cabins out, see to the discharge of baggage, report to the purser and have him inspect the cabins, collect his currency scrip. . . .

And at last he was in his own cabin, stripping off his uniform and hurrying into the undress wear of a Majko liner employee. On Waystation, in theory, he was free from the overlordship of the Cathrodynes; in practice, though, any of the easily recognizable curly-black-haired Majkos who tried to assert their privilege found themselves marked down and

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repaid for their arrogance when they were back in Cathrodyne jurisdiction.

So he put on the drab shirt and breeches resignedly, finding—as always—that after his fine purple uniform it was depressing to look at himself in the glass.

Then he made haste off the ship, winking at a pretty Glaithe receptionist as she put away her dossiers, waving at a Lubarran engineer off a sister ship to his own liner, respectfully saluting an officer of the Glaithe staff, and reluctantly making a token bow to a Cathrodyne grand-dame in a cripple-walker—a mechanically-propelled pair of artificial legs designed to restore the tone of muscles long unused. There were many such old women—and men also—who came to Waystation in the vain hope of finding the secret of eternal youth among the vast stores of knowledge in the master memory banks. Charlatans made a good living off such people—but only the Glaithes knew Waystation's secrets.

Some few, they parted with. At a price.

Vykor had to saunter across the reception hall, judging the moment of his arrival at the elevators. He had to take a particular car, and he had to be alone when he took it. A sudden influx of laughing children—Glaithes, on an educational trip—compelled him to dawdle at a sweetmeat automat, pretending to choose between the charms of crystallized mutches and weerwil steeped in honey.

When he got his chance, he slipped by himself into the car and glanced down the row of level-buttons he could press. These elevators were as complex as a subway system in a city planetside, but of uniform pattern because they followed geodesics of the artificial gravity field. Only sometimes they didn't—not exactly. This was one of the secrets that the Glaithes had entrusted to a few people, of whom Vykor was one.

It was simple, really. A matter of pressing two of the buttons simultaneously.

Vykor had never been able to make up his mind where the elevator actually took him when he did this. At first, he had assumed that it let him out between two levels, in a concealed space. Then he had gone to the level above and

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descended by the ordinary staircase to the one below, and then climbed up again. That had convinced him that there was no room for an extra concealed level between them. The elevator went somewhere else, then.

Some time he would stay at this level after seeing Captain Raige, and make his way out on foot, thus establishing once for all where he was. But not yet. He had too much to gain from the privilege he enjoyed to risk losing it.

The elevator stopped, and the doors slid back to reveal the same rather narrow, dark passage he had seen before, on other trips. It ran twenty paces in either direction, bathed in a dull orange-red glow from neon strip lighting, and then was blocked off by a T-junction. He had never been in either direction along either of the further passages; he was permitted to cross the passage in which he found himself after leaving the elevator car, press the admission button on the door opposite, and report to Raige. That was all.

Lately, he had been more and more tempted to hesitate and turn right or left and at least glance down the passages he had never yet seen. Now he told himself yet once more—with even greater reluctance—*Next time!*

And his thumb was on the admission button of the office; the door was purring back in its sliding grooves.

He was always a little bit afraid of Raige. She was a small woman, as all her people were small, and came no higher than Vykor's elbow. Her face was smooth-skinned and youthful, with large oval dark eyes under neatly braided black hair. But in some way—perhaps it was the absolute calm of her expression—she managed to appear master of all imaginable situations.

She sat in a low, round chair, reading back a pattern of flickering symbols projected by her personal recorder on to the smooth cream-painted bulkhead to the right of the door. Vykor glanced at the symbols and then away again; he knew better than to waste his time trying to read them. That was a code the Glaites had adapted from the memory bank records of Waystation, and no one else had ever gained access to the key.

"Welcome, Vykor," said Raige, not taking her sloe-dark eyes from the shifting, flickering pattern on the wall. "I will

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only detain you a few moments—there!” She shut off the recorder’s tiny, brilliant projector light, and slipped the whole machine away in the shrouding recess of her sleeve. A half-smile seemed to light up her whole face.

“Please be seated. It is good to see you again.”

“And I am delighted to see you, Captain Raige.” Vykor put enthusiasm into his voice—rather, could not keep it out. To him, Raige was an altogether amazing and wonderful person; he would say the same of almost any Glaithe, and had in fact said so to Lang before disembarking, but in his mind Raige was very special indeed.

A flicker of something crossed Raige’s smooth, unwrinkled face. “You have the dispatches?” she said after a short pause, and Vykor nodded. A tiny roll of microfilm was hard in his left shoe; he raised his foot and took the roll out and passed it to Raige.

“Thank you. I will see you again before you leave; there may well be an answer.”

“I . . . I have a further message which the group asked me to deliver personally,” Vykor ventured, and Raige nodded, waiting. “It is to say—to say how much the oppressed multitudes of Majkosi value the aid they receive from Glaithe sources, how heartening it is to know that the people of Glai sympathize, and how much we admire the achievement of your people in remaining independent of either Pag or Cathrodyne rule.”

His hands were clenched a little, and his fingers ached in tension. He had not been asked to deliver any message verbally; the clandestine group whom he served as courier never transmitted anything except in code—and if the Cathrodynes learned that the Glaithe were helping subject races surreptitiously under cover of their famous neutrality, perhaps not even the greedy desire they felt for Waystation would hold them back from war.

But, he told himself rebelliously, that was what the group felt. Or ought to feel.

Anyway, it was certainly what he felt himself.

And this was the only way he could convey it to Raige. He had to say it, somehow, because he wanted to so badly, and he couldn’t step out of his role as an impersonal courier. He

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waited for her answer in agonized suspense, and sighed with relief when she inclined her head gracefully, smiling.

"Thank you, Vyor," she said. "It is nice to hear that."

Then she briskened. "And now, if you please—about your passengers?"

### IV

THE TALL Pag officer had shouted one final, ringing insult across the reception hall after disembarkation procedure, and had turned with a swirl of her short dress cloak to climb on a conveyer chair. For her part, the quicker she got back among her own kind, the better.

Ferenc, absently waving aside offers from the Glaithe reception clerks of maps, currency scrip and other necessities, watched her go, eyes narrowed. He was picturing the Pag officer's man. He would be a yard taller than Ferenc, muscled like two ordinary men, smooth of scalp and cheek, with long white teeth that he bared meaninglessly or sometimes in a smile every few moments. He would wear, if anything, a wove-metal smock that even he could not rip to pieces. It would probably be fouled around the lower edges. He would speak little; they seldom bothered to teach male children to talk properly on Pagr.

Depicting this to himself, Ferenc felt the rankling sore in his mind diminish. The Pag officer was probably quite right to say that neither he nor any other Cathrodyne male could force her to submit. But who would want to make her submit, when her idea of love-making was to strip and climb into a cage with the male of the species, and be throttled half to death beforehand?

And yet he would dearly have liked to shove her remark—well—down her throat. . . .

He swung on his heel and reached out a long arm—long



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by Cathrodyne standards; Pag standards were another thing entirely. His hand fell on the shoulder of Ligmner, the archeologist, who was immersed in the Claithe-prepared maps he had been handed.

"Listen, young man!" he said harshly. "I didn't like the attitude you were taking, back there aboard ship. You'd do well to keep your scientific detachment in a separate compartment when there are Pags around to hear you. I don't know how much it's already spread around, but if there's a lot of this half-heartedness among your kind, it'll do our prestige a lot of harm."

Ligmner blinked at him, a little owlshly, and stopped and withdrew half a pace so that his shoulder was free of Ferenc's grasp. He said with dignity, "Officer Ferenc, national pride has to be based on truth, on hard fact. Would you have us descend to the level of the Pags, and bluster inflated nonsense about the 'vaulting Cathrodyne spirit'? Surely not!"

Ferenc hesitated, suddenly at a loss. Seizing his advantage, Ligmner hurried on, "No, of course not! Let them make their empty claims—it impresses no one except themselves. You may be sure that we, and I, will do nothing so foolish."

"All right!" growled Ferenc. "But bear in mind what I said, remember."

"Of course. They're not all as bad as that one we shipped with, fortunately; some of them are quite levelheaded. I'm going to be working with a woman from an archeological institute on Pagr who's something of a subversive movement so far as this kind of subject is concerned, and refuses to have any part of their nationalist boasting."

"It sounds unlikely," said Ferenc curtly. "Don't let them fool you into thinking they're reasonable beings—they aren't capable of it."

Ligmner flushed and turned away, and Ferenc, after one last hard glare at the other's back, finally allowed a receptionist to allot him the papers for his stay.

He saw out of the corner of his eye that the stranger, Lang, had approached Ligmner a few moments later, and was driven by curiosity to pass within earshot of their talk when he was walking toward the elevator cars. Lang was speaking.

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"... compliment you on your attitude," he said. Ligmer smiled in self-deprecation.

"Oh, I mean it," Lang was insisting. "I've traveled a good deal, as you know, and I always appreciate it when I find someone who doesn't let prejudice rule his thinking."

Ferenc frowned, and passed on toward his elevator. He made a mental note to investigate Lang while he was here; he didn't think Ligmer's stability was adequate for him to be sent out here to come under Pag influence, and Lang's remark—coming as it did from someone out of eye-range and therefore automatically regarded as a man of distinction—was apt to make the situation still worse.

And there was another matter he ought to drop some hints about, too. That priest, Dardaino: where was the man? He glanced along the row of elevators and saw the plump figure waiting at another door for the car to arrive. He walked across and spoke authoritatively.

"Dardaino!"

The priest blinked a little and fingered a ceremonial symbol on his robe. Ferenc ignored the gesture; Dardaino's creed had lost its hold on its home planet some time back.

"Yes, my son?"

"Officer Ferenc, if you please. Dardaino, I oughtn't to have to say this to you, but I'd better if no one else did already. Don't you know that this Iquida woman—the Lubarrian who came with us—represents a deliberate snub to the Cathrodynes? Haven't you heard about the reason for her being sent here?"

A little nervously, the priest nodded. "Yes, it struck me as odd to find her traveling with us, so I made inquiries."

"Yet you engaged her in conversation, and—one might almost say—attempted to make up to her. I suppose one can't expect any better taste on your part, since you live and work among Lubarrians all the time. But one might have expected more restraint from one whose first allegiance is to Cathrodynes."

Dardaino gulped. "I . . . I was restrained in my behavior, I thought. She is of my own faith, after all, and it is my duty to foster the faith where I can. But I did not attempt to exercise my rights over her, in view of the circumstances. I

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had to express my disapproval in some way, and that was the—the most obvious.”

“Rights over her?”

“Why, yes—I did not bid her to my cabin, or visit hers.”

“But isn’t she coming out here to her husband . . .?” Bells rang in Ferenc’s memory, and he checked himself. Of course. This faith of Dardaino’s incorporated some strange practices, the abuse of which had been a major factor in destroying its hold on Cathrodyne itself. Marriage, for example, was forbidden between the parents of children; all families were out-crossed, and it was considered anti-social to have more than one child by the same partner. It was, however, requisite to have a permanent partner as regards financial support and the maintenance of a home. A peculiar reversal of the system common to the other worlds of the Arm—and, so it appeared, of worlds further in-galaxy.

“Oh yes,” said Ferenc. “Oh yes. I’d forgotten. Well, I wouldn’t have expected more self-restraint from one of your persuasion, anyway. All right.”

He turned away, catching sight of Mrs. Iquida as he did so. Under the smiling supervision of a pretty Glaithe girl, she was climbing aboard a conveyer-chair, her eyes bright with excitement.

Behind Ferenc, the priest was sighing loudly with relief. Ferenc spat, deliberately and conspicuously, to symbolize his cumulative disgust: with the Glaithees at the way they had made the Cathrodynes eat dust in the Iquida case, with Dardaino and his sensual, self-indulging religion, with Ligmer for his lack of proper patriotism, and lastly with himself for failing to make the Pag officer respect him.

Well, he had business to attend to—in the intervals of pretending that he was on furlough. He found that the elevator car he wanted was waiting, and stepped into it. His last look back across the reception hall showed him that Lang, still in conversation with Ligmer, and stroking his pet animal, had his eyes on him.

“Your—uh—compatriot didn’t seem to approve of your remarks,” Lang suggested. Ligmer shook his head.

“Ferenc is an example of something we Cathrodynes would

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do better to rid ourselves of," he said. "I'm afraid his type is all too common—although," he added with virtuous planetary loyalty, "we're far better off than they are on Pagr. I suppose people like Ferenc had their place when Cathrodyne was expanding; it was his kind who got us our empire on Majkosi and Lubarria. But their automatic contempt for everything that isn't Cathrodyne is out of date, I think."

He gestured with a hand full of papers, to indicate the severe but impressive hall in which they stood. "It became out of date when Waystation was discovered, you might say. When it became perfectly obvious that things Cathrodyne were *not* superior to anything else, because Waystation is so incredibly far in advance of everything else we know."

"It is very remarkable," Lang agreed, glancing around.

"On Pagr, of course, they reacted quite characteristically. They said—as you heard from that officer we shipped with—that since everything Pag, in their view, is superior to all the rest, Waystation was built by Pags. Perfect logic! It's their official propaganda, but luckily some few of them are intelligent enough to be able to shake themselves free of such rubbish."

"You've been here before, I take it?" Lang asked. "You know Waystation well?"

"Nobody knows Waystation well except the Glaithes themselves," Ligmer said with a rueful expression. "Oh, they're very reasonable and co-operative in most respects; their only stipulation is that archeologists like myself and other investigators must not pry too closely into technical matters. Mark you, that's a handicap in itself, because so much of Waystation's hidden history must be bound up with technical questions—like the master memory banks, for instance. There's knowledge in the banks that the Glaithes can't use themselves and which they daren't, simply daren't, let loose indiscriminately. I suppose one can't blame them; they know that given a free hand both we Cathrodynes and the Pags would try to seize Waystation for themselves."

"Yes, I already gathered that." Lang frowned, and lifted his little pet on to his shoulder.

"What is that thing of yours?" Ligmer inquired. "I never saw one before."

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"Oh, it's a creature that's popular as a pet on some planets further in-galaxy, beyond the Arm." Lang rubbed his head against the pet's with a grin. "I call him Sunny. He's company for me."

Ligmer was aching to ask the all-important question—where Lang actually hailed from—but somehow he hadn't quite summoned the necessary words before Lang was speaking again.

"How do they organize Waystation—the Glaithes, I mean?"

"Well, there are about half a million Glaithes here, on the staff. It's practically a planetary industry with them, running it. They supervise luxury-goods trading between the rival empires, who otherwise would never get a chance to trade peaceably; they act as mediators in cases like that of Iquida, whose wife came out here with us; they help keep diplomatic relations below boiling point; they provide—and this isn't the least of their services—they provide a holiday resort for people who want a trip into space. And they run a very fine hospital with techniques they found out either for themselves or from records here."

"They occupy the whole station?" Lang blinked.

"Not exactly. They lease sections—under supervision—to us and the Pags, to do more or less what we like with. It annoys some people that they also insist on leasing sections to the subject races, who are in their view only subject by right of conquest, and won't forever remain inferior peoples. But naturally, because their home planets and all the shipping lines are under other jurisdiction the Majkos, Lubarrians, and Alchmids don't get much chance to enjoy their theoretical advantage. I suppose the Glaithes do it because only their occupation of Waystation has kept them from falling into the hands of one or other of the empires of the Arm."

Lang was staring across toward the elevators; Ferenc was just descending. A smile played around Lang's mouth.

"You know," he said, "I rather like what I hear of these Glaithes. Well, thank you for your time. I hope we shall meet again during our stay."

"Of course. And anything you want to know about Waystation—get in touch with me," Ligmer invited. "I can't guarantee to answer your questions, but I'll try."

## V

RAIGE WAS after something. At first, Vykor was merely glad that this time he was spending more time with her than usual, and did not have the detachment necessary to question why. But the calm discussion, the series of precise, probing inquiries, continued, while Raige's gentle fingers stroked code combinations into her recorder.

He warned her about the risk of explosion if Ferenc came back into contact with the Pag officer during their stay at Waystation; he gave his impression—not a very deep one—of Dardaino, reported that the bringing of Mrs. Iquida to Waystation had satisfactorily irritated the Cathrodyne authorities. But he gradually came to realize that all this was unimportant.

That much was routine, after all. Pag and Cathrodyne were liable to explode anyway, like a hammer and fulminate of mercury, or phosphorus and sandpaper. But Raige knew all that, and allowed for it. It was her life's work.

And if a new factor had entered, then it was due to something unprecedented. Eliminate everything else; that left a stranger. Lang.

But he could tell her practically nothing about Lang, except that he was so self-possessed that his imperturbability was in some peculiar way infectious. And he didn't tell Raige that directly; he hadn't even realized that he had noticed the fact until she elicited it from him by persistent questioning. Then he recounted how Lang had drained some of the tension from the air of the observation saloon, when Ferenc and the Pag officer were insulting each other, and he saw what he had missed previously.

He liked to watch Raige as they talked; he liked to see the ghost-reactions which his long acquaintance had taught him to recognize: satisfaction, puzzlement, annoyance—all

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showing as mere reflections in the misty mirror of her face. The subtlety of Glaithe manners appealed to him; his own people, the Majkos, might learn a lot from the Glaithes. After all, they had to conceal their own thoughts from their overlords the Cathrodynes. And for a reason more urgent than politeness—for survival's sake.

He had even tried to match her glacial calm. But he had failed, and given up the attempt. A lifetime of habit was necessary to achieve it.

More: it called for intense, never-ending concentration. But it gave results, that was certain. When he first met Raige, he had been half surprised at what he saw; he had taken her for a mere girl of twenty, so smooth and unlined was her face, so graceful and unforced were her movements. Gradually he had understood that her experiences and ability could never have been gained so young, and that indeed her age must be at least twice what he had guessed at first. And her apparent youth was due to the preternatural calm she and the others of her people maintained from childhood up. Glaithe levelheadedness formed the fulcrum of the balance which they kept between Pag and Cathrodyne.

Lang, Lang, Lang—the pattern of her questions dissolved and re-crystallized a hundred times, but always Lang was near the center of what she was hunting for. A resolution hardened in Vykor's mind: Since Raige wanted to know more about Lang, he would provide the information if he could.

At last Raige closed down the recorder and set it on the padded arm of her chair, giving a wide smile. "Thank you, Vykor," she said. "You have as usual been most helpful."

"But not nearly helpful enough," Vykor objected. "I have given you very little that you did not know already."

The ghost-reaction which he had learned to read indicated that she was surprised, inclined to deny what he had said, but unable to because it was true.

She shrugged, finally. "Yet more could not have been asked; not even I know what it is we really wish to discover. Thank you in any case. And I will see you again before your ship blasts off, with the replies to your group's dispatches."

She rose to her feet and bent her body in a neat formal bow; Vykor tried to match it, aware that his version was

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clumsy and awkward compared to hers, and found himself almost without warning outside in the passage again. The elevator door opposite was dark, indicating that the car was at some other level—not surprisingly, since the visits it paid to these hidden premises must be very few.

He reached out to touch the call button, and then drew back as a sudden surge of excitement raced through him. How long would it take to cover the twenty paces to the T-junctions at the end of the short, straight corridor he stood in? Three seconds? And then at least he would be able to look beyond the limits . . .

He didn't wait long enough to develop qualms, this time; he decided and acted and was noiselessly striding toward the left-hand intersection. At the corner, he stopped and craned his head round the sharp right-angle of the bulkhead.

His disappointment was acute. There was merely another corridor like the one he knew—rather narrow, rather dim, lit only by the orange neon strips, with plain doors in its walls. It was the same in both directions.

And once again, a T-junction blocked off his view twenty paces away.

Reluctantly, he began to turn away, back to the elevator. And as he started to move, soft footfalls fell on his ears—light, brushing footsteps, made by a woman or a lightly built man in soft-soled shoes. He flattened himself against the wall and once more craned his head around the corner.

And Lang walked across the intersection at which he was staring.

It *must* be Lang. A hundred other people in Waystation might have his build, his gait, his type of clothing. But who else in Waystation would carry on his shoulder a black-furred pet animal?

Vykor stayed frozen with astonishment for a long moment after Lang had disappeared, arguing with himself. If Lang was a stranger to Waystation, how had he so rapidly entered this area, which the Glaites kept secret from all but a few outsiders? By mistake? By accident? Or from prior knowledge? The odds against accidental entry seemed incredibly high.

And should he now go back and tell Raige that Lang was



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in her territory? If he did, he would have to admit that he had infringed the trust she placed in him by spying beyond the end of the corridor he was permitted to visit.

His debate with himself lasted only a few tenths of a second, and ended in a way which surprised him. He started out along this other corridor toward the intersection across which Lang had passed, and when he came to the corner, he went the way Lang had gone.

But there was no sign of Lang now. Nor of anyone else. Only a thin humming in the air, at the edge of hearing, and the reddish light and the walls with plain doors set in them at irregular intervals.

Feeling oddly let-down, Vykor stopped. He had been screwing up his courage for a lengthy pursuit through forbidden territory; now he had no one to follow and might as well turn back right away. He stood to gain nothing much by continuing when the corridors were alike, and he risked being unable to find the elevator which would take him back to the public sectors.

Lang must have gone into one of these rooms, though. The recognition startled him. Of course he must! This passage was cut off at the end by a blank bulkhead, not by yet another cross-running corridor.

Vykor crept forward cautiously. There were five doors—two on the left, three on the right—between him and the end wall. He listened at the first one. Nothing. On the other side, nothing. But behind the third door, there was a queer rising and falling sound, clear in timbre, like a reed pipe, with a musical quality about it. It wasn't music, though; it was too metronomically regular for that. Besides, at one time or another aboard ship or here at Waystation Vykor had learned to recognize the musical conventions of all the peoples of the Arm.

It couldn't perhaps be the music native to wherever Lang hailed from? The thought struck him in passing but was instantly dismissed. Would Lang have ventured into this area, occupied a cabin for himself, and calmly have begun to amuse himself with music, within a few hours of his arrival?

He went on to the next cabin. Silence again. And then at the fourth, the source of the humming he had sensed rather

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than heard for some distance. There was machinery in there, probably something very heavy and very accurately machined revolving at a high enough speed to engender disturbances in the air.

The last door again seemed to have no sound behind it. He had lifted his head and stepped back when it was suddenly slid aside, and a Glaithe officer in uniform was looking at him in amazement. Vykor's heart sank.

"What are you up to?" the officer interrogated, not seeming to be very angry. "What's a Majko doing walking round here, anyway? Your sector is clear over the other side of Waystation, young man!"

A bright light dawned in Vykor's mind. Was the mystery no more than a misunderstanding? Was this secret, isolated area no more than the Glaithe's private section of Waystation, access to which was shrouded in obscurity only because the Glaithes didn't want strangers intruding on their living quarters? It seemed possible, and if it was in fact that simple, he had not committed as serious an offense as he had feared. His spirits rose again.

He said humbly, "Noble sir, I have been delivering special dispatches to your distinguished Captain Raige. While I was waiting for my elevator, I saw a stranger pass who came on my ship. He claimed never to have been to Waystation before, but how could he have got into this area without knowing the secret?"

The officer pondered. He was a little taller than Raige, but still as much smaller than Vykor as Vykor was smaller than the Pag officers. There was something almost doll-like about this man.

"And since Raige seems interested in this stranger," Vykor went on after a pause, reinforcing his story, "I thought I would follow him. But he has disappeared—into one of the cabins along this corridor. There is nowhere else he could have gone. If he is here by authority and invitation, I unreservedly apologize, but I had thought to do a service—"

"In one of these cabins? One of these five?" The officer gestured. "Then we can settle the matter quickly enough."

He stepped rapidly to the cabin next to that from which

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he had himself come out. He shot the door back. "No one," he said. At the next one, "No one."

Vykor watched in growing dismay as the officer convinced himself that all five of the cabins were empty, and none of them had alternative exits. He came back with a shake of his head and a smile.

"I don't see how your story could be true, young man," he said. "Therefore we had better go together to see Captain Raige."

He gestured to Vykor to precede him, and Vykor did so, depressed. To have forfeited his right to special trust and to have gained nothing! It was galling and humiliating; it was worse still when he had to stand, hanging his head, before Captain Raige's inscrutable smile and confirm what his companion reported.

"Yes, Indle," she said at length. "Vykor was indeed down here at my request, and I am very much interested in this stranger, Lang." She switched her gaze to Vykor. "What exactly did Lang do, then?"

Vykor told her.

"It was the end of this corridor here, outside this cabin, that he walked across and where you saw him?"

Vykor bit his lip and shook his head. "I—I had a fit of curiosity," he confessed, feeling the blood mount to his cheeks.

"Well, let me dispel that if it hasn't been satisfied," Raige said placidly. "This is our home, Vykor—the Glaithe staff's private section of Waystation. We like to keep it to ourselves, so we don't advertise its existence, and in fact on the maps we publish we camouflage its whereabouts by distorting the scale here and there. I should have thought to tell you in the beginning."

"And you invited Lang down here, I suppose?" Vykor said in a gloomy voice.

"No," said Raige, shaking her head, and a look of wonder spread across her face. "No, no one would have done that. If Lang really was here—"

"He was!" insisted Vykor.

"Then he is no stranger here, and has lied to us. Indle, we must know why!"

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## VI

OFFICIALLY, Ferenc was on furlough. He was unmarried and had no dependents; his rank was high enough to convince onlookers that he had money to pour out on a trip to Waystation. He had been there before, moreover, as part of the permanent staff the Cathrodynes kept in their allotted sector of the station to handle trade disputes, prisoner repatriation and similar matters that were traditionally conducted on the neutral ground of Waystation.

It was therefore logical that he should go direct to the Cathrodyne section on his arrival, instead of setting out at once on the tourist circuit.

He had no baggage, of course; that would have been delivered by now through automatic chutes direct from the ship. He had the check number of the cabin to which it had gone. Anywhere on Waystation was within an hour's travel of anywhere else, and aside from mere physical propinquity it was a matter of indifference to visitors where they were accommodated.

He hardly bothered to think about the route he was taking; he had become familiar, during his tour here, with the layout of the entire station. And his mind was far too full of other matters.

Finally, having dropped ten levels and taken a conveyer chair across another two, he was in the Cathrodyne section. Almost at once, when he stepped from the elevator, he could sense the difference between his surroundings here and the calm, Glaithe-directed reception areas. Here the very atmosphere seemed to be wound up, tightly charged, tensed and poised for action.

A new snap in his walk, he strode down passages and into anterooms, presenting credentials. Three minutes saw him in the presence of the man he had asked for: General Marshal

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Temmis, the chief of staff, a bald man whose build was beginning to decay, but who still kept his shiny-domed head at an alert angle on his pile of double chins.

"Sit down, Ferenc—glad to see you here again," Temmis said, frowning. "You came in on the same ship as the Iquida woman, didn't you?"

"That's correct. I half expected to find you were over at the prison quarters, sir."

"And let the Glaites feel they had touched us where it hurt?" Temmis gave a short, harsh laugh. "I let a junior subaltern deal with that one—demoted a colonel for the job and gave him a youthpack mask to make him look about twenty."

Ferenc gave an appreciative and respectful grin. That was the sort of ingenuity he approved.

"Of course, I'm not denying it was a painful business, the whole thing," Temmis pursued. "But it was meant as a flea-bite—the Glaites planned it that way—and it's undignified to be seen scratching oneself in public. There are far bigger things on hand."

"So I assumed, sir, when I received my assignment. And if you'll forgive the remark, I've already noticed more dangerous matters than the Iquida affair."

"How so?" Temmis leaned back in his big chair.

Ferenc mentioned Dardaino first, and Temmis shook his head. "Disregard him; he was hand-picked. He's as ineffective as they come. There are a couple of thousand Lubarrians here who've more or less escaped from our jurisdiction, thanks to Glaithe protection, who daren't go home because they know very well what's waiting for them if they do. Dardaino's job is to let us know what's going on among them, and he'll take care of it excellently. He doesn't give a hoot about anything except his personal comforts, and he depends on our say-so for all of those."

"The logic behind the choice, sir, is obscure," Ferenc answered stiffly. "But I yield, of course, to your judgment. More dangerous than Dardaino, certainly, is the archeologist, Ligmer, whose head appears to be full of subversive notions and who told me he will be working in direct contact with a Pag during his stay here."

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"Yes, on this point I'm inclined to agree." Temmis put his fingertips together and glared at them. "It's part of a concerted plan, though, and it's not for me to object to the High Council's choice of operatives."

"As you are certainly aware, the detailed study of Waystation is a prime objective of all our work here. Much of the station is unknown except to the Glaithes. We've succeeded in undertaking a program of measurement and study in order to determine the accuracy of the maps issued by the Glaithes. And there's where you come in."

"I don't have to tell you that this is confidential, by the way."

"What it amounts to is this: The maps are ingeniously and subtly distorted. There are whole volumes unaccounted for. They may be service areas, pure and simple: gravity ducts, ventilation pipes, heating, lighting, power and so on. They may not. We have to tread warily here."

"It's fairly certain that the Pags also suspect this. Fortunately for us, they have published claims to know more about Waystation than the Glaithes do—this is all part of their propaganda, of course. We hope that this handicap will give us a sufficient lead to allow us to prepare adequate plans of the station—and these will be indispensable in the take-over."

It was years since Ferenc had heard that phrase: "the take-over"! It had been common currency when he was a cadet—the great day when a Cathrodyne staff instead of the ineffectual Glaithes would rule Waystation. But adolescent enthusiasm had given way to adult cynicism; he had scarcely even thought of the possibility that take-over day might occur within his own lifetime. To hear the phrase now on the lips of the chief of staff was a shock.

Greatly daring, he ventured, "Take-over is now definitely envisaged, then?"

"It's never been lost sight of," snapped Temmis. "Merely postponed owing to administrative difficulties."

"That's wonderful, sir. I never disbelieved it, naturally—"

"Well, stop sounding as though it was news, then," said Temmis with heavy irony, and Ferenc bit his lip, aware of having made a serious error.

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"All right," went on Temmis after a pause. He picked up a document from the table before him and ran his eye down it with a critical expression. "I'll look into what you say about Ligmer, but I doubt if there's anything we can do, and you can be sure he'll be pulled out in short order if he does show signs of falling under Pag influence. These other people who came in with you, now: How about the Pag officer?"

"A typical bitch," said Ferenc, with slightly more force than he intended. Temmis' baldness extended to his eyebrows, but he raised the patch of skin where the eyebrows would have grown.

"You sound as though she got at you," he commented.

"I'm afraid I can't deny it, sir. Her arrogance was uncalled for. I intend to ask permission to run into her by accident during my stay, and have it out with her in a private wrestling room."

"Permission withheld, Ferenc. I understand your urge, but don't lose sight of the fact that Pag women are nonetheless women, and fighting women is hardly a dignified undertaking. What's more, one part of your job during this visit is to get acquainted on a friendly basis with a Pag."

"What?" Ferenc jerked forward in his seat, his mouth falling open. "You—you can't be serious, sir!"

"Ferenc, something seems to have happened to you since you left the staff here. When I knew you before you were a levelheaded sort of person, and sufficiently reliable. Now you seem to have degenerated into the kind of excitable hothead who flunks cadet school. Do you imagine that I habitually make jokes about serious matters?"

"No, sir," Ferenc said miserably.

Temmis gave him a stone-hard glare. "Then I'm perfectly serious, am I not? And a moment's cool thought would have spared you such an idiotic remark!" He selected a sealed package from a tray at one side of his table. "Take this—it's your detailed instructions. Go away and read them carefully. You've got civilian dress, I suppose, as well as your uniforms?" he added as an afterthought.

"Yes, sir."

"Don't let me see you in uniform again before you leave,

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then; it's out of keeping with the character we want you to present. You're here to see a few old friends on the staff, which you will do. Over the course of a few days you'll lose interest in this, because—so you'll say if people ask you—you find us stuffier and less likeable than you remembered. You'll drift into a round of amusements. Keep your head! We think—in fact we're fairly certain—that half a dozen Pag women here on the station have been relenting toward Glaithe staff and even to Majkos and Lubarrians. Because they are as inflexible as ever toward the Alchmids, there must be an ulterior motive. We want to know what they're after. It would be bad for morale to have one of the regular staff associating with a Pag—therefore it's your job. You're big enough not to be ridiculously small by Pag standards; you're tough enough to wrestle your way out of tight corners if you have to—and the odds in favour are good—and on top of it, you are alleged to have an outstanding record." Temmis' eyes transfixed Ferenc like a pin securing a butterfly. "Go ahead and prove it."

Ferenc took the sealed package of orders in his left hand and got smartly to his feet. "Yes, sir," he said, and delivered a salute he felt would have pleased his cadet school drill-master.

"Man alive, Ferenc, where do you think you're going?" Temmis bawled. "Did I dismiss you yet? Sit down again! Quick! I want to know about this last passenger you came in with—a man called Lang."

"He's out of eye-range," said Ferenc, sweating as he sat down again, trying to subdue his fury (which was more against himself than Temmis). "Where exactly he does come from, I was unable to find out in spite of persistent inquiries, both indirectly from himself and directly from the crewmen who might have pieced two and two together to give me a line on him."

"Very disappointing, Ferenc. How long was the trip? Ten days? Twelve? and you did not succeed in establishing his origin?"

"He is a skilled practitioner in verbal camouflage," said Ferenc with sudden stubbornness. "I had no opportunity to observe him in unguarded situations; there was always a third



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party present, and Lang's ability to turn the subject of conversation without making it obvious suggests that he has had considerable experience with the theory of committees and related disciplines. I did, however, establish that he is from further in-galaxy than Etra."

"That's in eye-range, so the deduction is not remarkable." Temmis swung his chair half round and looked at the map hanging on the wall at his right. It showed the Arm—the galactic prominence of nine suns scattered along a line of some twenty-eight light-years, nothing beyond the end of the line until a small companion cluster too far away for man to reach. Etra was thirty systems in-galaxy from the root of the Arm, as shipping lines went. Further than people from the Arm systems cared to venture. What was the point? There were problems enough for one lifetime along the Arm.

"And something else, too," frowned Temmis. "It *costs* to travel. What does he use for money? I suppose he spent a while on Cathrodyne before he came out aboard your vessel. I should have thought that the arrival of someone out of eye-range would have rated at least a few moments in at least one news bulletin."

"He doesn't advertise the fact that he's so far from home."

"But even you found it out," said Temmis, heavily sarcastic. "A reporter might be expected to discover it also. Is he thinking of going on beyond Waystation—to Glai, or the Pag systems?"

"He didn't voice any intention of going on at all," Ferenc said. "He seemed merely to want to see Waystation; he'd heard rumors of it as far away as Etra, and wanted to visit it for himself. I don't see him being permitted to visit Pagr, even if he wants to."

"True. All right, Ferenc, you've been here long enough. Go and say hello to your former colleagues, but be quick about it, and then get to your quarters and memorize your instructions. Dismissed!"

But the first thing Ferenc did on reaching his cabin was not to read his instructions. It was comprehensively to curse every Pag, male as well as female, here or on Pagr, into the blackest depths of intergalactic space.

After that, he felt better.

## VII

VYKOR HAD often reflected that Waystation was like a living organism—in a dozen different ways. For one thing, it was virtually self-running, self-repairing, self-programming. It had attended to all its own wants for no one knew how many thousands of years before the first tentative explorers from Glai had come out here in slow ion-drive ships, before they developed faster-than-light drive. It was largely chance that had given the Glaithes their precedence here. They had been within a mere half light-year of Waystation when they achieved space flight, and although the Pags and Cathrodynes had both launched their first man-carrying ships at about the same time, they had had to wait for hyperdrive before they could come this far along the Arm.

Waystation resembled a living creature in another respect: It had a kind of metabolism, in which the part of corpuscles was played by human beings. Sometimes an injection from outside—a new Carthrodyn general with aggressive tendencies, a new loud-mouthed Pag—threatened to upset the delicate balance, and a kind of fever resulted. Then the Glaithes, the white corpuscles of the system, had to iron out the imbalance.

Something about the way Raige had acted made Vykor feel that this was one of those times.

And Lang looked as though he was going to be the foreign organism.

Usually Vykor was glad to get away after reporting to Raige, to enjoy the company of the free Majkos in the Majko section of the station for a few precious days before he had to report back for duty at the ship. And he always begrudged the occasions—once every four trips—when he had to stand watch between docking and blast-off.

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Today, however, was altogether different. He felt no urge to go in among his Majko friends—those odd people of a half-world, owing allegiance to Majkosi as their home, but forever confined to Waystation because they had revolted against Cathrodyne rule and would never be able to go home until Majkosi was set free. Here they were under Glaithe protection, though even that sometimes failed. Elsewhere, they were doomed.

They were always half ashamed and half eager to seek the company of a Majko from outside—a member of a ship's complement, a servant attached to the Cathrodyne staff, or, very rarely, a popular entertainer whose talent had lent him temporary immunity from Cathrodyne decrees and who was brought to Waystation to amuse his masters. They were eager because they were all permanently homesick, no matter how much they strove to conceal the fact under a superficial garb of flippancy; they were ashamed because they had achieved security for themselves at the cost of losing their chance to help in the struggle against the overlords at home. It was the same in the Lubarrian section, and in the Alechmid section; between them there was a sort of kinship, the fellowship of the condemned.

But Vykor knew that they tried to make up for their selfishness when they could; in fact, it was through Waystation's colonies of free members of the subject races that the revolutionary movements on Lubarrria and Majko were co-ordinated.

There were other couriers besides himself; there was no urgent task for him to do now until Raige gave him the answer to the dispatches he had delivered. He could go and relax with his friends, in comfort. And yet he lingered, when Raige and Indle let him go.

Pangs of hunger finally drove him to the Majko section's restaurant, where the synthesizers—they too had been running since Waystation was abandoned by its builders—had been adjusted to their clients' particular taste. He had chosen well as regards time; it was late evening on the local clocks, and there was no one present that he knew.

He took his order from the dispensers, presented his currency scrip for punching, and went across the hall to a table

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in an alcove where he would not be noticed. The low blue ceiling of the hall seemed somehow oppressive; the shiny white tables looked cold and impersonal; the squat chairs and stools were untidily arranged and irritated him in an indefinable way. He was in no mood for company; he realized that.

He was halfway through his meal when he raised his eyes from his plate to find a young man—in nondescript Majko leisure wear of drab cloth—sitting opposite him and staring at him fixedly. He held a mug of liquor in one hand, and his eyes were bright under bushy brows.

He was a stranger to Vykor, who therefore pointedly ignored him.

But the other wasn't having any. After a period of silence he glanced around to make sure there was no one within earshot, and coughed mysteriously. "You're Vykor, aren't you?" he said.

"That's right. And I came over to this corner to be alone."

The other scowled. "Be alone later, if you like. Right now I have questions for you, and I want them answered."

Vykor jerked his head upright and swallowed a mouthful of food. "You—" he began, and interrupted himself. The intruder had composed his hands into a casual-looking but meaningful pattern, leaving his mug standing aside on the table.

"My name's Larwik," said the stranger conversationally when he saw that Vykor recognized the symbol he had made. "You and I haven't run into each other before because we're in different ends of the movement. But we happen to need some information and advice, and you can give it to us and you happen by a stroke of luck to be involved with the movement already."

"What is it you want to know?" said Vykor. He had been dimly aware that there was more to the revolutionary movement in the Cathrodyne empire than the limited area he had covered; he had, though, not the least idea what the responsibility of other branches might be.

"That's all right," said Larwik, picking up his mug again and waving it toward Vykor's plate. "Eat your meal. I should prefer to talk alone with you, afterwards."

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He didn't speak again, merely watched with his sharp, bright gaze as Vykor ate.

At length Vykor found he could not force anything more into his reluctant belly; he shoved the plate aside and made to get up. "I'm ready," he said.

"Fine," murmured Larwik, and swigged the last of his liquor before also getting up. "Over to the elevators, please."

Vykor half suspected the kind of place to which he might be being taken even before he got into the car with Larwik and saw him press buttons on the selector—contriving to shield the exact combination with his body. So there were many other elevators, besides the one he took to Raige's office from the reception hall, which went to peculiar places if one pressed the right combination of buttons. Where would this trip take him?

As it proved, not far—certainly within the confine of the Majko sector, if the car had obeyed normal physical laws during its trip. They spent only a moment waiting for the door to open, and they stepped out into a room with no other exit, a room as absolutely square as a box. Its walls were lined from floor to nearly ceiling level with rough-finished crates, and the floor was covered with tiny bits of dark brown, crisp stuff, like fallen leaves.

A slight stinging puzzled Vykor as he stepped out into the room; then he placed what it was: a static curtain, to keep dust from entering the elevator car.

Larwik waited until the car had been called to an errand on some other level, and then turned briskly to face Vykor. "Sit down," he said, and hitched himself up on the only furniture available—a stack of the crates.

Vykor copied him, sniffing. There was a pungent aroma in the air, which he couldn't identify, but which seemed individual.

"Recognize it?" Larwik demanded after a pause. Vykor shook his head, and Larwik shrugged. "Well, tell you later, then—I suppose I'll have to. Right now, I want that information you can give me.

"Who or what is this man Lang?"

Lang again! If the entire retinue of the Suprema of Pagr, every member of which was habitually able to wear out

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three Pag males before finally giving in and letting herself be ravished by a fourth, had descended on Waystation, it would hardly have caused more impact than the coming of this one man. Vykor counter-questioned.

"I'll tell you what I know—which isn't much—but first, please tell me: what's special about him? My Glaithe contact wants to know about him; everyone seems to be interested."

Larwik bit his lower lip thoughtfully. "Is that so, now?" he said. "News has already been round the station about him—but we put it down to the fact that he's out of eye-range, and was therefore a distinguished visitor. At least, we hoped that that was all it was due to. It could have been due to something rather disastrous."

"Such as what?"

Larwik hesitated. "All right," he said at last. "I'll have to tell you anyway, I guess." He bent to one side and slipped the lid off one of the crates. Underneath was a mass of short brown twigs, with little needle-leaves on them, packed tightly together. At once the smell grew stronger.

Larwik pulled out one of the twigs with extreme care and handed it over for Vykor to inspect. "Don't know what it is, huh?" he said.

Vykor shook his head.

"It's dreamweed," said Larwik succinctly. "Our stock in trade."

"Now see here!" said Vykor, getting up with his face white. "I don't know what the hell you're playing at, but if there's dreamweed mixed up in it I want out—and quickly!"

Larwik waited, unmoved. "What do you know about dreamweed, anyway?" he said. "You didn't recognize it."

"I've seen enough of its effects not to like it," said Vykor harshly. "Those poor devils you get over in the Alchmid section sometimes—who've run away from their Pag slave-masters under the influence, and who die by inches because their supply has been withdrawn."

"Not any more," said Larwik levelly. "We keep them supplied, out of charity. They got us the stuff in the first place, you see—risked their lives to snatch seed-pods and smuggle them in."

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"But . . . but what the hell *for*?" exploded Vykor. "What do you want to soil your hands with it for?"

"The Pags use it to keep the Alchmids tamed," said Larwik. "It's the most powerful hallucinant and intoxicant we know. It's habit-forming as hell; addicts will pay everything they have in the galaxy for a shot when they're really strung out." He paused. "The Cathrodynes are really getting worried about the number of addicts they're getting these days. It's a very profitable business, Vykor—and it puts Cathrodyn money in our pockets."

Slowly Vykor relaxed. "I don't like it," he said grudgingly. "But . . . okay, it's a logical idea. I'd rather see the Alchmids giving it back to the Pags, because bad as they are the Cathrodynes never did anything like that to us."

"They did to the Lubarrians," said Larwik. "Seen that fat slob of a chaplain that's been dumped on them this time? To infect them with that phoney creed was near as bad as dreamweed."

"I'll give you that," said Vykor reluctantly. "Okay—you wanted to know about this man Lang."

He couldn't add anything to what he had told Raige; he did not even have a new theory to account for Lang's presence in Glaithe-reserved territory. And the whole affair mystified Larwik.

"Maybe he's genuine, then," Larwik said thoughtfully. "Or—no, he can't be, because he knows his way around the station too well, on your showing. Or . . . You see, I was afraid he might be a Cathrodyn plant—a real stranger, bought for the occasion, or a ringer near-perfectly disguised, whose job was to make like a susceptible tourist eager to try all the sights and entertainments and splashing money around everywhere. If such a character really did come here, we might be tempted to offer him a shot of dreamweed and milk him till his purse was dry. Shove him on an outgoing ship and who's the wiser when his withdrawal symptoms kill him? That's the way Cathrodynes work, anyway . . . This Ferenc who came in with you is a spy for sure, but he's mixed up in Cathrodyn-Pag high politics, and not in anything as incidental as tracing a source of drug addiction."

"Do the Glaithe know about this?" queried Vykor.

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"Know?" said Larwik in tones of high amusement, getting off his stacked crates and stretching uncomfortably. "Where do you think we grow the stuff? They gave us a whole bank of hydroponic tubes to play with. Of course they know! They practically *pushed* us into it."

"Oh. If they objected, Lang might have been a plant from them, but since they don't . . ." Vykor frowned. "Who the—?"

### VIII

THERE WAS a long pause. Finally Larwik went over to the elevator door again and pushed the call button. "I should dearly like to introduce Dardaino to dreamweed," he said in a meditative tone as he waited for the car to arrive. "But I don't think I can risk it. If the Cathrodynes discovered that the source of their trouble was here at Waystation I expect the Glaithes would have to disown us and pretend they never knew a thing about it. Maybe we could rig it indirectly, by having him invited to the Alchmid section; no one would be surprised to find dreamweed there, because half of the poor devils are only kept alive by what they can get of it . . ."

He interrupted himself as the car stopped at their level. "You realize, of course, that all this is under the usual precautions of secrecy?"

Stiffly, Vykor said, "I've done thirty-odd trips as a courier, and haven't fallen down yet."

"All right, all right," said Larwik good-humoredly. "No offense—just a reminder." He ushered his companion into the elevator car and slid the door shut.

"By the way," he added, as they began to rise, "whatever you find out about Lang—we want to know, as well as Raige."

"I'll do what I can," Promised Vykor. But even as he said



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the words, he knew that he was going to find it difficult even to fulfil that half-hearted undertaking.

There were a dozen incidental problems that could make life complicated aboard Waystation. Time, for instance. The Glaithe staff operated an arbitrary "day" which was in fact tolerable for members of all races here, and divided it into neither "night" nor "morning" nor "evening." They had to work the clock round, by shifts.

With fine disregard of everyone else's convenience, the Pag staff insisted on using their own Planetary Mean Time—which coincided with the Glaithe Station Time about once in three hundred days. And somehow (no one had ever been able to see why) the three subject races—Majkos, Lubarrians and Alchmids—each seemed to have chosen a different shift of the arbitrary day to serve as "night."

Now it was nearly midnight here in the Majko section. In the Alchmid section bleary-eyed drug victims would be reaching out with shaking hands for the dreamweed extract which alone permitted them to face a new day. And in the Lubarrian quarters "dusk" was just setting in.

To complete the chaos, the Cathrodynes mostly possessed a talent for cat-napping, and made do with a mere three hours' sleep per "day", catching up the rest at odd moments. As for the tourists rich enough to holiday here, they cared nothing for time and rioted on until they dropped with exhaustion.

Neutrality and tolerance, Vykor said to himself in a fit of sudden weariness, had their points. But sometimes they bred confusion.

Not being Cathrodyne, he needed regular sleep, and here in the Majko section it was getting dark—literally; the wall and ceiling illuminations were dimming everywhere, and would remain dim until eight hours hence. Vykor found himself yawning reflexively as he parted from Larwik and made his slow way to his quarters, head bowed in deep thought.

Lang . . . Larwik had said that news about the arrival of someone from out of eye-range had gone round the station. One would normally expect a curiosity like this to be taken up by tourists in the recreation areas, fêted, wine and dined and in general lionized. Vykor, though, didn't think

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Lang would enjoy that sort of treatment. And he didn't doubt the man's ability to avoid it without seeming impolite.

Nonetheless, he would have to look along the tourist circuit in the "morning." As a stranger to Waystation (or was he?), Lang would certainly want to see that, at least. And moreover, that was the truly neutral part of the station; no one had any authority there, not even the Glaites. It was to them a bottomless pool of money—Pag money, Cathrodyne money, and even Glaithe money.

Nearest the hull: machinery. Incredible devices that turned incident radiation into energy in usable form—including matter. And, of course, dock facilities, reception halls, and the rest.

Next: quarters, living facilities, offices assigned to the various staffs, service areas of all conceivable kinds.

And in the center—or rather, surrounding the center, like a shell of vacancy—the tourist area.

Vykor dropped down Chute Number Gold nervously. Today Chute Number Platinum was nearer the Majko section, but no Majko could afford to enter that chute, let alone Number Radium. Vykor wore his ordinary drab leisure clothes as a hint to concessionaires that he was not by intention a customer.

A hundred iridescent yellow bubbles soared up the chute to burst around his feet. What had the builders set aside this area for? Purely as a recreation center for the vessel's original passengers? In that case, their journey must have been an incredibly long one—or they were incredibly hard to keep amused.

Music swelled around him. One note that was struck seemed to make the very bone of his cranium resonate; it filled his brain with confusion and his eyes with tears. He caught at the side of the chute for an instant, to recover, and a boy and girl in their teens dived past him, yelling and laughing as they plunged head first toward the end of the chute. They were Glaites, both of them; they had been to the station at least twice before, because every Glaithe child had to know about Waystation, had to think, dream, *live* Waystation in all its aspects so that the iron grip of Glai should not loosen.

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No; correction: Not an iron grip. A grip like gravity, permitting certain movements, forbidding escape.

The chute widened, and the drop came to its end with a mist of purple perfume and a chiming of bronze gongs. Vykor felt his sandals sink a few inches into a firm but yielding floor, steadied himself by stretching out his arms like a tight-rope walker, and looked around.

Today, Chute Number Gold led to the Plains, it seemed. A rolling expanse ahead of him seemed endless: blue-green under an arched blue ceiling like an open sky. This was the calmest area of the tourist circuit.

The Glaithe children had caught at a hover as it skimmed past, and were now hanging thirty feet above the ground by their right arms, laughing with each other and gesturing toward the ground. Vykor followed their gaze, and saw a trio of Cathrodynes—middle-aged, the two women in scarlet and the man in soiled white—who slept on their backs with their mouths open. Empty bottles ringed them; plates bearing the crusts and hulls of food were overset at their sides.

Even as Vykor grimaced at them—the masters relaxing—the ground opened up and cleared away the rubbish. The boy and girl overhead chuckled and turned their hover away. They would be as grave as Raige in another year or two; now, they were learning not to forget to laugh. The secret of the Glaithe's achievements lay somewhere in the laughter which they managed to retain.

Vykor shook his head and began to walk across the Plains. In a little while he came to the Ocean, and plunged into it.

"You there!" said a person half woman, half fish, whose full, bare and very beautiful breasts glistened like mother-of-pearl. She leaned from a coral cavern-mouth; her hair was dyed orange to match the coral.

Vykor bubbled air from his mouth and breathed deeply. It was always terrifying for strangers to breathe the Ocean, but it was not water—it was a synthetic organic fluid containing a slightly higher proportion of free oxygen than the air of Majkosi and the same proportion as the ordinary air of Waystation. Vykor had been here before, a dozen times.

He said peaceably, hearing the sound buzz in his ears, "I

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am not rich enough to be a customer of yours."

The half woman made a disgusted noise. She was a Lubarrian; the Glaithe rented the greater part of the concessions in the tourist circuit to members of the "free" populations from the subject worlds here. It was a good way of keeping them occupied and making use of them, to look at it cynically; to look at it more clearly, it gave many people a reason to go on living.

"Besides," continued Vykor, "I am looking for someone. Do you know a stranger called Lang, who is out of eye-range?"

"I heard he was here," said the half-woman, adjusting the set of her fish-tail. "I didn't see him yet—and it's beyond hope that he'd patronize my dull little concession." She swung round and disappeared into the coral grotto behind her, adding, "And in any case, it usually takes people a day or two to pluck up courage to come into the Ocean after their arrival."

There was sense in that. Vykor looked around through the Ocean for signs of a rise, and spotted a mound of glowing shells that seemed to pierce the surface. He scaled it, and found that he could raise his head into air if he balanced on top of the mound; it fell short of the surface by his height to his shoulders.

There were the Mountains yonder; probably the Caves were beyond them at the moment. It was hard to be sure where any part of the tourist circuit was in relation to any other part; the relationships changed, slowly, but significantly over the course of a day or two.

And in the other direction there was the City, which was invariably the best bet. At any one time, more than half the visitors and off-duty staff would be in the City if they were anywhere in the tourist circuit. But that would mean he must equip himself first.

He plunged back into the Ocean and walked determinedly through the viscous fluid it contained until he could walk on to shore not far from the City limits. There were more people here, sure enough: a party of Glaithe children, aged less than ten years old, being instructed how to breathe the Ocean—and most of them too frightened to try although they saw that it was safe; four off-duty members of the Pag staff, exer-

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cising nonchalantly under eyes they knew to be admiring, their naked red-brown bodies glistening with oil, their muscles making their skin ripple sleekly as they took turns to lift each other one-armed over their heads; a wealthy Cathrodyne family arguing over its next choice of sights—the youth in his teens wanting to go to the Caves, his mother wishing to visit the Plains and relax, her husband virtuously and patriotically trying to keep himself from staring at the naked Pags, and failing.

There were concessions in booths and on stalls all along here—some covered by tents, some open and merely offering wares of various kinds. Vykor stopped at a costume seller's establishment and purchased a blue gown to conceal his clothes and a blue mask with fiery red eyes to conceal his face. He asked the costume seller in passing, as he presented his scrip to be punched, "Have you seen anything of this stranger from out of eye-range?"

"The one supposed to have come in yesterday?" The costume seller shook his head made fantastic with a vast crown of feathers and baubles. "No, I have not."

Vykor thanked him and passed on. The edge of the City which faced the shore of the Ocean at the moment was mostly lined with cafés, dancing floors and acrobatic spectacles; there was a Lubarrian team performing that was so good he paused to watch it for a moment. Here too he asked for news of Lang. A head-shake. He passed on.

From behind him, there was a faint rumble. Across in the Mountains, the other side of the Ocean at the moment, there was a storm in progress. When he glanced around he could see shafts of lightning like tiny white-hot needles breaking between the peaks.

He came eventually to a park near the center of the City, without having had success in his search for Lang. Everyone knew he was here; everyone thought they would recognize him from descriptions, or from the pet animal he carried. But no one had seen him.

Rather wearily, Vykor dropped on to a bench under a huge bush bearing sweet-smelling pink and white flowers. He frowned behind his mask.

Then his thoughtful mood was interrupted. From the far

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side of the bush overhanging his bench, he could hear a familiar voice in conversation with one that was totally strange to him. But it was this second voice which made him start up and peer—very cautiously—through the bush's thick foliage.

It was incredible. But it was a fact. Vykor felt as though a fast elevator had dropped the bottom out of his personal world. The patriot of patriots, the severe Cathrodyne nationalist, Capodistro Ferenc—sitting and conversing with a *Pag*.

### IX

SHAKEN, Vykor withdrew. His head was whirling. It was indubitably Ferenc—though he looked very different dressed as he was now, in high gold lamé boots, rust-colored pants and a shirt of red and green shot silk that changed color as he moved. He had had his hair dressed in another style, too. But it was certainly Ferenc.

The *Pag* to whom he was talking was a civilian, and had her hair instead of shaving her scalp as the military did. She was somewhat smaller than the average—about Ferenc's own height—and wore a severe black blouse and the inevitable *Pag* tights. There were silver symbols on the lapels of her blouse that probably indicated her official status. Only one of her front teeth was filed.

Straining his ears, Vykor managed to catch scraps of the conversation.

"... see things differently from outside," Ferenc was saying. "When one's compelled to stand on one's dignity all the time, it's easy to accept attitudes which are officially authorized and not to see that they're basically unsatisfactory."

The *Pag* laughed. She had a rich contralto voice. "As a matter of fact," she said, "it works on both sides. We won't ever settle our disagreements by trying to out-shout each other; we'd do better to ..."

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A blast of music from a nearby dancing floor interrupted her words. Vykor waited, but this was a loud and energetic dance that was being played, and it would be some minutes at least before he could hear more.

He didn't know whether to be furious at Ferenc for his double behavior, or pleased to discover that what he had taken for a typical dogmatic Cathrodyne officer was proving to be a comparatively tolerant human being.

He looked around him cautiously. He was fairly certain that even after seeing him daily during the twelve-day trip, Ferenc would fail to recognize him in his blue and red mask. Cathrodynes often did not trouble to distinguish between individual members of the subject races. He could go around the bush and sit down at another bench on the other side of the clear space from Ferenc and the Pag, and from there he would be able to see them clearly. But he would probably not be able to sit close enough to go on eavesdropping. They didn't seem to be keeping their voices down deliberately, of course . . .

He decided to walk around once, at least, and then make up his mind whether to sit down where he could watch and call for a drink to account for his presence, or to return here. He took a path through the bushes that would bring him out the other side of the clearing where they sat; the bushes were taller than he was and were thick, of a dark green hue.

He was just turning along a branch of the path that led to the bench he was making for, when another familiar figure came briefly into view from the other path and walked uncertainly out into the clearing.

Ligmer, the archeologist, carrying a thick portfolio of papers and a transparent bag full of photographs.

He went hesitantly across the open space, and the Pag who had been talking with Ferenc rose to her feet, smiling. Her face was really quite finely carved for someone as naturally oversize and coarse as a Pag, and the single filed tooth in the middle of her smile struck a jarring note. Vykor, slipping into the bench-seat opposite, thought wistfully of Raige's miniature beauty.

"I—I see you two know each other," Ligmer said in a

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rather cautious tone. Ferenc scowled, with a sudden return of his habitual manner.

"We got to talking," he said gruffly.

"We've been here only a short while," the Pag supplemented. "I was expecting you earlier, Ligmer."

"Yes. Well—uh—I'm sorry, but I was delayed. I couldn't lay my hands on a document I wanted." Ligmer's astonishment made him stumble over his words. "No, don't go," he added to Ferenc. "Not unless . . ."

Ferenc swigged the last of his liquor and got to his feet. He wiped off his mouth with the back of his hand. "You have business together, I guess," he said brusquely. "Don't let me get in the way."

He gave a stiff bow and walked away. Ligmer followed him with his eyes until he rounded a thick clump of bushes and vanished from sight. "Well, I'll be confounded," he said in puzzled tones. "I don't understand it at all."

"Understand what?" the Pag inquired, sitting down again and stretching out her long legs. "He seems quite a decent type for a military man—and one of yours, at that."

"It isn't that simple, Usri," said Ligmer, recollecting himself and likewise sitting down. "I shipped out with that man, and he behaved like a real diehard, with all the orthodox clichés ready to pop up at the press of the right button. To find him actually talking with a Pag, and politely, is unthinkable!"

Vykor could just catch the words, by straining his ears; he nodded automatically at the last sentence.

Usri's face showed puzzlement as deep as Ligmer's. "Then . . . then he probably has a reason for acting like this," she said shrewdly. "You probably threw a wrench into the works of some deep-laid scheme or other by breaking up the conversation. Well, never mind—we have our own business to attend to." She reached under the bench on which she sat and took out a file of documents as thick as Ligmer's, selected some, spread them out on the table, and looked up expectantly.

And at that moment Vykor became aware that he was no longer alone on his bench. Sitting at the other end, looking



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perfectly self-possessed and relaxed, and stroking the black fur of his pet, was Lang.

"Good day to you," Lang said, with a humorous twitch of his mouth, as soon as he saw that Vykor had recognized him. "I think you're the steward who looked after us during the trip from Cathrodyne, aren't you?"

So the mask wasn't working on him, at any rate. It was foolish to deny the truth; Vykor nodded and sat dumb.

"Allow me to buy you some refreshment, then," Lang proposed. "You gave us very good service; your Cathrodyne shipping lines are among the best I have encountered."

He signaled a waiter by pressing a bell on the arm of the bench before Vykor had a chance either to accept or refuse, and went on, "You were watching that peculiar little episode on the other side of the clearing, were you not?"

Vykor glanced over at Ligmer and Usri; the scholarly face and the face with the filed tooth marring its smile were bent together over a photograph, studying it with a magnifying glass. He nodded again.

"Strange, wouldn't you have said?" Lang pursued. "I was under the impression that Officer Ferenc would have died rather than be seen talking in friendship with a Pag—particularly with a Pag who was an evil influence on this young archeologist whose views he objected to."

Vykor found his tongue at last. "Distinguished sir, it was not only you or I who found it peculiar. Ligmer also seemed shaken."

"And with reason, I think." Lang saw that the waiter he had summoned was waiting for orders, and gestured inquiringly at Vykor.

"Distinguished sir, you owe me nothing," Vykor protested. "I was doing my job and no more—"

"But no less, either. Many people do less." Lang snapped his fingers. "Two fine wines, waiter."

The waiter nodded and vanished, and at that moment Ligmer looked up from his study of the photograph. He recognized Lang and came hurrying across the clearing.

"Join us, won't you?" he said. "I have been hoping to see you again, to answer those questions you said you might have—or to try to, at least. And now is a good opportunity,

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because I can also introduce you to my Pag associate, Scholar Usri."

"I had just invited our steward here to have a drink with me," said Lang, rising and lifting his pet on to his shoulder. A resigned expression, here and gone like summer lightning, flickered over Ligmer's face.

"He may come if he will," he said. He gave Vykor a sharp glance, and Vykor meekly removed the mask from his face. It might have been politeness that prevented Ligmer from telling him off about mingling with his betters in disguise; it might have been the fact that they were in tourist territory and the usual rules officially were suspended—except that that never prevented a Cathrodyne from being officious when he felt inclined.

Somehow, Vykor had the distinct impression that it was the presence of Lang.

He followed Lang and Ligmer across the clearing at a discreet distance, and sat down on a stool at a suitable point neither too close to the table nor ostentatiously far from it. He remained silent, accepting his glass of wine from the waiter when it was brought, and listening with eyes and ears alert.

"Out of eye-range, eh?" Usri said, plainly impressed. "A rarity along the Arm, sir. Do you plan to pass beyond Waystation to the Pag worlds?"

Lang let his pet climb down his chest and nestle on his lap. "I may do," he said. "Or may not." And smiled. "It was Waystation that attracted me this far, I'm afraid—not the renown of your empire."

"Huh!" Usri laughed shortly. "And quite right too. This place is a miracle, one of the marvels of the galaxy, and the more you get to know about it the more amazing it seems."

"So our friend Ligmer was telling me aboard ship." Lang glanced round at the Cathrodyne. "He was saying that its origin is buried in mystery, but that there were claims about ancient travelers from Pagr having built it . . ."

"This is probably eyewash," said Ligmer bluntly.

"Prejudice!" said Usri with sudden heat. "You cannot discount the relics on Pagr of an ancient space-flying culture—"

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"Which no one except Pags is allowed to see," Ligmer interrupted. "If they are there."

"Oh, for . . . They're there," Usri snapped, and rummaged in her file of documents, producing a photograph for Ligmer's inspection. "I haven't shown you this yet. Brought it specially for you."

Ligmer waved it down. "Photographs can be doctored," he said. "Not that I'm intending to discredit you, Usri; it's just that your official propaganda organs have issued so much nonsense in the past centuries that you can't expect us to take something so important on trust."

"May I see?" said Lang, and in the same instant contrived to lift the picture out of Usri's hand and spread it before him. Looking past him, Vykor could see only indistinct blurs.

"It's a ship," Lang said. "Fossilized: Am I right?" He turned to Usri, who gave a pleased nod.

"Not so much fossilized as embalmed," she said. "It's been there for at least ten thousand years. As we picture it, it had a faulty or experimental null-grav engine, and during ground testing or landing it over-stressed the planetary surface too close to a fault line. Result: a flow of magma, perhaps even a volcano, which buried it."

"And how is this picture supposed to have been obtained?" said Ligmer. His voice was heavy with sarcasm at the beginning of the sentence; it didn't quite last out.

"Well, the original elements of the hull are now present as high concentrations of trace elements in the solidified lava," said Usri. "We made that out of a hundred or so shots—polishing the surface of the rock to a high reflectivity, and then beaming bright light off it at the correct angle. The natural inhomogeneities of the rock cause too much noise for the complete outline to show in a single shot; by averaging the noise over a hundred pictures, though, you begin to get the distinctive shapes. I have more, and a copy of the report published by the team that did the work. Aside from the usual propaganda, there's some good stuff in it."

She glanced at Lang. "How does it strike you?" she said challengingly.

"I think," said Lang quietly after a pause, "that you're right to interpret the picture that way, but wrong in your

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further assumptions. A ship on Pagr, with Waystation out here, implies—to me at any rate—that someone came *from* here *to* there. And most likely, also to Glai, to Cathrodyne, to Alchmida, to Lubarria, and”—he gave a sidelong glance at Vykor—“to Majkosi.”

### X

VYKOR half expected a torrent of indignant counter-argument from the two archeologists, and in fact they looked at each other for a moment, their expressions suggesting that they were on the point of uttering some such retort.

But it didn't come. They relaxed slowly, and Ligmer was the first to speak—almost shamefacedly.

“As a matter of fact,” he said, “this really is the obvious answer, isn't it? Only there are obstacles. This theory has been put forward a dozen times over the past few centuries, since Waystation was first discovered, and each time it has foundered on some obstacle that seemed insuperable.” He gave Usri a brief glance. “And I don't think Pagr has ever given it serious thought.”

“Don't you?” said Usri wryly. “I hope no monitors are listening, because this is highly subversive and could cost me my rank and my right to visit Waystation—but I spent half the time I was in school arguing the pros and cons of what we call the Bringer theory. The main objections—leaving out matters of planetary pride—were that no one had claimed discovery of prehistoric space-flight relics on any other world than Pagr—and if they were there, no one would be likely to hush them up, would they?—and the fact that the peoples of the different worlds of the Arm are so different physically. Their cultures are also widely different, their ways of thinking, even. And an argument advanced against this theory of the Bringer, also, was the fact that the male-dominated

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social order of all the other worlds of the Arm coincided with what tradition declared to be the condition obtaining on Pagr before our modern society evolved."

Lang nodded. "And so what is the presently accepted theory concerning the origin of man, here in the Arm?"

Ligmer and Usri looked at each other again. "Depends which planet you're talking about," said Ligmer, grunting. "On Cathrodyne there's no generally accepted theory; some people support the Bringer theory, as Usri calls it, but rather few. Since human beings are pretty widespread through the galaxy, the opinion is that on oxygen-high worlds with seas and the right temperature man is statistically the most likely being to evolve."

Lang shook his head, without saying anything; Ligmer, however, chose to interpret it as a disdainful comment, and went on hotly, "Whereas on Pagr, of course, they give out that man first evolved there and then infected the whole galaxy!"

"And on Lubarria they still say what they were saying on Cathrodyne a mere century or so ago!" snapped Usri. "That man was created by some mystical dual principle—the stars male and the planets female, or the other way round—which he reflects in his own being. I must say that the priests of this cult certainly act as though the only principle they have is a sexual one—"

"You won't find a Cathrodyne above the level of a moron who takes that rubbish seriously today!" Ligmer broke in. They were practically shouting at each other when Lang coughed, and they calmed down sheepishly.

"Well, there are one or two supposedly insuperable obstacles to the Bringer theory which don't seem to me to be so hard to overcome," Lang said in judicious tones. "The fact that space-flight relics have only been found on Pagr, for instance. Pagr is right out towards the end of the Arm, isn't it? Doesn't that suggest that it might be the last world on which Waystation—which wouldn't have been a station at all, but an interstellar vessel, on this theory—the last world on which colonists were deposited? Naturally relics occur there; that's where the ships, no longer wanted, were dumped. They were probably first cannibalized, then left to decay."

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"That's one way of looking at it," said Usri grudgingly. Ligmer confirmed with a nod.

"What do they say about the origin of man on Majkosi, by the way?" Lang glanced at Vykor, who stared down at his wine.

"We are not permitted to speculate so far," he mumbled. "We are forbidden to have universities, observatories, laboratories, schools higher than mere technical colleges where one learns routine mechanical tasks, or in fact any of the centers where people talk about such matters."

He met Ligmer's glance with a defiant stare and relapsed into silence.

"But if you were asked to give your own opinion?" Lang pressed gently. Ligmer scowled; in his view, too much attention paid to subject races was dangerous. Still, Lang was an outsider; it wasn't as bad as if he himself had been doing it.

"All right," said Vykor. "I'd say that man must have started somewhere, *once*. I don't believe he could have grown up on all these different worlds—not just along the Arm, but all over the galaxy—by pure coincidence. Take mating, for instance." He was surprised to find himself warming to his thesis.

"Now we know that people from different planets can mate and have children. On Lubarria, where a lot of the priests are Cathrodynes who can't make a go of it on Cathrodyne itself, and where the fake religion that the Cathrodynes stuck there compels women to give in to priests when they're asked to—on Lubarria there you can see lots of kids of mixed blood. There are some mixed Lubarrian-Cathrodynes right here on Waystation, in the Lubarrian section; Cathrodynes won't accept them, Lubarrians hate their exalted opinion of themselves, so they make do here, if they can.

"Likewise between Alchmids and Pags. I've heard how, when your people, Scholar Usri"—he boldly looked the Pag straight in the face—"have a male they can't quiet down or satisfy themselves, they'll turn it loose among a crowd of Alchmid women. And pretty often there are kids born that way, too. Only you kill them off at birth."

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"True enough," said Usri dispassionately. "You have a sharp mind, fellow."

"Too sharp, I'd say," Ligner snapped. "A Majko has a very good reason to put about such theories; these would imply that all men ought to be on equal footing, and that Majkosi and Lubarria are oppressed unjustly."

There was a sudden tension in the air; Usri was aware of it, Lang was aware of it, even the little animal which Lang called Sunny raised its head inquiringly and snuffed. And Vykor grew aware of it also. But too late. Because by then he could hear the fatal words ringing in his memory. He had said—had actually said to the face of a Cathrodyne in the presence of a Pag—had said:

"And they are! Monstrously oppressed, and without a shred of justice for it!"

There was a long, frozen silence. Or rather, a period when none of them said anything; there was noise from everywhere, music from the dancing floor, talk from beyond the bushes that ringed the clearing, even very faint thunder from the storm still raging in the Mountains.

*Outcast! Outcast!* The word hammered at Vykor's imagination. He looked at Usri's frozen face, at Ligner's which was purpling with indignation, at Lang's which wore a quizzical half-smile. Suddenly he felt unreasonably angry with Lang. He had never dreamed he could do such a stupid thing! He had thrown away his life, his freedom to come and go between Waystation and home, his value as a courier for the revolutionary movement on Majkosi, through a moment's loss of control over his tongue. And somehow Lang was responsible. He felt it in his bones, he *knew* it—and at the same time knew that nothing Lang had said or done could explain his idiotic lapse.

He got to his feet with unsteady dignity, set down his half-full glass of wine with a hurt look at Lang, and walked away among the bushes.

"Well!" said Usri after a further pause. "I'm surprised you let him get away with that. If an Alchmid had said such a thing to me, I'd have broken his teeth in and sent him to be food for the males."

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"Oh, he won't get away with it, don't worry," said Ligner through clenched teeth. "There's not much anyone can do to him here on Waystation; he'll just hide among his fellow Majkos here and the Glaites will prevent us from dragging him out. But he won't be able to leave the station again unless he has it in mind to commit suicide. I'll have instructions given to the purser of his ship, just in case he tries to brazen it out and pretend nothing happened."

He turned to Lang and half rose to give a sort of bow. "I must thank you, distinguished sir," he said. "I did not see what you were driving at when you pressed him for his opinion; I see now that you were cunningly provoking him into voicing subversive views. It is a service we Cathrodynes will appreciate."

"You have nothing to thank me for," said Lang, and his gaze was dispassionate and hard. "I am neutral. As it were, I am a citizen of Waystation, and your national disputes are none of my concern."

He raised his glass and emptied it. When he set it down again, his manner had changed completely.

"I have been wandering through what I gather you call the tourist circuit," he said. "It is impressive."

"And damnably difficult to find your way around," said Usri shortly. "Forever changing places with itself. Yesterday I came down Chute Number Radium to the City; today I had to come right through the Caves to get here, and cross a bit of the Ocean. That I don't mind so much—the weird juice they have in it instead of water dries like magic once you come ashore again. But going through the Caves was a nuisance."

"Why?" said Lang, raising an eyebrow. "I haven't seen them."

"You will, if you're normal." Usri gave a sound halfway between a grunt and a laugh. "Even if you're not. By non-Pag standards, that is. Other people seem to think we're pretty peculiar because we won't give in to any male until he's proven he's worth it by beating us in single combat—but it's all a matter of attitude. So we don't go there for fun, the way most people do."

"It's a—shall we say—place of exotic amusements?"



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"More of them than anything else. One thing that does tend to support our historico-geneticists when they say that the people of other planets are degenerate culls of a primal Pagr stock is that we like our matings to be straight—Pagr to Pagr. In the Caves over yonder most visitors from other planets seem to go for a stock different from their own. You get Cathrodynes wanting Glaithe, Alchmids mucking around with Lubarrians—ugh!" She made a disgusted face. "Degenerate!"

"Yet your own males will take Alchmid women, as you admitted a little while ago," said Lang curtly. "So your males are of a degenerate stock and your females aren't?" Before Usri could muster an answer to that, he had leaned forward on the table to look again at the picture of the ship embalmed on Pagr in solidified lava.

"How many ships are known to have been preserved on Pagr?" he said. Usri hesitated, as though she had been going to say something totally different, and a small frown creased her red-brown forehead. But so completely had Lang the attitude of one who has forgotten the previous subject that she let it pass and answered his new question instead.

"We've found fifteen—possibly. All in strata laid down about the same time, at approximately the spot from where—as ordinary archeological studies suggest—our people spread across the planet."

"Fifteen." Lang felt in a pouch at his waist and took out a Glaithe-prepared map which he had been given in the reception hall on arriving. "There are a total of sixteen shiplocks on Waystation," he said. "Not counting four small ones with only a third of the capacity of the main locks. That's a fairly close match, Scholar Usri. You are welcome to the data and any conclusions you care to draw from them."

He lifted his pet onto his shoulder again, stood up, and nodded to each of them before walking off among the bushes.

"Who is he?" said Usri in astonishment when he had gone.

Ligmer shook his head. "An extraordinarily wealthy tourist—officially," he said. "Traveling to see the galaxy. Heard rumors of Waystation, came to see if it was real, will go away again afterwards."

"Gas-clouds," Usri said positively. "That's a dangerous man,

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Ligmer. He gives me the impression that without having been on Waystation before in his life he knows more about it—and us—than you or I could learn in a century's work."

Amazingly, uncharacteristically, she shuddered, and huge ripples moved down her sleek flanks under her black blouse.

"I don't like him!" she said fiercely. "I don't like him at all!"

## XI

CARRYING his mask, Vykor walked with head downcast for what seemed to be ages. Echoes of his words rang in his head, beat at the edges of his consciousness like waves eroding a rocky shore. His brain throbbed to the crazy pounding of his heart; his breath came and went in racking gasps.

His lips moved in a senseless repetition of a self-condemning sentence: *you must have been out of your mind, you must have been out of your mind, you must have been out of your mind . . .*

At length he sat down on a rocky slope among the foothills of the Mountains and stared back across an inlet of the Ocean towards the City. But it was an unseeing stare. Behind his eyes there were pictures of other things—of his world, Majkosi, of its people, of the past which should also have been his future and which he had thrown away in a fit of anger.

There was nothing he could do about it. He could not go to the Cathrodyne authorities and plead for forgiveness—the stern-faced Cathrodynes did not forgive such behavior. He would suffer, first, and then die. And dying did not seem to be worth it.

Somehow, he would cling to life. But his life would be here, at Waystation.

Maybe—he caught at a fugitive gleam of hope—maybe he could still be of some use. Maybe he could become like

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Larwik, agent of a disease gnawing at Cathrodyne supremacy, although the foul nature of Larwik's work had revolted him.

He remembered Majkosi in an agony of sorrow—remembered the dull industrial town where he had been born and grown up; remembered the people who wore drab clothing and had to step aside into the gutter when arrogant Cathrodyne officials came down the sidewalk, and who still managed to preserve a spark of independence; remembered the face of his father and the pride it had shown when he learned that his son was acting as a courier for the revolutionary movement in which he had himself for years taken part . . .

Majkosi, he found himself thinking, was a grey world—not of its nature, but because Cathrodyne domination cast a shadow over even the brightest day.

He would not see it again.

The chill finality of what had happened finally froze the pain in his mind to a mere ache. He debated with himself what he should do. Was it worth the risk to go back to his ship and get his belongings? He thought not; Liger had been so angry he had probably already notified the Cathrodyne authorities, and if he stepped outside Glaithe protection even for a moment he would be seized and jailed.

A group of Cathrodyne youths emerged from the Ocean within a short distance of him, laughing and spluttering, and began to play tag up the slopes of the foothills. Their gaiety mocked him, and by contrast his misery seemed that much more insupportable. He wished he could shout to them, tell them what he was suffering—but even if he did, they would not understand; they would don their Cathrodyne sneers and say that it served him right, if they condescended to answer a member of a subject race at all.

There was, though, somebody he could tell, who he was sure would understand—and whom he ought to tell, soon. He got up and plodded, head bowed more than ever under his burden of regret, toward a chute out of the tourist circuit.

He found his way as though in a dream to the familiar red-

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lit corridor on the level at which the elevator car never ordinarily stopped; he pressed the admission button on the door of the little office, and went in.

He was thinking: *of course, she may not be here just now; she may be out at work in the reception halls or somewhere*—when he belatedly understood what he was seeing and began to stammer apologies.

The strange red soft plastic material which usually had the form of two chairs, and which seemed to be the sole furniture of the cabin, was flat on the floor like a kind of thick mattress. The featureless bulkheads had changed; there on his left a hidden cupboard door had been slid back to show a row of clothing hanging up and some shoes and sandals in a rack, while opposite it a similar door was open to disclose a collection of printed and taped books. There were other similar changes.

They had not at first registered on his mind because the cabin was as dim as the corridor outside, the usual lighting turned down to a pale twilight glow. And in that glow Raige was starting awake, sleepy-eyed, under a shiny silk coverlet, lying on the thick soft plastic that served her as a bed.

She collected herself in a moment, and cut short his babble of excuses. "No matter, Vykor—you must have a reason, and you look so miserable! What is wrong?"

She sat up, contriving to wrap the coverlet around her so that Vykor caught no more than a glimpse of bare shoulder and a tantalizing curve of breast, and switched on the lights. She looked as tiny and fragile as a porcelain ornament with her bare toes peeping out from under the coverlet. Vykor licked his lips.

"I've been a fool," he said. "I don't think it was all my fault, but—"

She indicated that he should squat down on the plastic mat, and he did so awkwardly, trying not to look at her too directly. In abrupt, staccato phrases he recounted what had happened and why he was no longer going to be a free man. Raige listened in utter stillness, her small head tilted a little to one side.

"And that's it," said Vykor bitterly at the end. "I've

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been driven into throwing away my whole life on a stupid burst of annoyancel"

"Poor Vykor," said Raige, and laid a soft little hand on his arm. The touch was like a trigger; he bent his head down and felt his belly-muscles tighten in the first of many racking sobs.

He was only vaguely aware of Raige rising lithely to her feet behind him and moving at the edge of his tear-blurred vision. There was a hushing sound as the coverlet fell in a silken pile beside him. When he could raise his head and see clearly again, Raige was standing before him knotting the girdle of a plain white floor-length gown, her face more full of emotion than he could ever remember seeing it before.

"Come now," she said quietly, and gentled him to his feet with a brush of her hand. She bent down to the soft plastic mat and did something he could not quite follow, and it split in two. From each part she deftly formed one of the familiar chairs he had seen on his other visits, and made him sit down in the nearer.

"This will help," she said, turning to open another hidden door in the bulkheads and taking from a compartment beyond a small, beautifully shaped jug and two little mugs.

She poured for him and for herself and handed him one of the mugs. Convulsively, he sucked at the liquor and found it bland in the mouth, fiery in the belly, with a sudden comforting glow spreading through his body after a few moments.

Meanwhile, Raige settled into the other chair facing him, crossed her legs with delicate precision and tucked the front of the white gown between her knees. "You're very young, Vykor—aren't you?" she said.

He nodded apathetically. "I'm nearly twenty," he said in hesitant tones.

"And what has been your life up till now?"

He shrugged. "Ordinary enough. I did well in school, and when I was fifteen I was selected for local administrative training; then more or less by accident I was allotted to the spaceport staff near my home, and from there I moved on to purser's apprentice and finally got to be a steward on liners. And it turned out that people had been watching me. I was

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asked to bring some dispatches out here when the regular courier was taken sick; during the trip after that I was assigned to be your contact."

"And that's all? No, of course not. There are your parents waiting, and your friends—and a girl, perhaps?"

Vykor shook his head. Of course there wasn't a girl! He hesitated on the point of saying why not, and remembered that Raige after all was twice his age, and decided that he did not dare.

But he could hint at it, as it were. He said awkwardly, "It would have had to be a girl I could—could work with and admire as well as . . . well, you know. That's the only consolation I can think of about what's happened."

Raige took the tiniest sip of the liquor in her mug and nodded thoughtfully. "Yet life at Waystation need not be so bad, Vykor. I have spent nearly half my life here, except for leave at home once a year. You know that to us from Glai Waystation is far more than a possession, as Majkosi is to Cathrodyne or Alchmida to Pagr. It represents hope to us, and a shield against—against alien domination. But it also means work: night-long, day-long, life-long, without errors of judgment or lapses of attention.

"At first it was such an incredible strain I didn't think I could stand it. Then an affair which I had organized—a little individual part of a greater scheme—passed off successfully, and I began to see what I was here for, what I was doing and what it meant to other people. You probably feel the same about the work you've been doing for the Majko revolutionaries, don't you? The first sense of achievement in real life?"

Vykor nodded. That was exactly what he felt.

"Some day soon," continued Raige meditatively, putting out one hand and stroking the luxuriously curved side of the jug she had brought from the cupboard, "which is to say in another five or six years, I shall have to build a new life, too. I shall go home to Glai, and choose my husband, and bear the children who are waiting for me—they've been waiting since I was first assigned to duty here."

She looked down thoughtfully at the front of her slender

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body, as though picturing it in imagination as it would be when she began her family.

"One way, I shall be luckier than you. I shall have some few certainties on which to build my new life. And one way you are now luckier than I shall be. I shall have no surprises—I shall never again have that very wonderful experience when certain disaster turns into rewarding success . . ." Her voice trailed into pensive silence.

"But you, Vykor," she said after a pause, "can hope, and rather more than hope. I have watched and studied you since you became my courier. You haven't become a Waystation resident as most Majkos have done before—through what one must call selfishness, or inadequacy. From the purely material point of view you will have a far better life on Waystation than you could hope for at home. But that doesn't count with you, does it?"

"I'd rather be stranded at home, never to see Waystation or the inside of a spaceship again," said Vykor forcefully, "and be able to go on working for what I believe in."

"You'll be able to do that," said Raige. "What sort of life do you see for yourself here, now?"

"I haven't had time to give it much thought," said Vykor. "I suppose I could"—he hesitated, then remembered Larwik's assurance that the Glaites knew about this—"I could help in the dreamweed traffic to Cathrodyne. Or just take a concession in the tourist circuit and spend my life fooling with the rich holidaymakers . . ."

"Or you could become an associate member of the staff—perhaps even go to Glai some time, if you'd like to."

Vykor could hardly believe his ears. "I . . . that would be wonderful!" he stammered. "I always wanted to go to Glai. I admire your people so much for all they've done for us—"

"I thought you did," said Raige, and gave a little smile. "That message of gratitude you delivered, for instance, had a personal ring about it. Oh, we're not angels, Vykor! Not by a long, long way. This dreamweed traffic, for example: you musn't think we support it and help it along because it's a tool to free your world from Cathrodyne rule. We do so because it's in our interest to weaken both Cathrodyne and Pagr.

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Similarly, we take every chance we get to humiliate one or the other of them, to remind them that Glai accepts orders from no one. Sometimes we are forced to adopt cruel tactics, which make us ashamed, simply to preserve our freedom."

She spread her hands. "But one day, Vykor, one day! We have our ambitions for the future, too, as you hope for Majkosi to be independent, and as Pagr and Cathrodyne each hopes to seize Waystation. I'm prejudiced, probably, but I believe what we hope for is better than what anyone else in the Arm wants. Maybe you'll become convinced of that, too, and if you do, you'll be able to be happy again."

## XII

"No, I'm afraid not," said Raige, and gave an apologetic half-smile.

"But why not?" said Ligmer insistently, leaning forward so that he could put his right hand on the desk at which Raige sat in the official administration block of her station. This was the public section of Glaithe territory; so far as outsiders knew, it corresponded to Cathrodyne or Pag territory.

Or rather: so far as most outsiders knew. Whether it was due to loss of secrecy, or merely to ingenious deduction, it seemed that these two outsiders—Ligmer and his Pag opposite number, Usri—had penetrated the disguise protecting the Glaithe's private section of Waystation.

Raige set her face in a severe expression. "You have to admit, Ligmer," she said primly, "that neither you Cathrodynes nor the Pags have a very good record with regard to Waystation. You have both in the past attempted to gain control of the station for yourselves. Agreed, it is good to see that you are capable of working in co-operation as well as against one another; but I have small doubt that if you were permitted access to the information you want you would each



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immediately start thinking of ways in which it could be turned to the advantage of your own people and the disadvantage of others."

She uttered the speech in a lecturing tone, and was taken aback by the expression of satisfaction which crossed Usri's face when she had finished.

"Well, that tells us one thing," the Pag said. "We're correct in our guesswork. If we were wrong, you'd cheerfully let us go ahead and look for knowledge you were certain we'd never find—because it wouldn't be there. Your record isn't entirely clean either, Captain Raige; and you cannot deny that."

"We do what is necessary to preserve the neutrality of Waystation," said Raige stiffly.

"Including giving shelter to renegades," said Ligmer sourly. "How neutral is that?"

Raige looked ostentatiously puzzled.

"Oh, you know what I mean!" snapped Ligmer. "There was a Majko yesterday—a steward off one of our liners. You're too well informed not to know about him. Publicly insulted Cathrodyne by claiming that we rule Majkosi unjustly—"

"In that case," interrupted Raige, "we are happy to welcome him and give him asylum here. As you well know, Ligmer, our administration of Waystation is the only thing that prevents one or the other of your two empires from annexing us also. We can hardly deny to members of your so-called 'subject' races a freedom we enjoy ourselves."

Ligmer made an indignant rejoinder; Raige ignored him and looked down at the written application form on the desk. It had reached her a few hours ago, closely followed by the two archeologists in person to demand action on it.

They requested access to the pictorial records section of the memory banks—those giant electronic recorders hidden in the very heart of Waystation, shielded by all its bulk from the interstellar noise which could confuse or distort their delicate patterns. Some of them, nonetheless, had become unusable over the millennia, and the rest the Glaites had deciphered only with extreme difficulty and sometimes suspected inaccuracy. A single ultra-high energy cosmic ray particle could upset the balance in a thousand important circuits,

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garbling the information therein or even changing its sense completely.

And they had a very specific object in mind.

"Mark you," said Usri, "it's pretty obvious why they're scared to release such information. If the Bringer theory is confirmed, this will imply that all the races of the Arm are in fact descended from the builders of Waystation, and should be permitted to share in it equally. This is a long way from the monopoly Glai enjoys at present."

She spoke directly to Ligner, giving Raige a sidelong look to make sure the words went home.

"Scholar Usri is wrong, of course," said Raige without raising her head. "On that count and on the previous one. I honestly do not know whether this information does exist. If it does, and if it confirms the Bringer theory, it would not change the situation at all. I repeat: Pagr and Cathrodyne have both attempted to seize monopoly control of Waystation. We at least permit people of all races to come and go freely and to live here in undisputed peace; we cannot enforce this equitable treatment outside the limits of the station, but we would if we could."

Ligner gave vent to a disgusted snort. "All right then!" he said sharply. "Tell us why you deny us access to the master memory banks, when we are engaged in our professional pursuit of knowledge—and yet you give permission to someone who is not even a citizen of one of the systems of the Arm at all!"

There was a long silence. At length Raige said in genuine mystification, "Who do you mean? I've not heard of such a case."

"No?" said Usri, heavy with sarcasm. "Then how was it that we saw this man Lang coming out of the memory bank halls yesterday?"

Raige shook her head. "I didn't know about this. I will investigate if you like. It is possible that someone on our staff agreed to show him over the memory bank halls because he is a distinguished visitor, but it is perfectly certain that he would not have been allowed access to any information that has not been generally released."

Ligner got to his feet. "There is something rather un-

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pleasant about you Glaithes," he said. "Behind your facade of righteousness and impartiality you descend to some very nasty tricks."

Usri copied him, and towered over the doll-like figure of Raige as she remained seated. "Agreed!" said the Pag, curling back her upper lip to show her one filed tooth. "Can you expect my people to abandon their belief in the Pag origin of Waystation, for instance, if you will not permit scientific assessment of the facts?"

Impassively, Raige pressed the door-catch release on the desk. "You may leave," she said. And scowling, they did so.

When they left the office, Raige sat for a short while staring into space. Of course, it was entirely possible that Lang had been given a guided tour of the memory bank halls; it was also possible—but unlikely—that Ligmer and Usri had invented the story.

Somehow, though, she felt sure they hadn't—she remembered that Vykor had claimed to see Lang somewhere else where he shouldn't have been. Sighing, she contacted Indle on the internal communicator system.

"Indle, do you remember that young Majko, Vykor, who said he'd seen the man from out of eye-range in our quarters?"

"I do," Indle answered.

"I just had a report that Lang has also been seen emerging from the memory bank halls. Did anyone give him authority to visit them?"

"No!" said Indle positively. "No one could have granted such permission without my knowing about it; I'm responsible for all visitors to that section. Do you think the report is genuine?"

"Ninety-nine per cent sure." Raige hesitated. "Would you try and confirm it, though? Perhaps one of our staff on duty at the time saw him as well."

"Most unlikely—they'd have reported it. And this is the first I've heard. However, I'll let you know if I discover anything."

He broke the connection, sounding worried, and Raige gave a wry smile. That would hardly be surprising under the circumstances.

For a casual visitor, Lang was causing entirely too much

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trouble. There was the fact that Vykor believed him to be responsible for the fit of anger which was costing him his chance of going home. There was the episode in their private quarters. There was this conversation Vykor had also reported—about the various theories of Waystation's origin. There was . . .

She checked herself. Apart from the unexplained intrusion in the Glaithe quarters, which only Vykor vouched for, there was nothing certain in any of this. Perhaps she was yielding to the intuition she had felt when Vykor's ship came in, and imagination was strengthening her suspicions.

This joint visit from a Pag and a Cathrodyne together was a far more substantial matter to work on. It had been known for a long time that the mutual distrust of the two races was giving place bit by bit to a grudging respect, not to say admiration. The trend was assisted by the fact that both of them disliked the Glaithe as much as they detested one another.

And it had likewise been known that there were Pags like Usri who wished to see the nonsensical propaganda which was Pagr's official line replaced by something with a scientific foundation. So much was accountable.

What was not accountable was the story she had had from Vykor about the Cathrodyne officer called Ferenc. As Vykor had seen him on the trip out, he had appeared to be a typical intransigent diehard, so intolerant of Pags that he had nearly come to blows with the Pag officer who traveled with him.

Yet he had struck up an acquaintance with Usri in the City, apparently forgetting his previous animosity and talking in a friendly way.

This suggested two explanations. The first: Ferenc had put up a front during the trip out from Cathrodyne; it was just conceivable that he had undergone a change of heart since he had been a member of the Cathrodyne staff at Waystation some time before. Raige had never met him during his previous stay—he had been a comparatively junior officer, engaged in routine administration work. But the Glaithe painstakingly recorded every scrap of information they could glean about the foreign staffs on the station, and she had

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found from Ferenc's old dossier that a change of heart was improbable if not out of the question.

That left: a definite change of Cathrodyne policy. A new soft line of approach might be planned. Genuine? Or a cover for something else? Past analogy favored the latter—Pag and Cathrodyne had for long been worse bedfellows than lamb and lion.

Besides, if Ferenc had been sent out to Waystation (she did not believe for a moment that he was really on furlough) as a result of a change of policy at home, he would also have been a man who had had a change of heart, the relaxation at the top would have produced a corresponding personality at the bottom. But Ferenc wouldn't have felt it necessary to disguise such a change of heart by affecting intolerance during the trip out.

Raige sighed. The double-dealing complexity of work at Waystation was sometimes almost too much for her, and she found herself aching for the day when she would go back to Glai and bear those children that waited in the ovum bank for her arrival.

So the Cathrodynes must be on to something important enough for them to swallow their national pride and be polite to the Pags while they followed their discovery up. They must also be sure enough of themselves to allow Pags—in the person of Usri and others—to get a partial view of it. She lifted up Ligmer's application to get data from the memory banks. It asked for a comparative evaluation of design principles here in the structure of Waystation and in the ships that had been found fossilized in lava flows on Pagr.

Innocent enough, at first glance. But it might be deadly.

Evaluation of design principles, properly carried out, would reveal one thing right away: The maps published by the Glaites and supposed to show Waystation accurately did in fact contain deliberately misleading information. This would indicate the existence of the heretofore concealed Glaithe private quarters—which formed a vast network all through the station, under, around and between the sections allotted to other races, so that the Glaites could watch and be alert at all times.

Of course, that need not prove fatal; knowledge that this

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web of concealed cabins and corridors existed did not give a clue to the special elevator codes needed to enter it. But it might lead to the knowledge beyond, the knowledge which the Glaithes hoped desperately might remain their secret for ever, or until Pag and Cathrodyne no longer squabbled among the stars of the Arm.

The knowledge that in the heart of Waystation, yet further toward the center than the memory banks, still waited the incredible, unbelievable engines whose slumbering power had once hurled Waystation from star to star across the galaxy.

### XIII

"LIGMER! I want to have a word with you!"

At the crackle of Ferenc's voice, the archeologist halted in his tracks and swung round. He was returning to the cabin which had been allotted him in the Cathrodyne section of Waystation for the duration of his stay. His head had been full of anger at what he regarded as the arbitrary refusal by Raige of his request; he had been sure that to put it jointly in the name of himself and Usri would ensure acceptance.

Still in the casual civilian clothes which suited his upright frame so poorly, Ferenc came down the corridor with a set expression. He nodded at the door of the cabin outside which Ligmer had halted.

"This one yours?"

"Uh—no. The next one along."

"All right." Ferenc went past him swiftly and shoved open the door, standing slightly aside and gesturing to Ligmer to enter. As soon as he had done so, Ferenc followed and shut the door again.

He sat down in the nearest chair, leaving Ligmer to make do with the couch, and gave him a scowl. "I suppose you've

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been thinking some pretty disgraceful things about me," he said after a pause. He uttered the words as though they cost him a great effort.

"Why?" parried Ligmer.

"Don't give me that! Because after all that I said—and meant—during the trip here, you found me fraternizing with a Pag. Right?"

"It did seem strange," Ligmer agreed cautiously. "But now I think you had a reason for it."

"Damned right I did. And so that you can watch yourself when this Usri woman is around you—which looks like being most of the time, though *I* can't stand Pag company for more than a few minutes together no matter how much I drive myself—I got General-Marshal Temmis' permission to enlighten you about the reason."

"Oh," said Ligmer in a flat voice. It was clear from his face that he thought he had probably already committed some embarrassing blunder.

"I told Temmis when I got here that I didn't think it was wise for you to be allowed to muck around on your own in Pag company. Still, he said the High Council agreed to your assignment here, so I can't press the matter. After what happened, though, I suggested I ought to warn you to keep your nose clean.

"You know what gets done to people who don't keep their secrets properly?"

Ligmer swallowed and nodded.

"But I don't have much in the way of secrets," he ventured.

"You're just about to acquire one," said Ferenc grimly, and ran over the orders which Temmis had given him on his arrival, with the facts behind them as an explanation for his own unprecedented and out-of-character behavior.

As he progressed, a light seemed to dawn on Ligmer, and at the end he was nodding slowly, back and forth, back and forth. "*That's why*," he said in a satisfied tone as Ferenc's last words died into silence.

"Why what?" Ferenc's first reaction after his long speech had been relief at getting it over with; now he pounced alertly on Ligmer's words.

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"Why Captain Raige wouldn't agree my application that I filed together with Scholar Usri." Ligmner felt in the pockets of his slacks and produced a duplicate of the application. Ferenc almost snatched it from his hand.

"I don't see the connection," he said after a pause. He sounded reluctant to admit the fact.

"Well . . . maybe I'm wrong, then. But Usri and I deliberately phrased the application to look innocuous. We'd been talking over these relics of prehistoric spaceships alleged to have been found on Pagr—and by the way, it now looks as if they really exist—"

"I find that hard to swallow," grunted Ferenc. "Go on."

"Well, we succeeded in isolating two or three quite distinctive design principles in the fossil remains of these ships. I won't go into details, since it's all rather technical, but it's a development of a process my instructor at university invented for classifying types of engineering design.

"This could be the clue to a final demolition of Pag propaganda regarding Waystation. Or it might not. We shan't know, now, unless the Glaithes have a change of heart on the matter. Raige turned the application down cold. And now it seems likely that it was because a careful study of design principles in the structure of Waystation would at once reveal the distortions they've put into their maps."

Ferenc slapped his open palm on his thigh. "You may have something," he said. "You're not such a muddlehead as I thought you were when I first met you. You can't think of any other reason why Raige should have turned down the application?"

"No. Unless she was just feeling obstinate, and refused on principle."

"Not likely that. The Glaithes are cool customers—don't let their impulses run away with them. Speaking of impulses running away with them, what in the galaxy possessed you to let this steward Vykor escape when he'd insulted Cathrodyn?"

Ligmner flushed to the tips of his ears. This story was going to haunt him for ages; he could see that. He said defensively, "It was in the tourist circuit, and there wasn't very much I could do, was there? I reported the matter right away, and so



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far as I've heard he hasn't attempted to show his nose around his ship again."

"He still gets away with it, damn it! Thanks to those slimy Glaithes . . . Well, no good wasting worry on unimportant things like that."

A click sounded in the facsimile message pan on the wall of the cabin beside the bunk. Ligmer grunted and lifted the lid to reveal the message slip. He read it, and held it out to Ferenc, speechless with annoyance.

Under the code number of Ligmer's cabin, Ferenc read:

*Our inquiries have failed to reveal that anyone invited Lang to visit the memory bank halls. Consequently I must assume Scholar Usri and yourself to have been mistaken.*

It was signed, "Raige, Captain."

Ferenc scowled and gave it back. "This means . . .?" he demanded.

Ligmer briefly ran over the reason for the message. "But damnation!" he exploded at the end. "We were not mistaken. We were going around the various chutes leading into the tourist circuit and checking a few superficial points of the design of each so that we could decide whether or not it was worth sending in this application to Raige.

"You know that the entries to the memory bank halls are in the tourist circuit; there's an opinion that in fact the whole layout of the tourist circuit—the hovers, the garbage clearance and all the rest—is directly controlled by some portion or other of the banks. Usually, they're screened off at ground level.

"But you can see them from the mouth of a chute if it happens to be in the right relationship with them. We were in Chute Number Platinum at just such a moment, and we both saw Lang clearly and distinctly. Maybe we could have mistaken someone else for him, but who else carries a black-furred pet animal like that ghastly yapping creature he owns?"

"What was he doing?" Ferenc looked grim.

"Just coming out. I don't know how he passed the entries—I've been there a couple of times, when I was here as a student, and they were always secured and quartered to my knowledge."

"Then it's possible he hadn't actually been past the en-

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tries?"

"No! This entry was open, and closed as he came away."

"Temmis ought to know about this," said Ferenc with sudden decision. "We can't let Raige get away with calling you a liar, even if she accuses Usri at the same time."

The bald-headed chief of staff heard them out, nodding at the telling points of their narrative, and when they had finished slapped his hand down on his desk with a sound like a pistol.

"I want to know about this man Lang," he said crisply. "I think we should keep an eye on him. Obviously he's not what he pretends to be; obviously the Glaithe have an interest in him, if they're willing to cover up for him. You've spoken to him since your arrival, you say?" His sharp eyes fixed on Ligmer.

"Yes. As Officer Ferenc said, I and Scholar Usri discussed the theory of the origins of Waystation with him. Scholar Usri said something interesting afterwards. She said she had a feeling that he knew more about Waystation without having been there before than we did, who'd studied it."

"Humph! Wouldn't bet my money on a Pag's guesswork—but as you say, it's interesting that she should have made a remark like that." Temmis thumbed a stud on his desk, and a smart uniformed orderly presented himself at the door of the office.

"Find out from Glaithe reception or from their admin service where the stranger from out of eye-range, Lang, is accommodated," Temmis ordered him. "And if possible, find out where he is at the moment."

They waited in silence for the few minutes it took the orderly to go and come back. When he did, he wore a puzzled look.

"They say, noble sir," he told Temmis, "that he was assigned cabin G1-1420—that's in the Glaithe section, just close to the tourist circuit. They've put people from beyond the Arm there before, when there've been any."

"Ah!" said Temmis, and gave Ferenc and Ligmer a meaningful glance. "That's indicative! In the Glaithe section!"

"But, sir," pursued the orderly doggedly, "he never went

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to the cabin—his baggage is still exactly as it came from the delivery chute, the toilet materials are untouched, the meters show no record of water having been used in the washbasin, and the key-seal on the door appears not to have been broken since the cabin was last tenanted."

"But that's ridiculous!" snapped Temmis. The orderly gulped and looked unhappy.

"Yes, sir! That's what they told me, though."

"Right; dismissed," said Temmis with a frown. When the orderly had gone, he pressed the call-switch on his desk communicator and spoke to a staff officer.

"Colonel! How many personnel have you off-duty and in the section at the moment?"

"Approximately thirty-five, sir," the colonel's voice reported. "I can recall others if necessary, though."

"Thirty-five should be enough. I want a complete survey made of every accessible part of Waystation. We're looking for the stranger from out of eye-range."

"This man Lang? Yes, sir. Will do at once. What shall I tell them to do if they spot him?"

"Tell 'em to work in pairs, and then have one follow him, the other report in to me personally as fast as he can."

"Right, sir," the colonel said, and broke the connection.

It was more than an hour later when he called back, his voice unhappy. "We've hunted high and low, sir," he stated. "Reliable personnel have checked the tourist circuit, the Majko and Lubarrian sections, the public offices in the Glaithe section and those areas of the private section we could get into, and as much of the Alchmid section as was possible without running into Pag opposition. No one has seen hide nor hair of the man Lang for several hours."

Temmis nodded slowly, saying nothing. The colonel waited anxiously for a moment, then went on: "Any further instructions, sir?"

"Continue by relays till he shows up," Temmis told him, and flicked the switch. He raised his eyes to the others.

"Well, that means he could be in"—he checked the points on his fingers—"Pag territory, which is unlikely and may be discounted; a private corner of the Caves, having a good time with some good-time girl, which from his apparent na-

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ture seems almost as unlikely; or—and this does seem likely in view of what you've told me—some part of the Glaithe section which is forbidden to visitors."

He dropped his hands to the desk and folded them together. "In any case," he said softly, looking beyond the others and seemingly through the bulkhead of the cabin, "I'm getting very anxious indeed to speak to this man Lang. Not been to his cabin! Not to be found in any of the obvious places in Waystation! It must mean something—and I'm determined to find out what."

### XIV

"GET ACQUAINTED with Waystation," Raige had told him. "Not just the dock, the reception hall, the service areas, your own Majko section—all of it!"

Vykor was despondently trying to do exactly that. She had issued him an allowance of currency scrip to cover his needs for the immediate future and advised him to go and spend it in the tourist circuit first of all—to try and improve his mood.

But it was all meaningless to him now.

He had wandered through the City again, seeing a couple of free Majkos that he knew and exchanging a greeting, without mentioning that he had now become one of them. The news had reached them already; they congratulated him with one breath and commiserated with the next.

Now he was entering the mouth of the Caves, the one part of the tourist circuit he had not seen before—and the realization did what nothing else had done so far: pierced his apathy. There were rumors about the Caves, most of which he was fairly sure were true, and he had had a stern enough upbringing to make him ashamed of being seen there.

"That sort of thing is fit only for decadents like the Cath-

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rodynes"—how many times had he heard self-righteous voices at home utter just such a sentiment?

So, even now that he had become an expatriate, an out-cast, he hesitated before the entrance, looking up.

There was something odd about the Caves. They did not run under the Mountains, as might have been expected. They existed independently, like the Plains and the Ocean. Sometimes they were adjacent to one, sometimes to the other. But they, like everything else in the tourist circuit, moved on in a majestic slow cycle.

He strained his eyes to see past the Caves on either side and failed. Ahead of him, there was this dark-blue glowing entrance, a pointed, narrow, upright opening in something of semi-luminous blue-green, crusted and rough as though hung with dried organic residues. Light caught on tiny glittering points here and there and sparkled suddenly as he moved his head.

Hand-in-hand two masked Glaithes in gaudy holiday attire walked past him and were swallowed up in the blue-green gloom. Past them, odd noises—here a sharp cry, bitten off at the end; there a dull gurgling like water running into a hollow vessel; again, a series of a dozen heavy thuds—drifted to Vykor's ears.

He took a tentative step forward, and felt something firm yet yielding underfoot—sand, loosely packed. Some of it got into his openwork sandals, and he shook it out irritably.

Then at last he set his shoulders back and summoned the courage to walk straight ahead.

Beyond the entrance there was a short passage, rather low and cramped, so that at one point he had to duck his head a little to avoid an overhang which glowed eerie turquoise in color. He felt that he was going downwards, although there was no visible declivity.

Beyond the overhang, he came into a wider space, with a stream of clear water tumbling down one of its walls into a broad, shallow pool at the bottom. The floor of the pool also glowed a little. Sitting in the pool, wrapped from neck to ankles in a thick cloth like a blanket, a Lubarrian girl was cupping up water in one hand and pouring it over the other, alternately. Many of the residents of the half-world of the

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Caves were Lubarrians, as a consequence of the sensual religion they had acquired from their Cathrodyne masters. It had never struck root on Majkosi, and Vykor could not tell whether this action was symbolic of something or not. From the intent, ritualistic way in which the girl carried out her repetitive actions he suspected that it might be.

He went on further, and came to a long passage where one wall had been hollowed out every few yards to form a series of alcoves. Some of the alcoves had red curtains drawn across their mouths; as he passed, he heard grunts and movements from behind the curtains. One of them had a sort of black halfdoor, over which an Alchmid youth leaned, his eyes unseeing, his hands clenching and unclenching, his mouth slightly open as a bit of shining spittle ran over his lower lip. There were many Alchmids here, too—degraded by their addiction to dreamweed. Vykor shuddered and hurried past the boy. He seemed only a little younger than Vykor himself.

Beyond there, the passage branched into two; he hesitated, and took the right-hand branch because he thought he could hear music coming from it. He had barely entered it when there was a sudden high-pitched cry, followed by a scream of laughter, and an Alchmid girl wearing a skimpy cloth around her hips and a nearly transparent veil which floated behind her came running and giggling down the passage, almost colliding with him.

Behind her came a Majko of Vykor's own people, shouting breathlessly and waving a half-full bottle of purple liquor. He caught the girl as she stumbled in avoiding Vykor, and gave a triumphant cry as he turned and dragged her back up the passage.

Vykor followed them at a distance, and was relieved to find when he came out once again into a large open space that here there was feasting and dancing going on, to the music of a small band. Glaithes, Alchmids, Lubarrians, Majkos, even two bleary-eyed Cathrodynes, sat around a broad flat table lit by flaring wicks stuck in the necks of bottles, and yelled to him to stop and join them.

He considered doing so. Then he saw that there was an Alchmid girl, wearing a fantastic garb of red and white ruffles, sitting next to a Majko of middle age, who was carefully

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distilling dreamweed over the flame of one of the wicks on the table. Ready at her hand lay the sharp, crystalline spike with which the tarry-brown preparation of the drug was injected. The Majko was feverishly begging her to be quick about her task.

Vykor averted his eyes quickly, and hurried across the space in front of the band, having to avoid the clutching hands of a Lubarrian girl who rose from her place at table as he went by. He almost fell over the prostrate body of another Cathrodyne at the foot of the bandstand; the man clutched in his hand a bottle which was slopping its contents over his chest as it rose and fell with his breathing. His face smiled beatifically.

Again, there was a short passage, and again there was water running at the end of it. This time it was in the form of a shallow sparkling brook across the passage floor, and he was in it up to his ankles before he realized. Something snatched at his legs, and he gave a cry of alarm as he looked down.

It was a girl—a Lubarrian again—who sat hidden in the opening in the cave wall from which the stream floated, dressed in a shapeless garment of some stiff plastic material that made dull noises as she moved.

"Come and enjoy me?" she said, laughing with a great flash of white teeth. "It's good in the warm running water!"

Vykor muttered something and pulled his leg free. As he went on, sandals squelching, she shouted something after him and then gave an exaggerated sigh.

This whole area seemed to be laced and cross-hatched with pools, streams and little cascades; he picked his way among many, each occupied by a girl. Some were occupied by more than one person, he thought, but when this was the case a sort of isolated pool of impervious darkness formed a barrier.

There was someone coming up ahead: a fat figure, chuckling as it walked. It seemed vaguely familiar. Vykor dodged into an embrasure in the wall, for he had no wish to encounter anyone he knew here, and waited tensely.

It was a man of middle age, masked. He came into the middle of the open area, halted with his feet placed wide

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apart, and looked slowly about him. Then he threw up his arms in a gesture of astonishment, and exclaimed delightedly, "But this is paradise!"

Half a dozen girls who had not noticed his arrival—clad in sequins, braids and tassels that dripped water, or nothing at all—looked round to see who had spoken and clamored for his favors. Chuckling and giggling, he started on a tour of inspection.

Vykor closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall of the embrasure where he stood. That voice was unmistakable; it was Dardaino, the priest who had come out to be the new chaplain of the "free" Lubarrians at Waystation. And this, of course, was where one might expect to find him. Plainly the sensual religion of which he was the proponent had some ritual involvement with water.

He was looking cautiously to see whether there was a chance of slipping out unobserved, when heavy footsteps were heard in the same passages as that which Dardaino had come down. In a moment, two brawny Cathrodynes in uniform, each carrying a powerful flashlight, entered and stood pointing their beams of light like swords.

Dardaino gave a squeak like a frightened animal, and one of the Cathrodynes stepped up to him and took him by the arm.

"Have you seen anything of the stranger from out of eyerange, the man called Lang?" he demanded, after giving Dardaino a contemptuous, sweeping glare.

"No! On my life, no!"

"All right," said the man, and let him go. He swung his light again; the embrasure protected Vykor as he huddled back, shadowing him so that they failed to notice him, and they went on.

Dardaino sat down on an outcropping rock and wiped his face with a large kerchief, furtively raising his mask to do so and slipping it back into position hurriedly afterwards.

If Dardaino was going to spend much of his time here in the Caves, then Larwik wouldn't have to worry about getting him addicted to dreamweed—it would happen of itself.

Taking advantage of the fact that the man's back was turned, Vykor scurried from his hiding-place and made for



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the tunnel. This one was banded with patches of alternate light and dark; one of the dark areas concealed a sharp bend, and he barely turned aside in time to avoid hitting the wall. As he did so, he ran into someone and gave a startled cry, catching hold of the other's small, warm shoulder to stop himself overbalancing.

The person he had collided with stepped back into light, and he regarded her with puzzled eyes. Her. It was Raige, in a loose, flowing shirt of yellow crusted with sequins, that came halfway down her thighs, and thonged open sandals. Her pale bare legs were tensed so that the muscles of her calves stood in flat planes behind.

"Why, Vykor!" she said in astonishment. "Are you running from something?"

"N-not exactly," said Vykor. His mind was full of wild suspicions as he stared at her. The luxurious, shining fabric of the shirt which seemed to be her only garment gave her a sensual appearance so far from her habitual grave calm that he could scarcely believe his eyes.

"Did those Cathrodynes run into you?" Raige pressed him.

"I—I managed to dodge them," Vykor told her. "But they caught and questioned Dardaino."

"That one? He would be here! He thinks of his bodily urges all day and all night." Raige gave a little musical chuckle. "And what think you of the Caves, Vykor, your first time?"

"They are squalid and unpleasant," said Vykor, looking at the floor.

Raige regarded him speculatively. "Yesssss," she said in a voice that faded slowly to silence. Then after a pause, "Come—I'll guide you to the outside."

She put out her hand and turned in the same moment: without thinking, Vykor took her cool fingers in his, and did not realize till seconds had passed that this was something he had dreamed of and never dared hope. Was the amazing, infallible woman whom he had so long admired actually as weak and human as those—girls back there . . . ?

He repelled the idea, and followed meekly to the outside. They emerged very quickly, on a stretch of shore beside the Ocean, not far from the Mountains. There Raige stopped and

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turned to him. She didn't withdraw her hand; it was as though she had forgotten about it.

"It was well that you escaped those Cathrodynes," she said. "Though it's not you they're hunting. They have been scouring Waystation for Lang, and cannot find him. And what is stranger still, we—ourselves—do not know where he is."

"You—you do not know?" said Vykor, almost gaping.

She nodded and shrugged. A breeze off the Ocean tugged at the hem of her shirt. And then, in the same moment, her eyes widened, and she pulled her hand loose from Vykor's to point with it over his shoulder. He swung round, startled.

And saw Lang, whom so many people had been unable to find anywhere in Waystation, walking calmly along the beach with his pet animal playing at his feet.

## XV

THE CHANGE that came over Raige was like a miracle. In a second she regained her official manner; the yellow playshirt which had given her a casual air lost its effect, became merely clothing. She stepped forward and spoke in a clear, carrying voice.

"Lang!"

The stranger from out of eye-range half turned his head, unhurriedly, to see who had called him. Then he bent and reached down his right arm, so that his pet could scamper up it to his shoulder, and began to come towards them.

He halted five or six paces distant, and looked them over leisurely, giving Vykor a nod first and then studying Raige. Its movements oddly parallel with its master's, the creature called Sunny did the same from the vantage point of his shoulder.

There was even a certain resemblance between them, Vykor noticed. Lang's face, with its firm but rather narrow

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jaw, coming to a point, its high-bridged, thin nose and the eyes deep-set beneath sandy brows, was hardly the same in any single respect as the animal face of his pet; what they shared was a certain alertness, a never broken interest in the world around them.

"I am Captain Raige," said Raige when the silence had lasted some moments. "I am chief of the department of personnel administration, non-Glaithe branch. Accordingly, while you are at Waystation you fall within my field of responsibility."

"I am so well able to look after myself," said Lang with perfect gravity, "that I have even been able to undertake to look after another individual life besides my own." He put up his hand and scratched Sunny behind one of his pointed ears. "Do not concern yourself on my account."

"I'm afraid I must," said Raige bluntly. "You have been the cause—knowing or unknowing—of a good deal of trouble since your arrival. Moreover, you have been reported in unauthorized areas to which no one but the permanent Glaithe staff is allowed access." She stepped forward determinedly. "Please come with me to my office."

For a moment Vykor, watching in fascination, thought that she was going to succeed, and that the assumption that her request would be automatically complied with would bring Lang in her wake unquestioning.

Lang gave her a quizzical look, and shook his head very, very slightly. A trace of tension showed in Raige's neck muscles.

"You refuse?" she said.

"You might say that was my intention," Lang agreed.

"Very well," shrugged Raige. "I will have you taken there—eventually. Unless you would prefer to answer my questions here and at leisure, now."

"I'll answer such questions as I can," said Lang thoughtfully. "Yes, why not?" He looked around, selected a rock of convenient height to sit on, and tipped Sunny off his shoulder to run on the ground before relaxing onto his chosen seat.

"Go ahead," he invited, with a large gesture.

"Where have you been since your arrival at Waystation?" Raige's voice was as impersonal as ice. She had undone the

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neck of her shirt and was drawing out her tiny recorder on the end of a chain which she wore as a necklace. Her small fingers poised to note Lang's answer.

"I have been . . . in the station," said Lang. His face remained serious, but a hint of mockery danced in his eyes.

"Where exactly, please?" said Raige levelly. "You have not been to the cabin which was assigned to you—"

"Is it compulsory to spend a certain proportion of time in the cabin allotted?" broke in Lang. "If so, I plead ignorance—and fail to see why such a rule is necessary."

"There is not a rule requiring it—merely an inference that occasionally it is necessary to sleep, wash, change clothes."

"The Ocean is full of a liquid that cleanses swiftly," Lang said. "You have costume sellers all round the tourist circuit, as you call it, and as for—"

Vykor said suddenly, "What do you call it, then?"

Raige turned her head in surprise, and Lang affected polite non-comprehension. But his eyes contradicted his expression. "I? Call what?"

"The tourist circuit. You said, 'as *we* call it.' What do you think it should be called?"

Lang gave him a curious, meditative stare. "I think you are trying to read too much significance into a casual remark," he said.

Vykor shrugged. Sunny, having scratched in the ground for a few moments, seemed to become aware that something was happening and came trotting over to squat down and stare at him.

"I agree—it's neither here nor there," said Raige, and returned to her inquiries. "Lang, you have been reported in parts of Waystation to which entry is forbidden, as I said. Is this true?"

"I was informed that Waystation is neutral territory," Lang answered casually. "I have been wandering about looking and listening. Whether I infringed local regulations I do not know." He paused, and added, "Designation of a place as neutral implies to me that all may come and go as they wish."

"But you would not consider yourself free to come and go—let us say—in the bedrooms of a house belonging to even a

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close friend." Raige was studiously calm. "Where exactly have you been in the station?"

"I am a stranger here," said Lang. "I do not know what your names are for the places I have explored."

"Are you a stranger?" muttered Vykor, as though to himself. Sunny sat up on his hindquarters and waved his forelegs excitedly.

Lang chose to hear the low-voiced question, and bestowed a smile on Vykor. "Yes, young man," he said. "I am a stranger here. Why should you think I have been here before?"

Vykor hesitated. He glanced at Raige and received an almost imperceptible nod.

"Because I myself have seen you in a part of Waystation you could not possibly have entered by accident," he said.

"True—I have not entered any area by accident. I have been carrying out a systematic exploration to see as much of Waystation as I can in as short a time as possible."

"And what do you think of what you have seen?" said Raige.

Lang's face went dark on the instant, as though a thundercloud had crossed it. He said with sudden force, "It is *abominable*."

Vykor started, and glanced at Raige to see what her response would be to that. She preserved her composure, as usual, but there seemed to be a trace of disappointment in her tone as she said, "Why so?"

"I have seen . . . no happiness," said Lang surprisingly.

"None?"

"Selfishness, self-interest, lust to power, desire for satisfaction of personal urges, continual conflict, lack of security, lack of hope . . . these are what I have found at Waystation. And I have not found any attempt to set things right. I have not found anyone seeking a solution; I have seen not a single example of disinterested goodness."

He spoke with a rising passion, and on the last sentence his voice rang like a trumpet.

"You're wrong!" snapped Vykor. "Give credit to the Glaites for what they do!"

Lang leaned back, his eyes fixed on Vykor, crossed his left leg over his right and clasped its ankle. Tired of playing,

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Sunny came and rubbed his furry flank against his master's other leg.

"What?" Lang said softly. "The Pags curb their slave-subjects the Alchmids by making them dreamweed addicts. The Glaithes whom you admire curb their potential rivals the Cathrodynes by conniving at a Majko attempt to make them, also, addicts of the drug. What does this show in the way of hope? What is tomorrow?"

"The Glaithes"—he turned his gaze on Raige, bit by bit, as he went on—"arbitrarily deny to others the knowledge in the memory banks of Waystation. Is that your property, this knowledge? By what right do you arrogate it to yourselves? Merely because you think, as the Pags think and as the Cathrodynes think, that you are innately superior to others? It looks very much like it!"

Vykor was gaping. How had this man found out so much in so short a time? It seemed impossible that he should truly be as much a stranger as he claimed. He spoke out hotly.

"Wouldn't the Pags and the Cathrodynes do their best to turn this knowledge to their own advantage? If you know so much, you must have discovered that they are forever seeking a chance to stab each other in the back!"

"And who tells you that this knowledge, this information in the memory banks, would serve as a knife?" said Lang scathingly. "Moreover, does it not seem wrong to you—as a member yourself of an oppressed people—that individuals should be used as pawns in a game of power-politics? Take this poor woman Mrs. Iquida, who came out here in the same ship as we did! Do you like to see her become a tool to prod the dignity of the Cathrodynes?"

"Any way the arrogance of the Cathrodynes can be deflated seems good to me," said Vykor defiantly.

"I was afraid you might say that," Lang commented, and fell silent.

"You are an outsider," said Raige at length. She had put her recorder aside, and it hung on its chain against the bright fabric of her shirt. "It seems to me that you have little right to sit in judgment on us."

Lang sighed and gave a nod. "I have only the right of a free individual," he said. "But at least I am willing to use that

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right. Cruelty, depravity, injustice, evil of all sorts—these flourish most where individuals keep silence when they might condemn.”

He prodded Sunny with the toe of his right foot; the animal responded by running up his leg and body to his usual perch on his master’s shoulder.

“And moreover,” said Lang, apparently to himself more than to the others, “I have traveled far, and visited very many worlds. I have seen what can be made of human society, and what has been made of it. Here in the systems of the Arm you have failed in very nearly every imaginable way.”

“We have done our best,” said Raige. Lang’s tirade seemed to have affected her deeply.

“Then you must be willing to be judged by your achievement,” said Lang, and got to his feet and began to walk very slowly away along the edge of the Ocean.

Vykor was about to start after him and hold him, but Raige gestured to him. “Let him go,” she said soberly.

“But—after he refused to obey you? After he proved to know so many damaging things?”

“He is a stranger, and has no more than an abstract interest in our affairs here along the Arm.” Raige shrugged. “It is not likely, for instance, that he would tell the Cathrodynes who is responsible for starting this wave of dreamweed addiction they are so worried about. No, we must let him go.”

Despondently, Vykor sat down on the rock that was still warm from Lang’s body. “Do you—do you agree with what he said?” he ventured. “About what the Glaithes have done, in particular?”

He sounded hopeful, as though he expected Raige to deny the truth of the accusations categorically. But in this she disappointed him.

“He may be right,” she admitted. “After all, he has traveled to many worlds; he has seen much, and perhaps enough to permit him to judge us. I can only hope, for the sake of Glai, that he is talking without knowing all the facts—yet he seems to have discovered so much in such a short time I think even that consolation is denied to me.”

Vykor stared at Lang’s retreating back. Then he gave a sudden gasp, and flung up his arm, pointing.

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As Lang passed one of the openings in the rock which gave access to the Caves, two men leapt stealthily out. Cathrodynes, in uniform. They looked like the same pair who had interrogated Dardaino a short while before.

One of them knocked Sunny to the ground and clapped a baglike hood over Lang's head and shoulders; the other dived forward and wrapped his arms around Lang's legs to pinion them. In seconds, before Vykor could cry out, they had carried him off. Sunny fled yapping among the rocks.

"That," said Raige very softly, "is what I feared might happen. We cannot allow it, Vykor—and equally, we cannot do anything to prevent it."

"What are you going to do?" demanded Vykor, white-lipped.

Raige shrugged, dropping her recorder back inside her shirt and fastening it. "What we can," she said dully. "As always, what we can."

## XVI

IT WAS as well, Ligmer reflected, that he had been warned by Ferenc about the precipice he was treading so close to. It puzzled him why he should not have been warned about the Cathrodynes' discovery—their new knowledge about the real structure of Waystation—before leaving Cathrodyne.

He could so easily have let slip without realizing some information that would put the Pags on the same track!

And yet, of course, the knowledge he now had was also a distinct disadvantage. He had always discounted the Pags' extreme claims about the origins of Waystation, and had welcomed the nonconformist reactions of the rare scholars like Usri who seemed to be genuinely anxious to free themselves from prejudice and begin a scientific study of the subject. Now, of course, it was dismaying to know that this same



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trend among the Pags which he had welcomed might lead to his own people losing a valuable lead over their rivals.

He disliked Ferenc's brand of aggressive nationalism, but he regarded himself as thoroughly patriotic—as witness his strong reaction to Vykor's accusations of injustices by Cathrodynes on Majkosi. He found himself now torn between his patriotism and his scientific interests—and with the conflict he had grown tense and irritable.

"What in space has got into you, Ligmer?" snapped Usri, slapping down a sheaf of papers on the table at which they sat—in the City, as usual, since it was impossible for Usri to enter Cathrodyn territory or for Ligmer to visit her in Pag domains. The tourist circuit provided the only neutral place where they could meet and argue.

Feeling anger well up inside him, and welcoming it as a relief to an intolerable strain, Ligmer snapped back, "What do you mean, what's got into me? *You* seem to have a fit of real obstinacy today!"

"Of all the—! Look, I'm only trying to clear away prejudice from this problem, and bring proper scientific detachment to bear on it. I say what any fool could see with one eye and half a brain—that we must assume the Glaithe are hiding facts about the structure of the station from us! And the only way we can get at them is indirectly. Much more obstruction from you on the matter, and I'll be driven to conclude that when Raige turned down our application to use the memory banks she did it because you'd told her to!"

"Rubbish!" retorted Ligmer. "Gas clouds! You heard yourself why she refused, and I'm as annoyed about it as you are."

"Well, then, stop acting as though it was my fault the application was refused!"

They stared at each other bitterly. But neither of them said anything further for some moments. In the interval of silence, a figure came from between the thick clumps of bushes flanking the paths through the park, and stepped into their clearing. It was Ferenc; he seemed tense.

"Ah, Ligmer!" he said with obvious relief. "Good, I'm glad I managed to find you. 'Day, Usri. Do you mind if I have a

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word with Ligmer on his own?" It obviously cost Ferenc a lot to make the request a polite one.

"Frankly," said Usri in a disgusted voice, rattling together the documents she had before her and reaching to pick up the file in which she carried them around, "frankly, I don't give a yard of a comet's tail if I never see the face of him again. Go ahead!"

Ferenc frowned, and gave Ligmer a reproving glare. "Something's upset you," he said to Usri.

The Pag gave a short laugh. "Nothing more than I should have expected," she said cuttingly. "It was too good to hope that a Cathrodyne should keep his head clear of preconceptions for more than a day or two at a time."

"Now see here—" began Ligmer. Ferenc gave him a scowl this time, took a deep breath, and went on placatingly.

"I resent that, Usri . . . but maybe you'd better tell me what it was about."

"What's the good?" Usri answered, and then gave in, putting her documents back on the table. "Oh, all right, I guess it might conceivably help. The trouble's easy enough to explain. It's—"

There was laughter and the sound of heavy footfalls among the bushes, and loud contralto voices raised with Pag accents. Usri stopped short; Ferenc swung round to look in the direction from which the noise came, and he heard Ligmer give a gasp that verged on a groan. His own heart sank.

Two brawny Pags were emerging into the clearing. They both wore casual clothing similar to Usri's, but one of them had her head shaved, revealing that she was of military caste. It was the arrival of this one that so dismayed him—for it was the same Pag officer whom he had quarreled with during his trip out here. She must be working off a few days of her accumulated leave at Waystation.

She came into the clearing arm-in-arm with her companion; in her free hand she held a large mug of fuming liquor, and a small moustache of the purple froth on top of it disfigured her upper lip.

"Well, well, well!" she said, and a smile curled back the purple moustache over her sinister filed teeth. She shook her

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arm free from her companion, looking Ferenc slowly up and down and shaking her head.

Covertly, Ligmer turned aside his knees under the table, so that if necessary he could get up in a hurry.

At length the Pag officer finished her contemptuous survey, and glanced at Usri. "Is this big-mouthed Cathrodyne bothering you, dearie?" she asked.

"No, Officer Toehr," was the answer. "For one of them, he's passably tolerable."

"You don't say," Toehr commented musingly. "You don't say! Well, that's a far cry from the way he was acting on the trip out here—isn't it?" she finished with sudden venom, stabbing a fist through the air toward Ferenc's face with one finger extended accusingly.

Reflexively, Ferenc took a step backwards, and Toehr gave a sarcastic chuckle. "So that's the size of it! You're tough enough when you're aboard one of your own poky little ships—but when you're off your own ground you tremble at shadows!"

She turned to face Usri, so suddenly that some of the liquor splashed over and trickled slowly down the side of her mug. Drops of purple went on detaching themselves from the bottom for some moments afterwards, making little blots of color on the ground and fading away like jellyfish melting in hot sunlight.

"You should have heard this blowhard during the trip!" she said. "To listen to him, you'd have said he thought Pags weren't fit to share the same universe with him, let alone a corner of it like the Arm! He's climbed down since then, has he?"

Usri stared at Ferenc. "Are you sure you're talking about the same person?" she demanded of Toehr.

"Changed his tune that much, has he?" Toehr grinned savagely. "No, dearie, it's definitely the same man. He said he'd like to do something to me that you wouldn't forget in a hurry—and nor have I forgotten it. How about you, loud-mouth?" she barked suddenly at Ferenc. "You've forgotten it, sounds like!"

Ferenc licked his lips. "I don't remember what it was that you said," he retorted. "I never knew a Pag to have anything

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to say worth remembering. But I recall what I said, and if you want me to repeat it now, you can hear it again."

For a moment the Pag officer stood frozen with astonishment. Then she gave a yell of pure rage and hurled the mug she held directly at Ferenc's face, following it herself in a whirlwind of fists and feet.

Ferenc managed to avoid the mug itself; such was the force with which Toehr had thrown it that it would at least have broken his nose and might have knocked out his front teeth. But the spray of liquor from it sowed a purple stain across his face, some running into his eyes and making them fill with tears. At first, then, he could only strike out blindly at the savage fury who had attacked him.

Ligmer started to his feet, and felt a grip like a vice close on his arm. He glanced down, trying to pull free, and met Usri's granite eyes.

"No," she said meaningly, and shook her head once.

Toehr's companion, who had said nothing since coming into the clearing, took her eyes off the developing struggle long enough to give Usri an approving nod, and then yelled an encouragement to her friend, who had succeeded in getting a lock on Ferenc's right arm and was attempting to dislocate it with her knees braced against her opponent's back.

Ferenc's face was covered with a mixture of liquor, sweat, tears from his swollen eyes and dust from the ground. He looked like a primitive warrior with his warpaint on, and was trying to behave like one. He struggled to free his arm, failed, and brought his free hand round to catch at Toehr's feet.

His jaw muscles knotting with pain and effort, he secured a grip on one of Toehr's big toes and jerked it sharply sideways.

The pain startled Toehr into releasing her grip for an instant, and Ferenc seized his chance to roll free and scramble to his feet. Panting, Toehr copied him, and they stood half-crouched, facing each other from a distance of a few paces, each debating between attacking or waiting for an attack.

"All right—stop it there."

The cool voice scythed through the clearing, and their eyes switched to see where it had come from. In the mouth

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of each of the paths leading into the clearing stood Glaithe men-at-arms, coming no higher than Toehr's elbow but armed with paralysis guns which they kept alertly swinging from one to another of the group before them. They numbered at least a dozen altogether.

Their leader strode forward and gave the two combatants a glare. "Officer Indle," he said, jerking his thumb at his own chest. "What's it about this time?"

"You wouldn't understand," said Toehr, looking as though she would dearly like to pick him up and throw him away among the bushes. She could have done it with one hand.

"It's a matter of honor, something you Glaithe aren't acquainted with."

"We have better ways of looking after our honor than by scrapping on the ground like animals," Indle retorted. "All right—you've got one minute to leave the tourist circuit and return to your own sections. Both of you! Fast!"

"Like hell I will," said Ferenc. "I should be thrown out of neutral territory because a Pag with more muscles than sense chooses to throw a mug of liquor at me—"

Toehr's face contorted in a snarl, and she hurled herself at him again. Indle gestured, and there was the soft plop of a paralysis gun.

The tiny capsule of drugs which it released was a potent weapon; Ferenc had barely adopted a stance to defend himself before Toehr had thrown up her arms and fallen headlong, in a total stupor.

"Right; that'll do," said Indle. "Were you with her?" he added, turning to Toehr's companion, who nodded. "Okay, you can get her back to her own section."

"I'm going too," said Usri, standing up. "This whole business revolts me. I'll give you a hand," she added, and bent to grab Toehr's legs.

"If you're involved in another case of this kind," Indle said to Ferenc, "you get put under paralysis and shoved straight aboard one of your own ships. And you won't be allowed back on Waystation. Clear?" He swung round to Usri. "And the same goes for that hellion you're dragging away; tell her when she wakes up!"

He gathered his men-at-arms with a gesture and walked

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away into the bushes, leaving Ferenc staring after him with a sour expression and rubbing the arm Toehr had almost torn away from his shoulder.

"Are you all right?" Ligmer asked inanely. "I tried to give you a hand, but Usri held me back and I couldn't break loose."

"Oh, you'd have been more of a hindrance than a help," said Ferenc shortly. "I wish that Glaithe hadn't butted in—I've been itching to paste that Pag since before I arrived. Hell . . . no matter. At least she's more likely to steer clear of me from now on."

He wiped the dirt from his face with a kerchief from his belt pouch, and looked at Ligmer. "Now that's over, maybe I can tell you what I came here to say. They found Lang. He's in our section now, under restraint, and because you said he seemed to know more than he should about the origins of Waystation Temmis ordered me to get you to help with the interrogation. Come on, pick up those papers and move."

## XVII

AFTER he and Raige had separated—Raige hurrying back to the Glaithe administrative section to consult with her colleagues and settle what was to be done about the Cathrodynes' arrogant seizing of Lang—Vykor returned slowly to his own Majko section.

And discovered chaos.

His first intimation came as he headed down the long corridor that led into the section from the entrance to Chute Number Silver—currently that chute was providing the shortest cut to the Majko section from the tourist circuit.

There was blood on the floor of the passage.

It had been partly hidden with a handful of dust, so that his feet were slipping in it before he realized that it was wet.

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He dropped to one knee and touched it; the tip of his finger was red when he lifted it up.

Uncertainly, he looked about him. There was neither sound nor movement in the corridor. He stood up and went forward again.

The slightest hiss of plastic on metal alerted him as he passed one of the doors set in the bulkhead on either side; he had time to utter a choking gasp, but not to look round, as he felt a hood thrust over his head and his arms pinioned to his sides. A horrible sinking sensation overcame him as he recognized the technique the Cathrodynes had used to capture Lang. Had they decided to take him, Vykor, as well, to make him repent his hasty words at leisure?

"All right, he's one of ours—turn him loose."

The familiar voice of Larwik, uttering these words, brought a gush of relief, and he felt the hood being raised from his face. Larwik was standing before him, his face serious, his attitude taut and expectant.

"While you've been mucking around the Caves amusing yourself, we've been having trouble down here," he said acidly.

"What?" said Vykor confusedly, and then lifted his finger so that the redness on its tip pointed toward Larwik.

"That's right. Violent trouble," said the other shortly.

Vykor glanced around to see who else was present; a girl with a determined look stood at his right, holding the hood she had taken off his head, and a man whom Vykor knew by sight but not by name was on his left.

"What happened?"

The girl spoke up. "Some Cathrodynes walked into our section and started putting their noses where they weren't welcome. We thought they were looking for Larwik, or someone in touch with the dreamweed trade—"

"They were looking for Lang," interrupted Vykor. "What's more, they found him, just a few minutes back, near the Caves."

"We heard that later. It's immaterial," snapped Larwik. "What mattered was that they came walking into our section as though they owned Waystation and us too, and refused to get the hell out when they were told to. So we threw them

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out, and one of them got pretty badly hurt in the process. That's his blood you have on your hand."

"We've been waiting for them to come back," said the girl. "That's why we slapped the hood over your head—in case you were either a Cathrodyne or one of the Glaithe staff coming to interfere."

"Well, it wasn't!" said the man Vykor knew only by sight. "And it hasn't been for a hell of a long time, either! *I* say we oughtn't to skulk around here waiting for them meekly; we ought to set the record straight and walk into the Cathrodyne section. Then we'll see how *they* like having their privacy messed about with."

Larwik checked the time, glancing at a wall chronometer. "It's a hell of a time since they left," he agreed. He held a short length of metal bar in his right hand; he was slapping it meditatively into the palm of his left as he stood reflecting the matter.

"All right," he said at length, and dropped his arms to his sides. "I'd like to waggle this little stick of mine under the nose of that overweening fool, Temmis. But we can't just go in a group of half a dozen or so. Vykor! Go through A Quarter of the section and rout out everyone who can walk. I'll get them out of B Quarter—you others take C and D, and drag in anyone you come across in the public sections. And don't be slow about it, either."

Sudden happiness filled Vykor as he moved through the station in company with the assembled band of Majkos. To be walking together with others of his own people, bound on a single united mission, was tremendously inspiring. They walked with a swagger all of a sudden, moving as though they felt—and did not merely claim—that they were the equal of anyone else, their Cathrodyne masters included. Daringly, someone started to chant a song which had not been sung in public on Majkosi since before the great Cathrodyne armadas dropped from the sky and disgorged the armies which had made aliens rulers of their home planet.

They passed through the tourist circuit as the most direct path between their own section and that of the Cathrodynes. As they strode through the City, Majkos working as waiters



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in the cafés, gigolos on the dancing floors, entertainers in the cabarets, called out, "Where are you going?"

"Come with us!" was the answer they received. They hesitated—but they came, so that by the time the party reached the entrance of the Cathrodyne section it was more than two hundred strong.

Normally, there would have been guards at the head of the chute leading from the tourist circuit into Cathrodyne territory. There was no one, and when Larwik and Vykor, at the head of the improvised army, came out into the corridors they found a peculiar, unprecedented silence.

Cautiously, to begin with, then with increasing confidence they progressed into the section. At length they were boldly flinging back doors and looking into cabins that proved to be empty, or used for storage. There was no sign of the residents.

"They must have heard we were coming!" yelled someone, and gave a hoarse laugh of relief. Hearing it, Vykor realized just how deep was the fear that had been masked by the sense of comradeship the advance of the party had inspired.

"Don't relax your vigilance!" Larwik called back. "It may still be a trap!"

He threw open another door, and jumped back in case someone was waiting beyond. Nothing happened. He stepped circumspectly inside, and gave a startled exclamation.

Vykor followed him in. Sitting half sprawled across a desk, there was a Cathrodyne officer sunk in a complete stupor, which had overtaken him so swiftly that a stylus he had been using to write a report had traced a curved line from the tail of the last word he had written to the point where his hand now lay limp.

There was a cry from across the passage. Someone had found more Cathrodynes: two of them, this time, both also unconscious. And as they progressed, they found more, and more, and more.

"It's beginning to look as though they've all been struck down!" said Larwik, when they had discovered fifty or more of the lax bodies. "Here, you!" He slapped the face of the latest one he had found, and rolled back the man's eyelids, but there was absolutely no response.

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"They must have been gassed, or something," ventured Vykor, and Larwik nodded.

"Something of the sort. I wonder how long it will last, and who was responsible."

"Maybe if we go straight to the heart of things—into Temmis' office, for example—we'll find a clue." Vykor moistened his lips.

"Good idea." Larwik returned to the passage and shouted along it. "Is there anyone here who's worked in this section? We want to find Temmis' office!"

"I can tell you where it used to be," said a smouldering-eyed woman whose face was marred by a long curved scar. "I was there—once." She shouldered her way past them and walked rapidly forward—too rapidly for Larwik, whose expression grew worried as she strode ahead of him, but, as it proved, safely enough.

For even in the very center of the section, there were only unconscious men and women. Majko servants and Lubarrian clerks were in a slumber as deep as their masters'.

"That's Temmis' room," said the scarred woman at last. She slid the door open and went in. Yes, there he was—at his desk, one hand on a communicator, the other dangling towards the floor on the end of a slack arm.

The scarred woman tipped back his head and spat in his face deliberately.

"The only thing wrong," she said after a pause, "is that he's not aware of what I've done. But that'll come." And she turned and went out of the room again.

When she had gone, Larwik, Vykor, and two or three others who had followed them studied the scene.

"Do you know these others in here?" Larwik asked Vykor.

"As it happens, I do. That one"—Vykor pointed—"is an officer who came in on my ship, called Capodistro Ferenc. He"—another gesture—"is an archeologist called Ligner, who was also with us. Him"—again—"I saw at the Caves, not long back. He was one of the Cathrodynes who arrested Lang."

"And who do you suppose is missing?" said Larwik. He walked round the room, frowning. Temmis himself, Ligner, Ferenc and the unknown formed four points of a rough

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square. In the center of the square, facing Temmis' desk, was a vacant chair.

"Lang," said Vykor.

"It looks that way, doesn't it? Then do you suppose he was responsible for putting all the Cathrodynes to sleep? What is he—a magician?"

"This is probably a trick the Glaites have kept secret," Vykor suggested. "With Pags and Cathrodynes in the same station, they'd need some kind of method for quelling riots, or freezing a dangerous situation like this one, without having to fight their way in."

"Something the builders of Waystation incorporated in the first place, and which only the Glaites have figured out how to work," nodded Larwik. "Yes, that seems reasonable. Just one trouble: why aren't there any Glaites here now? You'd expect them to take advantage of this."

"Maybe the effects are due to wear off any moment—and the Cathrodynes are going to be crazy mad at losing Lang."

"Could be. Well, we'd better make the best of whatever time remains to us; this is a priceless opportunity to upset the Cathrodynes! We can drag their records out and burn them, muck around with their food, their— Of course! Vykor, suppose we slip dreamweed into all their stored food? They'll have to haul out the entire personnell! Dreamweed addicts can't be as uppity and—"

A shout of warning and a clattering of feet in the corridors interrupted him, and the sound of heavy bodies falling, thudding on the floor. They rushed to the door to see what was happening.

At the head of a party of Glaithe men-at-arms whose paralysis pistols were smoking from constant and rapid use, Raige was striding down the corridor like a fury. She saw Larwik and Vykor and charged up to them.

"I don't know where you got the paralysis shots to put the whole Cathrodyne staff under," she barked. "But whatever you were planning is finished, understand? I've had to put most of your Majkos to sleep, too, and my men have better things to do than to haul them down corridors like sacks of rubbish—"

"But . . . *we* didn't put them to sleep!" interrupted Vykor,

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hardly believing his ears. "Didn't you? Wasn't it a trick you pulled to get Lang back from the Cathrodynes?"

"Isn't he still here?" Raige's astonishment matched Vykor's, and for a long moment they merely stared at each other.

Larwik drew a deep breath. "Look in Temmis' office," he invited, and stood aside so Raige could see. "That chair was empty when we got here."

Raige thrust past him and stared round. "Yes, it was Lang who was here," she said. "There are animal pad-prints on the floor by this chair, about the size of the tracks of that pet he keeps." She whirled and came back to them.

"Vykor, you wouldn't lie to me. Is this true? Did you find everything like this: Lang gone and the Cathrodynes in coma? Or have you taken Lang?"

"It's true," said Vykor stonily. "We thought *you'd* taken him."

"No! We were getting ready to—at gunpoint if necessary—but when we came into the section we found you'd got here a few moments ahead of us." She called to a man-at-arms down the passage.

"Get to Captain Indle! General emergency positions for all personnel. We've got to find that man Lang and hold him, or there's no telling what disasters may not happen!"

## XVIII

THE men-at-arms nodded and doubled away. Raige turned back to face Larwik and Vykor.

"Now get these Majkos out of Cathrodyne territory—and be quick about it!"

Larwik gave her a defiant stare. "And pass up a unique opportunity to get a bit of our own back on them? Not on your life, Raigel!"

As though by magic, a paralysis gun appeared in Raige's

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hand. "We'll do it the slow way, if you like. I've already got a working party hauling your people back to their own quarters. We're in charge of Waystation, and we mean to stay in charge. This is neutral territory. Whatever our personal opinions of the rights and wrongs in questions involving the subject races, we keep them out of the station. Move!"

Larwik's eyes switched betrayingly, as he looked for something he could throw at the gun in Raige's hand; he had put his metal bar down somewhere when he found that there was not going to be any resistance from the Cathrodynes. Accustomed to reading her own people's expressions, which were impassive as stone compared to those of most other people along the Arm, Raige saw what he had in mind and tightened her finger on the trigger before he could move. A capsule of paralyzant sank into Larwik's diaphragm, and he tottered and tumbled within a second.

Raige gave Vykor a searching glance, and then put her gun away again. "I'm sorry to have to do that," she said in a low tone. "But—well, you know how we stand when it comes to arguments between Majkos and Cathrodynes; we're on the side of the oppressed. Only Waystation is not the place to fight out disagreements."

Vykor nodded, swallowing hard. "I suppose you couldn't do anything else," he agreed reluctantly. "But it would have been wonderful to use this chance . . ."

"It wouldn't have been much of a chance," said Raige. She was looking fixedly past him, into Temmis' office. "Because whatever it was that put the Cathrodynes out, it's wearing off already. Look!"

Vykor followed her gaze. Ferenc was stirring; he raised his head, without opening his eyes, and put his hand to his face as though he were giddy.

"Fortunately we're nearly finished clearing the section of Majkos," said Raige in a low tone. "Get Larwik out of sight, will you? Get one of my working parties to put him back where he belongs."

Vykor obeyed quickly, gathering Larwik up by his shoulders and knees and staggering clumsily down the corridor with him held like a ridiculously overgrown baby. Meantime, Raige stepped into the office and glanced round. Apparently

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Ferenc was more resistant than the others; he was the only one to be moving yet.

Now his eyes flickered open, and he found himself looking at the vacant chair. He came completely alive in an instant. "Where in the galaxy did he go to?" he snapped, and jumped up. Then he also saw Temmis, Ligmer and the other man—and Raige.

"Is this a trick of yours, Raige?" he demanded forcefully. "What's happened to Lang?"

"Calm down, Ferenc, and tell me what happened. I'll go into the matter of your kidnapping Lang later—right now, he's disappeared completely and I want to know what put you all to sleep like this. It wasn't one of our tricks—I wish we did have an emergency procedure like that to handle you."

Swift question and answer satisfied Ferenc that she was speaking the truth. He sat down again with a weary expression and stared at Temmis while he spoke.

"You turned down an application from Ligmer and his Pag friend Usri—that was where it started." He uttered the name of the Pag archeologist with a disgusted curl of his lip. "Yet you'd allowed Lang to use the memory banks, without authority or a good reason."

"We never gave him any such permission—I told Ligmer so."

"I saw your message. I didn't believe it. I only half believe it now. But if I'm to accept that he put everyone in our section to sleep while he was sitting here in this room, so that he could make his escape, then I could believe anything."

"All we wanted him for was to find out what special knowledge or what special status he had. It was shriekingly clear that whatever he was he wasn't the simple rich tourist that he pretended to be."

"And?"

"And nothing. Within a few moments of us bringing him in here, after he'd sat down in that chair, the door opened and that blasted animal he keeps came scurrying over to him. He bent down and picked it up."

"Then I remember there was a kind of humming sound. Temmis was going to ask who the hell let the animal into the section; Breger over there, who was one of the men who

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arrested Lang, said he'd left the animal out by the Caves."

"I saw him do the job. We were all set to walk in here and paralyse the lot of you. We aren't going to tolerate what you did, Ferenc—and I wish Temmis would wake up so that I could tell him what I think of him."

Ferenc scowled. "You're too conceited, you Glaithes," he growled. "Pretty soon, we'll see how well you laugh on the other side of your faces."

"Save the threats," Raige told him impatiently. "After the humming noise, what next?"

Puzzlement overcame Ferenc's irritation. "I was going to go to the door and see how Lang's animal could have opened it," he said slowly. "And I didn't even manage to get out of my chair. I remember nothing at all—not even the subconscious awareness that time has passed which you get when you're asleep—until I woke up to see you in here a moment ago."

Someone else had come into the room in time to hear the last two or three remarks. Raige exchanged nods with him, and Ferenc swung his chair round to see who it was. It was Indle.

"I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it," Indle said in response to a hint of a look of inquiry from Raige. "One or two are just beginning to wake up. They don't recall a thing."

"You've no idea where Lang is, I suppose?"

"Unless the Pags are sheltering him . . . there's going to be trouble on that side, Raige! They refused to let our search parties enter, and we had to shoot our way in. We inspected part of the section as a matter of principle. But we didn't have the resources to complete the job, so I pulled the searchers out of the section again and just set a watch in case a swarm of angry Pags come blazing out the way the Majkos came out after the Cathrodynes earlier."

Raige gave him a reproving frown, but the damage was done.

"What was that?" said Ferenc, leaping to his feet. "Did you say the Majkos went out after us? What happened?"

"Nothing," said Raige flatly. "We stopped it, and you'd better be properly grateful. They were talking about intruding on your privacy in a way you'd feel, because your search-

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parties who went looking for Lang in the Majko sections weren't exactly tactful. That's another matter I want to reprimand Temmis for."

"This little mess will take ages to straighten out," said Indle. "I don't think we've seen the half of it yet. The Alchmids got wind of the fact that we were shooting down Pags, and what must amount to half the Alchmid staff of servants and clerks in the Pag section just walked out. They asked us for asylum—and of course we had to give it to them—but almost every one of them is a dreamweed addict."

"More likely to be *every* one," said Raige heavily. "Pags don't trust their subjects well enough to let Alchmids free from addiction work here at Waystation."

"Delightful," added Raige in a bitter tone. "If it's any consolation to you, Ferenc, I think I hate the Pags worse than the Cathrodynes, for the way they habitually drug their servants."

"How clean is your nose?" snapped Ferenc. "You permit the sale of dreamweed openly at Waystation—even one or two of our staff, and several of our people here on vacation, have succumbed to it, thanks to you."

"If your people were as strong-willed as they like to claim, they'd run no risk," snapped back Raige. Her nerves were feeling raw.

"I wish Lang had never come to Waystation," said Indle. "Intentionally or unintentionally he has created more chaos within a few days than an army of subversive agents."

"He is an army of subversive agents," said Raige positively. "I no longer believe that he is doing this irresponsibly, at random. He's working to a plan, and that plan is to cause us the maximum inconvenience, difficulty and annoyance in the minimum time. I wish we could find him!"

Ferenc burst out unexpectedly with a great guffaw of laughter.

"There are things I'd like to wring Lang's neck for!" he exclaimed. "But I'd like to fall on his neck, too—for letting me see the pompous little Glaithes running around in circles like insects! It makes me wonder why we've put up with your arrogance for so long. If one man with a little determination



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and originality can achieve so much, why in the galaxy haven't we penetrated your pose before?"

"Because you have neither determination nor originality," said Raige curtly. "Come on, Indle, let's go and inspect the damage to date."

They passed unmolested through the corridors to beyond the Cathrodyne section. Here and there a group of men-at-arms—three, each facing in a different direction, was the common pattern—watchfully ensured that the angry Cathrodynes did not start to add to the problems the Pags had created on their side of Waystation.

But at the exit, there was someone lurking in a dark corner, and Raige put out her hand to stop Indle in his steps. "Careful!" she murmured. Then added, louder, "Come out, you!"

It was Vykor who moved cautiously into light. He was wild-eyed, and panted violently. A blue bruise marred his forehead; there was a trace of dried blood on his chin, as though he had cut his lip.

"Be careful, Raigel" he whispered, and had to pause to gulp air. "This is hell! The whole station's gone crazy—everybody is chasing and cursing everybody else!"

"Who hit you?" said Raige, narrow eyed.

"Larwik, the bastard! A lot of Majkos who've woken up from being paralysed want to come back here and take the Cathrodyne section to pieces whether or not you Glaithes try to stop us. I tried to make them see reason, and Larwik called me a traitor and had me thrown out of the section—said he'd break my jaw if I put my head back in. And the Pags—"

"We know about the Pags," said Indle shortly.

"You heard by communicator?"

Indle exchanged glances with Raige. "Maybe we don't know, then. Better tell us," he said.

"Why, they turned their males loose in the Alchmid section!"

"What?" Indle and Raige exclaimed simultaneously.

"Yes! They were so angry at their Alchmid servants mutinying and asking for asylum, they uncaged their males and turned them loose. There must be fifty of them! They're raping and wrecking all through the section, and paralysis shots

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won't stop them the way they do ordinary people—two shots at once will put them out for a few minutes, but they wake up so soon!”

“Those Pags!” said Raige between clenched teeth. She began to stride towards an elevator.

“That’s not all!” called Vykor, and she indicated that he had better come with her if he had more he wanted her to hear.

“The Lubarrians!” he said. “They lynched their chaplain, Dardaino—said they’d had enough of priests using their religious office as an excuse for laying every woman they could find!”

“They *killed* him?” Indle demanded.

“Threw him down an elevator shaft without waiting for the car to arrive.”

At that same instant the car Raige had signaled did arrive; Indle trembled visibly as he stepped into it. Vykor followed, crowding the car.

“I can almost feel Waystation shaking to pieces,” said Raige as she pressed buttons for the Glaithe administration block.

The car was beginning to move, and Indle was formulating a comment, when the inconspicuous loudspeaker set in the ceiling of the car—no place in the station was out of range of the central PA system—clicked and came to life.

“Stand by to abandon!” it said crisply. “Stand by to abandon Waystation! In one hour local time, abandon Waystation!”

Lang’s voice!

## XIX

THE AUTOMATIC assumption was: “So that’s where he must be!” For the PA system was centrally controlled from a cabin in the section which the Glaithe had chosen for their own

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administrative offices when they were partitioning Waystation—chosen for just that reason, that it included most of the essential services.

The reaction was equally automatic, in light of what Lang had achieved already. "He probably doesn't have to be there physically!" Indle voiced the first; Raige the second.

But they went there regardless as soon as the elevator reached the level, at a run, and not sparing the mental energy to notice that the Glaithe section was suddenly still, as the Cathrodyne section had been when the Majkos walked in bent on revenge.

It was almost a shock to find that Lang *was* there, seated comfortably in a chair before the master communicator panels, with Sunny on his lap. The animal gave them a curious glance as they rushed in.

For a few moments they confronted one another in silence. Then Lang moved, turning his chair to face them, and spoke almost affably.

"I thought that was a quick way of bringing you here," he said.

"What are you trying to do, Lang?" said Raige. Her hands opened and clenched as though she were trying to master an ungovernable anger. "Have you any idea of what you've done to Waystation? Have you heard that the Lubarrians have lynched their chaplain? That the Pags have turned loose their males in the Alchmid section? That the Majkos are contemplating tearing the Cathrodynes to bits? What are you doing this for?"

She ended on a note that was almost tearful, pleading for there to be some rational answer. Lang looked her up and down thoughtfully.

"I've stopped all that," he said after a pause.

"You've what?"

"I've stopped it. Only some Glaithe staff are still awake—and some few people in the Cathrodyne section who have already recovered from their coma. It took me a little while to adjust the commands to their particular personality types; the Pag males were the most difficult of all, because they hardly think rationally."

"You . . ." began Indle, and had to stop to swallow pain-

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fully. It was Vykor, taking a pace forward with his face pale so that the bruise stood out on his forehead, who uttered the important questions.

"Who are you, Lang? And what do you want here?"

"I am one of the people who built Waystation," said Lang. "And I came here to take back what rightly belongs to us."

The words died away in the cabin, but they seemed to echo in the minds of each of his listeners, throbbing, like heartbeats when the head is stretched drum-skin tight by fever.

"But—" said Raige faintly after a long silence, and Lang cut her short with sudden severity.

"There is no *but*. I came prepared to see and listen and investigate, with an open mind. I came prepared to live out my role as an ordinary tourist, inquisitively visiting one of the greatest wonders and mysteries of the locality. I have traveled a very long way. Sometimes I managed to continue on regular shipping lines; sometimes I had to buy a spaceship and fly it myself across a gap in the trail. I was following the route that Waystation took, before it became merely Waystation and was still as it was originally: one of the greatest interstellar vessels ever built."

Raige was nodding slowly.

"But . . . then it was true that you'd never seen Waystation before," she said.

"Quite true. But I had seen pictures, and read specifications. We have a long history on my world, the longest in the whole galaxy, because it was on my world that man began his journey."

Vykor shivered suddenly, as though the room in which he stood had suddenly opened to reveal the entire majesty of the universe of stars.

"Oh, miracle!" said Raige with a sudden gusty breath. And as one they all three bent their heads in reverence.

"And yet," said Indle musingly, as to himself, "though this sounds well . . ." He raised his head again sharply and gave Lang a defiant stare.

"Give proof!" he demanded.

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"I have already given it. How, in your view, should anyone know of the secrets Waystation holds unless he is of the people who built it? I stopped the rioting as I stopped the Cathrodynes interfering with my escape from their section, and as I have stopped others from coming into this room since you."

"What?" Raige swung round and went to the door which Vykor had closed behind him. She thrust aside the sliding panel, and gave a gasp. A Glaithe lay there unconscious on the floor of the passage; another, a few feet beyond him.

"This was the means employed to compress journeys that became unbearably tedious even at speeds many times faster than light," said Lang shortly. "It is a means of slowing down subjective time—there are rhythms which can be radically altered in the nervous and hormonal systems of the body. It is a small thing, but a valuable tool at times."

"And how have you achieved all this?" Raige whispered. "How did you enter our private quarters so easily? How did you enter the memory bank halls without being stopped by our guards? How did you escape pursuit without leaving Waystation?"

As answer, Lang lifted up the pet animal in his lap. "My key," he said simply.

"How?" They all looked blank.

"Why, it is simple. Sunny was bred to serve as a biochemical analogue of this ship. He is a living radio transceiver, a computer input has been trained into his brain, and while he is here everything he sees, hears, or feels is also perceived by the master memory banks. And they, of course, are far more than just a store of information; the sections which you mistakenly assumed to have been garbled contained the master plan which formerly controlled the ship."

"Then the—information was all still there? It wasn't distorted, and we just misunderstood it?" Raige asked.

"Almost all of it is intact. I investigated. But one very important circuit indeed has really been upset—the one which has given me the trouble of coming all the way here to get the ship back.

"You see, when this ship was launched it flew very fast beyond the then limit of human colonization. We met very

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few other oxygen-breathing races, and we had hoped to meet alien intelligences with whom we could co-operate. Our own views were, we felt, becoming set, predictable, reactionary—in a word, *dull*. And we feared that dullness might be the prelude to decadence, decay, *death*.

"We needed a new stimulus, at all costs. We could not find an alien race to provide it. We therefore planned to achieve the maximum variety we could among the human race itself. We loaded ships like these with people, with sperms and ova in giant sterile réfrigeration banks, with the means of getting food, with everything except the history of what man had previously achieved, and sent them out to scatter the race to every world on which we could breathe the air and drink the water.

"There were *thousands* of such worlds! And some of them had life, but none of them had the intelligence we hunted for.

"It has been a long time. It has been ten thousand years. The ships have gone out, discharged their cargoes here, there . . . moving on, circling or driving straight ahead, then moving back when they were empty along the course they had earlier followed, making records automatically so that we, waiting at home, could know what had become of our new cousins."

He shrugged. "But this ship never came back at all. That was the circuit which really went wrong: the one containing that all-important command."

"And . . . has the answer been found?" said Raige. Vykor heard her voice tremble, and on glancing at her set face saw in surprise that a tear had run down her cheek.

"No. The new sons of man behave as man has always done. With more enthusiasm for having forgotten that it has been done not once but a million times. But essentially as always."

There was an alarm light flashing on the communicator panel. Lang, with his face thoughtful and his manner abstracted, answered the call, and Temmis' angry voice came roaring into the cabin.

"What's all this garbage about evacuating the station?" he bellowed. "One hour? What right have you to—?"

"Start your preparations if you haven't yet done so. In

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two hours it will be too late. If you wish to see your home planet again, General-Marshal Temmis, you must hurry."

He cut the circuit; when the light flashed again, he left it flashing.

"So—you mean it?" Indle demanded.

"You can't!" Vykor burst out. "Where would we go—I and the others in my position? We're outcasts! We offended the Cathrodynes, and if we set foot again on any world they rule our lives will be forfeit!"

Lang gave him a long compassionate look. "I'm afraid this is a case in which the Glaites must honor their obligations," he said. "Raige, you will do that, of course; you must, I think. After all, the 'free' Majkos, Lubarrians and Alchmids put themselves under your protection; you must accept them as refugees on Glai."

The chaotic thoughts racing through their minds could almost be read verbally off their faces. Raige: *so I shall have my children, my family, my future, sooner than I expected—only I won't, more probably. For with Waystation gone, life on Glai will be terrible.*

Indle: *not just the risk that, with the prize of Waystation snatched away, Pags and Cathrodynes will engage in mortal combat over the domination of Glai. There's also the psychological result; for centuries our whole planetary society has centered on Waystation. It's been most of our reason for living.*

Vykor: *I wished to see Glai, but the Glai I thought I'd find was a proud independent world I could admire. Instead . . .*

"It can't be done in an hour, anyway," Indle said finally.

"Perhaps not in one. It can be done in two, and it is going to be done. If necessary, your men will have to put the unwilling ones aboard their ships under paralysis. But I've checked the capacity of the ships at present docked here; it totals more than the amount originally carried—more than the carrying-power of the ships which gave all your worlds their populations, and rested finally on Pagr because the ship was empty of life. Waiting for the automatic order which never came, to depart on its return voyage."

"So it was due to an error of yours that Waystation was

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here, and we found it," said Indle bitterly. "Have you given thought to what will happen when you've taken it away? Or is that of little interest, like the death of a priest?"

"You must do with Glai itself what Glaites have done here with Waystation," said Lang. "You will begin with a group of people of all races. It will be best to take everyone who is evacuated directly to Glai, including Pags and Cathrodynes."

Then his mask of impersonal detachment slipped for a moment, and naked pity shone from his eyes like a sword blade. Sunny flinched on his lap and whimpered.

"You are a few among millions upon millions of millions," Lang said. "I am sorry. We of my world are engaged in a great quest; time is short, even though it is counted in thousands of years. We have watched the sands of time run out, grain by grain, with our desperation mounting as we see the risk of psychological degeneracy increase. Here already you can see the first hints: a man from out of eye-range is a wonder, although the ships of man weave between almost every system in the galaxy! Travel is possible—why do not curious people travel? Is it because we are losing hope, having hunted for a single goal for too long and not having found it?"

"However it may be, the die is cast. Man's existence will be summed up in this search. If it fails, we fail. Our fate is certain."

"Then," said Raige in a puzzled voice, "if the galaxy has all been explored, and the answer has not been found, why must you take Waystation from us?"

And then she put her hand to her mouth, as though in asking the question she had realized its answer, and yet did not dare to believe it.

Stroking Sunny's head with one hand, as casual as though making reference to a self-evident fact, Lang gave her confirmation.

"There are other galaxies . . ."



## XX

IT HAD TAKEN some considerable time for the fact to sink in that Waystation had to be abandoned. The on-watch ships' crews, who had only very second hand information about what was happening inboard, responded most readily by jumping to the conclusion that disaster had overtaken either an atomic pile which was liable to hit guncrit or the artificial gravity system.

So when they were faced by an army of Glaites carrying and guiding would-be refugees, many of them suffering injuries from the recent rioting, they didn't waste time asking questions. The worst problem lay in preventing Pags and Cathrodynes from boarding one another's vessels, in making certain that members of all the subject races remained safely away from Pag ships, that Majkos and Lubbarians stayed far from Cathrodynes. But this was dealt with. So convincingly was the impression of controlled panic created that even the most violent of the emotions the rioting had conjured up seemed to melt in the rush of departure.

Vykor was glad to keep out of the way; he early went aboard a Glaithe vessel and reported to the purser, stating that he had had experience as a steward, and was enlisted to help organize the refugees. One of the people he assigned to quarters for the brief journey was Larwik. Neither of them spoke of the bruise on Vykor's face.

Assigning Lubbarians, Alchmids, Majkos and Glaites side by side to the available cabins, converted holds, empty store-rooms, Vykor gradually came to have a sense of new excitement.

*Why, he thought, I'm building a new world!*

He felt almost the same as he had when he was invited to work with the revolutionary movement on Majkosi—only the new world he was building now was of a different sort. It wasn't a new Majkosi; it was going to be a new Glai, a neutral world, a world whose people had acted surely and

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swiftly to save men and women of all the races of the Arm from sudden disaster.

It was sure that the disappearance of Waystation would be interpreted in a hundred conflicting ways; it would not be in the interests of Glai to disclose the truth yet. Let people think it had been accident—an accident from whose consequences people had been selflessly saved.

Working alone, fighting more to save themselves than to further an ideal, the Glaithes had never succeeded in keeping Waystation truly neutral ground. In miniature, the hatreds and fears and prejudices of the various worlds whose peoples occupied it flourished as they did throughout the Arm.

Now, maybe, working with others who had suddenly been compelled to seek refuge on Glai itself, rather than merely from Glaithes, they would accomplish what they had previously only half achieved.

Or maybe not. Maybe a disastrous war would rock the worlds of the Arm, as Pag and Cathrodyne jointly blamed the Glaithes and perhaps each other for the loss of their hoped-for prize.

And yet even that did not much matter. So full was Vykor's mind of the illimitable concept conjured up by Lang's simple words that he could not really care at the moment about the fate of a few million people on a few isolated worlds.

*There are other galaxies.*

A fact. But till now, a fact that had had no meaning.

Now it was done. Vykor and two of the Glaithe stewards waited by the lock of their ship, tensely wondering whether anyone else would come. Search parties, they knew, were still busy in the ship, making doubly, trebly certain that no one was left behind.

Except Lang. But they would not think about Lang, not as anyone special. Those who were in a position to ask pointed questions, like Temmis, who had heard Lang speak in reply to his roaring demand, were under paralysis and would not recover till they had left Waystation behind.

And until Waystation had left them behind, too.

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Then there were clattering footsteps as one of the parties that had checked the ship—Vykor realized suddenly that he had been thinking of Waystation as a ship and not just a station ever since he left Lang's presence—came hurrying to safety. Raige was at their head, and called to the Glaithe stewards as she approached.

"Get ready to blast off!" she ordered. "There's not much time now!"

The order crackled back into the ship.

Wearily, Raige paused inside the lock as the Glaithe stewards dogged it fast. She passed a tired hand across her face.

"It's a lot to happen in so short a time," she said abruptly to Vykor.

Vykor swallowed and made an incomprehensible sound by way of answer. The Glaithe finished their lock-dogging and went in-ship.

"Listen!" said Raige, cocking her head on one side. "That's a sound I hoped I might never hear."

Vykor, bewildered, listened, and then heard it. At the very bottom of the audible range, a dull sound like waves hammering on a distant beach. He licked his lips.

"What is it?"

"That's the engines!" said Raige. "We knew they were there, waiting to be used. And we never dared to test them, or to admit that they existed, even. They're in the heart of the ship, right inside the memory banks. He said he was going to warm them up."

"You've . . . seen him again?"

"Yes, he came to tell our search party not to waste its time. He had found out somehow that there was no one left in Waystation but ourselves."

"And—"

"And Lang himself, of course. I asked him what he was going to do during the flight back, and how long it would take. He said it would take years. He said he would sleep, and be glad to rest. Apparently when he was seen coming out of the memory bank halls, he had already adjusted the faulty circuit. It's been ready for days"

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"I'd like to see it go," said Vykor half inaudibly. Raige nodded.

"All right," she said.

She took him to the ship's observation saloon; it was full of sprawling bodies, and a doctor and a nurse were moving about, checking injuries received during the riots. But the space closest to the observation port itself was clear; they picked their way to it and stood watching.

All the ships that had been docked at Waystation were now blasting clear. As they watched, first one, then another, winked into hyperdrive with a flash of rising radiation frequencies.

Tentatively, Vykor let his hand seek Raige's. She took his fingers in hers, and spoke in a low voice, staring through the port.

"Don't hope for anything from me, Vykor. It isn't me, you know. It's the abstract of what I represent that means so much to you. And I don't represent it any longer."

He let go. It was true. Now he could admit it, he felt a security which was strange and very pleasant.

"And there it goes," said Raige after a pause.

Under the drive of its colossal engines, turning it slowly to red, to yellow, green, up the spectrum toward departure point, Waystation was once more becoming a ship. Blue . . . violet, unbearable brilliant violet . . .

Then black, flecked here and there with star-gold. The ship was gone.

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