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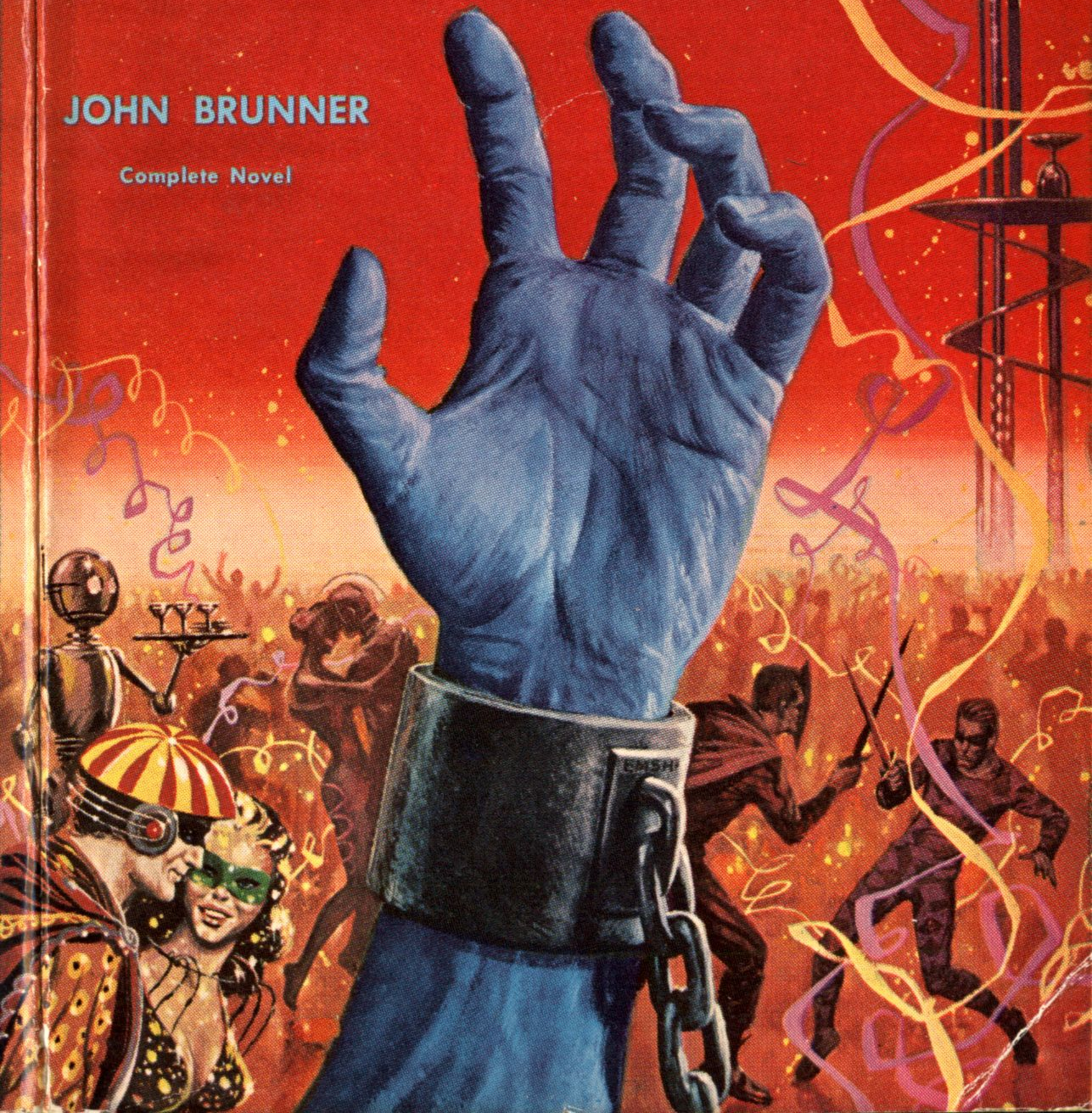
D-421

Beware of the blueskin robots

SLAVERS OF SPACE

JOHN BRUNNER

Complete Novel



CONSPIRACY IN STAR FLESH

There were robots and there were androids. A man of quality and wealth like Derry Horn could have either for the purchasing. The robots were fine, if you liked a machine that could talk and do your bidding exactly. But in some ways androids were even better.

Those blue-skinned creations, boiled out of some far planet's chemical vats, were very realistic. They did what they were told, conversed intelligently, and might almost be mistaken for people.

But not quite. For when Derry Horn finally made that mistake one frightful carnival night, it was to involve him in a one-way galactic transit to a rendezvous with utter horror.

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

JOHN BRUNNER writes of himself:

"Biographical data? Born, I believe; married, 12th July, 1958; dead, not yet. I've been reading science-fiction since I was seven and writing it since I was nine—but I didn't actually collect my first rejection slip till I was 13 . . .

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

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

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

SLAVERS OF SPACE

by

JOHN BRUNNER

ACE BOOKS, INC.

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SLAVERS OF SPACE

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John Brunner is the author of:

THRESHHOLD OF ETERNITY (D-335)

THE 100TH MILLENIUM (D-362)

ECHO IN THE SKULL (D-385)

THE WORLD SWAPPERS (D-391)

DR. FUTURITY

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CHAPTER ONE

IN THOSE LAST few months Lars Talibrand traveled far and fast from star to star, from system to system, back-tracking, making false trails when he could spare a precious day or two. But he could not elude the patient death that dogged his footsteps.

He went from Vernier to Arthworld to Creew 'n Dith; from Creew 'n Dith to Newholme to Mars. He came at the last to Earth at carnival time, when all the world was making holiday, and there, in a high chamber in a hotel overlooking the fairground's tumult on the one side, and a placid inlet of the sea on the other, he met his destiny.

When that was done which certain people had decreed must be done, the news of its doing went the way Lars Talibrand had come. This news traveled faster than he had been able to travel, even in the knowledge that more than his life depended on speed.

And on worlds scattered across the galaxy certain men, certain women, breathed easier because Lars Talibrand breathed no longer.

Blasting bands, chanting choirs, performing animals, hordes of feverish revelers shouting, throwing things, laughing as though the whole world was the stage for a vast slapstick comedy—the carnival procession streamed past the hotel in which Lars Talibrand could not hear them.

Why not? After all, tonight and for the week to come, this planet Earth *would* be the stage for a comedy, the farce of carnival in which all could become pantaloons, harlequins, columbines, by turns.

Processions such as this were winding through the streets

of every town on the terminator. As the sunset moved around the planet, other towns would join them.

Now, down by the beach, officials were making the last checks before turning on the lights, setting loose the tiny luminous organisms which would make the very ocean glow. The service robots tested each other's circuits, making sure beyond doubt that they would not fail during the coming week. In the fairground the concessionaires were setting up their booths, marquees, stalls, their gydromes, switchbacks, grav-free dance halls. Trucks full of accessories lumbered up, bringing the last batches of sweetmeats, streamers, practical-joke kits, flasks of wine, masks, dueling swords, aphrodisiacs, and a thousand other things.

Prudent householders were taking the last of their valuables to the public depositories. It had been known for men to lose themselves so completely in the feverish half-world of the carnival that they pledged away everything they owned. Owners of family groundcars and helis who had no garages of their own were taking their vehicles into public ones. During carnival no one could possibly want to go anywhere in a hurry; there was no business, nothing urgent to attend to, except perhaps an occasional romantic rendezvous. At the curbs the robots were parking the bubbletaxi, the little open two- and four-seater drifters, which took their passengers *somewhere*, that was definite, but which could not be directed before daybreak. After daybreak it was permitted to give an address to the bubbletaxi, your own—or anyone's. But until then, it was up to the random robot selector where it should take its passengers.

The sky above shone a luminescent darkening blue, with hardly a cloud to be seen. It would have to rain, here and there across the face of Earth, some time during carnival week, in order to preserve the meteorological balance of the atmosphere. But it would rain so far as possible out to sea, and at a local time when most of the revelers would be sleeping.

The food wagons were falling in behind the carnival procession, thousands of them. There had to be thousands; no place of business remained open during carnival, and that included food shops and restaurants.

Now, as the sun went down, the luxury stores which had remained open to meet the last minute demand for wigs, cosmetics, fancy-dress costumes and perfumes, put up their shutters. Their staffs hurried to change and join the crowds.

Derry Horn drew back from the window overlooking the roadway. The last of the procession had streamed into the fairground, and the organs were drowning out the sound of the parade bands. Time now to dress and go join the fun.

At a curt command the windows went opaque, the doors of the wardrobe slid back to reveal the selection of costumes he had ordered for carnival. As he fingered the silks, the stiff parchments, the glitter-weaves, he found himself oddly at a loss.

No, not *oddly*. He made the admission with a weary sigh. Rather, the phrase should be, *as usual*.

Irritated, he seized one of the outfits at random and threw it across a chair. At once he began to wonder what in the world had made him choose *that* one.

He made himself dismiss the thought and determined to put the costume on anyway. He slipped out of his ordinary clothes and went across to the bathroom at the side of his suite to freshen up.

When he came from the shower he stepped into the drying cabinet facing the full-length mirror, and regarded himself thoughtfully as the gentle warmth sucked the moisture off his body. *This is you*, he told himself. *This is Derry Horn at twenty-two.*

He saw a dark-haired young man with pale skin and dark blue eyes. Around his full mouth there was a noticeable slackness. The flesh of his arms and thighs was unfirm, shaking just a little to his movements. The paleness of his skin and the darkness of his hair combined to make his cheeks and chin almost blue, like watered milk, with the roots of beard that not even the most efficient depilatory could remove.

He touched his left cheek, wondering what atavistic compulsion still made men think it unmanly not to be able to grow beards even though they spent so much time trying to prevent them from growing.

Maybe it was just that they had to have something which

opposed their will? There certainly wasn't much else on this disciplined world which resisted their whims.

He grew aware that he was thoroughly dried, and left the cabinet. With the removal of his weight from its floor, the gentle blasts of hot air ceased their hissing.

On his return, the costume he had chosen looked even more ridiculous. But when he glanced around at the still-open wardrobe, he could see nothing that was more to his fancy. Naked, he threw himself down in a padded chair and lit a smokehale. This was a hell of a state to be in the first night of carnival!

It crossed his mind that a drink might help, and he called for a waiter, which came swiftly. This hotel offered the best service in the world and since the world was Earth, the best in the galaxy. The waiter came around to face his chair and halted in mute inquiry, unembarrassed by Horn's nudity. No clothes covered its own sleek, glistening plastic body.

"I want something to snap me out of a fit of depression," Horn said abruptly. "What do you suggest?"

The waiter hesitated. "I'm not programmed to prescribe for illness, sir," it said apologetically. "Might—"

"I'm not ill!" snapped Horn. "I want a euphoric of some kind. The best you've got."

"I could get you the most expensive," suggested the waiter doubtfully. "I presume that would be the best. Although, to be honest, I've heard from various clients that others at lower prices were more to their taste."

"It'd make things a sight easier if the management put androids on waiter duty instead of robots," Horn exclaimed. "At least they'd have some idea of the way the stock tasted."

With a faint air of protest, the waiter said, "If you'll permit me to correct you, sir, it wouldn't help at all. Androids are prohibited from indulging in alcoholic beverages, as you know."

"One could get around that," said Horn with the air of a man who has got around many regulations. He had. He was a wealthy man, even by the standards of a wealthy age. "But all a drink would do to you would be to short your circuits out."

Suddenly the ridiculousness of the situation—arguing with

a robot—struck him, and he began to chuckle. The waiter made a solicitous move forward, and he waved it away.

"You didn't tell me which euphoric you wished," it said.

"Doesn't matter," Horn said, getting to his feet. "Crazy, forget it."

"I'm physically unable to forget anything," said the waiter proudly. "In fact, it took them quite a long time to teach me the implications of the word." Then it was struck by the possibility that its last admission had been damaging, hesitated again, and went out, its plastic feet hushing on the heavy pile of the carpet.

When it had gone, Horn put on his carnival costume and gave a final glance around the room. Headquarters for the week. Well, that was a change, anyway. Maybe the change would make the difference. Somehow or other he had to enjoy himself! If he didn't somehow reawaken his ability to enjoy himself, he might lose it forever. His whole life would monotone down to the same flat round of boredom from which he was trying to escape. Last year's carnival had been so far from the memories of the ones he had enjoyed as a child, so unstimulating, so *dull*.

This year, a different city; hotel room instead of his home to come back to. No relatives within a thousand miles. Maybe it was the cloying circle of his family that had ruined his fun last year . . . *maybe*.

He hated to think of what his future would be like if it were not his surroundings that were at fault. If the fault lay in himself, he would face a hundred years of mere existence, gray day after gray day.

Maybe he should have had that euphoric after all!

CHAPTER TWO

HE WENT automatically to the private elevator connected to his suite, and had pressed the button to call it to his floor before he remembered: carnival week had officially started now. Instead of the elevator rising in its shaft to meet him, a speaker on the wall came to life and with dulcet tones gave him a gentle reminder.

"It's carnival week, sir! In the interests of good fellowship and getting together, the hotel has withdrawn the private elevator service in favor of the main elevators. Please leave your suite and turn left along the corridor to reach your nearest public elevator. We hope you meet congenial company there even before you join the merry throng outdoors!"

When he was sixteen or seventeen, he and a bunch of student friends had discovered this habit of hotel managements, and had spent half an evening making absolutely certain that hotel residents met congenial company in their elevators. They had got themselves up to look like strangled corpses—blue-faced, puffy-handed, with wall-white contact lenses on their eyeballs—and lay themselves down on the floors of empty elevators to await results. The score had included four heart attacks, one fatal. They had thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

Somehow, though, it didn't seem so funny now that he looked back on it. He hoped no one here had had the same idea, or at any rate, that no one had put it into practice this early in carnival week.

He had not used the corridor outside his suite since his arrival. Presumably the robots which had brought his baggage had come that way, but he himself had come up in the private elevator. Everyone did. Consequently there was an indefinable deserted air about the corridors, not in any form as tangible as dust, or an echo—simply an absence of human passage.

He walked quickly towards the elevator because the sensa-

tion was a disturbing one. He pressed the call button and looked uneasily along the passages. There were two; they met at right angles here near the elevator well.

A few paces along the corridor which he had not taken, a pile of baggage was waiting to be put into store. Beyond the piled trunks there was a sudden movement at floor level. An arm shot into view, as though thrown out by a man lying prone on his back. And at the same moment there was a low moan.

It might have been a word. It might have been, "Help!"

So someone had had the same idea as he and his student friends five years ago. Oh well, it was a standard gag. He pressed the call button again, wishing the elevator would hurry.

The arm drew back. A leg was thrown wildly into the air and came down on the floor of the corridor with a slamming noise. The violence of the movement was insane. There was a hint of a crunch mingled with the sound of impact, as though a bone had broken. And a scream.

The agony behind the scream cut through Horn's assumptions. This was no carnival joke. That scream had its roots in pain.

He found himself already moving towards the source of it.

The skin on the back of the hand which showed beside the baggage pile was blue. Android. But nonetheless a feeling being, capable of suffering. Heavy-looking cases were piled over and around his head and body. Others, formerly laid on his legs, had been thrust aside. Inch by inch he was dragging back the leg he had flung out, as though in preparation for another wild spasm.

"Service!" yelled Horn, throwing back his head. The call vanished into the length of the corridor. Then he bent to haul the concealing cases clear.

They were lighter than they looked, but he was unused to handling even light objects. There were robots for that. He was sweating before he had swept aside the half-dozen he had to move. He almost vomited as he looked down.

In the shadow, the android's blue skin looked gray, like a sick human being's, and his features of course were altogether human. Had been, rather. Someone had beaten him

on the face until his eyes burst, his nose was mashed flat on his cheekbones, his teeth broken from their sockets. It was the burst eyeballs that were most revolting.

Horn had never felt so helpless in his life. Half of him insisted that he tear his eyes away, that he go quickly to the elevator and out to the street and the carnival. The other half of him ached to do something to relieve the pain the mutilated android must be undergoing. But he did not know how to begin, or even if it were possible to do anything.

He was staring sickly down when a voice hailed him from behind.

"Say, friend! Was it you wanting the elevator?"

He glanced around. A pudgy, middle-aged man in a parti-colored jester's suit was leaning out from the elevator car. It must have stopped in answer to his call of a few moments previous.

"Yes, but look, come here, will you?"

The pudgy man chuckled. "Oh-oh! At it already, are you? What's behind that stack of baggage? A booby-trap of some sort?" He shrugged, "Well, I'll buy it. It's carnival time."

He trotted from the elevator and came up to look over Horn's shoulder. Hearing the sudden catch in his breathing, Horn knew he had changed his opinion about booby traps.

"Hey! That's messy, isn't it?" the pudgy man said in a low voice. "Wonder why the garbage robots didn't clear it up yet."

"It was hidden under these cases," Horn gestured. "It looks as if he was beaten unconscious and only recovered enough to push the cases away and yell for help just as I came by."

The pudgy man drew back a couple of steps, staring as if fascinated by the sight. "I should . . . uh . . . come away, friend," he suggested. "They'll clear it away soon enough."

"But how could such a thing happen?"

The pudgy man gave him a knowing glance. "Pretty young, aren't you? Looks to *me*"—in the one word he managed to condense a dozen implications of superior worldliness—"as if some sadist got started on his carnival fun early.

Hope he confines himself to androids, damn it! Shouldn't like to help whoever did *that* get his kicks!"

Horn digested the explanation for a moment. Then he said, "But we can't just leave the poor devil lying here!"

"What else can we do? If I had a dueling sword with me, you could run him through and finish him off, if that's the way you feel. As it is, I'm not the dueling type, neither are you. Service is pretty good in the hotel, they'll get rid of him soon."

A speaker by the elevator announced that there was another call, and unless a passenger entered within thirty seconds the car would go to another floor. The pudgy man muttered, "Excuse me!" and hastened back the way he had come.

He just made it into the elevator before the door shut.

Horn felt tears starting into his eyes as the android, obviously conscious enough to have heard voices close by, tried to lift his hands and clutch at the world he could no longer see. His mouth had been torn at the corners; he attempted to articulate words, but they were shapeless and incomprehensible.

Overcoming his revulsion, Horn dropped on one knee and took the blue-skinned hand with his own. The android moaned like a child and pressed it feebly, drawing at least a shred of comfort from the contact.

Why the hell hadn't robots come running when he shouted for service? Horn swung round angrily to call again, and was shaken to find someone already standing within a foot or two of him.

"It was good of you to do that much for him," said a soft voice. "I am afraid it doesn't look as though there's much else to be done."

He disengaged his hand gently from that of the dying android and got up. "You on the hotel staff?" he asked. His tone was more brusque than he liked, but he was afraid it might break, otherwise.

The blue-skinned man, serious-faced, nodded. The fact that he was still wearing ordinary clothing when a human being would probably have changed for carnival would have been an answer to the question, anyway.

"I'm the manager's secretary," he said. "For the time be-

ing, of course, that makes me the manager. My chief went out to the fairground ten minutes ago. What happened?"

Horn told him.

"I believe you." The secretary's eyes were on Horn's face. "I wouldn't have, if I hadn't seen you holding his hand when I came up. Not that that would have made any difference."

There was veiled hostility in his tone. "What do you mean?" snapped Horn, feeling put on the defensive.

The android shrugged. "There won't be any consequences. It's not a crime, you know. You can do anything you like to one of *us*." Dryly, he finished, "We're replaceable."

"But surely—" Horn began in an incredulous voice.

"Oh, he was trained, and valuable to the hotel. He was the floor supervisor, incidentally. If this had happened at an ordinary time, the management could sue the person responsible and recover the cost of training him and maybe some extra damages for loss of services. As it is, it's carnival. My chief has handed his business over to me for the week. By the time he gets back and sobers up enough to start worrying about business again, there won't be a hope of finding the culprit."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Nothing. Put a deputy on to look after this floor, and get the cleaning robots to tidy up." The android's tone was almost insulting now.

"You must feel pretty badly about this," Horn said reluctantly. He didn't want to get involved. But he felt himself being driven towards it.

"I do. But thanks for holding his hand, anyway. I wouldn't have expected that much from most people."

Horn remembered the pudgy man. With a sudden flash of insight he said, "You wouldn't have admitted that much to most people, either. Would you?" He felt in the most peculiar way honored when the android smiled and shook his head.

"No, I wouldn't. Most people would remember what I'd said and report me to my chief at the end of carnival. And that would have been the finish. We have to watch ourselves pretty carefully, you know."

"There isn't anything else I can do, is there?" Horn asked.

"Nothing, thank you. I'll take care of it from now on. I

suppose you'll be wanting to get out on the street and get on with the fun."

Horn shook his head. "I don't think I could have much fun with this fresh in my mind. I'll go back to my room and give myself a chance to get over it."

He felt the android's eyes on the back of his neck as he started along the corridor again. He had gone twenty paces before he realized he was in the wrong one.

Annoyed at his own stupidity, wondering how he could brush it aside, he halted and began to retrace his steps. Facing this way, he could see through the gap where the door of one of the suites stood ajar. And beyond the door . . .

Gasping, he strode forward and slammed the door back. "Here!" He called. "Come here!"

This was not so ugly, but it reinforced ugliness already in his mind, and his head swam.

The manager's secretary came unhurriedly up to him. "What is it?" he asked.

"Your chance to catch the culprit who beat that—that one along there to death." Horn stepped across the threshold into the suite. It was identical with the one he himself had been assigned. Except for its occupant.

"The chances are the same man did both," he pressed on, and had to lick lips gone suddenly hot and dry. "And even in carnival week I suppose the lawforce is concerned about murder."

He was red-haired, this man, and his skin was a human shade. He lay on his back on the carpet, whose pile had spread out a little around his weight, like grass. His eyes were open and looked at the ceiling. They did not see it. A large, sharp, wooden-handled knife protruded from his chest just over his heart, and presumably because with his last dying strength he had tried to pull the blade from its place, his hands were loosely disposed around it, as though folded on his chest by a compassionate hospital attendant.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LAWFORCE came reluctantly. There were four androids under the leadership of a human superintendent whose every movement demanded silently why should he have to be on the job while everyone else was out having fun. He was an irritable man named Coolin, who took smokehale after smokehale as he ordered his team around the suite and corridor.

They took solidos of the dead man and the dead android; the latter's moanings and motions had died to silence a few minutes before they arrived, and they had had no comprehensible word from his mangled mouth. At length Coolin decided it was enough, and his team, watchful, burdened with equipment, gathered near the dead man who still lay on the floor.

"A'right," he grunted. "Let me just get this whole thing straight. Who was he, anyway?"

The android acting-manager whose name was Dordy, shrugged. "When he arrived, he gave us the name of Winch. But that may not be his own. I saw him just after he checked in. I always try to welcome our clients myself and inquire if they are satisfied with our service. That was yesterday, about noon. I noticed that he spoke stiffly, and with an accent I did not recognize."

Coolin grunted again, this time with a hint of professional interest. "But you must have a pretty cosmopolitan crowd in a hotel like this. I shoulda thought you get people here from all over."

"From all over Earth," agreed Dordy. "At a guess, he was from off the planet."

Coolin lowered himself into a padded chair and regarded the corpse. "An ordinary knife. Odd, that. Supposing there was someone who wanted him out of the way . . . wanted it bad. It's carnival week. He coulda waited till tonight and picked a duel with him, if he had the courage. If he didn't,

then he would more likely have slipped him a shot of poison, I guess. Not tackled him face to face with a knife."

His eyes roamed around the suite, pausing for a moment on Horn's white face. "Not a coward's way of doing things," he said softly. "It doesn't look like he put up much of a fight. Maybe he yelled?"

Dordy nodded. "That would have brought our floor supervisor—the one who was found dying in the corridor. Your murderer is a big man, sir. Strong!"

"To have beaten your assistant's face in like that? Uh-uh." Coolin threw away the latest of his series of smokehailes and got up.

"This corridor . . . people don't use it much?"

"Except at carnival, no one uses it. We have private elevator service to every suite in the hotel. The cleaning robots pass along it when they are called for and between the hours of ten and noon. My staff uses it also. Otherwise, no one."

"So the killer could have come in and gone away again unnoticed. Right now, he's probably out there disguised as a Lower Canal Martian or something." Coolin made a sweeping gesture. "He picked a good time to do the job. Well, I'll make what inquiries I can, but I'm not going to make promises."

He beckoned to one of his assistants. "Get Horn's testimony on record. Better get Dordy's as well, though since an android was also killed I don't know how android testimony would stand up in court. Still, you never know. We might find him. Maybe he'll get a fit of conscience and confess."

He gave one final glance around him.

"Rest of you get the bodies out and then join me at the reception desk. Dordy, ring down and let your clerk know I'm coming and what I want."

Dordy nodded.

Recording the testimony took only a short time; then the dead man and the android were carried off to a heli which hovered outside the windows of the suite. It would be irreparably bad for the reputation of the hotel to have them taken away by a route where clients might see them, Dordy had quietly pointed out.

And it was over.

Horn remained in the chair where he had sat since Coolin's

arrival, staring at the spots of blood on the carpet but not seeing the red-haired man, who had lain there peacefully. He pictured instead, the android who had died in agony.

Some people, he knew, found violent death the most thrilling thing in the world. After his first brush with it, Horn realized he was not one of these people. He had found the whole affair sordid and sickening.

The door of the suite slid back again, and Dordy returned, this time accompanied by two functional cleaning robots. He nodded to Horn with an assumption of equality that Horn might well have found insulting at another time. Dordy gave directions to the robots and saw that their tasks were well in hand before addressing Horn.

"You were wrong, weren't you?" he said evenly.

Horn roused himself with an effort. "About what?"

"About this being my chance to find whoever it was that committed the crimes." Dordy shrugged. "Unless I have an opinion of this Superintendent Coolin made irrationally low by prejudice."

Horn shook his head. "I guess we're just too habitually law-abiding on Earth these days. What anti-social impulses we still have, we blow off during carnival. I wonder how many murders the lawforce has to investigate in the course of a year."

"Two to three per billion of the population," Dordy replied absently, scuffing with his foot at a place on the carpet where the cleaning robots had removed blood. "Not counting android deaths. There are a good many of those."

Horn shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "It must be pretty rough to be . . . one of you," he suggested haltingly.

"It is." Dordy's eyes fixed on his face. "Want to find out how hard? It's carnival week, the season of merriment and goodwill. So get yourself some blue dye and rub yourself with it, and put on your ordinary clothes and go out on the street. It'll be an education." Suddenly, unforced he laughed. "I'm sorry, Mr. Horn. I'm presuming a hell of a lot on the strength of one decent gesture you made. Suppose I shut my big mouth."

Horn got to his feet and walked over to the window. From here he could see down to the shore of the bay, where

dark paddle-boats were churning up the multi-colored luminescence in the sea. Very faintly, from the other side of the hotel where the fairground lay, there came the intermingled tunes from the carnival.

"I don't know," he said abruptly. "This man Coolin didn't seem to care very much whether he got the killer of—what did you say his name was?"

"He said his name was Winch. But I doubt it."

"It looked to me as though the androids he had with him were more anxious about getting whoever had done in your floor supervisor. That sort of surprises me." He gave Dordy an inquiring look.

"Because we don't have families, or relations? Because we come out of a chemical vat instead of a womb?" Dordy gave a sarcastic grin. "That makes us all brothers, Mr. Horn. All of us."

"I'll take your word, I—" Horn faltered. It was hard for him to continue, because it was halfway or more to sounding sentimental, and that was generally considered a fault. "I'd like it a lot better if we cared more about each other."

"You're bucking thousands of years of history," said Dordy.

The cleaning robots rolled up to him and demanded whether their task was adequately done; he agreed that it was, and they left the room. As soon as they had gone, Dordy walked over to the wardrobe and opened it with a brisk word. Horn regarded him in faint surprise.

"Why it's still got all Winch's things in there! Why didn't you tell Coolin to search them?"

"I formed my opinion of Coolin pretty soon after his arrival," Dordy answered over his shoulder. "Why didn't he think of it for himself? Because, as you said, he doesn't really care. I formed my opinion of you in a hurry, too. It's a habit one has to learn in my job. I have to size up a client when I set eyes on him, guess whether he's likely to cause trouble, be difficult about service—that sort of thing. I carry the habit over into other things."

As he spoke, he went on opening doors and drawers manually. Most of the compartments were empty.

"I was right about Winch. I placed him as unlikely to do

anything to call attention to himself. And if he was being hounded by a killer, that was right."

He left the doors and drawers as they were and strode towards the exit. On the threshold he paused and looked back. "Now's your chance to behave as though you meant what you said—as though you're capable of caring as much about one of you with a knife in his heart as we are about one of us with his face beaten to pulp."

He put his blue-skinned hand inside the tunic of his formal black suit, fumbled for something flat and oblong in a pocket, and tossed it across the room to Horn, who caught it automatically.

"His name wasn't Winch," said Dordy. "His name was Lars Talibrand."

And he went out.

For long moments after the android had gone, Horn sat in his chair turning over in his hands the thing he had been given. Eventually he looked at it, puzzled. It was a sort of wallet of dull gray woven metal: a pocket-shaped sheath enclosing a slightly smaller oblong which could be pulled out. He pulled it out. It was a thin booklet, stamped across the front cover with words in four or five different languages. He could read only one of them, but that was enough to make him blink with surprise.

The legend said *Citizen of the Galaxy*.

Inside was a solido picture. It must have had bio-identity, for now it was fading from its original life-like coloring towards a monotone gray, and the eyes in the face were closed. But enough detail remained for him to be certain this was the red-haired man who had died in this room.

Opposite the picture was a page of wording in an unfamiliar tongue, in the midst of which the name stood out: *Lars Talibrand*. The next page he could read, and was presumably a translation of the foregoing. It declared that on such a day of such a year the government of a world called Creew 'n Dith had nominated Lars Talibrand to the distinction of galactic citizenship, and continued below in slightly different type to the effect that a world called Vernier had seconded the nomination, and again in different type added that a world called Lygos had confirmed it. At the foot of the page

was a list of five other worlds to which the same Lars Tali-brand had rendered service.

Horn felt a chill of awe run down his spine. What kind of a man was this who had died here? What kind of a man would do such work as to make whole planets grateful to him?

A man ordinary enough to die with a knife in his heart.

He got to his feet and determinedly set to to work his way through the sparse belongings in the room. There were a few changes of clothes, carefully looked after, showing signs of hard wear. There were toilet articles, new, probably bought since his arrival. Nothing else. Maybe the killer had been here before, although there was little sign of disarrangement.

Dissatisfied, he opened the booklet anew. He had presumed that it consisted entirely of versions of the same certificate in various languages; now he found that there were only as many translations as there were on the cover—five. Behind them came pages of planetary exit and entry stamps. He guessed at two hundred or more, covering twenty different worlds, and the thought made him almost dizzy. A traveler, this man!

Curiously, he looked on the last used page for an entry stamp for Earth. There wasn't one.

He put the booklet back in its wallet and went down to find Dordy. He had some questions to ask.

CHAPTER FOUR

IN THE PUBLIC elevator the carnival spirit was already rampant. A slender woman wearing what seemed to be no more than a coat of iridescent paint struggled to persuade him to try a special euphoric she had been given; a serious-faced boy of sixteen or so got in on the first floor with the intention of spreading *joie de vivre* among the robots and androids in

the basement service departments with the help of a case of small fireworks. Fortunately the woman in the coat of paint managed to press some of her euphoric on him before he left the car. Horn glanced back a couple of times and the second time saw him sitting on the floor with his back to the wall lost in wave after wave of hysterical laughter.

A robot, puzzled at finding a client in carnival dress in this basement, hurried up to him to ask if he had lost his way. Horn shook his head, and explained that he was looking for Dordy's office.

Reproachfully, the robot pointed out that he had only to ask for the manager to come to his suite.

"I know what I'm doing!" snapped Horn. "Where is his office, anyway?"

"Third door on the right," said the robot. "But it is quite possible he will not be there."

The office was in fact empty. Horn went in and sat down in a hard plain chair and took out a smokehale. It was half finished before Dordy came in, expressing no surprise at seeing his visitor. Nodding, he closed the door carefully.

"I'm sorry you had to wait," he said. "I only just saw the last of the lawforce androids off the premises. They were a little more thorough than Coolin."

"Were you expecting me? It looks as though you were."

"I think I was." Dordy sat down and crossed his legs in a relaxed posture. As Horn took out the gray woven-metal wallet, his eyes dropped to it.

"You probably want to ask me some questions about that."

Horn nodded. "What is it, exactly? I mean, I've read it, so I assume it's some kind of pass or certificate. But I've never heard of anyone being made a citizen of the galaxy. It sounds so melodramatic."

"Earth doesn't recognize them," Dordy answered. "Hardly surprising. This is a very parochial planet, I understand. But there's a lot more to the galaxy than just this one world—as you'll have seen from the impressive list of stamps in the back of that booklet."

"Well, one knows that. I mean, one studies galactography and gets to recognize the stars with inhabited planets in the

sky at night. And there are imported luxuries and so on. Only it doesn't strike home very hard, I guess."

"Apparently not."

Was there sarcasm in the tone? Why? Suddenly Horn had a depressing sense of inferiority in face of this blue-skinned man who was after all not even a man but a facsimile grown from a solution of organics in some way he did not know the details of. Inferior to an andriod? Men had invented the android process! He reassured himself silently. Maybe Dordy had a more inquiring mind, or something as insignificant as that.

He couldn't quite convince himself that to have such a mind made so little difference.

"Well, how did you come to get hold of this document, anyway?" he demanded.

"Talibrand gave it to me on his arrival. It was the most precious thing he had, except his life. He could only part with it because he knew that he was in very great danger, and to be found with it on him would have sealed his fate however well he might otherwise have covered his tracks."

"But why to *you*?" Horn felt at a loss. "Did you know him well?"

"I'd never seen him before."

"Then—" no, this wasn't making sense. He tried another tack. "Who was he running from? How did he know he was in danger? And if you know, why didn't you tell Coolin?"

"For the same reason I don't propose to tell you." Dordy smiled.

"Then you do know."

"I know . . . vaguely. I could name a name and feel certain it was right, and still not be able to prove it in a hundred years."

"I think you're stalling," said Horn suddenly. "I think you're trying to get me worked up about this thing. It's nothing to do with me. I think you're just trying to get someone to put pressure on the lawforce so that you can square accounts with whoever killed your friend the supervisor. I don't think you give a damn about Talibrand; you probably had a quick look through his belongings before Coolin and his

team got here, and took this because you thought it looked important."

He tossed the gray wallet with its amazing booklet on the table and got up.

"I think I've had just about enough of this. I'm going out and have some fun."

He was on the point of leaving the room when Dordy, who had not made a move, called after him.

"Mr. Horn!"

He glanced back, saying nothing.

"You're wrong to say I don't care about Talibrand. He was a good man."

"So that booklet says. But in whose opinion? He wasn't anything to Earth."

"You're wrong there, too. Incidentally, there's no point in leaving this document with me. It's no use to me."

"Nor to me," said Horn harshly, and went out.

A drinking-fountain was moving slowly past the entrance to the hotel when he reached the street. He hurried after it and halted it long enough to sip two or three mouthful of the fruit-flavored euphoric streaming from its dozen spouts. At once heady artificial gaiety took possession of him. He bought a mask from a passing vendor and put it on.

At the curb waited the bubbletaxi, pastel-colored lemon, green, pink, sky blue. Their patient robots hummed imperceptibly, awaiting passengers. As Horn strolled unhurriedly to select one for his own use, one which had been chartered elsewhere in the city settled to rest nearby, bearing a young couple making passionate love. Passers-by hooted with laughter at their annoyance as they had to leave their vehicle and climb into another to resume their airborne petting. It was the one Horn had been intending to take. Gravely, he bowed and gave them precedence, and the girl who was very pretty flashed him a smile.

He took the bubbletaxi they had vacated instead, and it rose gently, bobbing like a feather, to take the air. The seats were still warm from the former occupants, and a hint of fragrance clung even in the open cockpit. Horn crossed his legs,

putting his feet up on the forward rim of the vehicle, and leaned back to look up at the stars.

One learns to recognize the ones which have inhabited planets...

Only later one also forgets, he qualified. He couldn't for the life of him have named two of those stars or their inhabited worlds. He could have remembered most of the names, given a few minutes; certainly, though, he could not have attached the names to the proper dots of brilliance above.

Annoyed, he put his feet on the floor and leaned over the side to stare at the lights under him instead. There was the fairground, of course; there was the arc of the beach, and there were a few streaks of luminescence carried away from the shore by chance changes of current. His vehicle was taking him in a wide curving swoop all over the city; now he could hear only the blare of the fairground, now a freak of the breeze bore him a snatch of song from a boat lazing on the ripples a mile from shore. Carnival

This is more like it, he told himself in satisfaction, and hoped that his bubbletaxi would bring him down towards the fairground so he could get into the thick of the merry-making.

His hope was answered, and like thistledown the taxi took its place on a grassy bank beside the fair. He got out and patted it ridiculously on the flank as though it were a living creature. Then he threw his arms above his head, shouted and ran down the bank between two of the garish booths.

Two girls who were coming the other way arm-in-arm tried to leap apart in order to let him charge between them. They didn't quite separate fast enough, anyway, a moment later they were all three sprawled on the ground, laughing with the note of hysteria that always pervaded the laughter of carnival week.

"Idiot!" giggled one of them, seizing a discarded burr of glittering plastic from near at hand and throwing it so that it tangled in Horn's dark hair.

"Congratulations! I *am* an idiot!" Horn agreed. "Carnival more than three hours old, and I've only just come. Want to help me make up for lost time?"

They did. They linked arms again, this time with Horn in

the middle, and went stepping through the fairground to a nonsense song based on some tune picked up from one of the organs to which each of them contributed a verse in turn. The girls seemed to laugh much louder at Horn's verses than at their own. Delighted, he laughed louder than both of them.

Balls of silver rising and falling in a shimmering column of light drew them; they found a device that distorted gravity at random, and spent ten crazy minutes being whirled, lifted, dropped, tumbled together in one of the silver balls.

They were thirsty then, and stopped at a drinking-fountain. Horn had three shots, and thereafter the evening began to melt together like a dream. They picked up other people along the way until Horn found himself leading a party of a dozen or more through sideshow after sideshow, competition after competition.

At last, though, it seemed that their gaiety was lessening while his still grew. The night was far gone; barely an hour remained before dawn. Some people were already asleep on the ground; this was usual on the first night of carnival. Tomorrow people would sleep all day and then awake refreshed at sunset; this first day they had been awake for eighteen hours or more already.

"Come on!" Horn was calling hysterically. "We still have to see the—"

He broke off and looked around rather foolishly. He was speaking to nobody; his party had dissolved seemingly into the air. Inspection of neighboring concessions gave him the probable explanation. There was a sign saying simply, *Double Beds*.

Not even one of the two girls with whom he had begun the evening remained to keep him company. Disconsolate, he began to walk with his head down, whistling. He kicked at a tent-peg or two, caught his toe on one of them, and fell headlong.

The residue of the euphoric he had drunk forced him into a spell of short laughter. When it was over, he decided he might as well lie where he was and rest for a while, his head pillowed on his hands.

A few minutes had passed when he felt a gentle tug at a bauble he was still grasping. Then another. He opened

his eyes and was astonished to find himself looking into the gray face of one of the gray-clad dispossessed, who had crawled out from hiding under the flap of a nearby tent and was trying to take the bauble.

Horn sat up, and the dispossessed cowered back into shadow. "Here, take the damn' thing!" Horn said morosely, and gave him what he wanted. Chuckling, the dispossessed made off into his own half-world again.

Someone was coming towards him, masked, wearing gold and white daubed with stains of soft fruit where someone had pelted him for amusement. The stranger stopped, looking down at Horn through a gold mask.

"Your name's Horn," he said in a voice which sounded as though it ought to be familiar. Automatically Horn felt his own mask; it now dangled at his neck by its string.

"That's right," he admitted. "What is it?"

The stranger, eyes unblinking behind his mask, thrust forward the hilt of a dueling sword. "I propose to kill you," he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

FOR A LONG moment the world went round and round as though he were in one of the gyrodromes he had visited earlier. At length he shook his head.

"You must be out of your mind," he said. "I don't know you! I never did anything to you to warrant a challenge!"

"You can take your choice," said the man in white and gold stonily. "A fair fight in a dueling hall, or a messy death here on the grass." Like magic the sword reversed itself in his hand, so that now he held the hilt instead of extending it towards Horn. "No one will see except friends of mine."

Horn grew aware that there were silent figures looming

out of shadow all about him. The noise of the fair was dying away with the approach of dawn; there would be some concessions still open, though.

"All right," he said wearily, and got to his feet. The man in white and gold took a step back, as though the acceptance of his challenge had surprised him. He recovered his self-possession swiftly.

"Excellent. The nearest hall is a few paces that way. I see you have no sword of your own. You can rent one there."

Horn ignored the remark and strode purposefully over to a cooler serving iced drinks and confectionery. He dipped his hands in the stream and soused the back of his head with the coldness; then he scooped up something bright-colored and sticky with fruit pulp and slapped it across his forehead as though it were an ice-poultice. The residue of juice was sugary and uncomfortable when he was finished, but at least he had a calmer head.

A smoldering anger had kindled somewhere in the depths of his mind. Maybe it was due to a subconscious recognition of his challenger, though on the level of normal memory he could not identify him.

"All right, that'll do," he said, wiping away the mess of frozen fruit pulp from his face with a blouse some girl had discarded on the ground nearby. "Where's this dueling hall of yours?"

The challenger gestured and began to walk. Horn fell in at his side. The shadowers kept a respectful distance, but they were still there, watchful.

"You seem to be pretty free with your challenges," Horn said after a while, sourly. "You do a lot of this?"

The other's eyes glinted. "I have killed at every carnival since I was twenty," he said.

"By picking on opponents who never fought before?" Horn suggested, making the words as acid as he could. The man in white and gold, to judge by the tone of his reply, flushed at the implication.

"Once! Only once! Have you never dueled, then?"

Horn gave him a sidelong glance and shook his head. Then had much pleasure in qualifying the gesture. "But I won the

premier award for swordplay in my home town last year," he said.

The challenger didn't answer; they went the last few paces in silence, Horn thinking, *and of course everyone believed the family bought the judges . . .*

The dueling hall was empty now. The proprietor of the concession was beginning to drowse over his reception desk. In the corners of the hall cleaning robots waited to sweep the hall free of its blood-stained sawdust and replace it with fresh shavings for the next night's customers. Blearily, the proprietor welcomed them in mechanical terms.

"You have swords?" he demanded, and the challenger nodded, hefting his own and spinning it in his hand. Horn leaned forward to look at the weapons available for hire on their rack.

"Have you a Duple Champion?" he said. The proprietor nodded and took it down for him; he felt it, put it to the whirring grindstone at the side of the reception desk and stroked a few grams of metal from the thickest part of the shaft to perfect its balance.

He nodded to express his satisfaction, and the proprietor sat back in his chair with an expansive gesture. "Anywhere you like on the floor, gentlemen. I don't expect we shall have anyone else in before dawn."

A small black cloud of nervousness formed behind Horn's eyes, even though remembered skills were reawakening in his limbs. Before, he had taken sword in hand in play only; this was for a life. Make it quickly, then; make it before this challenger began to recognize with his movements as well as with his conscious mind that his opponent had skill.

They squared off, touched blades, parried, twisted, getting each other's measure. The challenger then launched a furious attack but went an inch too far. In the moment while he was so over-extended, Horn switched his sword from right hand to left and stroked the razor-sharp blade up the man's trunk from crotch to rib-cage. At the end of its course he thrust it home, let it go, and turned his back to walk from the hall.

Red had barely begun to discolor the white and gold before he turned.

The proprietor, goggle-eyed, was on his feet, demanding to know who was going to pay his fee.

"He was the challenger," Horn shrugged. "Get it from him, whoever he is—"

A thought struck him, and he spun on his heel. Who *was* he, anyway? He dropped to his knee in the sawdust and blood and twitched aside the mask.

No wonder the voice had struck a chord of memory, although now he realized it had been disguised with an assumed formality of speech, care of enunciation.

This was Superintendent Coolin of the lawforce.

Restlessly, Horn tossed in his supremely comfortable bed. He was physically exhausted, but he could not dig his way to the dark mine of sleep. When he tried, visions kept intruding and startling him awake again: pictures of faces, mostly. The face of the android he had found dying in the corridor stared at him with its burst eyeballs and reproached him with its torn mouth; the voice was that of Dordy. The face of the red-haired man who had died by the knife melted and became the face of Coolin who had died by the sword. It was like delirium.

Then the little gray booklet floated into his mind's eye, and he saw the pages turn to reveal visit after visit to world after world. Almost every world had later certified its gratitude in that amazing certificate at the beginning of the document. Well . . . nearly half of them, anyway, and that was remarkable enough, surely. What could this Lars Talibrand have done? Nothing that Horn would have recognized in his daily life, he was sure.

He couldn't imagine his grandfather, for instance, being issued with one of those certificates for his services to a grateful Earth! It was the autocratic old man, around whose existence the life of all Horn's immediate family revolved. Old man Horn had for many, many years, supplied the population with more robots than any competitor. He had established a permanent lead over the rival suppliers by introducing an improvement so radical it called for complete re-tooling in all the factories. By the time the other companies caught on and decided they would have to follow suit, they had fallen

so far behind on sales that they could not afford to re-tool themselves.

Suddenly he remembered something he had heard when he was ten years old or less—something his grandfather had muttered about going into the android business as well. He wondered why he had never heard anything further about the venture.

If the old man ever got to hear of the events of the past day he would probably give him a severe taking-to-task like a schoolboy, for being so stupid as to get mixed up in things that didn't concern him. Grandfather would be particularly annoyed since it was all the fault of a worthless android in the first place. And then he would probably make some inquiries and grease a few palms in the background to ensure that nothing came of it.

His father? Probably would gruffly compliment him on his victory over Coolin and then go and see *his* father in a fit of agitation about possible complications. His mother, on the other hand, would certainly flutter on about his risking his life, before going away and boasting about the affair to her friends.

His sister, who was four years younger than he, would perhaps have another fit of wide-eyed wondering hero-worship.

And the rest of the family—of whom there were seemingly myriads, scattered across the face of Earth—would grunt and wonder what the younger generation was coming to these days.

He was pretty sure he wasn't going to enjoy the carnival. Again. As usual. He was pretty sure he wasn't going to enjoy life.

After tossing and turning while the sun climbed up the sky, he ordered the windows to darken and finally managed to sleep.

When he wakened, something in the room had changed. At first he could not identify the alteration, and put it down to the fact that he was used to wakening during carnival in his own home or the home of friends, whereas now for the first time he was in a hotel in a strange city.

But that wasn't it. He found himself so irked by the nag-

ging uncertainty that he sat up in the bed and stared about him. At last he spotted it. Tiny, but significant.

While he was asleep, someone had been into the suite—probably Dordy. For on the small table at the head of the bed where he had left nothing but a box of smokehales and a handkerchief, lay the gray woven-metal wallet which had belonged to Lars Talibrand.

He cleared the windows, took a smokehale and slipped the booklet from the wallet again, thumbing over the pages. The names of the alien worlds on which Talibrand had been a welcome guest rang in his head as he looked at them.

What were they like? He had been told in superficial terms when he was a student. Now he wrinkled his brow in an effort to unite facts with names, almost as he had done last night in the bubbletaxi when he looked at the stars. Creew 'n Dith. Something about the name suggested warm rain, or else sharp cold gales blasting around a crest of a mountain. Arthworld. Again, this suggested waves breaking on a long, long beach, white surf on white sand.

All that, out there—individuals with personal existences, ruling, serving, loving, hating, doing all the human things but not as he himself did them, for they moved in a different cosmos.

He felt a wrenching change in his mental perspective, as though someone inside his head had seized his consciousness and dragged it by main force from its accustomed path, setting it to follow another at right angles to the first. He could picture Earth, the mother-world, like a dowager, content to relax and play with her lapdog, finding her occupations in small things while her sons went out and conquered elsewhere.

This man Talibrand . . .

Horn turned to the solido at the beginning of the booklet. It had faded altogether to gray now. Lars Talibrand was finished.

Only if he had made himself so important that enemies hunted him from world to world and even to Earth where his safe-conduct of galactic citizenship no longer protected him! Maybe then the chances were that he had also made

himself important enough to be loved and remembered by the people he called his friends.

The beginning of a decision sprouted in his mind, like a shy flower putting forth green to test the climate before risking its delicate petals. He turned to the last used page of stamps in the booklet, and his eyes unfocused as he looked beyond the mere name to the reality it implied.

Newholme. A nice substantial name, that. Without the exotic, romantic ring of Creew 'n Dith or Arthworld or Lygos. But different from the flat, placid, plopping sound *Earth*.

The decision toughened, and he wondered for a moment whether it was some foreknowledge of it which had led Dordy to speak so strangely yesterday.

Perhaps; but that was of no consequence. He was going to Newholme.

CHAPTER SIX

A HEADY excitement seized him, tempered with cool astonishment at his own daring. There was impatience, too, so that it seemed every second he spent after making up his mind was a wasted chance to get off Earth. He leaped from the bed and shouted for service, telling the robot which answered the call to go find Dordy for him and send him up.

He was already showered and dressed, tucking his stock into the neck of his tunic, when the blue-skinned acting-manager announced himself and entered.

"You sent for me, Mr. Horn?"

"That's right." Horn turned away from the mirror, satisfied with the set of the stock. "I'm checking out."

Dordy nodded. "You've found more congenial accomo-

dation for the rest of carnival? With friends, perhaps? Or a friend?"

"I'm *sick* of carnival." Horn gave the words a measured emphasis. "I'm sick of the people who take part. I'm sick of the things they do. I'm getting the hell out."

Dordy nodded again. "It's still carnival week, though," he offered.

Horn froze for an instant as the implications sank in. Of course! Carnival week! It would be pretty nearly impossible to go anywhere for the next six days. People weren't supposed to want to travel at this season. They were supposed to be busy enjoying themselves. Then he relaxed. There'd be a way of getting around that problem. There was always some way of getting around any problem.

He shrugged. "That can probably be arranged," he said. "It might interest you to know that someone challenged me to a duel last night—this morning. I killed him."

"So there hadn't been enough deaths already," suggested Dordy.

"Not for him, apparently." Horn forced himself to appear to miss the point. "I took his mask off afterwards. It was Coolin. The lawforce superintendent."

"That explains quite a lot of things," said Dordy comfortably.

"Does it, to you? It leaves me completely in the dark," said Horn in an aggrieved tone. The robot waiter entered the suite bringing a tray of breakfast. Horn pulled up a chair and sat down to eat. He had an appetite which surprised him.

"All right," he said between mouthfuls. "Suppose you sit down and tell me what exactly Coolin's interference is supposed to clarify."

Dordy refused with a brief headshake. "I can't do more than give you a warning," he said. "It was bad luck for you to get mixed up in the murder of Lars Talibrand. If you'd behaved like the average citizen—done your minimal duty in giving testimony and then shown impatience to get on with the fun of carnival and forget what had happened—you'd probably have been permitted relative ignorance. As it is, you've trespassed on the fringe of something very important, and made yourself a potential danger to dangerous people."

Horn blinked. "But this sounds like a sort of historical melodrama!" he objected.

"Does it? Isn't it dramatic that a man should have been hunted from planet to planet, driven out of the regions where his reputation was his protection, to Earth where his immunity no longer held—and killed?"

"You seem to know a hell of a lot about this Lars Talibrand," said Horn. "How?"

"You mean how does a menial android come to know more of what's going on in the galaxy than you do? But why should you take my word? You'll have proof, and understanding, soon enough, if you take the trouble to go and look for them."

"I'm going to," said Horn determinedly. "This whole affair is too much of a mystery to give me a moment's peace until I get to the bottom of it."

Dordy chuckled, without humor. "You may be more right than you realize. Or you may be altogether wrong, in that it will afford you permanent peace by getting you killed. If I don't seem to take the second possibility very seriously, I think it's because the life of one of my kind has no value before the law."

His manner changed. Again he assumed the position of the manager's secretary. "I'll have your baggage ready for you as soon as you succeed in getting transportation for yourself, Mr. Horn. I hope you manage it shortly. I think you're well advised to leave this city under the circumstances."

He nodded and went out. Horn leaned his elbows on the table, one either side of his plate, and lost himself completely in thought.

His enthusiasm for the project he had undertaken began to wane as soon as he set about seriously trying to get home. He felt it necessary to get there at once, even in the knowledge that his family would be annoyed at his disturbing them in the midst of their revels. They would demand why he thought it necessary to go away from Earth at all, and most of all why be bothered them when they were enjoying themselves.

Unfortunately, there was no reasonable alternative. He had come equipped with only enough money to take him through

any foreseeable kind of indulgence he might fancy during the week of carnival, and his return ticket. The ticket insured that even if he managed to spend every penny he had before the carnival was over, he could still get home.

He managed to find two or three people with vehicles. They were put out at having someone bother them on a mundane question like traveling when it was carnival time. Desperately, he offered payment up to the limit of his ready cash; but nobody well enough off to have a vehicle could be badly enough off to want to sacrifice the day—or rather night—of carnival which it would cost.

Soon he stopped having even that much success, for it was nearing sunset, and people were getting ready to go back to the pleasure-beach and the fairground and the cabarets for the night. Horn went morosely back to the hotel, cursing carnival and all it stood for. The money he had with him was on the one hand too much, for he had no urge to spend it on anything. On the other hand, it was far too little, for it would barely cover the cost of a single ticket off Earth.

All travel agents, of course, would have shut their premises. All the public conveyances were suspended. His own heli, in which he had traveled down, was of course in store in a public garage which would not be reopened until the morning after carnival. Maybe the hotel would let him have an additional stock of cash so that he could find out tomorrow whether doubling the price he offered made any difference to the result.

With this in mind, he had the robot waiter go in search of Dordy. But he must already have been on his way, for he announced himself at the suite almost as soon as the robot had departed.

"Not much success, I presume?" Dordy inquired. "I have not yet had your baggage cleared for your departure, just in case."

Horn nodded. "Damnation, nobody gives a penny for anything but this lunatic carnival right now! You'd think the world had come to a complete stop!" The implications of this last remark penetrated, and he put his hand on his chin, musing. "But it can't, can it? There must always be some services that have to continue during carnival—power, water supply,

heating, and even servicing the bubbletaxis and drinking-fountains and things. And the lawforce, if it comes to that. *Somebody* must be keeping things going. Who?"

"Who do you think?" said Dordy with a trace of weariness. He jerked one blue-skinned hand up into a fist, with the thumb pointing at his own chest.

"I'm sorry," said Horn after a pause. "I should have had more sense than to ask such a ridiculous question."

"Don't apologize. It's what we're here for. Robots are reliable enough in their way, but when it comes to complicated, variable situations, we have the can to carry."

Horn sat down and waved Dordy to another chair. "Smoke?" he asked, offering a box of smokehales. Dordy refused them by spreading his open palm.

"Not allowed," he said. "We're conditioned against them, in fact. And against liquor."

Horn nodded. "Well, do you think it would be possible to get one of your—uh—your people to take me home? Or organize a heli for me, or something? I'd pay well."

"Question of payment hardly arises. We aren't allowed to spend money in public places, so riches are meaningless as far as we're concerned. Oh, I suppose it's possible to be better off than another android, but it doesn't help much when we're so much worse off than human beings in all other respects. No, money doesn't count."

"I . . . I don't quite know what else to offer," Horn said, at a loss. A half-remembered tag from a history text crossed his mind, and he suggested, "How about . . . what's it called? Manumission, that's it? You know, giving freedom. My family is pretty rich. I could organize it, if it's possible at all. Or is that just plain naïve?"

"It's all of that," said Dordy. "The only way one of us ever gets his freedom is by dying. What do you think I'd do if someone came to me now and said, 'Dordy, you can quit your job and you need never do anything ever again'? I'd thank him kindly and turn the offer down. What would I do if I didn't have my work and a nice comfortable place in the scheme of things? Sit in an android barracks somewhere and read the classics of literature?" He sounded rather bored, as though the matter was quite academic.

"Tell me, Mr. Horn, exactly what are you hoping to do?"

"Why. . . why, I don't really know," Horn replied honestly. "Maybe I could find out who killed Lars Talibrand, and why, and who killed your floor supervisor, too, and bring them to justice. Only this sounds like it comes straight out of an old-fashioned romance. I'll try and do that, even if it's a ridiculous project. I want to get the hell out and go find out what people are doing up there on the other side of our nice clear-blue sky, find out what a man does to get to be a citizen of the galaxy."

"With aspirations that way yourself?"

"How should I know, till I find out what's involved?"

"Yes, what's involved is important," agreed Dordy, looking at the wall of the room. "I'm told things aren't so comfortable on other worlds as they are on Earth, for a start. Of course, things aren't always comfortable here, but that doesn't affect you very much."

"So what?" Horn got to his feet and started to pace the floor. "I'm comfortable, I'm wealthy, and I'm damned sure my old man will tell me I'm a fool and don't know when I'm well off. *So what?* If there isn't anything more important to be got out of life, I might as well cut my throat."

Dordy seemed to be debating within himself; after a while he too got up and glanced down at his clothes, straightening the set of his tunic with quick twitches. "All right, Mr. Horn. I don't suppose it's very important that you should take your bags with you, is it? They can wait over till the end of carnival week all right? Because if that's convenient I can get you home tonight."

CHAPTER SEVEN

IN DORDY's office was a big, taciturn android with a blunt chin, wearing the overalls of some kind of general service technician. As Horn came into the room with Dordy this android gave him a searching look up and down, then switched his eyes to Dordy's face.

"Him?" he said in a tone that was only just neutral; it came within a hair of being disparaging.

"That's right," Dordy confirmed. "Mr. Horn, this is Berl. He's with the city public service department. I figured you might be unable to arrange yourself transportation through regular channels during carnival, so I passed the word to see if there was anyone free tonight who had access to a heli or a truck or something similar. Berl's off duty, and said he'd get a heli and fly you home."

Something in Berl's steady eyes discomfited Horn. He said, "Well, there isn't any need for that, you know. I can fly a heli if there's a machine available. I would have flown my own but for the fact that it's in store under a time-lock."

"With all the continental guide-beams turned off for overhaul?" asked Berl, addressing him for the first time.

"Why no! I mean . . . Are they? I didn't realize."

"Sure they are. Carnival's the only chance we get to go over public service equipment properly. And at that it's a lot of work to cram in one week even working around the clock. Maybe," he shifted his gaze from Horn to Dordy, "maybe we should get together and start a movement to double the length of carnival."

There was a sound of faint hissing from beyond the door, then a sharp report, and a crash as though a pile of crocks had been dropped. "Excuse me," said Dordy wearily, and went to see what had happened. He returned shortly.

"Boy with some fireworks. He was here last night, too. Full of the carnival spirit. He blew the foot off a robot waiter with that one. Did you say something about wanting carnival to go on for two weeks instead of one, Berl?"

The blue-skinned men exchanged glances full of mutual comprehension; Horn felt oddly left out of the exchange. Then Berl shrugged.

"Well, life's like that. Okay, Mr. Horn, let's go. You won't find my heli as comfortable as your limousines, it's one I've borrowed for the night from the wreck-salvage section. But that's your lookout."

Horn nodded, and turned awkwardly to Dordy. "I don't know quite how to say thanks," he said. "Is there anything I can do? You told me money wasn't any good."

Berl made a noise halfway between a grunt and a laugh. He got up and started towards the door.

"Thanks aren't all that much use, either," said Dordy. "Not to an android. Believe me, I wouldn't have done a hand's turn more than I had to if you hadn't said you wanted to carry on Lars Talibrand's work."

Had he said that? Or was it merely an inevitable consequence of his decision to leave Earth and follow Talibrand's trail? Horn felt confused, wondering if he had perhaps made some promise to the effect under euphoric stimulation. He said, "Just a minute! What *was* this work of Talibrand's you seem to know so much about?"

"You're in it already," said Dordy with equanimity. "Whether you like it or not, you're in it up to your neck. And it all depends on you whether you come out the other end with your neck intact. Good-bye, Mr. Horn."

A sensation of terrifying loss of control made Horn shiver for a moment; it was as though he had slipped on the edge of a precipice and was seeing himself sliding inexorably towards the brink while scrabbling desperately for a saving hold that was not to be found. It was followed by an even stranger sense of calm. He put out his hand to Dordy, noting with pride that it did not tremble, and after a moment of hesitation Dordy shook it. Behind him, Berl made another of his grunting noises. This one could perhaps have been interpreted as surprised approval.

The heli was indeed a long way from the passenger models to which he was accustomed. Pot-bellied, immensely powerful, it lumbered slowly through the sky with its legs spread

wide on either side of a retracted grappling unit. He sat in acute discomfort on a plain metal bench between a rattling tool chest and an appallingly flimsy-looking door fitted with a quick-release opening device. Berl warned him not to lean even a finger on the door in case he operated the catch.

The edge of the bench cut off the circulation in his legs, sending his calves to prickling sleep no matter how often he shifted his weight from side to side. There was a stink of lubricating oil from the bearings of the rotor overhead.

"It's not designed for this sort of trip," Berl vouchsafed in an amused tone after they had been in flight an hour. He had noticed Horn's vain attempts to make himself comfortable, and crinkles of repressed laughter had deepened around his eyes.

It was the first thing Berl had said since they took off; he had pointedly ignored Horn's halting attempts to get him into conversation.

It was cold up here among the stars; he leaned back on the bench to get the warmth that seeped through from the turbine astern of their cockpit.

"What is it designed for, exactly?" he ventured. "You said something about wreck-salvage, didn't you?"

Berl nodded. There was no light except starlight and the dim glow from the instrument panel; the blueness of Berl's skin was indistinguishable, in fact it looked as neutral a gray as was Horn's own complexion.

"It's a heavy lifting job, really. That unit down between the undercarriage legs is a universal grapple. Hitch it on to one, two, three or even four smashed-up groundcars, crashed helis, even a light space-rocket, and there's power enough in the turbine to lift 'em and drag 'em a couple hundred miles." He spared a curious glance. "Never seen one of us at work?"

Horn shook his head. "I think I've been by at the spot where an accident has recently taken place, but the clean-up job was always done before I arrived." Something occurred to him that he might add. "Your boys must do a pretty fast job!"

Berl chuckled. "We try to. Right now, of course, there's no call for the heavy salvage helis like this since there're nothing on the streets but bubbletaxis, and if one of them gets

into trouble what it needs is a computer mechanic, not a salvage wagon."

They were passing to the east of a city Horn could not identify. From the heli it looked like the patch of misty brilliance of an extra-galactic nebula as seen through a giant telescope. The dots of brighter lights increased the resemblance.

He said something to that effect to Berl, who grunted. "Wouldn't know about that. My job's wreck-salvage."

A faux pas; a bad one. Damn it, he thought, here I am asking an android questions about a simple job stuck right under my nose on Earth that I've never bothered to find out about.

"There's a hell of a lot I don't know even here," he said half aloud. "Maybe I'm out of my mind to think about running off the planet until I've pried around a bit more on Earth."

There was no reply to that. Horn realized suddenly that the heli was losing altitude, and a group of lights ahead of them took on familiar patterns. This was the estate; they were about to land. He remembered he had meant to plan what he was going to say to his family, think up counters to their predictable objections.

Well, it wasn't that late, even though the trip had been slow. There was still an hour or two, probably, before the members of the family would drift back from the city to sleep the day away. Or did all those lights mean there was a carnival party going on?

The heli grounded under expert guidance, and Berl reached a brawny arm all the way across the cockpit to tap the catch on Horn's door. It fell open, forming a ramp to the ground. His legs moving stiffly, he clambered down and turned to look back. Berl was leaning out after him.

"Dordy asked me to give you this back," he said, and threw something flat and oblong. Even before he caught it, Horn realized it was the wallet that had belonged to Lars Tali-brand.

"By the way, what you were saying about sticking around on Earth and prying into people's jobs and like that! Don't waste the time! You leave us androids to worry about wreck-

salvage and public-service facilities and all, and you do *your* job. 'Bye!"

The door hoisted shut again, and the downdraft from the rotors became a vertical gale as the ungainly heli hauled itself into the sky. Horn watched it go before turning towards the house, weighing the little grey wallet in his hand.

His arrival could not have gone unnoticed; the big heli was efficiently silenced, but not nearly as thoroughly as a passenger model. At any moment during his slow walk up the slope from the landing-ground to the gardens banked before the house, he expected the lights to go up and transfix him. Instead, when he was already on the cool grass and beginning to sense the fragrance of the flowers swirling up to meet him, he saw a hand-held flashlamp spring to life ahead, and heard a cool voice say, "Good morning, Mr. Derry. Nice to see you back."

"Thanks, Rowl. Uh . . . you don't seem very surprised to see me." Horn fell in alongside the android butler who had been in his family's service since he was first imported; he had heard of the arguments which had raged about employing an android in the household of the planet's leading robot manufacturer, which had finally been settled on the basis that it must be an *imported* android, whose prestige value would outweigh other considerations. But Rowl was still the only android on the staff; the rest were custom-designed robots.

"Well, no, Mr. Derry. You see, the manager of the hotel where you were staying—or rather, his secretary—advised me of your arrival."

"Did he now!" said Horn, staring. They had come on to the long patio before the house. It's transparent walls which gave the illusion of continuity between interior and exterior allowed him to see that no one was in the house, no one moved except the ever-busy service robots. Rowl turned off the flashlamp because there was a reasonable level of illumination here; as he did so, his eyes fell to and lingered on the gray woven-metal wallet in Horn's hand.

Rowl didn't seem disposed to enlarge on his remark, and Horn wasn't sure exactly how to. He changed the subject. "Everyone's down in the city, I presume?"

"Oh yes. Mr. Derry, Senior, hasn't been home at all today,

or rather yesterday, and Mrs. Lu said not to expect her tonight. And the elder Mr. Horn is saying that he doesn't enjoy carnival so much as he used to. He was in a very bad temper when he came home yesterday, and I expect will probably feel the same way today."

"And my sister?"

"Oh, Miss Via is with a party of students under the supervision of your cousin, Mrs. Leadora. That entire branch of the family is here, incidentally."

"Damn. I'd clean forgotten about that. Oh well, I'll have to try, anyway. Do you suppose there's a hundred-thousand in ready cash in the house, Rowl?"

The android looked doubtful. "There probably is, Mr. Derry, but it'll be down to ten or five thousand by the end of carnival. The manager of your hotel said you proposed to leave Earth, by the way. Is that true, if you don't mind my asking? Or—uh—were you just displeased with the hotel?"

"It's perfectly true, Rowl. And as soon as I can make it. That's what I want a hundred-thousand for." He started into the house.

"Would you get me a drink and a snack, Rowl? I think I need it to set me up for an argument with granddad."

CHAPTER EIGHT

HE ATE sitting alone on the long central lounge which ran from end to end of the main hall of the house. One wall was entirely transparent and united the room with the patio. On the other side, shifting luminous patterns made the wall a different color and design from instant to instant. The smooth, hard, glossy floor reflected the plain, tasteful furniture; a thousand-year-old carpet hung on the wall in a case filled with helium gas against the creeping onset of decay.

He had finished eating, and was beginning to pull on a smokehale, when his sister Via entered amid a crowd of shrieking, yelling young people in their late teens, with his mother's cousin Leadora trying vainly to control them. Rowl was hovering as usual somewhere in the background.

As soon as she saw her brother, Via rushed forward with a cry of delight. "Derry, you *beast!* You've lost my bet for me!"

"What bet?" said Horn crossly, disengaging her from around his neck.

"Oh, I bet Sampidge over there that you'd enjoy carnival so much better on your own that you wouldn't come back. He said you would be back because it's more fun to spend carnival with people you know. Now here you are back already, so I guess he was right, wasn't he?"

"Your bet's washed out," said Horn, getting to his feet.

I'm not back for carnival, I'm through with carnival and all it stands for. All I came back for was to get a hundred-thousand out of granddad so I can go to Newholme, and maybe further than that. But Newholme will do as a start."

"Where's that?" said Via, a little uncertainly. "Far?"

There was a sudden breathless lull in the chatter and talk which had filled the room when the party returned, and Horn's harsh reply was loud enough to be heard by everyone.

"Far! It's a pretty long way from Earth, but it's hardly far enough!"

Faces turned to stare at him. A boy of eighteen with a scholarly expression detached himself from the group and came over. Horn regarded him sullenly; he barely heard Via stating that this was the Sampidge who had won the bet.

"If I heard you right, you said you were leaving Earth?" Sampidge inquired. Horn nodded. "What for? Right in the middle of carnival, I mean. It seems like an odd time to get the pioneering spirit."

"I'm just sick of the whole shallow situation," Horn snapped.

Someone, tiring of the momentary distraction provided by his outburst, threw a fat cushion from one of the sections of the lounge; it missed Sampidge, at whom it was obviously aimed, and struck Horn full in the face. In a moment there was a first-class mock fight in progress, accompanied by

laughter and shrieks of exaggerated terror. But the unexpected impact had knocked Horn off balance, and he had sat down very hard and in very undignified fashion on the floor.

Then a rasping voice cut through the racket. "What the hell is all this? Row! clear this bunch of ruffians out of here! Enough's enough!"

The silence fell like night on an airless world. The young people put their cushions shamefacedly down and muttered, "Good morning, sir!" and made themselves scarce, Via and Sampidge along with them.

In the doorway, Granddad Horn scowled at them as they departed, before lumbering forward to the lounge. "Row! a drink!" he ordered, and Row obeyed. It was not until he was bending his legs carefully to sit on the lounge that the old man noticed his grandson picking himself up from the floor.

"Derry! What the hell are *you* doing here? I thought you'd taken it into your head our company wasn't good enough for you this carnival. Changed your mind?"

Usually Horn was respectful towards his grandfather, as were all the family. But his mood in general was one of *to hell with consequences*. He snapped an answer as gruff as the question.

"I've decided this sort of company isn't fit for me—period. I came back to ask for a hundred-thousand of what's coming to me, and I'm going to leave Earth."

His grandfather leaned forward incredulously. Row approached bearing a selection of drinks on a tray but old man Horn waved him away impatiently.

"Boy, you're either out of your head, or . . . Ah-ah, *I get it*." He sat back again, chuckling. "Who was she? Someone you met down yonder? Must have been quite a dish to make you suicidal like this!"

"I'm not mooning over a woman!" Horn retaliated. "I'm just fed up, with carnival, with Earth, the whole works. And besides I've got something to do out there."

His grandfather's ninety-odd years sat lightly on him; he had often taken advantage of this to attempt brotherly conversations with his grandson. Now he patted the cushion on

the seat next to him. "Come and sit down, Derry," he said. "Never let it be said that I don't have time to deal with my own family's problems."

Horn shook his head and remained standing where he was. His grandfather shrugged. "Very well. Now about leaving Earth. Have you done anything seriously wrong?"

"Killed a man last night, a lawforce superintendent—" began Horn, and his grandfather leaped ahead.

"That's not so good. I guessed there was some reason behind this idea of yours. But even a lawforce superintendent isn't irremediably bad. How'd it happen?"

"He picked on me and forced me to a dueling hall."

"You killed your challenger in a regular duel? Hell, boy, it's carnival! They can't do anything to you for that, didn't you know?" Mentally the old man was slapping his pocket-book shut.

There was the noise of a heli descending outside. The old man cocked his head on one side. "Rowl! Where's that damn' drink I asked for? Oh, there. Whose heli is that coming in?"

"Mr. Derry, Senior's, I think, sir. The same model, anyway."

"Okay. Now you look here, young man! You take a drink and hang on till your father comes in, and we'll see if we can straighten out this crazy notion of yours right away."

His father came in practically cross-eyed with euphorics; the old man, snorting annoyance, sent Rowl to fetch antidotes and an ice-bag, against which Derry Horn, Senior protested feebly. The old man slapped him down as though he were a child again.

"Now you get your head clear, and fast! You never seem to have got a clear picture of your responsibilities, Derry! Here's this boy of yours with a head full of some crackbrain scheme for running away from Earth, and you're stewed to the gills."

The information sank home. "He's what!" said Derry, Senior and turned blood-shot eyes on his son. "He's got a scheme to *what*?"

"That's better," said the old man sharply. "Now, boy, you tell the whole story and we'll see about it."

Horn did so. He hadn't intended to, but only to demand

the money he wanted and walk out, leaving the family asking each other what they had done to make him act this way. However, the events which had brought him to the decision were so bright in his mind and preoccupied him so much, that he could not refrain from pouring out the story as it happened.

When he had finished, there was a silence during which he looked in vain for signs of comprehension on the faces of his listeners. He even glanced at Rowl, hovering in the background, but the android was in shadow and it was impossible to see whether there might be sympathy there as there had been in Dordy's expression.

"So because your carnival was spoiled by some off-planet character getting himself stuck with a knife," said his father at last, "you want to rid yourself of all your family obligations and run away to some backward world where you'll most likely wind up working in mud like a—a farming robot!"

"Family obligations!" flared Horn. "That's good, coming from you! I never saw you do anything but pile your own obligations on to granddad's back!"

"Why, I ought to turn you over and whop you!" exploded his father, purpling.

"Sit down, Derry!" the old man ordered him as he made to rise and put his threat into effect. "It's more complicated than that! I think we ought to do something about this android at the hotel, for a start—filling your head with the idea that you'd got yourself into danger through prying into this off-worlder's murder. We'll see to him!"

"You'll do nothing of the kind. I'm tired of hiding behind the skirts of your money!" Horn interrupted. The old man gave him a glare.

"I suppose you think that sounds grown-up and independent! Fine! But you didn't have any qualms about coming and asking me for a hundred-thousand, did you? Five times what it would take to settle this whole thing without fuss!"

"All right," said Horn wearily. "Forget about it. I've just about got enough for a one-way ticket, I guess. I didn't spend much at the carnival down there. If I've got anything in me worth keeping, I'll make out when I get to Newholme. If I haven't, that's too bad, and I've no business being alive."

"Dad," said his father, plucking nervously at the old man's sleeve, with his eyes on his son's face. "Dad, I think he really means this."

"So that much has penetrated your thick skull, has it?" Horn snapped.

"Don't talk to me like that! All these wild dreams about going out and being a citizen of the galaxy and probably rescuing fair maidens tied to man-eating alien trees or something—you may take them seriously, but you can't expect us to! If you'd had the sense not to poke your nose in where it wasn't wanted, just because of some worthless android!"

"In the past twenty-four hours I've met androids who are better men than you'll ever be! Damn it, at the very least they do a useful day's work!"

There was a long, cold silence after that. At length it was broken by the rustle of money.

"If you feel that way about us, young man, I think it would be better for you to leave Earth," said his grandfather. His eyes, his whole face, were like stone. "And since you think androids do useful work, which is more than I or your father, I'm going to let you *do* an android's work. There's a ship loading a consignment of robots at Faraway Field right now. It's from Newholme, its crew doesn't observe carnival. I was intending to ship an android as supercargo. Instead, I'm sending you. Don't interrupt!" he blazed at his son, who was feebly protesting. "A descendant of mine who wants to associate with androids instead of his own kind? It's too disgusting to be tolerated!"

He held out a sheaf of notes, plucked at random from his pocketbooks. "That's your pay for the trip. There's twenty thousand there. And at that I'm being generous. An android wouldn't have cost me more than food, drink and clothing. Do you want more than twenty thousand? It's up to you! Because I'm going to see that you don't come back to Earth sniveling for help. In fact, I'm going to see you're not allowed back on Earth unless you're carrying at least double that amount with you. Now do you want more, yes or no?"

Horn, astonished at his own calmness, took the money and counted it deliberately. When he had counted nineteen of the thousands, he gave the last one back.

"That's for the food, drink and clothing I'm costing you," he said in a tone of maximum insult.

His grandfather, face reddening, pulled himself to his feet. He was so angry he could barely speak. He held out his arm towards the exit, and it shook visibly.

"Out!" he said thickly. "Out! And *stay* out!"

Then he whirled on his heel and stormed from the room.

CHAPTER NINE

"THAT'S THE quarters we got for a supercargo," said the hard-eyed man who was the ship's first mate. He jerked a thumb through the narrow hatchway into the tiny cabin. "Stow your duffel in there and get back to number-one hold and get busy with the cargo manifest fast as you can. You got twenty-five minutes is all."

He stepped back to let Horn go past. Struggling with his bags, Horn managed to force his way through the hatch, drop the pile of his belongings, and look around. His face must have reflected his reactions, for the first mate shrugged.

"Android quarters," he said. "Whatchu expect?"

When the first mate had gone, Horn thrust as much of his gear as he could under the bunk and between it and the washbowl. Then he sat down on the bunk and buried his head in his hands.

Well, that was that.

He was on his own now, for better or worse, and the memory of the violent scene with his father and grandfather was beginning to seem reproachful to him. After all, he had hurled some very unpleasant insults. He had gone home to demand they do something for him which was entirely a whim of his own.

No, not a whim! He lowered his hands from his face and

looked around. It wasn't a whim, which would pass and leave him feeling repentant and sorry for himself. It was a genuine decision. But he felt ridiculously youthful and inadequate to stake his future on such a sudden resolve.

Now he began to take in his surroundings. This bunk he was sitting on was almost as hard as the bare metal bench in the heli Berl had flown home for him. There was a washbowl, with some kind of guard over it and a pressure tap aimed squarely at the wastepipe. No plug for the wastepipe. It took him some minutes to work out why. Once they lifted they would be running under practically zero gravity, and water would splash all over the room if one tried to fill a bowl with it. Then there was a locker for clothes. And nothing else.

No table, even. There wouldn't have been room.

He realized with a start that five of his precious twenty-five minutes were gone. He began to put away as much of his kit as he could. Most of it had to stay in its cases. Then he washed, and gingerly exchanged his regular clothes for the poorly-fitting merchant service drills the first mate had given him.

Over the washbowl was a few square inches of mirror; he tried to get a view of himself, noting that he should have found time for a shave.

He felt oddly uplifted by the rough cloth he wore. It implied that he was *doing* something, no matter how menial. Now he was certain to get rid of that peculiar feeling of inferiority he had endured in face both of Berl and of Dordy.

Three minutes! he realized suddenly, and hastened from the cabin.

He had trouble finding number-one hold; when he did, the first mate was there waiting impatiently. "Where the hell have you been, Horn?" he demanded, and ploughed on before Horn could offer an explanation. "I can see this trip's going to be a rough one! Shipping with a damn stupid human supercargo. Androids at any rate do what you tell 'em!"

Cheeks burning, Horn took the cargo manifest and began laboriously to check it.

Crate after crate of robots, lying patiently in their plastic coffins, awaiting their personal dawn on Newholme. Unfamiliar, incomprehensible identity codes had to be explained to

him. Then it was a maddening job, clambering between the crates to get a sight of the markings.

At the end he seemed to have too many robots. Eighteen crates remained unchecked. Wearily, with wordless disgust, the first mate showed him where he had turned two pages of the manifest over together.

"A' right," he said at long last. "Back to quarters. Chow's in quarter-hour, and we lift two hours after. Don't know what the hell we're doing about feeding you. Guess we can't fill you up with android staple, seeing you're human. Man, I never saw the advantages of androids so much till now."

But when the first mate took Horn to the mess at chow-time, the captain, Larrow, who was already at table, set down his cutlery and stared at the intruder.

"Horn!" he said frostily. "What are you doing here?"

"The first mate brought me along," said Horn, staring.

The captain switched his gaze. "Dize, you had no damned business doing such a thing! Didn't I tell you old man Horn gave strict, explicit orders that his help wanted to be treated like an android? That goes for food, in my book, as well as the rest of it!" He was a red-faced man with big, bristly eyebrows. "All right, get him down to his quarters and issue him a ration of staple. And get this, Horn! Next chow-time, you do this before you're told! Go to the steward, Mr. Arglewain, and get your own issue. Maybe you won't like it after the fancy grub you had back on Earth, but it's what's coming to you. I've lived on it for days myself." He grunted and went back to the succulent meat on his own plate.

The android staple was a kind of gray-green goo; it was some sort of algae emulsified and fortified, Horn guessed. He choked a little of it down in the seclusion of his cabin. It came right back up again twenty minutes after they lifted.

"You'll get over it," said Dize sympathetically when he dropped by before going off-watch an hour or two later. "In fact, you'll *have* to get over it, and inside eight hours at that. A supercargo is pretty busy aboard a tub like this." He was, of course, floating a foot off the regular floor as he spoke. "You'll find that's no exaggeration, believe me!"

"I believe you," said Horn feebly. "Say, Mr. Dize! Just a moment, Mr. Dize!"

"What is it?" The first mate paused with one hand lightly gripping the edge of the hatch.

"You're from Newholme, aren't you?"

"Well, of course! This is a Newholmer ship you're on."

"What's it like on Newholme? What's it really like, I mean? What makes it different from Earth?" Horn was struggling to sit up under the restraining straps holding him to his bunk; his face was almost the color of the undigested android staple he had thrown up.

"That's a pretty funny question," said Dize, slowly beginning to haul himself down through the hatch again. "What do you want to know that for?"

"That's mainly why I told my granddad I wanted to get off Earth." Horn made a vague gesture. "Damn it all, people live on twenty other worlds or more, but on Earth we never get to hear a damn' thing about them except maybe when we buy something imported. I want to know what people are like out here, how they think, what they dress like, what they like to eat—you know, what makes the difference in their lives."

"We-ell!" said Dize, and made himself comfortable in mid-air, fumbling for a pipe and managing to light it in the draft from the ventilator fans. "This makes sense!"

Dize told him they disliked Earthmen in general—too full of themselves and their own ways, he said. But he complimented Horn handsomely when he found sincerity behind that first naive inquiry, and told him lavish tales of the worlds he had visited. He made things easier for Horn, too. He lightened Horn's work here and there, gave him hints he might have spent an hour working out for himself. Horn began to suspect, though, that Dize might have done the same for an android.

Three days out, Dize thrust open the door of Horn's cabin at chow-time, found him spooning the drab staple into his mouth. "C'mere!" he said, beckoning, and hurried him down the companion-tunnels to the mess room. Astonished, Horn hesitated in the entrance as the crewmen looked up at him.

Then Captain Larrow extended a hand to indicate a chair.

"Please join us, Mr. Horn," he said heavily. "Mr. Dize tells me he thinks you'll be an asset to our company."

Three days further out they took the Big Step around the intervening light-years. By this time Horn was finding it possible to enjoy himself in a way he had never imagined before. Once he actually found himself humming a snatch of tune as he ran hull-security checks.

After they had put down and cleared their holds, Derry went back to his cabin to gather his duffel prior to signing off the complement. Dize found him there, dressed again in his regular clothes, wondering whether or not to keep the beard he had sprouted during the twelve days in space.

"So you're not staying with us," Dize said half-mockingly.

"No." Horn decided in that moment to keep the beard and picked up a comb instead of a razor. "But I'd like to do it again some time. I really would."

"Be glad to have you back, any time," Dize said. "And I guess that goes for the captain, too, though he wouldn't say so. Say! I'd like to take back what I said about androids."

"Easier to work with, you mean?" Horn laughed. "That's okay, they probably are. What will you be loading for the trip back?"

"Androids, as always."

"*Androids!*" Horn dropped his comb into the washbowl, he was so startled. "You mean in the same holds as the robots?"

"Why, yes! Except for the one they elect as supercargo, he gets to use this cabin. We fit up cages instead of the crate-racks, and they make out all right on a twelve-day trip like this one."

Horn stared at him for a moment, and then gave a forced laugh and turned away. "Remind me only to make outward trips with you," he said. "Robots are easier to handle."

"Androids aren't troublesome," Dize assured him.

"Is there a big trade in them, then? I thought . . . I had an idea most androids on Earth were made right there."

Dize shook his head. "If any of 'em are made on Earth, it's a pretty small proportion. Why, we ship eighteen-hundred at a time, every thirty days or so. They don't even come from

Newholme, they transship 'em here, is all. They make 'em further out. Lygos way, I believe. Or Creew 'n Dith."

So the family pride in owning Rowl, an *imported* android, was all ridiculous! Horn laughed, then shook his head when Dize asked why, and frowned over a tantalizing idea that he could not quite identify.

"Well," Dize said, pushing himself away from the wall where he had been leaning, "if you're staying here, I guess it's up to one of us to show you around. Like to come into town with me and I'll get you acquainted with the people?"

"That'd be great," agreed Horn. "Just a moment while I check if I have everything." He glanced through the locker and under the bunk, finding nothing; then he made sure he had his cash safely in his pockets; he had about twenty-six thousand altogether, counting the unspent balance of what he had taken for carnival.

Finally, he took out the little gray woven-metal wallet and pulled the booklet halfway loose to reassure himself it really existed. He was putting it back when Dize's hand fell on his arm with an iron grip.

"Hey!" Horn protested, seeing that an almost manic excitement had come into Dize's eyes. "What's that for?"

There was a sort of accusation in Dize's attitude. He whipped the wallet from Derry's grasp and held it poised in front of him.

"What the hell are you doing with one of these?" he said in a frosty voice. "*You* never did anything that could earn you this—you—you lousy Earthborn impostor!"

CHAPTER TEN

TENSION froze the air, like a crumb of ice dropped into supercooled water. Then Horn gave a nervous laugh. "Why not look inside?" he suggested. "It's not mine, and I'm not trying to pretend it is."

Suspiciously, as though not wanting to take his eyes off Horn's face, Dize glanced down at the booklet and saw the grayness of the dead solido picture. "Where'd you get it, anyway?" he said.

"It belonged to a man who was killed in the same hotel as I was staying at, first night of carnival week. He'd given that to the android manager of the hotel. When he was killed I found the body. Later the android gave it to me. And I—well, it wasn't altogether right what I told you about my deciding to come off Earth. Or rather, it was right, but it wasn't the whole story. I made up my mind to follow Lars Talibrand's trail back from Newholme on, till I caught up with the reason why he was killed."

A little respect began to temper the suspicion in Dize's eyes. "Why would this have been given to someone like you?" he demanded.

Horn spread his hands. "There was an android beaten to death at the same time, probably by the same killer. The hotel manager's secretary is an android, like I said. I guess maybe I made a favorable impression on him. He couldn't, obviously, make the trip himself. So as I see it now, he sort of planted the germ of the notion in my mind, and I was fed up and wanted to *do* something, so it stuck. And here I am."

Dize gave a choked, bitter laugh. "Man, I don't expect to see you shipping with us again. You should live that long! You've stuck your nose in bad business." He turned the pages of the booklet almost with reverence. "Get around, don't they, too!" he added as he glanced through the pages and pages of stamped exit and entry dates.

Horn leaned back against the washbowl. "Say, you know much about these documents? I never saw one before."

"Nor did I, not a real one. You see pictures all over, of course, so you recognize them right away." He shut the booklet regretfully and returned it to the wallet.

"Well, who are these citizens of the galaxy? What do they do?"

"More than all the rest of us put together and slightly better," said Dize succinctly, and put the wallet back in Horn's hand. "There aren't many of them, you know. Never have been."

"I *don't* know," corrected Horn. "They aren't recognized by Earth, I was told."

"The hayseeds on Earth wouldn't recognize it if their sun went nova!" snorted Dize. "All right, I'll tell you even though it seems sort of stupid. Out here we learn all this in first grade."

"Well, right now there are three citizens of the galaxy—no, sorry, just two, if Lars Talibrand's dead. So that was his name, was it? Lars Talibrand! Well, we'd have been told by now probably, if we hadn't been in space. Sorry, that must seem pretty queer to you. We knew that another citizen had been confirmed some years back, but we didn't get to hear who he was, because they said if his name and picture were published that would mean he'd be recognized where ever he went and it'd handicap him in what he was doing. The other two are both pretty old; one's on Vernier and the other on Arthworld."

"Gayk on Vernier was a medic. Infected himself with half a dozen diseases nobody thought could be cured. *Cured* 'em. He had some kind of bacteriophage he'd synthesized himself in his lab, which he said could handle all these diseases—all at once if it had to. Viruses, too. Refused to try it on volunteers in case it didn't work."

"And it did work?"

"That's right. But he didn't know till he'd tried it."

"He sounds like a brave man," said Horn inanely. "How about the one on Arthworld?"

"Spaceman," Dize said proudly. "There was a star going nova out that way; they'd never managed to get the com-

plete spectroscopic record of a nova, so they'd planted a whole townful of equipment on its nearest planet to radio back data. Turned out the approach of the nova was making the signals useless with noise. But all the signals were on record there, and they wanted them pretty bad. They couldn't send in a robot, because its circuits would be ionized to ruins by the radiation. So this guy went in and got them. He was pretty well burned—crippled for many years after. Y'see, the qualification for galactic citizenship is to do something which benefits whole planetary populations."

Horn blinked. "How did getting these records benefit people so much?" he asked.

"How d'you think? Now we have these data, we can keep watch on all the stars that are likely to go nova. Nobody need ever again be afraid his world will be burned to cinders with him still on it. We can evacuate before the dangerous period sets in. See?"

"You mean he provided people with a warning?"

"That's the idea."

"And how about Lars Talibrand?" Horn tapped the booklet in its wallet.

"Him I wouldn't know about. But it was something different again, of course. Maybe he stumbled across some racket or other—blew up a traffic in drugs, could be, or medical blackmail."

"What's that?"

"It's happened occasionally. Someone corners the available supplies of some antibiotic, for instance, during an epidemic, and jacks up the price because people are desperate. Or they water it down so people go on being sick and have to go on buying for longer than they should have to."

"If he'd done something like that, someone might hate him enough to hunt him all the way to Earth and kill him there," Horn speculated.

"It'd fit, wouldn't it? Well, maybe now that he's dead they'll publish the details."

"Or maybe not," Horn shrugged, "because if they managed to catch up with him and kill him, he can't have finished the job."

Dize nodded. "Got a point there," he said. "Well, let's

move, shall we, if you're ready? We can talk just as well on the way into town, and we can be getting nearer a drink at the same time."

Now the sensation of really being elsewhere then on Earth started to assail him. Superficialities, first: the different layout of the houses, smaller and closer together. The virtual absence of helis overhead; there were however, one or two big, hundred-seater, passenger conveyances parked at the edge of the spaceport awaiting passengers, but there were hardly any private models. Groundcars ran with a humming, crackle of electricity. This was produced, so Dize told him, by solar conversion batteries.

After the differences, the similarities. After all, these were men on the streets, men and women like those of Earth only dressed differently, different average complexion, smaller average height by perhaps as much as half a head. But still human beings.

Poorer human beings. That was a point. They caught a public groundcar that Dize called a bus. The driver was human. On Earth, of course, the city transport was robotic and automatically programmed over its route. Earth's intercity and intercontinental vehicles would be android-controlled.

There was another point! So far he hadn't seen an android since his arrival, whereas on Earth one could hardly go ten minutes in a center of population without seeing a blue-skinned man somewhere. He mentioned it to Dize, who laughed dryly.

"You really will have to watch yourself," he said. "You make the most naïve statements! Man, androids *cost*! They cost like hell! Maybe there's a couple of hundred on all of Newholme, aside from the ones in transit. *They* go to Earth, and we get robots and machine tools and things like that. Androids we can do without, but not robots."

"No robots made here, then?"

"Simple ones. We don't have the level of resources to turn out ones like your granddad makes."

Horn was silent for the rest of the brief trip. There was something definitely odd about this question of androids. It was puzzling him more and more as he added facts to his

small store of information about them.

Dize was nudging him to get up and leave the bus; he complied, and found himself in a quiet residential street with native trees shading long one-story houses. Dize headed for a gateway twenty paces away, beckoning Horn to follow, and as they went up the path, the house door was flung open and two boys about eight and ten came clamoring to greet them.

Horn hung back in slight embarrassment; he hadn't realized that when Dize invited him to get acquainted he proposed to take him home. But Dize, picking one son up in each arm, swung them round and then called for Horn to come on in.

Now his wife, a pretty little woman, who looked (by Horn's preconceived standards) prematurely middle-aged, came out to greet her man. She paused in surprise at seeing Dize was not alone.

"This is Derry Horn. He shipped with us this trip," Dize explained. "He's from Earth, but he's all right."

There's a backhanded compliment! Horn hoped he managed to keep the reaction from revealing itself in his expression as he acknowledged a reluctant greeting and came indoors.

Different! Furniture basically the same in structure, but doubtless made of native materials merely shaped, not processed. The decorations were dark and solid-looking instead of insubstantial and airy as were those on Earth.

The two boys demanded what seemed to be a regular report on the trip just past. Dize's wife fetched some light, flavorful drink in clumsy pottery mugs, and Horn thanked her and sat sipping and listening to Dize and drinking in his surroundings along with the liquor.

A bit later Dize dismissed the boys and looked across at his guest. "Sorry, have to get that over with or there's no peace in the house! Say, look, I should have warned you. I brought you along here mainly because I think if you just start marching around Newholme, or any other world, making dumb remarks you'll find things pretty rough. We're a bit sort of—whassa word—parochial, that sounds like it. We like things *solid*. We're inclined to the average, and the normal.

"Now me, I've watched you during this trip, and you made it pretty clear you were sound. But hell, I think you're insane to have thought of taking on the job you said you were. Mat-

ter of fact, I was half inclined to try and talk you out of it. But I don't think I'll try. There's two reasons for that. First off, you got grit, and grit and a pile of luck can see the *most* unlikely people through hell-fire! That's what you probably have coming, of course.

"Second, damn it, I wouldn't want to hold back an Earthsider who really took it into his head to do something worth while 'stead of sitting back and taking it easy all his life, the way most of you seem to. Think you can make out on your own, though? Have you even any clear idea of how you're going to go about what you want to do?"

Horn shook his head dumbly. Then he found his voice and said, "I'd be grateful if you could advise me how to avoid making myself look naïve, if that's not too big a job."

"Shouldn't be. You stick around a few days, you're welcome. The wife'll get used to you fast enough. What you need is to start thinking like someone who gets around. You've thought like an Earthman all you life so far, but you're young yet. It's not too late to get you started on thinking like a generalized human being."

He tilted his mug to his mouth and drained the last of its contents. "Matter of fact, I reckon you've got halfway there by yourself. Let's push you all the way, huh?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

NEWHOLME, in any case, wasn't worth all that much to Horn. For when he looked at the end of the series of stamps in the back of the gray booklet, he saw that there was only the one pair of entries for Newholme. It was recent entry, followed within days by an exit. That would have been on Talibrand's way to Earth, and his death there. Inspection of the preceding pages revealed that Creew 'n Dith had been the world

Talibrand visited most frequently; second came Venier, third Lygos, and after that Arthworld and others.

He didn't propose to make like a detective and go around showing the dead solido in the front of the booklet to space-port authorities and hotel managers, asking whether they had seen this man Talibrand. For one thing, there were entirely too many places to cover, for another, it seemed probable that if Talibrand had never touched Newholme before, then none of his mysterious business concerned this world directly.

Enlisting Dize's assistance, he worked out for himself a picture of the two-way trade of which Dize's own shuttling voyages between Newholme and Earth were the last portion. Robots one way, androids the other; roughly in a proportion of eight to three. This agreed well with the respective cost of robots and androids, and implied that the trade was nicely balanced and stable.

Dize didn't know how long it had been going on; certainly for longer than anyone he had ever met in space service could remember, he stated.

"But why are you taking such interest in this trade?" Dize asked. "Do you think it has anything to do with Talibrand?"

Horn shrugged. "I suppose it's possible," he allowed. "After all, Talibrand must have had some reason for entrusting his galactic citizenship certificate to an android he had never met before. I'm sure Dordy was telling the truth when he said that was the case. On the other hand, though, the reason could be much simpler, perhaps because Dordy, like most androids on Earth, was imported, he knew from the time before he came to Earth what a galactic citizen was and how important his work could be, whereas practically no one else on Earth would even know there were such people." Derry sat silent for a moment. Then he looked directly at Dize and continued.

"No, what I have in mind is to move on to the destination of a batch of robots. A third of the cargo we brought in on our trip, for instance, is going to Creew 'n Dith. Creew 'n Dith was not only Talibrand's last stop before Newholme on his trip to Earth; it was also the world he visited most frequently and the world which nominated him for galactic citizenship

in the first place. And I'll be quite open about who I am, grandson of Horn, of Horn Robots, learning the business and making a tour of the worlds that import our products to get first-hand knowledge of them."

"I had the idea that your connection with the family business had been severed," Dize commented, raising his eyebrows.

"So it has, I guess. But are they to know that, out on Creew 'n Dith? That's a fair step from here, isn't it?"

"Four—no, five systems off. I went there two or three times when I was a trainee, before I decided to settle and get married and start working up towards a captaincy."

"How are you doing?"

"Pretty well," Dize chuckled. "I picked the right sort of trade! I may even get Larrow's job when he quits. That'll be in a few more trips."

Horn nodded absently, looking at a chart of the inhabited worlds as they were known on Newholme. Newholme was a long-established colony, so long established as to regard itself as autonomous. Further out, though, the worlds grew progressively younger; in a fringe of uncertainty fifty or sixty systems off, there were marked worlds whose names were spelled phonetically and followed by a query, or entered in brackets on the chart against the plot of more than one star, because it was not known exactly where they were.

Horn felt a shiver of excited anticipation crawl on his spine. There was something almost terrifyingly thrilling about the idea of worlds cut off in such a way from the rest of mankind.

He pulled himself together. "Well," he said thoughtfully, "I guess it's about time I started to put granddad's money to its proper use."

If he had wanted to go to more local systems, he could have traveled on comparatively luxurious liners; there was a fairly large number of wealthy passengers, mostly businessmen and women, export-import agents and such, traveling within this radius. But Creew 'n Dith was the world beyond the regular liner routes, the point at which the frontier really began, so to speak.

Dressed in the height of Earth's fashions, affecting a lazy disinterest which he felt matched his official role of a grandson rather unwillingly learning the business of his family, he lounged examining his fingernails in the office of the space-port agency, while various alternative propositions were put up to him.

Transship at the last possible moment, they suggested, so that you spend the least time aboard some other, uncomfortable vessel.

"No," Horn said casually. "That'd involve delay. I want to get this trip over as quick as I can. I'd rather ship on a cargo tub, come to that, so long as it will take me clear out to Creew 'n Dith."

At last, apologetically, they parted with the information. There was such a vessel scheduled to leave tomorrow; one which carried his own firm's robots.

"It'll do," said Horn, and fanned the requisite money on the desk.

The woman in charge of the office, slightly gap-toothed, smiled with pure joy at the sight of the fresh crisp currency. "Thank *you!*" she said, and seized the payment as though it might evaporate if left exposed to the air for too long. "I shall attend to your comfort aboard the ship myself. We will put the captain's own cabin at your disposal."

"You must be out of your mind," said Horn in a bored tone. "It will put the captain in a filthy temper, and when the captain is in that sort of mood he takes it out on his subordinates and so on all down the line. I'd prefer my trip to be made in a more pleasant atmosphere. Turn out one of the second mates, perhaps." He raised his eyes to the woman's face and smiled. "When my grandfather is affected by an attack of indigestion, production suffers for two days following."

The remark was something of a libel on his grandfather, but it was successful in its object. Soothingly, the woman agreed to do exactly as he said, and he left her bubbling over with her impressions of his charm, good sense and breeding. It would probably be impossible for her to stop talking about him for the next day or two.

The fare to Creew 'n Dith had proved to be lower than he

would have guessed by the standards of Earth. As Dize told him, the purchasing power of money went up, broadly speaking, in direct ratio to the distance from Earth.

A couple of hours before his ship was due to lift, he went down to the spaceport to clear with the authorities. Dize came with him, for he had to report back to his ship for loading cargo.

The cargo was already on the port. A light drizzle was falling from a grey overcast sky, and there was a chilly wind. In a compound at the edge of the port, hundreds of androids stood or lay huddled together, with only their issue ponchos of coarse cloth as protection. Dize snorted in annoyance as he came in sight.

"Damn these fools of port officials!" he snapped. "Why haven't they put up the awnings? We're liable to lose half the cargo from pneumonia if they're put aboard in that condition! Excuse me, I'm going to raise a little hell."

He departed with a vague promise to come back and see Horn off, and Horn, with many backward glances at the miserable huddle of androids, made his way slowly through the rain to the port authority office.

Here the captain of the ship that was taking him to Creew 'n Dith was waiting for him impatiently; he was a wiry man called Shembo, who spoke thickly and slowly. This irritated Horn at first, and made him feel he was dealing with a person of subnormal intelligence. Then he abruptly realized that Shembo was Creewndithian by birth, and consequently was speaking a language foreign to him. The reality of languages other than the Anglic Terrestrial to which he had been born had never really penetrated his mind before. He made a resolution to try and pick up what he could of Creewndithian on the trip.

Despite his thickness of speech, Shembo appeared to wish to be on good terms with his important passenger. When the formalities of port control were done with, he invited Horn to accompany him to the ship, and personally escorted him across the port. Again Horn found his eyes straying unbidden to the waiting androids; by now Dize's complaints had paid dividends, and the androids had been given big awnings on

poles which flapped like the wings of a dying bird while the workmen struggled to pitch them against the wind. Shembo saw the direction of his companion's gaze.

"Good cargo, huh?" he said with a wide smile. "We bring in many this trip."

"You brought this load? They're from Creew 'n Dith, then?"

"Oh no! They from far out, these. Long far. Maybe Arthworld, maybe further. I not know. We get from other ships on Creew 'n Dith four cargoes. I buy best of each at-bidding . . . How you say that? When each makes his price?"

"Auction?" suggested Horn. Shembo ringed his thumb and forefinger in a gesture of agreement.

"Oction, is right. I very good buyer for androids, I get best and treat well. Lose few lives! Other traders not so good, pay low prices, get bad stock, lose many, try get more price than worth after. Best do business with *good* androids."

So they came from far out, did they? That was interesting! Offhand, Horn would have doubted that worlds as distant even as Creew 'n Dith—let alone Arthworld or planets beyond it—had the technology for artificial life manufacture even of the simplest kind.

They passed the android compound on the way to the ship. Shembo was just raising a proud arm to indicate his vessel when there was a hail from behind, and Horn swung around to discover that one of the Newholmers' electric groundcars had run almost silently up to within twenty paces of them.

A man was standing up in the cockpit, holding a hat on his head with one hand because the rainy wind threatened to lift it off. "Are you Derry Horn?" he called. Horn shouted back that he was, and the groundcar's driver let it purr forward the last few yards till it drew up to him.

"Sorry to trouble you, Mr. Horn," said the man in the hat. "Could you come back to the port authority office for a moment? Apparently they overlooked some requirement about your signature on a certificate saying you don't propose to set up permanently in business on Creew 'n Dith."

He said it glibly with a faintly weary air, as though implying, *You know what these regulations are!* Horn shrugged in annoyance, and made to get into the car.

"Sorry, Captain Shembo!" he said. "I won't be long. I'll make my own way over to the ship when this is settled."

The man in the groundcar opened the door and got courteously out as though to usher Horn into the seat; with his hand still on the door and both feet on the ground, he froze. His eyes widened in a horrified stare.

Horn was yanked bodily to one side by a sudden, tremendous pull. Shembo, displaying startling strength, had shot out one arm; in his other hand was an ugly but efficient-looking projectile weapon that was pointed at the midriff of the man from the groundcar.

"Is no such certificat!" Shembo was saying through his teeth as he maintained the unwavering threat of his gun. "I guess you very rich man, Mr. Horn, I guess too these—" he put in some word Horn didn't catch, probably a Creewndithian obscenity, "try kidnap you for ransom. You go to ship. Run!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

SHEMBO SEEMED to have assumed command of the situation so thoroughly that for a moment Horn's only impulse was to obey. Then he mastered himself.

"No!" he said sharply. "I've got a better idea. Suppose instead of them taking *us* along, we take *them* along! If you don't mind?" he qualified, with a sidelong glance at Shembo.

The Creewndithian gave a mirthless grin. "Is good idea, if you like," he said. "You can drive car?"

"Make 'em get out and walk," shrugged Horn. "Let 'em get their feet wet like us."

"Okay! You—" Shembo jerked the muzzle of his gun towards the driver, "come out with your friend here."

For an instant Horn thought the driver was going to risk

everything and try and drive away; then he thought better of the idea and sullenly complied.

They walked the two men across the port to the ship. The loading had just been finished, so fortunately there was nobody to ask questions except members of Shembo's crew, to whom he gave brief, amused explanations in Creewndithian. Unwilling, the two would-be kidnapers allowed themselves to be lined up under the shelter of the rear tubes of the ship, backs to the hull. Shembo called half a dozen burly crewmen—this vessel appeared to be manned more heavily than the one aboard which Horn had left Earth—to stand guard, and then lowered his gun.

"All right!" said Horn, assuming the sternest tone he could and feeling a moment of gratitude for the way his new black beard (by now flourishing) had added years to his apparent age. "Let's have your names, to start with."

The driver glanced at his former passenger, who seemed to be the man in authority. This one scowled and said nothing.

Shembo addressed a sharp remark to one of his crewmen, who stepped forward and slapped both of the two men viciously on the face.

Horn nodded. "You'll get more of that if you don't open up," he said. "Come on, let's have it!"

The ex-passenger glanced at the driver and frowned, as if expecting him to do something; the driver shook his head weakly, and astonishingly the passenger punched him under the chin. As the guards leaped forward to intervene, the driver crumpled slowly to the ground, his face working. A moment later, the passenger followed suit. Before he collapsed he had made some motion of his jaw, which appeared to explain a great deal to Shembo. He thrust a stubby finger into the mouth of the passenger, and then turned away with a grunt of disgust.

"Poison hid in tooth," he said to Horn. "Is no good. Is dead the both."

Horn had a moment of utter certainty that these two men had taken an interest in him because he had taken an interest in the fate of Lars Talibrand. He suddenly found himself wishing that he had known the red-haired man when he was alive.

What would Talibrand have done now? Well, he would have known what to do because he knew what his business was. Horn didn't. But if this was a sample of the situation he was in, he was either going to find out, or die.

He directed Shembo to have the corpses stripped of anything that might give a clue to their identity, and leave them where they were. Let Newholme worry! He wanted to get on to Creew 'n Dith.

Later, he had a chance to go through the proceeds of the rifling of the corpses' clothes. And here was a treasure trove. Obviously, the opposition had underestimated him. He made a wry correction. The opposition had assessed him extremely accurately; it was only Shembo's presence of mind which had saved him. What Dize had said about grit and a lot of luck taking him through hell-fire came back to his mind. Here was the luck paying off.

According to the documents they had with them, the two dead men were both export-import agents from Maxplan, one of the local inhabited worlds. Their names were Udd and Cavelgrune. Udd had been in authority.

He set the documents aside and went through the rest of their possessions. He added their cash to his own resources; although it amounted only to a few hundreds, it would come in useful.

Two or three letters of instruction, and these were the important things. One referred to the arrival of a cargo of androids on Newholme, for transshipment and forwarding to Earth, the "usual procedure" was invoked. This letter was brief; Horn made a note of the signature and went on to the next.

At this point the ship lifted, and he had to set his letters aside and chafe in his acceleration couch until free fall set in. Once in free fall he settled down to read the second letter.

This was it! From an address in the Newholmer city he had just left. Damn it! He would have liked to go around there and investigate this Kyer who had signed the letter. It ran:

We learn that a boy calling himself Derry Horn and claiming to be of the family of Horn, of Horn Robots, is intending

to leave Newholme for Creew 'n Dith at 0900 on 4-4-008. The ship is Creewndithian under a Captain Shembo.

In view of the report that another Derry Horn became involved with the death of Lars Talibrand and later killed one of our local agents, we think it advisable to take him in charge. Talibrand, of course, was from Creew 'n Dith. It does not seem likely that this Horn could make serious trouble, but this is for insurance. You won't have much difficulty in taking him in charge, probably.

Horn smarted a little at the disparaging reference to himself as a "boy," and turned to the third letter. This was rather older, being dated about eleven days back. It was very brief.

You can stop worrying about the Creewndithian problem. It was solved on Earth after a bit of delay.

Horn pushed himself back and reclined in mid-air, his eyes fixed on the cabin wall but not looking at it.

The Creewndithian problem solved on Earth might so well be the interference of Talibrand in whatever the business was, ended by his death. And as for the business . . .

One common denominator seemed to underlie the whole tangled scheme. Talibrand had given his citizenship certificate to an android. The person who told Horn what galactic citizenship was, was an android. The export-import agency in which Udd and his companion were concerned dealt with androids.

How about that? Horn had a momentary vision of some vast android organization linking the stars, passing news, knowledge, scandal, threats, blackmail in a huge interstellar confederacy of criminal exploitation. Could that be it? After all, in some ways androids were dynamite. So long as they kept themselves to themselves they were trusted within limits; let one of them overstep their rigid confining rules, and he died. In the android barracks word of mouth would take information of any kind privately from anyone to anyone.

No, that didn't fit. Ridiculous. It fell down on the first fact it encountered: the fact that Talibrand had entrusted his certificate to Dordy. Than again that need not be true.

But that was ridiculous! For if Talibrand had been on the trail of some such conspiracy, Dordy would never have turned

the certificate over to another human being and incited him to follow up Talibrand's work.

Once again he slipped the gray woven-metal wallet from his pocket and thumbed through the pages of stamps. A faint noise in the passage disturbed him; he thrust it hastily out of sight as Shembo entered the cabin following a casual knock.

The wiry Creewndithian hung himself up on the air and gave Horn a grin. "You not what I expect," he said without preamble. "They tell me I carry spoiled rich boy. I think this trip we all wait on you like androids. Wrong?"

"Wrong," said Horn, smiling. "Like you said about androids—it's best for my family to deal in *good* robots. Those you have in your hold this trip were made in my grandfather's factories."

Shembo nodded his head slowly back and forth; the motion of course transferred itself to his trunk, and he swayed in the air for minutes afterwards like a very slow pendulum. He complicated the motion by pulling out a box of smoke-hales and offering one.

"And you make trip for what?"

Horn hesitated. Shembo had done him a very good turn; obviously, he was not involved with the people who had been after Lars Talibrand. But it would be safer to stick to his planned story.

"My grandfather wants me to follow him into the business," he lied, shrugging. "Only I don't like the idea of sitting at a desk and figuring output. I told him I wanted to look after the export side. So he said I ought to make this trip and see for myself."

"Yah-huh." Shembo disappeared into the first, vast cloud from his smokehale. "You go long way? Past Creew 'n Dith?"

"Maybe, maybe not." Horn decided to risk throwing out a small piece of bait. "I'd be interested to go right on to the end of the line and see where the androids that we get in trade are made. I recall one time my grandfather said he was interested in getting into the android trade himself."

Shembo chuckled. "He not manage it," he said flatly.

"That's right, at least I never heard anything further. What makes you so sure?"

Shembo extended a hand with two fingers crossed, one over the other. "Android trade like *that*," he said. "All fix, all tight as hell. Men that got it, they say they keep what they got, and no one else get in with them."

"That accounts for it," Horn agreed, and frowned. Surely mere monopoly-breaking couldn't have been what so commended Talibrand to the citizens of all these planets that had honored him? After all, as far as he could piece the picture together, the intervening worlds through which the trade in androids plied merely benefited from their passage in dues and perhaps customs levies. Earth, the consumer of androids, would be the only sufferer if a monopoly jacked up prices, and Earth was probably too fat and prosperous to care.

Yet Talibrand's work had in some way been tied up with androids, and the knowledge he had acquired was dangerous enough for him to be hunted down and killed.

"Shembo," he said, "you only have about a third of the cargo of robots which originally left Earth going to Creew 'n Dith. What would have happened to the others?"

Shembo stared at him. "You the one who knows, Mr. Horn! It your business, not so much mine!"

Horn cursed himself for a fool, and covered the remark. "I should have made that clearer," he said as smoothly as he could. "I was merely wondering about the terms of the exchange. From Earth to Newholme the ratio is about eight robots to three androids. You brought in a lot of androids, and you're taking back comparatively few robots." He hesitated. "Of course, it's well worth your while, but—"

"I get!" said Shembo, his brow clearing like a gale driving off storm clouds. "Out beyond Creew 'n Dith androids good and cheap, see? Robots worth more androids further you get from Earth. Oh, sure we make robots too, but robots we make less good than real Earth ones. Yours the best! Worth very good price further out."

Of course. Simple enough. If the bulk of androids originated somewhere out Arthworld way, this variation in their value was perfectly logical. After all, doubtless the android losses Dize had referred to when he saw them huddled together in the rain also affected their value. The further they

had been transported, the more were lost, the more valuable they became.

Shembo had gone off into a garbled and very technical account of price fluctuations in the android market, to which Horn listened with only half an ear. Creew 'n Dith. This was the world which had nominated Talibrand to be a citizen of the galaxy; doubtless the procedure was an official one, and the government authorities would be able to tell him why they had proposed him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"No, I WILL NOT tell you what the reason was for nominating Talibrand," said Hereditary Councilor Braithwin coldly. "And I want to know your reason for asking such a stupid question!"

He was a man of medium height and great girth. He sat back in a high thronelike chair of black and yellow native woods, padded with what looked like unprocessed animal furs, and he wore a black tunic and black full breeches with a gold-plated belt and soft leather calf-length boots. He spoke virtually perfect Anglic, with hardly a trace of the thick accent Shembo exhibited.

Horn felt himself flushing under the accusing stare of the hereditary councilor. He was totally at a loss. He had been at a loss ever since his arrival on Creew 'n Dith, for this really was a different world! Compared to Creew 'n Dith, Newholme with all its minor changes could have been a regional variant of Earth. But here . . .

He tried to look scornful as he glanced around the hall, noting the women in long white dresses, many of them young and pretty, the men in variations of the costume worn by Braithwin. Somehow they seemed more masculine and effi-

cient than Horn in his Earthside clothing. The low timber-beamed ceiling, the walls of dressed stone with narrow windows, the furs spread out on the hard floor, all gave the place a barbaric feeling.

He raised his voice to make sure everyone in the hall could hear him, looked Braithwin straight in the eye, and said, "Is it so important to know for what reason a citizen of the galaxy was *killed*?"

"What!" Braithwin seized the arms of his chair and pulled his body forward from the waist to glare down at Horn. At the same moment a rustling cry of despair ran through the hall. "What is this you say?"

There was a buzz of talk as those in the audience who spoke Anglic translated Horn's words to those who did not, and another series of cries of dismay rose. Braithwin silenced all with a glare. "Proof!" he snapped at Horn.

"I came from Earth to Newholme because Talibrand came from Newholme to Earth," Horn answered deliberately. "From Newholme I came to Creew 'n Dith because Tailbrand came from Creew 'n Dith to Newholme. I knew this because I have this."

Unhurriedly, he held out Talibrand's gray wallet. Braithwin got to his feet momentarily to snatch it and look at it.

When he raised his eyes again, it was not to look at Horn but to sweep the assembly with his gaze. "Out!" he commanded. Then he uttered a couple of sentences in sharp Creewndithian; Horn had picked up enough from Shembo to understand that they amounted to an elaboration of the previous order.

Soon they were alone in the great echoing hall, and Braithwin, tapping the wallet on the back of his hand, was staring thoughtfully at Horn.

"You're no more'n a boy spite of that beard you wear."

Horn didn't attempt to deny the fact. Braithwin got to his feet and descended the steps of the dais on which his chair rested. He began pacing back and forth.

"All right," Braithwin said at last. "You came here, you say, to pry into the fate of the robots your family sells to us. You've spent ten days fooling around at that, while I kept shuffling you off, dodging your applications for an audience,

because I didn't want to waste my time on some young empty-headed fool from Earth. This world's a sight different from yours, young man. Your world practically runs itself, what with your machines, your androids, your robots and all. Here *we* do the work. We humans! We run our planet, we don't just leave it up to cogs and circuits and blue-skinned artificial men. And that means I have better things to do with my time than indulging in vain gabbling and flowery compliments."

He swung to face Horn directly and thrust out the hand holding Talibrand's wallet so that a corner pointed straight at the younger man's chest. "Why the blazes didn't you say what you'd come here for?"

"Because Talibrand was killed!" flared Derry. "Because whoever it was he was up against tried to have me killed in a duel on Earth and then tried to kidnap me on Newholme! Because Talibrand died with his work unfinished and whoever killed him is trying to make sure no one else completes it!"

"You're trying to complete it?" said Braithwin in a tone of astonishment.

"I want to try! But I don't even know what it was! Why else do you think I asked you? As I figured it, on the world where he was given that document—" Horn nodded at the gray wallet, "I'd find out."

"Let's get out of this hall," said Braithwin abruptly. "I think we need to sit down in comfort and talk." He gave a bellow which produced an obsequious girl in the ubiquitous white floor-length dress; he spoke rapidly and at some length to her in Creewndithian.

"Right! That'll be enough of the audience for today," he said to Horn when he finished. "Come into my study and have a drink and tell me the whole story."

The study was off the main hall behind the dais. It was small, with the same stone walls as the hall, and a rough wooden trestle table and a small group of chairs occupied most of the floor. There were books, some of them from Earth, in ranks of shelves attached to the wall by pegs. The girl brought a pottery jug and two mugs and poured a sourish brown liquid for them to drink.

"The drink that's made us what we are," said Braithwin half-humorously. "Creewndithian beer is rough and has surprising potency. So have Creewndithians. *Haell!*"

They drank, Horn barely taking a sip, and then Braithwin sat back and crossed his legs.

"The whole story!" he commanded. "And don't make it too elaborate."

When Horn had finished, Braithwin was sitting with a far-away look in his eyes. "Why should he have gone to Earth?" he muttered. "Here on Creew 'n Dith he would have been safe had he stayed! When he was here on his last journey, he said nothing of the danger he was in, but of course, he would not have."

"You knew him personally?" ventured Horn. "I wish I had."

"Lars and his brother Jan are distant relations of mine. I have sent for Lars' brother; it will be well that he is told of Lars' death at once, before it gets to him by rumor. A fresh mug of beer!"

Horn covered his mug with his hand and shook his head.

"Will you tell me what it was that Talibrand was doing, then?" he requested. Braithwin shrugged.

"That I cannot. I can only tell you what it was that made us propose him for the citizenship. After that, we made a secret of his name and his appearance."

"A spaceman on Newholme told me about that," Horn interjected. "He said it would prevent him finishing his work if he was recognized wherever he went, is that right?"

"That was what he said. So in fact we hereditary councilors, our counterparts on the worlds which subscribed to his nomination, and his own immediate family were the only people who knew who it was had been honored.

"He brought me proof that the eldest son of one of our noble families had been stolen away by a vicious and jealous rival; he set out to trace the boy, and found him, and in the doing, discovered that others had been taken, too. Some unscrupulous space traders had been paid to kidnap them. And they were taken out further, beyond Arthworld, transhipped, dyed blue—"

"Conditioned, and used to swell the number of androids?"

Horn leaned forward breathlessly, his mind racing. Braithwin gave him a look of respect.

"Precisely! But Lars Talibrand did not stop there. He attempted to follow the whole terrible business to its end. He uncovered many such happenings on a dozen different worlds, and in some cases was even able to restore the children to their families. So much did this revolt our council that we came close to pledging that the android traders should never again be permitted to pass their goods through Creew 'n Dith. How could we know whether these androids of theirs might not sometimes be human children? But Lars Talibrand and his brother Jan argued against this, saying—or I recollect it was rather Jan who argued it, that there must be only a few such cases, for to take many children and pass them off for androids would surely be impossible without people noticing. And we depend much on the profits we get as middlemen in this trade, though I for one like it little. Still, you are from Earth, and Earth is the destination of most of the androids, you doubtless feel differently."

Horn shook his head slowly. "I've met androids I liked better than men themselves!" he declared. "In fact, as I told you, without the help of androids I could not have begun my journey." Then he frowned. "It seemes strange to me that even a few children could have vanished in this manner without some outcry."

Braithwin gave a mirthless chuckle. "To you, from a tame world such as Earth, doubtless. But—" he reached to the floor beside his chair and lifted up a skull, ivory-yellow, mounted with its cruelly fanged jaws open in a dead snarl. It was fully the length of a man's forearm from the tip of its snout to the dome of its cranium.

"That belonged to a beast I killed on my own estate not two years past," said Braithwin somberly. "It had taken the daughter of one of my retainers, a girl aged twelve. You have had a long time to tame Earth, Horn. Ours is a wild world even today."

"So these missing children . . .?"

"Could so easily have fallen prey to such a beast, or its hungry fellow-ravagers."

"I follow you," said Horn thoughtfully. "This explains to

me a puzzling connection with androids which ran like a single thread all through the pattern of events which followed Talibrand's death. I mentioned them in my story. Doubtless the androids knew what he had done?"

"Doubtless! And I heard from Lars' own mouth that many androids had risked their lives to help him in the dim hope that they too might be found to have been stolen from human parents and not made in some chemical stew."

"Where *are* androids made? Did your friend Lars tell you?"

"That's a strange way to phrase such a question," frowned Braithwin. "No, he did not. I never asked. The less I have to do with android traders, the better I'm pleased, and to me it's all one on what world they've set up their infernal cookery."

Again this peculiar haze around the origin of androids! Horn said, fumbling, "I don't understand why androids are made so far out, when they have to be shipped to Earth. Why don't the manufacturers simply set up in business here on Creew 'n Dith, or even on Newholme, or come to Earth itself?"

"For this world, I can answer. We want no more to do with this trade than we can help. I think other worlds feel the same way. There's something *unnatural* about the thought of men, living, breathing, eating, sleeping, prone to our diseases, capable of speech, but born of some artificial process. Human in all respects except one."

"And that is?"

"Androids are sterile, of course. Indeed, it was found that the devils who stole away the children had rendered their kidnaped victims as sterile as though they truly were androids."

The girl who had brought their beer was back, addressing Braithwin in low tones. The councilor answered briskly, and rose to his feet with a glance at Horn.

"His brother Jan is here. He came at once to meet you when he heard the news."

Horn too, got to his feet, just as Jan Talibrand entered, and was surprised to see a man so unlike Lars that it was almost impossible to credit that the two were brothers.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HE WAS a long man: long of face, with dark eyes set together beneath thin black eyebrows; long of limb and body, long of hand and foot. Carefully dressed dark hair curled on his head, he wore clothes of the same style as did Braithwin, but elaborately embroidered with gold thread on a black ground, and his belt was studded with jewels. He had a ring on his right thumb and jeweled buckles on the low shoes he wore in place of the boots Braithwin preferred.

The hand he extended in greeting was soft, and perhaps a trifle damp.

His voice was low and his command of Anglic almost as good as Braithwin's; he said, "So you, sir, are the Earthman who cared enough about the fate of my unfortunate brother to bring news of him all the way from Earth. My thanks, my sincere thanks although the news, of course, is terrible."

"Sit down, Jan," said Braithwin gruffly, "and stop trying to pretend it cuts you to the quick."

Jan Talibrand glanced around, with the start of a hot retort on his lips, and then shrugged. "It's true. I have been expecting to hear that Lars had risked his life once too often since he so foolhardily took on this problem which obsessed him."

He took a chair and crossed his legs, refusing the waiting-girl's suggestion of beer with a quick headshake. "Tell me how it happened," he said. "It was, I suppose, on Earth, since you're an Earthman."

Horn nodded, and gave a bald recital of the facts of the death. At the end, Jan Talibrand shook his head slowly.

"I warned him. Still, he was never satisfied. If he had only listened to me he might have been alive and happy on Creew 'n Dith on our own estate."

"Alive perhaps," grunted Braithwin with an edge of sar-

casm, "but not happy. He was only happy when he was searching out this evil he stumbled on."

Horn scrutinized Talibrand's face, vainly striving to make out his real feelings.

"Was Lars your elder brother or younger brother, Mr. Talibrand?" he had demanded before he could stop himself, and Talibrand frowned at him.

"He was, if you must know, three years younger than myself. And for your information, it is not Mister, it is Councilor. Hereditary Councilor."

Horn made a noncommittal noise.

Now Talibrand was rising to his feet. "Tomorrow I must hold obsequies for my brother," he said. "You will be quite unfamiliar with our customs, *Mister Horn*," he stressed the word in a manner so that the implications were not lost on either of his hearers, "but it is usual to hold a feast to honor the memory of the departed. Only the family and those close friends whom the departed directed should be invited, are present. My brother of course left no directions, or none more recent than the time he left Creew 'n Dith and began to roam from world to world. But I am sure that he would have wished you to be present." His dark eyes smoldered distantly.

Horn glanced at Braithwin, who gave him no clue. Well, it would be churlish to refuse, he supposed. He got to his feet and gave a half-bow.

"It will be a privilege," he said formally, and caught a tiny nod of approval from Braithwin at the corner of his eye.

"You will accept hospitality for tonight and as long as you wish to stay," Jan Talibrand had said, and had taken the guest's consent for granted. He had ordered two of his retainers to bring Horn's belongings from the inn where he had been staying since his arrival on Creew 'n Dith, and had invited Horn to get into his luxurious groundcar. It was a model that had been popular on Earth not more than two years before; since his arrival, Horn had seen nothing to compare with it on Creew 'n Dith.

He had seized the moment when Talibrand was giving his retainers directions to make mention of the groundcar to

Braithwin. "I take it *Councilor* Talibrand is not poor?" Derry had suggested.

"He has not perhaps the largest estate on Creew 'n Dith," Braithwin had answered. "But his great-grandfather had the foresight to build a well-appointed spaceport on a portion of his land, and consequently though not the wealthiest in lands, this family is the richest in terms of belongings."

That accounted for a great deal.

The groundcar ran smoothly through the streets of the town. Although it was one of the most densely populated cities, on the planet, Horn could hardly regard it as a city. They skirted the spaceport; a consignment of androids was being discharged from a newly-arrived vessel; they marched across the port in groups of twenty under the orders of a human guard, and were penned into compounds similar to the one he had seen on Newholme.

How many of them were human beings disguised? The idea revolted him; no wonder Lars Talibrand had been nominated to his high distinction for uncovering the ghastly truth.

"I gather, Councilor, that this is part of your family estate?" he ventured. Talibrand, sitting sidewise in the far corner of the back seat of the car, nodded.

"This is the furthest corner of it from my residence," he said. "Despite the nearness of the port, it does not disturb our peace and comfort."

Even if the Talibrand estate wasn't the largest on the planet, it was impressive enough. They ran over rough roads that tried the springs of their vehicle, through woods, between fields in which poor tenant farmers labored behind draft animals. In other fields expensive robot farming equipment prepared the ground for Talibrand's own crops.

Darkness was falling as they approached the house. It was a long, rambling structure of stone roofed with timber. There were gardens before it that reminded Horn a little of the gardens around his own family's home, and he had to repress a faint nostalgic longing.

"We dine an hour past dark," Talibrand told him when he brought him into the entrance of the house. "Please join us. My retainers are at your service and will take you to your room. Your own belongings have probably not yet come up

from the town, but everything in your room is at your disposal."

There was a good deal in the room, which was far more lavishly appointed than any Horn had yet seen on Creew 'n Dith. There was a suit of Creewndithian clothing, and it took him only a moment to decide to change into it; he felt so conspicuous in his Earthside outfits. He had barely finished putting it on, when there was a timid knock on the door.

Probably Talibrand's retainers bringing his baggage from the town, he guessed, and called permission to enter.

A woman—no, not more than a girl—slipped hastily through the entrance, shut the door promptly behind her, and stood leaning back against it with her eyes closed as though recovering from tremendous effort. She was slim but shapely; her hair was long and brown and caught up on her head by a clasp.

Horn was too taken aback to do more than gape at her, but in a moment she recovered and came forward. "Please forgive me for intruding on you!" she said tensely. "I had to come."

"I never object to pretty girls intruding on me," said Horn inanely. "Won't you sit down?" He indicated a chair.

"No, I dare not stay. If Jan were to hear of my coming I dread to think what would happen. My name is Moda Talibrand, I should tell you. Please, it is true that you came here to bring news of Lars' death?"

There was a kind of urgent supplication in her voice. Horn hesitated. "Moda Talibrand," he echoed. "Are you Lars' sister, then?"

"No," she said, and gave a little proud toss of her head. "I'm his widow."

Horn digested the information in silence for a moment. She waited impatiently, with little frightened glances at the door at every imagined footfall, and finally could bear the delay no longer. "Please!" she begged. "Answer me!"

"To you," said Horn slowly, "if you will promise not to reveal it, I will admit that I came here not to bring news of Lars' death—though it is true he is dead—but to see if I could somehow carry on his work. It sounds presumptuous of me, doesn't it? But, well, I didn't know your husband when

he lived. I think, though, I've come to know him pretty well since. And I'd like to try and make his last efforts worthwhile."

She looked at him with her upper lip trembling, and began to say something; instead of that, though, she turned and ran from the room, leaving Horn stretching out a vain hand to stop her.

He saw her again the following day. She did not appear at dinner the same evening. But at the feast which Jan held at noon of the morrow she presided at one end of the long wooden table in the great hall, wearing black and with her hair in a black snood. She lifted her eyes occasionally from the table to look at the chair which stood empty at the other end, draped in black.

Horn thought that the feast was more of an excuse for stuffing the guests' bellies and swilling gallons of the sour Creewndithian beer, than a proper tribute to Lars Talibrand. Jan made a speech extoling his brother's virtues, but his heart seemed not to be in it. Braithwin, who had come up presumably as a member of the family, for he had said that he was distant kin to the Talibrands, spoke better, but at too great length. The restless audience, which consisted mainly of brawny men of young to middle age, a few oldsters, and matronly women who shed tears at intervals, were anxious to get back to their beer jugs.

The man whose son had been kidnaped and disguised as an android leaped to his feet and swept the space before him clear of plates, mugs and dishes with his sword. Then he jumped up on the table and set his hands on his hips.

"Lars Talibrand!" he roared. "If these drunken sots won't speak better of you than this, then I must! Here they sit swigging your beer and gnawing joints of meat, heedless of what they're supposed to be here for!"

Horn was sitting next to Braithwin, who told him in low tones who the speaker was and what he was saying. Now Jan Talibrand got slowly to his feet, his face like thunder.

"Whose beer?" he snapped. "Whose meat? Whose house and hospitality are you abusing?"

The man on the table looked down and sneered. "Don't try and lie to me, Councilor Talibrand! You're glad your brother's dead, for he was a better man than you'll every be!"

"Better get out of here," advised Braithwin in a low voice. "There's going to be a fight." And indeed Jan Talibrand had himself leaped up on the table, yelling for one of the retainers to throw him a sword, and was stamping down towards the man who had insulted him. Some of the audience cheered and laughed as though looking forward to the battle. Horn noticed that Moda Talibrand had leaned forward in her chair with parted lips, and seemed perhaps to be uttering a prayer for the man who had so praised her husband.

But others were judging discretion better than valor, and though Horn was not inclined to be thought cowardly, he obeyed Braithwin's suggestion and left the hall in company with him.

"I should go to your room till the evening," Braithwin advised frowningly. "This might spread. Jan Talibrand isn't liked, and there's the makings of a small army on the estate now."

Horn went. When he looked back and saw that the doors of the Great Hall had been burst open by a group of four wildly struggling swordsmen, he quickened his pace.

He thought at first he had mistaken his room when he finally reached it, for a bent figure in a drab gown was sitting in one of the chairs and addressed him in low, old woman's tones. He apologized and began to withdraw.

"I beg forgiveness, Mr. Horn," the old woman wheezed. "But I had to speak to you. I had to speak to you about my son. Lars was my son! He who is dead!"

She was struggling to rise from the chair, and now succeeded. For the first time the light fell on her face. Horn saw with world-shaking amazement that the face of Lars Talibrand's mother, was *blue*.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"PLEASE!" said the old woman in supplication. "Please! I am very old, but I am not mad!"

Horn came forward slowly and sat down on the edge of the bed facing her as she lowered her aged bones once more into the chair, closing her eyes as she did so. "I didn't say anything, granny," he murmured. "Please explain."

She did so, rapidly, confusedly, repeating herself sometimes, but obviously speaking with sincerity, and the pattern that emerged was simple enough.

Barg Talibrand, father of Jan and Lars, had been a "simpler" man than either of his sons; that was her way of putting it. Horn guessed it as meaning less intelligent, perhaps even of dispossessed standard back on Earth. When his wife had been too ill to stand his violent love-making after bearing him his first son, Jan, he had gone down to the spaceport one day and picked himself a female android to satisfy him instead.

Here was something that needed explaining. Horn had never before seen a female android. As he pieced the story together, he learned that there were such, but that they were no longer brought even as far as Creew 'n Dith. They were extensively used as kitchen maids and concubines, apparently, further out. Earth, for some reason, had never accepted them.

When his female android—allegedly as sterile as the males, which was one reason they were popular as concubines—conceived, Barg Talibrand had at first been amused and had made ridiculous jokes about his being so virile he could even father children of a woman who couldn't have any. Then the strangeness of the event had begun to prey on his mind. Some superstitious explanation had been given to him by one of the members of a distant branch of the family, a man who had seen his chance to take the power into his own hands by getting the thick-witted Barg under his thumb.

And so the affair had been hushed up; Barg had become obsessed with the idea that he was cursed, not blessed with incredible powers of generation, and had at last died in a haze of insanity.

By then Jan was old enough to run the estate, and cleared out the parasites who had preyed on his father. But by this time his half-brother, Lars, had been old enough to prevent him from also doing away with this old female android who was in fact his mother. For by then he had been told the story by her. When Lars stumbled across the fate of the son of the man who had insulted Jan in the Great Hall this afternoon, the explanation had of course become clear to him. His mother could not be an android; she too must have been a kidnaped child of human descent. And that was the motive which had driven him from world to world to hunt out the android traders who swelled their profits by stealing away human children.

But though he would have wished to acknowledge the old woman as his mother, there were two reasons why not. First, a lifetime as an android had so formed her mind that she could not reconcile herself to the prospect of "becoming human," as she pathetically described it. Besides, the blue color of her skin was due to infection with some self-perpetuating protein molecule which could not be cured, so to speak. And second, Jan had no great wish to let his supposed full brother publish the fact that he was actually a bastard.

No wonder Jan hated his brother!

The door was flung wide, and Horn leaped to his feet in alarm, swinging around as he rose.

And there was Jan Talibrand, panting, sweat and grime on his face, blood running out of his left sleeve and over the back of his hand. There was blood on the naked sword he held at his side.

He had to draw a deep breath before he spoke, and when he did it was in Creewndithian to the old woman behind Horn, who put her hands up to cover her face and rocked backwards and forwards as though racked by sudden sobs.

At last, in response to what seemed to be a question a dozen times repeated, which Horn almost caught the sense

of but not quite, she made tearful answer, and Talibrand spat on the floor.

"So, you lickspittle Earthling," he said to Horn, "you too abuse my hospitality and spy on my family affairs, prowling in corners and bribing my retainers!" He uttered the last phrase with viciousness. The old woman shrieked out that she had voluntarily given Horn the information, and his face distorted with terrible rage.

"In that case, we're finished with you!" he snarled. "For too long you've paraded my family's shame! Every time I look at you I'm reminded—"

He choked and leaped forward with sword swinging, on to the yielding bed, chopping down with insane violence. He split the old woman's head from crown to nape.

Horn was overwhelmed by the needless, futile savagery of the deed. Some of what he felt must have been felt equally by Talibrand, who drew his sword back slowly, as though about to be horrified by what he had done.

"Your father's shame is nothing to the shame of *that*!" said Horn thickly.

Talibrand rounded on him. "To kill an android?" he said, beginning to recover himself. "What's that? To kill an animal! Whatever Lars said, whatever my false brother claimed, to the world that was an android, a thing, not a human being! And I shall see to it that no one can say differently."

"How?" said Horn contemptuously, surprised at his own coolness. "By cutting me down, defenseless, the way you cut your brother's mother down? Go on then! Sooner or later what you have done will find you out! As I have found you out."

He was going to go on, but his acid remarks had already had their effect. Talibrand had mastered his rage, and was now possessed by a cold anger.

"Come then! I will get you a sword. They tell me you are clever with your blade. You killed one of our agents lately! But he was soft and an Earthling like you. Let's find out how you compare with a man of Creew 'n Dith!"

Horn hardly heard the last words; his head was ringing with what had gone before. One of *our* agents! Then when Lars Talibrand was relentlessly hunting down the evil men

he hated, his own brother was hand-in-glove with the mortal enemy.

Talibrand hastened him through the passages towards the great hall. They passed signs of battle as they drew nearer. Here a patch of floor was slippery with blood, there a wooden door bore the trace of a wild sword-slash, and from outside the house came the occasional crack of a large projectile weapon.

"There's a sword!" Talibrand's voice cut through Horn's furious thinking. He had leveled his own blade at one which had been discarded on the floor, clean, as though its owner had been struck down before he could wield it. It was heavy and cumbersome compared with the dueling swords Horn had used on Earth. This sword was designed for slashing and not for thrusting, but there was no choice. He could not ask for the Duple Champion model he preferred, or lighten it to his taste at the grindstone.

He glanced around him to get an idea of the surroundings, and leaped forward, turning and stooping in the air as he went, and landed with his feet apart facing Talibrand, seizing the hilt of the sword from the floor. In an instant, he was fighting for his life.

Here was no fencer like Coolin, over-confident of his skill and grace. Talibrand was a killing swordsman, dependent on strength and stamina and he still had plenty of both.

Horn had the brief pleasure of seeing a look of surprise cross his opponent's face at the competent way this Earthling handled his weapon. Then in a matter of seconds he was too busy fending off a furious attack to notice anything but the whirling blades.

Forced on the defensive, he found his foot in a pool of blood and slipped and tumbled. Gasping, he was back on his feet before the tiring Talibrand could follow through, more grateful than he could say that he had put on the Creewndithian suit.

He tried a counterattack and drove Talibrand back ten paces in a rush. Then Jan locked swords with him; it was a jar he could feel right up to his shoulder. Horn tried to heave Talibrand off his feet. This was no good. Horn was lighter by pounds than Talibrand, and even though he had hardened

up considerably since leaving Earth, he was not as strong. And that was what was going to tell.

He disengaged his blade and had to run back to avoid Talibrand's next slash. Turning thus, he saw that they were no longer alone. They were in the anteroom to the great hall, into which there were two entrances; the door from outside and the door from the living apartments. Both doors had admitted watchers, retainers back from driving the guests off the premises; they held long guns on their shoulders. Beside these rough men, was Moda Talibrand.

She was watching. Tensely, her hands clasped together as if in prayer. She had been weeping—perhaps, it occurred to Horn, for the failure of the first challenger to kill her brother-in-law.

He had allowed his glance to stray for half a second too long; Talibrand was upon him, blade lifted high for a death-blow. Moda cried out.

Desperately he wrenched himself aside, and as he did so his sword, almost undirected by his hand, found Talibrand's already wounded left arm and raked through its flesh. Horn felt the grating as it rubbed the living bone.

As despair suddenly replaced his triumph, Talibrand gave a sharp cry, and instantly the retainers standing at the side of the hall rushed forward. Two men helped him keep to his feet, the others seized Horn and wrested his sword from him.

At first he was too dazed to recognize what had happened. Then awareness of the surroundings seeped back and he shut his eyes and cursed. It would have been too much to expect a man like Talibrand to fight fairly to a finish.

That was the opinion of Moda, too, it seemed. Tensely she was walking forward, her black dress swishing a little on the floor at each step. She halted in front of her brother-in-law. Deliberately she pursed her lips and spat in his face.

"Coward!" she said. She spoke the word in Anglic, and left no doubt, by glancing around at Horn directly afterwards, for whose benefit she had selected the language.

Talibrand raised his right hand, the retainers took his sword gently from him and wiped the spittle from his cheek. He looked at her with burning eyes.

"Coward!" repeated Moda. "Why not get your hirelings

to finish the job you're too weak to do yourself? Go on! Tell them to cut his throat as though he were a pig!"

She stamped her foot, blazing with rage. "Oh, if I were a man!"

"You're not a natural woman," said Talibrand coldly. "To wed and bed with the child of an android! You disgust me, and I take no account of your mouthings." His eyes strayed to Horn's face. "But I will not kill him. A clean death is not for him. I found him in his room with the body of your husband's mother. He had split her skull."

The incredible arrogance of the lie shocked Horn into action. He tried to thrust himself forward. "Why, you—he began, but one of the men who held him clapped a huge palm over his mouth, and though he struggled to bite into the man's flesh and force him to take the hand away, he could not manage it.

Now Talibrand was shaking loose the arms that supported him, he came forward to confront Horn. Blood was still rippling from his fresh wound, and his face was pale and waxen.

"For you, who are also it seems a lover of androids, there is only one logical, beautiful fate. I hope you *hate* your life before it snuffs out!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LATER, after Horn had exhausted himself struggling, he was dragged through the house to a dark, stinking room. An old woman as drawn and shriveled as a mummified bat trembled forward and broke a capsule of something sharp-smelling under his nose, and his consciousness shattered into fragments.

He woke once to jolting darkness and the sound of men yelling orders; a fetid animal stench assailed his nose. Later—how much later, he could not guess—he again briefly broke

the surface of sleep to find himself floating under low gravity, bouncing slowly from side to side of a cuboid cage of stretched thongs. Something sticky and wet and unpleasant was smeared all over the thongs. He was glad to flee again into darkness.

But that was the last time the inhaled drug gave him the peace of oblivion. The next time he woke he was lying on a patch of gravelly soil, under a white sky. The air around was sharp and cold, but it was fresh. A man had just dashed a pail of cold water over him, and was now speaking harshly.

"You've slept long enough, you!" He rattled the bucket to the ground. "On your feet!"

Horn obeyed, swaying, and looked slowly about him. The sky was white with high, driven clouds; the land too seemed white, and here and there gave back a sort of crystalline reflection. A salt pan. Distantly there came the soughing of a sluggish ocean beating against a beach. When he licked his lips, the taste of the water still running down his face was salty.

Behind the man with the bucket, four battered and rusty ships pointed their blunt noses at the sky. Men and women dressed alike in coarse tweedlike cloth of ill cut, guns and daggers belted at their waists, were going about the ships.

"Where . . . where have you brought me?" Horn whispered.

The man with the bucket laughed. "A long way from Earth, my friend!" He too wore the coarse cloth, the weapon-stuck belt. "But we'll send you back, never fear. Partway, at least." He jerked a thumb, "Start walking."

He stumbled blindly, the salty gravel got into his shoes and cut his feet. Then he had to scramble up a dune and tough grasslike plants whipped and cut at his shins. And over the crest of the dune . . .

Camps. Compounds. For miles. Glittering huts of blocks of salt, stained brown here and there. Among them, huge vats steaming towards the sky, around which clustered a spread of dull blueness. As Horn came closer, the blueness separated into pieces—human-shaped pieces. They were children.

By each of the vats a brawny human woman was yelling as she supervised the distribution of the steaming mush from

the vats. Horn and his companion passed between the double rows of close-set wire mesh isolating the compounds along a heavily trodden path of beaten gravel. Horn's eyes switched from side to side, boys in these compounds, girls in those. They were draped with issue ponchos and nothing else, their skins uniformly a dull blue.

None of them seemed to be older than twelve or fourteen. But this was a waste world! They must be far out indeed, here. And the further you went from Earth . . .

Horn remembered the chart he had studied in Dize's home on Newholme. He recalled the fringe of uncertainty where they had marked worlds whose parent stars had not been identified for sure. This would be one of them.

He was beginning to take stock of himself as well as his surroundings now. His body ached all over, stiff, bruised, here and there swollen around a joint, right wrist, right knee, left ankle. They must have thrown him around on the trip as though he had been a sack of rubbish.

At an intersection of the paths between the compounds a sharp female voice hailed Horn's companion, and a woman with an air of authority strode up to them.

"That the one Talibrand sent out from Creew 'n Dith?" she demanded, looking Horn up and down. Horn's companion nodded.

"Miserable-looking specimen, isn't he?" the woman grunted. "Whose ship did he come in with, Rynalman's?"

"That's right. Talibrand sent him off Creew 'n Dith by the Arthworld route. Said to pass him back by way of Vernier."

"Arrh-hah." The woman consulted a sheaf of dirty paper in her hand. "Arrange that easy enough. Firgal's processing the load that just came in from out Lostworld way. Take him down and get him blued up. Then you can stick him in with the batch Plurivel's taking out tomorrow. They're going through Vernier according to the schedule. How's about the rest of it? Did Talibrand say to sterilize him and condition him as well?"

"Nuh-uh. Way I get it, he did Talibrand a whole lot of wrong! So Talibrand figures it'd be better if he wasn't conditioned; it'll hurt more if he can remember what he was be-

fore. Pretty soon someone'll take a gun to him if he tries to make out he's really human. They'll think he's got delusions and liable to run amok. About sterilizing, though, I don't know." He looked doubtful, sucking his lower lip.

Horn was listening to the exchange in incredulous horror. So this was the "logical, beautiful" fate Talibrand had in mind! He glanced around wildly, seeking a way of escape.

"Watch him!" said the women sharply, and Horn felt himself suddenly pinioned. "That's better. Well, what the hell difference does it make if we sterilize him or not? All he'll get from now on is android company, besides, they're not paying us anything on this one, why should we bother?"

She shrugged, and gestured for Horn's captor to proceed.

He dragged Horn with contemptuous ease to a large, low building, framed in metal, walled with the ubiquitous salt blocks. It was here where Firgal was processing. This was a sight that made Horn weak with horror, and explained with a single blinding flash what it was that Lars Talibrand had been on the verge of uncovering. The truth about the origin of androids!

They were processing children. Human children. More than a hundred were waiting in a compound behind the building, and Horn's head rang with their screaming. Pale, most naked, they were aged between six months and six years. Women in dirty gowns dragged the next one from the group. It was put on a table, sterilized with a fast blast from a selective radiation unit, stabbed with something in a hypodermic, and pushed out the other end.

Frenzied Horn fought against his captor, but he was too weak, half-starved and wholly stiff with inactivity. A blow on the side of the head laid him low, and he felt a jab in the fleshy part of his thigh.

"That'll fix him," said someone in a satisfied tone. When Horn woke up, his skin was blue.

He looked at his hand incredulously. Android blue. They had taken his clothes from him and given him one of the standard ponchos. He swept it off him uncaring of modesty and saw that he was blue from head to foot.

Despair settled and numbed his brain.

They put him in with a crowd of young male androids, the batch Plurivel was taking out tomorrow. They crowded about him curiously at first, but he snapped at them, and later they left him alone.

So this was how his foolhardy venture was going to end. He had found out what he had set out to discover. There were no android factories. There were no androids. There were *only* the human children stolen from their parents.

Out here, where the worlds were poor and struggling and the frontier ebbed and flowed, where it was not known for sure which planets had been colonized and which not, the android traders gathered their harvest. He got a clue to the manner of their operation when they were being driven into the holds of Plurivel's vessel. This ship had been attacked and defended. Its sides were spattered with shot, and an explosion had distorted two of the drive tubes. Horn pictured the traders dropping on a village and seizing the children, perhaps taking them from a school, a nursery, or elsewhere, perhaps snatching them from their mothers, perhaps catching them one by one if they were left alone.

After that, they were brought here for processing. Most of them were too young to understand what was happening. If older ones had to be added to make up the total, then these were hypnotized, starved, and brainwashed into amnesia. Losses were high among this group; it was avoided when possible.

All this he picked up in dribs and drabs, from talking to the androids he had been shipped with. In general they were dull of mind. They accepted without question what they had been told—that they had been manufactured in a laboratory. And why not? After all, the truth about human birth is incredible to many children. This lie had been hammered into their heads so often it had taken a hold as firm as that of a religious dogma. Though they were capable of questioning their origin, they would never truly believe a different story from what they had been told.

The blueness: that was another thing he managed to account for by filling in hints. A semiliving suspension of protein capable of reacting with and fixing one of the skin secretions, which would renew itself till the skin died.

He looked about him at his companions and wondered whether there was one among them who would later make a Dordy. He could see several who would make a Berl, a skilled manual worker. But where was the intellect, the inquiring mind that Dordy had displayed?

That too he solved. The brilliant and precocious, who might ask the wrong questions, were early centrifuged out of the mass and sent to other compounds on other worlds, given a fair education, disciplined more subtly than by violence and slaps across the face. And doubly conditioned.

Lars Talibrand must have suspected all of this and was on the verge of finding definite proof. The traders, knowing they were on the verge of being exposed, had hunted Talibrand down.

Lars Talibrand had never seen the android trade from the inside as Horn was now seeing it, and in that respect Horn had acquired far greater knowledge than Lars Talibrand. But Lars Talibrand had been wary enough to guard his freedom.

Whereas Horn felt the bitter taste of truth in his mouth when he recalled what the man in the android camp had said: "Pretty soon someone'll take a gun to him if he tries to make out he's really human. They'll think he's got delusions and liable to run amok."

Hopeless! Hopeless! Trapped in his blue disguise, Horn fumed, fretted, raged in silence, wondering whether he could bring himself to cut his throat.

They broke the cargoes up at planetfalls. He thought he separated on Vernier but he didn't know for sure; he didn't get a look even past the edge of the spaceport. Once separated from his original companions he was put in with a higher-grade group. He was bid for and bought at an auction. Then he was shipped again. For days he floated in the cage of springy thongs, in air thick with the reek of packed bodies.

And then—fresh air, and a familiar sight which made his despair blacker than ever. Here was the compound on Newholm! Here they were putting up awnings against rain, as they had done when he passed this way before. Now *he* was

shivering and huddling close to his companions for warmth. He cursed to himself over the misery of his fate.

Until suddenly hope lit like a nova in the dark of his mind. Men were coming to look over the androids. Loud-voiced, they spoke of picking a supercargo for the trip to Earth.

And Horn, filling his lungs as full of air as his mind was of pure joy, threw back his head and shouted, "*Dize!*"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DIZE WAS STANDING, one of a group of three men, at the side of the compound. As Horn forced his way desperately through the tight press of penned androids, the spaceman's voice came to him quite clearly again. Dize was turning to one of his companions and saying, "What was that I heard, Kyer?"

Kyer! The name that had been signed to the letter he had found in Udd's pockets. Kyer was right here on this spaceport on Newholme! He wondered for a brief instant what had happened to those letters; doubtless they had fallen into the hands of Jan Talibrand on Creew 'n Dith.

Kyer was a little man with sharp eyes; his face revealed anxiety as he glanced over the android compound. "Nothing, Mr. Dize. One of them yelling, I guess. Well, shall we move on?"

By now Horn had managed to claw and shove his way to the wire. "Dize! he called again. "Dize, come here and take a look at me!"

Kyer's sharp eyes fell on Horn's face now, and a strange succession of horrified thoughts seemed to flash through his mind. The third man in the group was probably a member of the spaceport authority's staff; he appeared to be at a total loss.

Now Dize, with a glance at Kyer, had started to walk over to the wire. In a sudden move of desperation, Kyer caught at his arm. Dize shook the grip loose angrily, and came to a halt facing Horn, while Kyer babbled wildly behind him.

Dize's searching stare moved almost tangibly over Horn's face. "Don't you know who I am?" Horn whispered. And after a long, terrible silence, Dize nodded.

"You're Derry Horn! And by the stars, I want to know why this bastard Kyer is trying to sell you to me as an android!"

He spun on his heel and addressed the port official crisply. "Put that man under arrest!" he barked. "And let that guy out of the cage! He's not android, he's human! I shipped with him off Earth less than three months back!"

The port official's eyes widened, his mouth opened as if to say something. Abruptly he drew a gun from his belt with which to cover Kyer. But already the little man had assessed the hopelessness of his situation, and his mouth was working as Udd's had worked on this very spaceport.

"Stop him!" snapped Horn. "He's got poison hidden in a tooth!"

"Too late," said Dize grimly, stepping forward and catching Kyer as he collapsed. "Sorry, wish you'd spoken sooner! Hey you!" he snapped at the port official again. "Get this friend of mine outa there, I told you! Move!"

Doubtfully, the official complied, but kept Horn covered with his gun warily. Horn limped weakly from the cage. The other androids—the other androids—moved restlessly and spoke in low tones, staring.

"Here!" Dize said, stepping forward to give Horn his arm. "You look in a bad way! Where've you been? How come that bastard was trying to pass you off as one of those androids? Did he know you were human?"

"There's no such thing as an android," said Horn feebly. "They're all human—all of them! I've been all the way out to the place where they process them. They're kidnaped in wholesale lots from the planets far out, then sterilized and dyed. Finally they're shipped to Earth as *manufactured* products. I've seen it all. That's what Lars Talibrand found out, I guess. That's why they had to kill him."

"What?"

"Probably what he's been through has turned his mind," the port official said solicitously. "What he says is ridiculous! It could never have gone unnoticed all these years."

"No?" Horn lifted burning eyes to the man's face. "How big a cut do *you* get on the android cargoes that pass through Newholme? Dize, get me to governmental authorities as fast as you can. I've got to go to Creew 'n Dith and fix the man who sold me to the android traders. I want to tear him to pieces with my bare hands."

Dize glanced down at the dead body of Kyer; then he made up his mind instantly.

"Captain Larrow's waiting for me to bring the cargo over to the ship, but I'm not going to leave you like this. You need me to vouch for your identity. Hang on while I tell the old man he's going to be short-handed this trip, and I'll be right with you!"

The quiet, prosperous-looking officials exchanged glances. Then the one who sat in the middle looked up at Horn.

"So you were kidnaped by this man on Creew 'n Dith and sent out to an android factory, Mr. Horn? Where you were disguised as one of the artificial—"

"Stop saying *artificial*!" blazed Horn. "I tell you they're human children! I don't know exactly where they get them, but they get some of them as near to here as Creew 'n Dith!"

Again the exchange of significant glances, and the man in the middle leaned forward on his table. "Mr. Dize," he said slowly, "your friend here has obviously undergone considerable strain. Suppose you take him to a psychiatrist we recommend and let him recover from his grueling experience under proper care."

"But this thing's got to be stopped!" snapped Horn. "I'll have time to recuperate when the android traders have been smashed!"

But the fight went out of him under the bland gaze of the officials. He spread his hands hopelessly and turned away.

"Mr. Dize," said one of the others behind the table, "as a man who has, I gather, participated over long periods in the android trade, you're more likely to appreciate just what

we're being asked to do. This . . . this *man* Horn—" the hesitation was accompanied by a glance at Horn's blue skin, "is demanding that we cut our own economic lifeline with Earth, isn't he? Why, there's no single product that brings half as much revenue to the worlds through which it passes as the android trade."

"Ach, you!" said Horn violently. "You'd probably sell your own son for an android! Dize, let's get out of here."

Dize was silent as they left the trade ministry building. On the street, he spoke in thoughtful tones.

"It does sound fantastic, doesn't it? How the hell *could* something like this go on undetected?"

"Easily." Horn spoke with weariness, for he had gone over and over the whole scheme in his mind during the long, lonely days he had spent penned up with the cargo of androids.

"Part of the supply of androids comes from fairly close in—Creew 'n Dith, Arthworld, Lygos, Vernier. Not much nowadays, though probably until Lars Talibrand uncovered his aspect of the racket the numbers were quite considerable."

His eyes were hardly seeing the dull gray rain-washed street, he was visualizing the events he described.

"But humanity has spread out a long way now, you know. At first, of course, Earth must have taken great interest in the fate of the colonies. Then they were no longer news, and the flood of emigration ceased, and Newholme changed from a pioneer world to the comfortable sort of place it is today. Newholme isn't interested in the fate of its fellow worlds, you must admit. That chart you showed me was marked by guesswork out beyond Vernier and Creew 'n Dith! But if anyone had taken the trouble to investigate, it would have been easy to check every entry on the chart. Only people aren't interested enough.

"Out there, the wave is probably still moving forward. In the last two or three centuries since that chart was last up to date, probably a dozen worlds more have been added to the roster without the news leaking back even to Newholme, let alone to Earth. And it's out there the traders get their stocks. It must be! That's the only explanation that fits."

"Do you mean there never were such things as androids?"

Horn shook his head. "Of course not. Maybe there were a long time ago. But they would have been made on Earth, because the labor, skill, and highly advanced biochemical knowledge involved, must have been fantastic. Probably they were totally uneconomic. But knowing the people of Earth, I guess there was probably a tremendous demand for them. So someone said to himself, 'I know the answer to this one!' And he organized a supply of *imported* androids to fill the demand.

"As I figure it, at first the business would have been a mere kidnaping racket, and the profit on individual victims would have had to sustain the whole trade. But it probably proved profitable enough for businessmen, who may perfectly well have swallowed the tale that these were 'imported androids.' And look! Suddenly there's a profitable commercial item for which the outworlds can trade to Earth, where before they were too poor to buy anything except the most essential imports from their wealthy parent-world.

"So the kidnaping racket becomes a full-scale slave trade. The master-minds behind it make absolutely sure they will keep their secret. Their agents are subdivided into compartments, with the actual kidnapers working far out among the isolated worlds whose existence no one on Earth has heard of. The headquarters—the place where I was taken—is a clearinghouse and no more. There's more than one of them, I believe. The most trusted agents are compelled to kill themselves if there's a risk of their secret escaping. The people who work at the clearinghouses have an ever-present threat hanging over them. They can always be thrown in among the next batch of supposed androids if they betray the secret.

"There's no direct contact between the collectors, the kidnapers, and the consumers, except for the androids themselves. I've changed hands three times on my way in, counting Kyer's trying to sell me in this batch. The groups of androids are broken up in transit for extra safety. Androids believe they have been manufactured, and the image of the blue-skinned artificial man has been so successfully sold to the public-at-large that if it hadn't been for the one slip-up in sterilization and Lars Talibrand's subsequent birth, the

whole racket could quite easily have gone on and on and on without foreseeable end!"

"What was that about Talibrand's birth?" Dize demanded.

Horn told him.

Dize nodded very slowly. "I've eavesdropped on androids sometimes," he said at length. "I've gone down to the holds and listened to them talk. Sometimes I've had one or two aboard who've been working and have already lived in android barracks on some world or other, maybe finishing some kind of specialized training. There's a sort of mythology which circulates among them nowadays. They talk about it in whispers, and if they're caught by a human being, they look guilty and shut up fast.

"Seems they know about Talibrand, I guess. These androids who've been in barracks already, or in touch with older ones in other ways, brief the new lot about it. Tell them that some of them may turn out to be human-born, and if they work well and patiently and behave themselves and don't offend a human so they don't get killed off, then maybe one day Talibrand—I guess that's who they mean—will come to them and tell them they're really human and they can wash in something special and all the blue will go away." He shrugged, "We never paid it much mind. Figured it was a story some bright guy started among androids to make sure they worked and behaved themselves."

"It fits!" said Horn somberly. "That was what Talibrand did. He traced some kids that had been disguised as androids. Some of them he did return to their parents. But I don't know about washing off the blueness. Is there anything that will remove it?"

Dize shook his head. "Nuh-uh."

Horn shrugged. "Well, they won't believe me here, will they?" he said, reverting to an earlier subject. "But there's a man called Braithwin on Creew 'n Dith who'll believe me. I'd better get as fast as I can to Creew 'n Dith."

"How?" said Dize flatly. "You're apparently an android! Even if I come along and swear to your humanity, they most likely still won't let you travel off the planet! And like I said, there isn't any way of cleaning the blue off you."

"How?" said Horn, and his tone was suddenly light. "Why, if I can stay alive long enough, and keep out of sight of the android traders' agents, all I have to do is wait till Shembo puts in here again. He knows me as well as you do. He'll get me to Creew 'n Dith."

"Could try it, I guess," Dize nodded. "Say, while I think of it, did you find out who killed Talibrand?"

"No," said Horn. "But I know who sold him out, I think."

"Who?"

"His brother. His brother Jan sold him out."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DIZE TOOK HIM to his home again, where his wife listened somberly to the whole story, thinking of her own two young sons, and reflecting that all the comfort about her, all the material well-being with which her husband had provided her, was bought at the cost of slavery for other women's children. She was fierce in her praise of what Horn had done.

"Done!" Horn objected sharply. "All I've done so far is to trip over things that were lying right in front of me and rub my nose in the dirt of the facts! There's this vast evil network of the android trade pushing out among the stars like the mycelium of a fungus. What have I, or anyone, even Lars Talibrand, actually done to stop its growth?"

"You haven't done so badly even without really intending to!" said Dize. "You've cost them three agents on Newholme. And according to what you've told me so far you're about to reveal what Talibrand's brother has been up to on Creew 'n Dith."

"If," said Horn morosely, "if I ever get there."

"I'll check at the port as soon as Shembo's due to put in,

make sure of catching him. But it may be a while." Dize frowned, "Now that I think about it, it is just the way you say it is. There's no continuity of contact between the various stages of the android trade—except the poor damned androids themselves."

"But there must be something we can do!" Dize's wife maintained. "Wouldn't everyone be so revolted if they were told the truth that they'd refuse to allow androids to come through their spaceports?"

"That might be a hindrance," Horn allowed. "Braithwin on Creew 'n Dith said they'd considered something of the kind, and been talked out of it by Jan Talibrand. Of course, that would have been some time ago, before the full facts were known."

"But even if that worked, it wouldn't hit at Earth," said Dize shrewdly.

"Exactly. Androids on Earth are a part of our life. We regard them as something just that much above robots. They get the repetitive dirty work we'd be ashamed to give to a human being; their blue skins salve our consciences. At least, they would if most people thought about the question. And there's the economic factor we had shoved in our faces at the trade ministry here. No other trade-goods are half so profitable to the worlds that handle them."

"Well, suppose you took people to see this place where the poor children are dyed blue?" persisted Dize's wife doggedly.

"Where is it? I don't know. I was there, but I didn't get a sight of the star patterns in the sky, even. How could I tell which of a hundred suns it goes around? I saw maybe two square miles of its surface!"

"Well then, couldn't you tell the androids the truth?"

Horn shook his head. "I'm afraid it wouldn't work. They believe implicitly the story of their origin, I can assure you. They're all sterile, so none of them have any idea of the human process of birth, and by the time they get a chance to come into contact with it they're so conditioned to regard their blue skins as a sign of fundamental difference they can't apply it to themselves." He restlessly paced up and down.

"The only possible solution, so far as I can see, in the long

run, is to push the android traders back. Back further than they've ever been driven. Re-establish contact with the worlds that have been colonized and never heard about afterwards. I'm sure that's where the so-called androids come from. We can catch men like Jan Talibrand, Kyer, Udd, Cavelgrune, but most of them will fall to us by chance, because they make a slip and this time we're watching for them. But that's only cutting off the flower from the weed; it won't eradicate the roots."

He was right about that. An attempt on his life was made two days later, which implied that the android traders' organization on Newholme hadn't been more than mildly inconvenienced by the loss of Kyer and his associates. A small bomb was thrown from a passing groundcar into the front room of Dize's house. Miraculously, it fell into the channel of the space-heating conduit which led up from the warmers in the basement, and exploded below their feet, shaking the house.

They sent for the lawforce, but Horn was cynical about the possible fruits of investigation.

"On Earth," he recalled, "it was a lawforce man who turned out to be the first agent of the android traders I came in contact with. Don't expect too much."

But he turned the event to advantage by persuading Dize, his wife and sons to appear in public heavily bandaged and plastered, and to say that he, Horn, had been seriously hurt. He lent color to the idea by keeping himself well out of sight.

Chafing, he awaited a further move from the traders. None came; satisfied to some extent, he supposed, they were now expecting instructions from Jan Talibrand as to what to do next.

He had no great doubts as to who had been responsible for the attack. Word would have got to Talibrand by now of the miraculous escape he had achieved from the android compound here. Certainly Talibrand must be sweating blood for fear Horn might return to Creew 'n Dith and denounce him.

And that was precisely what Horn itched to do.

As he had forecast, the lawforce still had not brought the bomb-thrower to book when Dize jubilantly announced the imminent planetfall of Shembo's ship, and charged off to fetch the Creewndithian captain from the port.

It was an unusually sober and quiet Shembo who listened to Horn's recital.

"This make many strange things plain," Shembo said at last.

"Such as what?" Horn leaned forward.

"Like . . . well, you know bigges' port on Creew 'n Dith, my own port, belong to Talibrand family. Much mystery on Creew 'n Dith about where you go, Mr. Horn. Jan Talibrand say you insult him, abuse his frien'ship but no one believe. Say you leave in secret to look for missing boy kidnaped by traders. No one believe that, either. Still, no one know truth, so no one do anything.

"Then jus' lately, things happen. Like every time androids come in port, Jan Talibrand come look at them. All my crew have hands washed by Talibrand men, see if they painted to hide blue skin. All other ships the same." Shembo gulped a generous swig from the mug Mrs. Dize had given him, and sat back with a complacent expression.

"All plain now. Talibrand look for you. Look damn' hard. Talibrand real scared!"

"Good," said Horn without sympathy. "But this makes things rather difficult. How the devil am I going to get down on Creew 'n Dith if Talibrand's watching for me so hard? I had thought of putting some cosmetic or other on to cover the blue." He thrust out his hand and stared at it. "You say they're on to that possibility too?"

"We think of some way out," Shembo said comfortably. "I fix."

"Say," Horn mused, "you're very ready to help me, Captain Shembo. Doesn't it make any difference to you that I'm taking your living away from you? Or trying to?"

Shembo shrugged. "This bad, androids turn out to be human kids. This very bad. Make me sick. Maybe for time being I go on, I used to it, see? But later, something else. Must be trade. Maybe, I guess, people still like have people work for them. Like on Creew 'n Dith. All big rich families

have retainers. Maybe same. Maybe poor people from out-worlds want work on Earth. I guess people on Earth build some clever robots, more clever like people, and stop having androids. I guess maybe too they hire real human people."

Horn nodded slowly. It was a possible answer. Indeed, it suggested a line of attack for the problem on Earth. The prestige value attached to hiring a real human being could be exploited. Some other trade goods might be found to take the place of androids.

But that was for long-term planning. Right now, he didn't care if the destruction of the android racket brought the whole economic structure of galactic trade crashing about their ears. Maybe it would even be good for the human race to have that happen.

He grew aware that Shembo was nodding his head slowly back and forth. "I have idea," said the Creewndithian. "I guess maybe I know how we get you safe to Braithwin."

The essential point in Shembo's plan was the timing of the planetfall. The ship dropped through the night towards the spaceport on the Talibrand estate; it would touch down between one and two hours before dawn, in the dead part of night when men's minds are sluggish and their bodies weary. The part of the night, too, when Jan Talibrand would be most reluctant to carry out his self-imposed personal inspection of android cargoes.

Of course, they weren't carrying androids this trip. They were out of Newholme, and only one blue-skinned man was aboard. But this one was dangerous.

The ship touched down, and the guards, roused from sleep and grumbling to each other, came out to put the crew through the newly instituted checks and searches.

Tensely, in the shadow of one of the cargo locks, Horn waited for what he knew must happen.

Suddenly there was a commotion on the far side of the ship, voices yelling in Creewndithian. The sound of running. A light swept across the port. The guards in Horn's field of view hurried to see what the fuss was about, drawing their guns as they ran.

The instant they were out of sight, Horn dropped to the ground and ran, head low, across the port.

By the time they found they had been chasing one of Shembo's crewmen, acting drunk, and laughing his head off at the success of his "practical joke," Horn was safely hidden between two heaps of stored goods under canvas at the edge of the port.

Having been made to look like fools, the guards would be wary of a second such trick, and would be reluctant to investigate suspicious noises and actions in case they proved to be equally baseless.

Irritated, they hauled Shembo and the crewman off to the port authority building; Shembo's voice raised in expostulation drifted clearly across the wide landing ground. Horn waited patiently until all was still. Then he crept warily around the port to the gate; the man on duty was snoozing and did not hear Horn go by.

He ran, after that, finding it hard to recognize the few landmarks he knew in the dark, but coming after a time to the district near the hall where Braithwin held his audiences. Dawn was now smearing the sky with dirty light gray, but fortunately few people were yet about, and when he encountered anyone Horn could shadow his face and conceal its blue skin.

Unlike Jan Talibrand, Braithwin did not feel the need to ring himself with guards and retainers. Horn reached the door of the hall unmolested and thundered on it with his fists.

Soon a sleepy-eyed porter came to open for him, and on seeing an android knocking, snarled an insult and made to close it again.

"Take me to Hereditary Councilor Braithwin!" ordered Horn. "Get him from bed if he still sleeps!"

"Fool!" the porter countered. "Today is the session of the Hereditary Council, and he was up late last night planning the business with which it must deal!"

"So much the better," said Horn with grim satisfaction. "Tell him, though, that I have a message from Lars Talibrand, a message from the dead. And he will listen."

Doubtfully, the porter nodded. It was almost comical to

see the change of expression on his face when he returned. "You may come inside," he said, swallowing. "Councilor Braithwin said he would hear your message."

And in the hall, puffy with sleep and still dragging his robe around him, Braithwin shouted with excitement and dismay to see Horn, whom he said he had thought long dead.

There in the hall he stood, and listened, and lastly gave a grim nod.

"Today the Hereditary Council meets," he said. "We have come from all over Creew 'n Dith to plan the coming year. But first we shall sit in judgment!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THERE WERE twenty of the hereditary councilors, all men. Two of them were very old, two of them rather young, the rest of Braithwin's age give or take several years. The table had been set out for them in the hall of audience, with pens and paper and a neat sheaf of printed reports before each chair. An hour and a half after dawn they began to arrive. Those who came from close at hand arrived yawning and stretching in groundcars, having traveled through the night. Those who came from furthest away had taken up to three days for the trip and had slept last night as guests of Braithwin's and so greeted the day fresh and rested.

He saluted them as they joined him in the hall, and went to warm themselves at the open fire or to snatch a breakfast from the waiting-girls' trays. A barrel of the sour Creewndithian beer stood waiting to be tapped later.

Of them all, Jan Talibrand arrived last, when Braithwin had already taken his place at the head of the table. The showy recent-model Earth-built groundcar hummed to a halt

outside, and the carefully dressed, carefully barbered, carefully scented Talibrand made his entry with a flourish.

Only the dark rings below his eyes betrayed the fact that he had spent the past weeks in mortal terror of exposure.

He took his place at the table, acknowledged grunts of greeting from the others, and looked expectantly towards Braithwin. The men's eyes met for an instant; then Braithwin looked down at the papers before him.

"This day are we the hereditary councilors of this world met together that we shall hear how goes it with our people, their business, and their livings, how justice rules, how prosperity increases, how there is peace abroad on Creew 'n Dith, and where business fails, life passes, justice is found wanting, prosperity wanes, or peace gives place to war, to set speedily about righting the same. I am Braithwin. I am here and undertake faithfully to discharge the tasks of a member of this council."

He looked towards the man on his left, and the declaration went down the table as each spoke. His eyes followed the words, but seemed to linger longest on one face in particular.

"I am Talibrand. I am here and undertake faithfully to discharge the tasks of a member of this council." Was there a certain insolence in that level tone? Braithwin dragged his eyes away.

He looked down at the papers before him, feeling his heart begin to pound as he lifted the first of them. He licked his lips before he spoke.

"I hereby declare this council open and do impeach one of our number namely Jan Talibrand of the house of Talibrand and maintain that he sits among us not by right but by arrogance for that he has crimes unanswered for."

They were beginning to understand what was being said, and with their mouths opening in astonishment were turning to stare at him. Talibrand himself had gone completely white and did not move a muscle.

Up to now, Braithwin had been almost droning his words. But suddenly he adopted a fierce tone and gave his words individual stress.

"In that, first: He has conspired with others being or not being citizens of this planet to steal away and sell into slavery

certain human beings and particularly children and to profit thereby.

"Second: He conspired with others being or not being citizens of this planet to bring about the death by violence of his brother Lars Talibrand, a citizen of the galaxy.

"Third: He of his personal responsibility did steal away and sell into slavery one Derry Horn, a citizen of the planet Earth."

Braithwin had to lick his lips again as he rustled the papers together. Now he looked straight at Talibrand.

"Jan Talibrand, what answer give you to these charges?"

All eyes turned incredulously to fix on Talibrand, but he did not notice. He was slowly rising to his feet, his eyes on something behind Braithwin. The other councilors shifted their gaze accordingly, and saw an android, blue-skinned, coming slowly through the door that led from Braithwin's study. The android with a full black beard, menacing eyes, now lifted his arm and pointed full at Talibrand.

Talibrand's nerve broke. With a sound like a sob, he swung on his heel and fled headlong from the hall.

"Stop him!" cried several voices, but they were too late. Before anyone could reach the door, the groundcar outside had hummed swiftly away, and there was a babble of questions, stilled by the authoritative voice of Braithwin.

"He will go to his estate, certainly. Later we will follow him there if you, having heard the charges, agree that they should be answered. Here is an android who is not an android, but a man. This is Derry Horn of whom you have heard. He can tell you that there are no androids."

He looked at Horn and spoke in Anglic; Horn of course had been able to follow what had gone before largely by guesswork, but had had no details.

The oldest member of the council, who had not stirred his aged bones from his seat in the rush to follow Talibrand, coughed and moved that the testimony of the witness be heard. So, with Braithwin translating for the benefit of those who did not understand Anglic, Horn planned, planed, nailed together the coffin which would bury Jan Talibrand.

They came to the gates of the Talibrand estate to find

them barred against visitors. Even the threat of their authority as the hereditary council failed to provoke even a reply. They would have gone back to discuss their business and leave the question of Talibrand's trial until after their session was over, had not a gunshot rung out.

The bullet was doubtless meant for Horn, but it found the belly of the oldest member of the council. With that deed, Talibrand's guilt was no longer a matter for disputation.

As though realizing he was doomed, Talibrand ordered all fire unleashed. The council fled to assemble their retainers and set siege to the Talibrand estate.

They moved in at nightfall, breaking the fence at two or three places and sending a detachment up through the spaceport to provide a distraction for the defences. Horn was politely but firmly advised by Braithwin to keep in the background.

"For one thing," the councilor pointed out, "even in the dark you're easy to identify by your blue skin, and you've done too much for us already for us to have you picked as a ready target. For another, this is between us. It's not just the fact that Talibrand has engaged in this evil trade, or murdered his brother, or any of the rest of it—it's that he has brought shame on the hereditary councilors of Creew 'n Dith, and it's for us to wipe out that shame."

In the woods of the estate, twigs broke, and their tiny sharp report was answered by louder ones and then perhaps by a scream. In the fields, dark shadows seemed to move in the hollows; sometimes they did move, and moved together, and a grunting struggle was begun with knives. But it was slow; the Talibrand estate had been laid out when this sort of thing was not uncommon. The only advantage the attackers had now was that many of them had visited Talibrand's family, and knew the layout.

Slowly the night ebbed away. Slowly the defenders were driven back to the house. But when that much was accomplished, and only a small number of Talibrand's horde of retainers survived in the woods and fields, Braithwin sighed and ordered a general entrenchment.

"That house won't fall to anything short of bombs," he

said musingly. "Or starvation. And with the season being what it is, they must have most of the harvest in the sheds by now. Hell! What are *you* doing here, Horn?"

He had almost raised his gun before he identified the man who was snaking up to them from the rear.

"It seemed quieter. I thought you wouldn't begrudge me a sight of the finish." Horn spoke mock-apologetically.

"You'll have to wait a long time for that," Braithwin answered. He turned and surveyed the long, dark, rambling house, explaining in low tones why that was. Occasionally, as one of the defenders thought he spotted a movement, a shot spurted from the dark embrasure of a window.

"Of course, it's only a matter of time," he muttered. "But we must be patient."

"Must we?" said Horn softly. "Look!"

At first Braithwin did not see what Horn meant. He thought only that one of the sheds at the end of the house looked larger in the dark. Then a line of red revealed that the increase in size was due to a pall of dark smoke rising. A fire!

"That can only have been set from inside," he said incredulously. "It may drive them out. The wind's set right. But who?"

"One of Talibrand's retainers, disgusted with him?"

Braithwin shook his head. "Never. Creewndithians stay loyal."

But whoever had been responsible, the fire was doing its job. Soon smoke was bellying from windows further along the house. Thanks to the way all the house's sections were interconnected, nothing could escape the blaze.

Now the shots came all from one end of the house, as the defenders failed to cope with the choking smoke. A ragged cheer went up from the attackers, as they spread the news of what was happening.

"A shamel!" said Braithwin somberly. "One of the finest old mansions on Creew 'n Dith. But perhaps if it had remained, it would have been a monument to the shame of the Talibrands."

How long could they stand it? Now the smoke was being

whirled as though through a horizontal chimney all the length of the house; the roof of the shed where it had started had fallen in and the blaze lit the lower side of the smoke-cloud with ruddy flashes.

Not long. For the wide doors were flung open and now a group of women and children marched forth under a white flag. The attackers let them come down from the house to the fields and led them away; the sound of their weeping was clear in the distance.

Braithwin glanced around for Horn, and was surprised to discover he was gone. He shrugged, and called for his men to move forward anew, to cover the still-open door of the hall.

Doubtless it was open because Talibrand planned a last desperate rush, to sell his life dearly—doubtless! And here it came!

The sally suddenly became a melee. The attackers rushed up from cover, swords swinging—this was too close combat for most of their guns. It was hard to tell which blades were red with blood, which from the glare of the fire.

Only the screams of men dying indexed the progress of the fight.

Suddenly Braithwin was struck by an idea. Maybe Horn had also guessed what must happen and had gone to try and settle his account personally. Swearing, Braithwin unsheathed his sword and went forward into the fray.

On the lawn before the wide doors, Talibrand fought, his sword spattering sprays of blood at every stroke, his face white and set, his blows still accurate and deadly. With him fought two of his closest retainers.

Braithwin leaped forward shouting, "A Braithwin! A *Bra-a-a-aithwi-i-in!*"

And on the final beat of the rhythmical shout he thrust aside one of his own retainers to leave a clear field of sweep for the sword that cut through Talibrand's sword arm and through his rib-cage and through his shoulder-blade and his spine and last of all through his hard, black heart.

In blank astonishment Braithwin looked at what he had done. He had come here to look for Horn, not to strike down

Talibrand! And as his retainers crowded around congratulating him on his triumphal blow, he demanded of them where Horn was.

None of them knew.

CHAPTER TWENTY

NOW THE HOUSE was blazing fiercely; the timbered roof had caught along a good half of its length, and smoke was welling from the double doors through which the last desperate sally had been made. By the light of the flames Braithwin set off around the house, demanding whether anyone had seen Horn or knew where he was. He made the complete circuit without receiving a positive answer.

His heart was sinking as he returned to his starting point. Probably the young fool had started off to try and get to close quarters with Talibrand, and had been cut down in one of the shrubberies, perhaps . . .

A yell penetrated his gloom, and he swung around as someone raised an arm and pointed to the house. From the smoke-belching double doorway, a dark figure staggered, bearing a limp burden. He scorned offers of help and when he was down the slope he set it on the ground.

"Someone look after her," he said in a voice made hoarse by smoke and fumes. "She was the wife of a good man."

"So I went down to look for her among the group of women and children that had been given safe-conduct from the house," Horn explained in low tones. "Councilor Braithwin had told me that no Creewndithian retainer would turn against his master, and the families of the retainers and the members of the Talibrand family itself I guessed would probably feel the same way. But obviously someone inside the house had set the fire."

"Lars' wife," Braithwin nodded.

"That's right, Moda Talibrand. I knew she hated her brother-in-law, and with justice, though she only had her suspicions to go by. When I didn't find her with the rest of the women, I was sure he'd discovered who was responsible for the fire and had left her behind deliberately in revenge. I was right."

He raised his beer mug and poured more of the oddly pleasant liquid down his throat.

The councilors sat around the hall of audience on big padded chairs, drinking, eating and listening. Now they nodded in approval and exchanged glances with Braithwin. Their faces were tired still, but they had rested after the night's battle, and were refreshing themselves even as they resumed their interrupted session.

Braithwin cleared his throat. "For the benefit of our distinguished visitor Derry Horn, I propose to conduct this part of the business in Anglic. First: A motion. It is resolved that no more so-called androids be permitted to pass through Creewndithian spaceports, and henceforth it shall be an offence for Creewndithian citizens to engage in trade in androids in any connection whatsoever. Aye?"

Every hand was raised.

"Second: A motion. It is resolved that Derry Horn, a citizen of Earth, be granted the honorary citizenship of this planet. Aye?"

Again, every hand went up.

"Third: An entry of record. Jan Talibrand formerly of this council by his crimes forfeited his right and the right of his descendants to the hereditary councilor's rank. Aye?"

And a third time, approval.

"Good," said Braithwin, and sat back. "We'll settle the matter of his replacement later. Right now, I have a suggestion to make to you, Horn. What are you going to do about this . . . this blue skin of yours? After all, it's the thing which has established the whole idea of 'androids' in the public's mind, on your own world and elsewhere. You'll have to get rid of it, won't you?"

Horn looked down self-consciously at his blue hands.

"So far as I know, that's impossible," he said.

Braithwin felt in one of his pockets and took out the gray wallet which had been Lars Talibrand's. "As a friend of a deceased citizen of the galaxy," he said, with a hint of a twinkle, "I think you might find another citizen of the galaxy disposed to assist you. As you may know, there is a biochemist on Vernier, called Gayk, who shares the distinction Lars Talibrand achieved. We will send you to see him, and it is most probable he will be able to find a way of counteracting this blue infection."

He shifted in his chair, comfortably, and held the wallet out for Horn to take. "I think, gentlemen, there is no one in whose hands we can better leave this former citizenship certificate of Lars Talibrand's?" He made it a question and glanced around the room. Nods answered him.

"And what next?"

Horn got up and paced back and forth. "I don't know. We must break the trade completely. Maybe it'll be enough to forbid the traders to use the ports of any decent world. If not . . . but that's for later."

"Agreed. For now, would you care to go into my study?"

Puzzled, Horn obeyed, and heard a ripple of chuckles behind him as he stepped into the little room.

From her chair, Moda Talibrand rose to greet him. She had put off her black mourning garb and resumed the plain white gown Creewndithian women normally wore. Her face was full of a strange mixture of sorrow and happiness.

There was a long silence between them. At last she spoke, in a tone that suggested she was resuming a conversation that had been briefly interrupted.

"You know, I thought I was married to a man who was infinitely better than any other I was ever likely to meet. I must have been judging him by the standard of his brother. Because now I'm certain there's more than one man like Lars in the galaxy. I've met another. And where there are two so close together there must be many, many more."

A lump rose in Horn's throat, and he could not speak. He was thinking of a red-haired man lying dead with a knife in his chest on the floor of a room on Earth.

The word went out.

They told Shembo of the new regulations about android trading, and that his staple livelihood was gone. He grinned and gave a shrug.

"Must be trade," he said. And set about finding a substitute.

The word came to a world where ships put down on a hard salt pan beside a sluggish sea, and it seemed that a chill wind blew from it. And that applied on other worlds, too.

But on Arthworld, and Vernier, and Lygos, and others, the effect was rather as though sun had broken through a cloud. And this was the case later on other worlds whose names were not known to many people, one of which, indeed, was called Lostworld.

They told Dize, and he said, "Well, I'll be! I never really thought he'd make it!" And he scrapped his idea of becoming captain of his own ship, and set about finding a task that would atone for his unknowing participation in the slave-trade that had passed as the shipment of androids.

Word came to Earth, and Derry Horn, Senior, spoke frowningly to his father. "That young whippersnapper of a son of mine really seems to have done something out yonder!"

"Wrecked a lot of business, for one thing!" his father grunted, studying the reports that Vernier, and Arthworld, and Lygos had followed the lead of Creew 'n Dith in banning the android traders from their spaceports.

Then they both together lifted their eyes worriedly to look at the butler, Rowl, and wondered: *does he know?*

The word traveled fastest, of course, among the androids; it had already passed along the trade routes before the ban began to interfere with their passage.

Androids were used to conversing through a third party; in one such conversation which followed the arrival of the word on Earth, the intermediary was the driver of a garbage wagon that served the hotel where Lars Talibrand had died. He lived in the same android barracks as did Berl of the wreck-salvage team.

From Berl at the barracks to Dordy at the hotel he carried the opening remarks. "What do you know! I never thought that soft-looking boy would win out! Say, what are you go-

ing to do when they get the message down here and hafta repeal the regulations that keep us on the hook? First off, *I'm* going to . . ."

There followed a list of wild fantasies, most of which would have called for androids to be freed from the laws of nature as well as the laws of man to make their fulfillment possible. When Dordy heard them relayed by the garbage wagon driver, he smiled, and sent back his answer crisp, direct and as the result of much thought.

"Start a movement to have Derry Horn made a citizen of the galaxy!"