Analog

Edited by
John W. Campbell

Eleven excellent science fiction stories ranging from the ends of the galaxy to the Mafia of the future
ANALOG 7

An exciting, generous helping of the best stories of the year from the most popular science fiction magazine of them all, ANALOG. From the furthest reaches of the galaxy to the criminal underworlds of the future, ANALOG 7 offers an intelligent and spell-binding assortment of the possible worlds of tomorrow. The stories include:

Fiesta Brava by Mack Reynolds . . . Elementary Mistake by Poul Anderson . . . The Last Command by Keith Laumer . . . There is a Crooked Man by Jack Wodhams . . . Weyr Search by Anne McCaffrey . . . The Featherbedders by Frank Herbert . . . plus many more.
ANALOG

7

Edited by

John W. Campbell

Originally published in hard cover by
Doubleday & Company, Inc.

Belmont Books • New York City
Contents

AIM FOR THE HEEL 7
John T. Phillifent

FIESTA BRAVA 32
Mack Reynolds

FREE VACATION 105
W. Macfarlane

THE FEATHERBEDDERS 118
Frank Herbert

WEYR SEARCH 145
Anne McCaffrey

LOST CALLING 205
Verge Foray

THE LAST COMMAND 225
Keith Laumer

 DEAD END 245
Mike Hodous

THERE IS A CROOKED MAN 256
Jack Wodhams

ELEMENTARY MISTAKE 313
Poul Anderson

BURDEN OF PROOF 331
Bob Shaw
Andrew Mellish stood in a dark room he had never been in before, and would probably never visit again. Although he couldn't see it, he knew there was a desk, and a man behind it. The man spoke quietly, precisely, with barely a trace of tension. Mellish had never heard that particular voice before and might never hear it again.

"You will be given the dossiers of three men. They are held to be directly and deliberately responsible for the failure and destruction of the Mid-Atlantic Artificial-Island Community Project, and the extensive loss of life, injury and misery entailed—"

"Then it wasn't an accident, after all? Not ignorance, or faulty design, or just plain bad luck?"

"It was not. The data has been through the computer seven times, to make absolutely sure. It was deliberate neglect, price-cutting and sabotage, involving insurance speculations, for profit, profit and profit."

"And there is no chance of legal redress?"

"None at all. Nothing can be proved to the law's satisfaction, and to instigate proceedings for inquiry would be futile. That ground has been fully covered. It's up to us. To you. The three men are to be eliminated and the results leaked. We handle the leak. You take care of the elimination. By the code. Understood?"

"Understood," Mellish sighed. "By the code," and stretched out his hand to grasp and take a bundle of cardboard folders. That done, he faced about and saw a faint violet glow just ahead and to his left. He went towards it, and it moved, leading him out of the room, along a passage with several bends until he was once more in the light.

The man by the desk stood still a moment to let the nerve tensions unwind. No matter how often one did this kind of thing, one felt a stomach-twist at ordering the death of a fellow-human. No matter how justified; no matter that there could be no doubt; no matter even
that these men were fellow-humans only by courtesy of shape and appearance, and far too cunningly versed in the tricks and stratagems of legal practice ever to be caught and brought to book; no matter that there was no other way to balance the scales—it was still an awful moment. Then he remembered Mellish, and shook his head in the dark. For the field-agent it was even worse. He had to do it. And do it, moreover, by the code. Then there came footsteps, and lights, and the urgent business of removing all traces of this momentary command post.

Mellish, by his outward appearance, might have brought keen delight to a student of the absolutely indistinguishable norm, but hardly to anyone else. He looked so utterly ordinary that any particularized description would have seemed an overstatement. That average, neutral, plain-gray exterior was so much part of his manner that he no longer thought consciously about it. Not now, certainly, as he selected a table with a striped umbrella, settled into a seat, hailed the waiter for an anisette, spared a moment to eye the strolling pedestrians, then settled to study the dossiers he had been given. The study needed care, because each dossier was minutely detailed, painstakingly thorough, and printed in a medium that was designed to begin boiling off the paper at the first exposure to light, the process being total after three hours, to leave no trace whatever.

He was quite unaware that he was being watched, that the powerful telephoto lens of a camera was trained on him from a balcony across the square. By means of the reflex-lenses keen gray eyes studied him, his relaxed ease, his appearance, his obvious preoccupation with his reading matter. Those lenses were so good that the girl using them almost could have read the larger print in the dossiers. But she didn’t bother. She was far more intrigued by the man himself. With the eyes and trained instincts of the professional photographer, she saw what almost anyone else would have missed. To herself she murmured,

“Never have I seen one so perfectly, so completely designed to dissolve into the scenery. Either I am a fool, or that man is hiding something. Himself and something else. And very cleverly. No one—but no one—looks as
invisibly-ordinary as that by accident. And that," she de-
cided, gathering her kit rapidly into its bag, "makes you
a very odd and interesting person indeed, signor. Well
worth watching a little more!"

Mellish appreciated the dossiers. Before moving up
into field work he had helped to compile similar efforts.
In his hands now he held a complete breakdown on
three men, physical descriptions augmented with finely
drawn sketches—which highlight significant aspects
much more vividly than any photograph can do—last-
known addresses, occupations, associates and so-on
down to fine details on fears and fancies, habits and
hobbies, likes and dislikes and other idiosyncrasies. He
absorbed efficiently, noting key points. All three men,
for instance, were in this city at this time, which didn't
surprise him. The code-command would have chosen
such a moment, for greater convenience. Also, the three
were not likely to associate, even remotely, not for a
long time to come. They were smart enough to avoid
even the fractional risk such a gathering might entail.
But they would certainly be keenly aware of each other,
and that was a factor he could use.

He shuffled and chose one to concentrate on for a be-
ginning in depth. Vittorio Pauolo Torricelli—a name like
that! Mellish shook his head wryly and read on. Aged
forty-three, single, Neapolitan, financially impregnable,
and backing and controlling brain behind three different
firms of consultant engineers, with controlling interests
in several other businesses supplying raw materials and
know-how—he read on steadily and swiftly, getting the
full picture. Then he sat a while, to work out his modus
operandi.

Signor Torricelli stared at the card his secretary had
brought in, and then at her. "This . . . Mellish?" he
checked the name again. "What sort of a man is he?
What does he look like?"

"Like nothing," she shrugged and made an expressive
face. "Just a man. Possibly American, but who can tell,
these days? I told him you were busy."
“I am,” Torricelli scowled back at the card. “Let him wait ten minutes, then bring him in.” He continued to study the card as she nodded and went away. The inscription was extremely simple, merely “ANDREW MELLISH. CODE FIELD-AGENT.” And, as Torricelli eyed it, the print of the second line grew bright red, lingered a moment like blood, and then faded away into nothing. He shivered and felt suddenly old. He had heard rumors, and stories told with a wry grin and a snigger. It was all a gag, a joke—or was it? He felt fear, and fear made him angry. Torricelli had risen to his present pinnacle by virtue of facing and dealing with anything that threatened to oppose him, not by being afraid. He thrived on opposition, but how could you oppose a joke? Grimly he waited for the moments to pass, settled himself solidly in his chair, laid his arms on the leather rests, and watched Mellish walk in, nod, and sit. This man? Contempt lay thick on his face, rasped his voice.

“You are a field-agent of the code? You?”

“That’s what was on my card,” Mellish admitted. “You can believe it or not, just as you please.”

“I believe that this is some kind of bluff. This code—is a joke!”

“That’s your privilege.” Mellish nodded graciously. “I can tell you about it, if you like. Somebody, some wit, made up the acronym CODE from the words Consortium for Offsettings the Defects and Exceptions of law and order. It’s quite a gag, isn’t it? The Code of law and order. Funny, don’t you agree? Now it’s just ‘the code,’ and everybody knows about it, but nobody takes it seriously. Well”—he waved a hand—“almost nobody.”

“Why have you come here?” Torricelli barked.

“Just for a talk. To tell you, for one thing, that we know you are one of the three men responsible for the disaster that happened to the Mid-Atlantic Artificial-Island Community Project, and that you made a big profit out of it.”

“The statement is libelous, without proof. Have you any? Can you even show how I am in any way connected with the failure? Can you? But I can show you how I
lost much money, and some very good friends, in that disaster!"

"I'm sure you can." Mellish crossed his legs easily. "I'm sure the people who manage your books are first class at their jobs. Your accounts will be unimpeachable, of course. I am also sure that certain individuals who might have caused you a degree of embarrassment, had they lived, were among the hundreds who perished in the disaster. Your friends? I am also aware that many of them had relatives, and friends, who still work for you in one capacity or another, and that it would throw something of a strain on their loyalty if they so much as suspected the truth."

Torricelli stiffened. "That is dangerous talk!"
"For you, yes. Suspicion is enough, for some people."
"But not for me. This is just talk. You have no proof!"
"Of course not. If proof were available, I wouldn't be here."

"Then why are you here? To scare me, perhaps?"
"Possibly," Mellish admitted gently. "That would be part of it. But I'm here chiefly to tell you that I have arranged for you to die."

Torricelli jerked upright and his hand went out for a button. Mellish put up his finger fast. "I wouldn't, not just yet. No point in calling for help at the moment. I'm not armed in any way. There will be no violence, I assure you. I can't stand violence."

"Why shouldn't I call the police and have you arrested? You have threatened me, here in my own office."

"I have? I don't recall that!"

Torricelli smiled a mean smile. "Suppose I say our conversation is on record, what then?"

"I would say you're either a liar or a fool, and you're not a fool. If you care to think back, several things have been said that you wouldn't want aired, not officially. But no threats by me."

"You said you will arrange for me to die. That's a threat!"

"You didn't listen." Mellish was pained. "Not 'will arrange,' I have arranged it. It's all done. But I shan't kill you. Nor will anyone else. If you know anything at all
about the code, you know that’s not how we work. And, what’s more, I’m alone. Solo. And I can’t abide violence.”

“You are crazy. Imbecile!” Torricelli sounded convinced. “How have you arranged this, eh? How?” . . . .

“I’ll tell you that at the proper time. Maybe.”

Torricelli’s hand went for the button again, hovered over it. “You will tell me now, or I will do some arranging. I can have you followed, beaten-up, even killed—”

“Of course you can,” Mellish agreed heartily. “But you won’t. Isn’t it strange that you can arrange to wipe out a whole community of people, and never even be suspected, but to kill just one man—me—would put you in jeopardy! You’d have to recruit the right man or men, hire them, pay them to do it, and go on paying them to keep quiet afterwards. And think of the investigation by the police. Several people saw me come in here, not all of them under your thumb. And I would take care to leave evidence incriminating you. And so-on. And even if you did put me away, which wouldn’t be too hard to do, there would be someone else after me, and another to follow him, and so-on. Think again.”

Torricelli brought his finger away from the button again. A thin sheen of sweat grew on his face. He had never met anyone quite like this man before. The quiet, almost apologetic, assurance was devastating.

“You are going to kill me!” he squealed. “First you frighten me, then you kill me. You are vampiro!” . . .

“I am unarmed,” Mellish repeated patiently. “I never carry weapons. And I am not going to kill you. That would be contrary to the code. All I do is arrange things.”

“How? When?”

Mellish stood, shook down his pants’ legs neatly and smiled down at the freely sweating businessman behind the desk. “I’ll tell you more this evening. At the lower end of the Via Conti there is a small bridge over a canal, where it flows into the river. I’ll meet you there, on the bridge, at six sharp, this evening. Come alone.”

“Now you must think I am crazy!” Torricelli shouted. “You expect me to go stupidly to my own assassination?”

“Come now!” Mellish protested. “In broad daylight in a public spot? I picked that spot and time because it is
public but won't be too crowded for us to meet and talk. I repeat and guarantee that I shall be alone and unarmed. I will be expecting you."

Mellish went away leaving Signor Torricelli thoroughly disorganized and badly worried. He was confident in his own mind that the date would be kept, so thought no more about that, but gave his attention to the next chore. It was just after lunch that he sent in his card to Felix Apramin, Managing Director of Apramin International Exchange, in another part of the city entirely. Apramin was swarthy, thick in the chest, and testy of manner.

"What is this silliness about code, eh?" There was more than a trace of Levantine about his features and accent, and acid suspicion in his manner. "What do you want? Be quick, I am a busy man!"

"You certainly should be," Mellish nodded, "seeing that you haven't long to live." Apramin sat absolutely still for a moment, then laughed. It was not a pleasant noise.

"Either you are trying to frighten me, Mr. Mellish, or to sell me some insurance. But I do not frighten very easily. I do not find your code funny, either. If anything, futile."

"Perhaps, I could mention a few names, people who didn't think it was funny either. Of course, they're not available for opinions now."

"It's no good." Apramin shook his head fractionally. "I'm not impressed by tricks—or rumors. I've heard some. I see this trick with the vanishing ink. It's childish nonsense."

"Isn't it?" Mellish agreed. "But that's the way it's done. It convinced Torricelli—and I think it will convince Herr Doktor Heinrich Haberman, when I get to him. Your confederates in crime, Signor Apramin. That, at least, is not nonsense, is it?" He used a moment to study the swarthy face opposite him, saw that the point had gone home, and went on. "You are to die, all three of you. I have arranged it."

Apramin moved slowly back in his chair, conflict plain on his face, not knowing whether to accept or reject, his
shrewd black eyes rock-steady. Then, all at once, he snorted in disdain.

"It's not going to work, code-man. You can't frighten me. I have long learned not to be frightened. Listen, I have asthma. I have had it long, and acutely. There is no cure."

"I know." Mellish assured him gently.

"You do? Well, I don't breathe too well. If I get excited I have an attack. I choke. People rush about and think I am going to die. But I get over it. I spoke of insurance, just now. This is my insurance!" He stretched out a hand to tap a small lacquered box at the end of his desk.

"I know," Mellish repeated, still gentle. There was something about his calm assurance that finally got through the other's control.

"I have learned not to get excited, or afraid. You would be a fool to try anything, here in my own office!"

"No need for alarm, sir. I shan't do anything, except perhaps to help a little." Mellish stood, moved, reached out to the box and opened it, all so smoothly and confidently that it was done before Apramin could react. "This is the stuff, isn't it?" He lifted out a small ampul and held it between finger and thumb. Apramin made a choking noise. Mellish frowned.

"It's all right. I'm not going to take it away. Adrenalin, isn't it? That's what the man said in the drugstore round the corner, where you get your supplies. I asked him." He put the fingertips of his other hand into his vest pocket and produced another ampul like the first.

"See? I wanted to help. I thought maybe your supply was running low, so I asked for a refill of your prescription. This one is exactly the same as yours. Exactly the same. See?" He slipped both into his palm and held it out for Apramin to see. "I bet you can't tell which is which. Can you?"

Apramin couldn't speak. Veins stood out like cords on his neck and forehead and his jaw was clamped as his nostrils dilated and his chest heaved in the effort to breathe. So far as he could see the ampules were identical, on the outside. But inside—? Terror swelled up to
choke him further and he began to turn blue. Mellish shook his head.

"Now you're having an attack, aren't you? Where's your alarm?" He followed Apramin's agonized stare, found a button and pushed it firmly, then dropped one ampul back in the box, tapped it shut and turned to move towards the door. Within seconds the door was flung open and a female quartermaster sergeant in nurse's uniform strode in, absorbed the situation at a glance, and marched to the desk.

Mellish stood respectfully aside and watched her brisk efficiency with hypodermic and ampul, and then with Apramin's arm, taking not the slightest notice of his presence, or the victim's feeble attempts to resist her ministrations. Another ten seconds and the struggling man went limp and silent in his chair. The nurse wheeled on Mellish.

"Please leave, signor. This is a bad one. I must summon a doctor at once. Your business will have to wait until another time."

"It's all right," Mellish sighed, as she began to dial, "I'm all through here, now."

On his way out of the building he paused just long enough to discard the ampul in a trash basket then strolled away down the street, pausing once again to watch the ambulance go racing past on its way to the building he had just left. Some ten minutes later, at a table of another sidewalk cafe, he made himself busy with a manicure set and a small bottle of fluid, removing collodion from his fingertips. He had just completed the operation to his satisfaction when someone settled into a chair alongside him and he looked up to meet the steady stare of a pair of very fine gray eyes. They formed part of a lovely face, vividly young, framed in glossy black hair and so instantly attractive that he smiled at it by reflex.

"Something I can do for you?"

"Possibly." Her straight brows came down a fraction. "First you should know that I have been following and watching you all day."

"Oh!" he put the smile away and became serious, if a
trifle puzzled. “That must have been dull for you. Was there some reason?”

“You are the cool one. Are you not worried?”

“Should I be?”

“I think so. See this,” and she hoisted a battered leather bag to the table and opened it wide enough to let him see the camera and kit of lenses inside. He was frankly and genuinely surprised.

“A paparazzi? You? I thought it was only men who went in for that.”

“There are places a woman can go where a man cannot.”

“That’s true. I hadn’t thought of it like that. I suppose one should not go by appearances, and any comment by me would be impertinent, so let’s just say I’m surprised.”

“But not worried?” she insisted.

“No. Perhaps I ought to warn you”—her face stiffened in instant alarm and he grinned as he completed the sentence—“that no one is ever going to pay you money for pictures of me. No one at all.”

“You think not?” her alarm slid into alert triumph as she dived a hand into her pocket and brought it out holding the small capsule he had thrown away. “What about this?”

“What about it?” he countered, gazing innocently at her.

“You bought this in a drugstore,” she said, biting her words off close. “You then went in to have an interview with Signor Apramin. You were in there about twenty minutes. You came out. You threw this away in a disposal box. This that you bought—or one like it. And Signor Apramin is dead. And”—she showed her teeth in a momentary and meaningless smile—“the man in the drugstore told me you claimed to be getting a drug for signor Apramin. Yet he is now dead. This is what about it.”

“Oh no, it isn’t,” he objected. “That’s not nearly enough. You have yet to show any real connection between those items.”

“You are not surprised when I tell you Apramin is dead,” she accused.

“No,” he admitted. “I expected something like that. And, in a left-handed sort of way I suppose it was my
fault. He was a sick man, and I said something to upset
him, to bring on a bad attack of asthma. Too bad!"
"You admit it?" she was shrill and he frowned at her.
"Admit what? I was discussing business with him. He
got upset. He died. So?"
"And this?" she nudged the capsule.
"What of it? That is the proper medicine for his injec-
tion in the event of just such an attack. I knew that. I
bought it knowing that. If you care to go back and ask
the attendant in the drugstore he will tell you the same.
He will tell you that I checked with him first. And I
showed it to Apramin, and told him what it was. I even
compared it with his own, which was identical. In fact, I
don't know whether that's the one I bought, or if it is
Apramin's. I may have swapped them without knowing
it."

She stared at him, and he saw the faint rictus of hor-
ror creep over her pretty face. Then she whispered,
"You switched—his medicine for yours?"
"It's possible. I may have done so."
"What are you?" she breathed. "A monster?"
"Funny how the mind works, isn't it?" he sighed.
"Yours, just like his. But let me ask you a question now.
What prompted you to select me to follow and spy on?"
"Hah!" she put a slim hand to her bag and clicked it
shut. "I take many photographs. I don't just look, like
other people. I see! And I saw a man trying very hard,
very skillfully, to be invisible. So I was curious, and I
followed. And watched!"

Mellish laughed, then lifted a finger for the waiter.
"That's very good. Congratulations. You have very good
eyes, in every sense. Now, what will you have, coffee—
or something stronger?"

She betrayed momentary confusion, and his broad
grin didn't help any. Then she muttered, "Very well,
coffee. Thank you. But you will explain, here and now!"
"Why not?" he transmitted the order and then sat back,
still grinning. "This is quite a situation, isn't it? You
think you have me over a barrel—and you have—but it
isn't quite the shape you think it is." He scratched his
jaw thoughtfully, silent while the waiter brought their
order and then apparently engrossed in stirring sugar
into his cup. She took care to keep her cup well away from his reach, and that made him smile again.

"Quite a situation. Unique, I believe. According to the code—and I have to take it seriously, even if no one else does—I'm supposed to do whatever I do in such a way that it would make no difference at all if someone was watching my every move. That's the theory. It's to preserve an ethic, and keep a clear conscience. In theory. But, as far as I know, no one has ever worked under those specific conditions. Until now."

"I don't understand," she confessed, tearing the sugar wrapper with care and dribbling the contents into her cup well out of his reach. "I don't understand at all."

"No. Not yet, you wouldn't. But let's check one thing, before I make it clear. You're not recording me, are you?"

"Recording?" her eyes opened wide, then she shook her head. "No. I only do pictures."

"I'll take your word. Pictures I don't mind, but a recording would be awkward. Not fatal, but awkward. Now——" he sat forward, all at once quietly intent and not at all neutral or ordinary. "You are intelligent enough to know that there are many men in this world who are criminals, monsters, yet who are clever enough to be safely out of reach of the law, yes? My job is to help put that right. I'm just one of many. My assignment, as of now, is to take care of three men, to see that they die. They all richly deserve it, no doubt about that and no need to go further into that side of it. But—I am a man, an ordinary man, with a conscience, and ethics. And I serve and respect the law. So it is necessary that I arrange these deaths in such a way that no crime is committed, least of all by me. Clear, so far?"

"No," she shook her head stubbornly. "You killed Apramin."

"I didn't. Listen carefully. I spoke to Apramin. I reminded him of the crime he had committed. This he already knew, so there was nothing criminal in that. I told him he was going to die, which is always true, of everybody. And I showed him the ampul of adrenalin I had bought for him, from his own drugstore—and which was, believe me, identical with the one in his own medi-
cine cabinet. I mixed the two, but what harm did that do? They were identical. He took fright. He had an attack. His own nurse gave him an injection. But he died. Why? Because he had a suspicious mind. Because he firmly believed I had switched his medicine for something lethal, just as you believed, just now. Because he couldn’t accept the truth. His own suspicion and fear killed him, not me. I merely arranged it. Think about it!”

He watched her for a while. Her face was almost as easy to read as print. A pretty face. Smart, too. He knew a momentary pang of regret at the knowledge that a lovely girl like this would never take notice of him for his own sake. But that was one of the inevitable drawbacks of his job, and he didn’t dwell on it. She ended up looking slightly ill.

“You frighten me right down to my stomach,” she whispered. “So cold-blooded, so deliberate.”

“That’s a point of view,” he admitted. “I can think of some seven hundred odd people who would like to be alive to hear you say it, and hundreds more in hospitals, and thousands more destitute and ruined, who might argue with you. All that can be laid at the doors of the three men on my list. They didn’t kill anyone, either, not directly, not if you want to split hairs. By law, those men are immune. And that’s a dangerous way for a man to be. My job is to crack that immunity, and to see that other like-minded people get to hear of it. But I’m not a killer. I have a code, just as you have.” She cringed back fractionally as he switched to the offensive.

“You take sneak pictures. You take advantage of the well-known, the famous, the notorious. They seek privacy. You hound them, take pictures of them, sell them for money, right? But—gambling on your face—I’ll bet there are some things, certain pictures, you wouldn’t touch. Am I right?”

He was a good judge of faces. He watched the struggle on hers now. In the end she shrugged as only an Italian woman can, and admitted. “It is true. There are subjects I would refuse to touch!”

“All right. I won’t ask you what they are, that’s your business. But credit me with the same kind of ethic,
Please." He finished his coffee and studied her, wondering if he might be able to modify his plans somewhat in the light of this new factor. She still had reservations.

"What were you doing to your fingers, just now?"

"Removing collodion. Handy if you don't want to leave fingerprints, and I didn't. It might have been awkward if some nosy person found strange fingerprints all over Apramin's medicine chest, and traced them to me. Not fatal, as I said before, but awkward."

"But how did you know about the medicine and everything?"

"Aha!" he smiled. "That's power. That's the hidden nine-tenths of the whole thing. Information. It makes all the difference. Tell me"—he sat forward again—"your camera, it's equipped for instant pictures?"

"But of course! Most times it is essential to be quick, you understand? What are you thinking about now?"

"I'd like you to help me." Her face dissolved into incredulity but before she could speak he hurried on. "You know the bridge at the bottom end of the Via Conti? Over the canal? I'm meeting a certain man there this afternoon, at six prompt."

"One more of the three?"

"Right. I think there is going to be an accident. I'd like you to be there. Not right on the spot but somewhere handy where you can get pictures of everything that happens. Will you do that?"

"You must be crazy! You want that I should take pictures of you while you are actually doing it?"

"You keep on getting it the wrong way round, my dear. I want you to be there and take pictures to prove that I didn't do it. Just in case it is necessary. Unless you've had experience you won't believe just what queer things eyewitnesses will testify to. Will you?"

"Very well," she snapped. "And afterwards I shall go straight to the police and show them!"

If she expected protest she was disappointed. Mellish grinned. "That's the stuff. Perfect. Thank you very much!"

One of the difficult lessons Mellish had learned early in his career with the code was to avoid speculation about
contingent details once they had been finalized. As he strolled on to the little bridge just five minutes before six, he had no idea where the girl was, or even if she was there at all. He had learned that her name was Anna-Maria Santessi, and that she was single and self-supporting. For the rest he was prepared to rely on his character-judgment, and let it go. Right now he needed to choose his spot with nice care. At this hour the light was still good. One spate of rush-hour traffic had come and gone, and in half-an-hour there would be another, the effect of public ordinances staggering the press of home-going workers, but just now the bridge was almost deserted. A strolling policeman inspected him with an impersonal stare and strolled on.

Mellish moved with purpose to a spot near the center, where city workmen had begun a much-needed repair to the ancient and corroded fancy ironwork of the guard rails. A seven-foot stretch had been cut out entirely and the gap filled with roped planks for temporary safety. He eyed this jury-rigged barricade calculatingly, then craned gingerly over to see that the canal flow right under him was building up into a torrent. All according to information and plan. He spared just one quick glance up and down the river, saw the hands of a distant clock standing up to half a minute away from six, and turned to put his back to the barrier and his face to the bridge.

Here came Torricelli now. Punctual. That was one of his habits, so the dossier had said. Mellish studied the walk, estimating it, seeing in it an uneasy blend of fear and rage, the unbalanced courage that is first-cousin to desperation. He moved a step or two clear of the plank-assembly, waiting. Torricelli slowed suspiciously, tossed sharp glances to right and left and backwards. Mellish smiled.

"There's no need for that. I'm alone."

"Then you are a fool!" Torricelli growled, coming closer. "I am not alone."

Mellish studied his flushed face and frowned: "You haven't been such a deficiente as to hire thugs, surely?"

"You call me a moron?" Torricelli swelled in rage.
“For a thing like this I need no one to help. I can do it myself!”

“Do what? No violence now!” Mellish edged back uneasily. “As I told you before, I’m not armed!”

“And you called me deficient? Cretino confusionario! Let me tell you, code-man, what I have arranged. In a moment I shall make a signal. A black limousine will roar on to the bridge, very fast. By the time it gets to here it will be done, I shall leap in, and be away!”

“Oh, I see!” Mellish edged back and Torricelli became proportionately more bold, thrusting his chin forward.

“You see, code-man, I am armed. You are going to die!”

“No, no!” Mellish denied, still cringing back. “Not me. You! First Apramin, who is now dead. Then you. And then Haberman. It’s all arranged!”

“Scimmione!” Torricelli squealed, lurching forward and dragging at the buttons of his jacket. Mellish caught just a glimpse of the heavy pistol that was stuffed in the other’s waistband before he spread his arms and wrapped them round Torricelli to smother the draw. This was violence, the part he hated. He clung frantically tight as Torricelli snarled. Two pedestrians at one end of the bridge stopped to stare and point. The policeman, at the other end, shouted and began to run. Past him, roaring powerfully, came the big black car. They were all just too late. Torricelli had the weight advantage. Mellish could block his draw, but he couldn’t stand against the rush.

Locked in a death struggle the two men lurched against the temporary barricade and it yielded. They went over, and out, and down.

A keen-eyed observer might have seen Mellish let go and kick himself free in mid-air, to strike the rushing water in a creditable dive. What most of the horrified on-lookers did see was Torricelli flailing the air frantically on the way down to smack into the water with a tremendous splash. They heard him scream. They saw his head break surface two or three times before the swift flow took him out of sight down the river. Whistles blew and people ran to and fro and shouted, but it was
three-quarters of an hour later that a riverboat wallowed and chugged up alongside Mellish, who was by that time weary and glad of the helping hands.

“No far away!” he panted. “I tried to hold him up. Kept sinking. I had to let go. Heavy. Only a few minutes—”

“I saw!” nodded a brawny seaman, already kicking off his boots. “I will get him. I know this river well.”

He did, too. Within another fifteen minutes he had hauled Torricelli’s body to the point where more hands could reach down and haul the pair of them inboard. Then, while the riverboat swung round and chugged back to a pier near the bridge, those willing hands went through the dreary exercises of artificial respiration, but by the time the police swarmed aboard and took charge, the painful truth was inescapable. A police sergeant with suspicious eyes and a black-bristle moustache conducted the interview in the little day-cabin of the riverboat.

“You say you had met Signor Torricelli before, Signor Mellish?”

“That’s right. Only once. This morning, to talk business. I do a little agency work.” Mellish looked even less impressive than before in the thick sweater and coarse pants he had managed to borrow while his own clothes were drying.

“And he arranged to meet you on the bridge?”

“Well, no. That was my idea. Too many eyes and ears in his office. I wanted it private.”

“That much is true,” the sergeant conceded. “He came in a car. We have it, and the man in it has been questioned. But why would he attack you?”

“I suppose I must have said something to upset him.”

“It is not enough,” the sergeant was harsh. “You say Signor Torricelli tried to kill you. Why do you say that?”

“He had a gun!” Mellish said.

“So? It is true he had a gun, but why would he—Signor Mellish, you will understand, surely, that Signor Torricelli was a very important man, very rich, a *gentiluomo*. I think there is more. One of my men saw you attack . . . a moment, please!” He broke off as a uniformed man came into the cabin with a sheaf of pictures, leaned over and whispered. Mellish caught just the word “pap-
parazzi," and felt relief. He watched the two policemen argue for a minute longer, then the sergeant turned to him, putting the pictures to one side, face down.

"Signor Mellish," he said, very smoothly, "it seems there has been a tragic accident. You understand? To think that such a man as Signor Torricelli would attack, or try to kill, anyone, is obviously ridiculous. He was a great man, very rich, respectable, of great influence."

"What about the gun? Are those pictures of what happened?" Mellish asked.

"It is none of your concern. As for the gun, a man may carry a gun to defend himself, you agree? It was an accident. Nothing more will be said."

"All right, whatever you say," Mellish sighed. "I don't want to cause any trouble."

"That is very sensible. In a moment, when your clothing is dry, you may go. You are very lucky to be alive, signor, think of that!"

Mellish thought about it as he strolled away from the pier. After he had gone a discreet distance, Miss Santessi caught up with him. He smiled crookedly at her and steered her to a nearby restaurant.

"I owe you a dinner, at least," he explained. "Your prompt action with the pictures saved me quite a bit of trouble. Thank you."

Beautiful but bewildered, she kept a discreet silence while he ordered, then, "I didn't surrender all the pictures. I kept some, just to convince myself. He tried to kill you!"

"Yes. It was predictable. I knew too much. And he had to do it himself, because it would have been dangerous to hire anyone for a raw job like that. It was a good plan, for him. A silenced pistol, a shot, a fast car. The pistol would have gone in the river, the driver of the car wouldn't see a thing. Yes, a good plan, only I was expecting it, you see."

"You knew that he would come, like that, and try to kill you?"

"Oh, yes. It was arranged. I knew his characteristic reactions, his temperament. I also knew about the bridge repair, the state of the tidal flow, the traffic situation. And I also knew that Torricelli couldn't swim, that he
was afraid of water. Knowledge,” he said, not very originally, “is power. The only power I subscribe to. You know,” he became pensive as the waiter brought soup and the wine list, “that man called me cretino confusionario, a blundering idiot. That was another of his weaknesses, the inability to credit anyone else with intelligence and brains. I'm afraid that doesn’t apply to the third man. I shall have to work differently with Herr Doktor Heinrich Haberman. Very differently.”

She coughed over a mouthful of soup, went red in the face and then coughed again. “You tell me?” she shrilled. “You are arranging to . . . to remove one more, and you tell me his name?”

“Why not? What can you do, go to the police?”
““You think I am an imbecile?” she snapped, and then, thoughtfully, “but why not? I could report it.”
““My dear, the police have already told me to va all’inferno. They do not wish to know about me. They have dropped me, and desire me to stay that way. If you try to persuade them to pick me up again, you’ll be in trouble.”

“I could warn Herr Haberman, however!”
““You could. I’ll tell you where to find him. He owns and occupies a massive office building on the Via Cavour. You can’t miss it. The residential extension of the roof, and the penthouse above it, must make it one of the tallest buildings in the city.”
““Why do you tell me this?” He was fascinated by the way fear, and anger, and suspicion, all played across her lively features, to give way in the end to bright-eyed shrewdness. “Is it that you want me to warn him? To tell him that he is going to die? Is it part of the arrangement?”

“It wouldn’t make much difference. Might help a little.”
““Help? Then I won’t do it!” She bit the words off abruptly, pushed away her plate, then gasped as it occurred to her. “You knew I would say and think like that!”

“Oh, come!” he chuckled. “I’m not that smart. You do whatever you think best. But, if you’ll take a tip from me, be on hand by the Haberman Building around nine
to nine-thirty tomorrow. Get as close as you can, as high as you can, and you’ll get some good pictures. Should be worth a bit, to you.”

To Mellish, who had an eye for such things, the building combined all the worst features of several architectural styles, but he was willing to concede that those who lived and worked there found it admirable. There was certainly enough of it. He strode purposefully into the foyer carrying a bag that looked heavy, carrying it with obvious and genuine care. He used gadgetry only when absolutely necessary and then with great reluctance. The clerk at the inquiry desk heard his name, nodded and raised a finger. Mellish turned to see two hard-faced men close in on either side.

“Much obliged for the card, code-man,” one of them growled. “We have been expecting you. We’ll take you up to see the doctor personally. March!” They convoyed him to an elevator. As the doors hissed shut he made tentative moves with the bag and one of the escorting men snarled at him.

“Hold it!” He flourished the gun he had conjured from somewhere. “Do nothing with that bag, get it? Nothing. Just hold it!”

“I was only going to change hands. It’s heavy!”

“Schwachsinniger blödkopf! I said hold it! And keep quiet!”

Mellish held it. He didn’t mind so much being called a feeble-minded fool, but the bag was heavy and it was a long ride all the way up to the penthouse. At their insistence he marched out patiently into a large and ornate room with tiger-skin rugs on a tiled floor, a scatter of luxurious chairs, a tinkling fountain jetting into a goldfish pool, and one wall solid with what looked like books. Taking it in with a glance, he decided against naming its function and allowed himself to be shepherded up to a pair of massive chrome-steel doors that were, at the moment, shut. This far, at least, the dossier was accurate, although he had found it hard to believe in cold print. One of his watchdogs punched a button and spoke into a wall unit, in German.
"We have the code-man. He carries a bag with great care. It seems to be heavy."

"Do not let him put down the bag. Search him, thoroughly. Report!"

It was a thorough search, Mellish had to admit, even if they did overlook the little thing he held in his other hand. Strange, he mused, how a searcher always looks for something hidden. Eventually the same watchdog was able to report.

"There is nothing lethal, or unusual, on him. We did not touch the bag at all. Yes?"

"Good! The doors will open now. Remain outside, on call."

In a matter of seconds the double-doors rumbled and slid apart to the hum of motors. Mellish gazed in, into a smaller, almost austere room that was mostly silver-gray carpet, white wood paneling and a large desk over there backed up to a wall that was all window. Haberman sat on the other side of that desk, a lean man with a port-wine complexion against which his white moustache and hair stood out vividly, and from which his pale gray eyes stared as chill as ice. On either side of him stood a stone-faced bodyguard, each with weapon drawn and ready.

"Just two steps. No more!" Haberman barked.

Mellish made the two steps patiently, heard the massive doors rumble shut at his back and click into place.

"Now! You will stand still, code-man, while I tell you some things. This room is soundproof, is utterly private. I am master of what happens here, you understand? One word from me, one sign, and you cease to exist, you are eliminated totally. It is understood?"

"I think so. You mean, don’t you, that it would be futile of me to try any tricks on you?"

"Exactly! Whatever it is that you have in the bag, you will not now be able to use it."

"The bag?" Mellish stared down at it in his hand as if he had only just that moment noticed.

"So, the bag! You will put it down beside you, there. Now! And you will stand back by the door. And we will wait, one minute!" Mellish set the bag down very carefully by his left foot, then straightened and leaned back
against the doors. "We wait," Haberman explained, "just to see. If there is anything, a click, a bang, or perhaps a pouf of gas—anything, and you die. At once!"

Mellish sighed. The bag was by his foot, it was sixteen feet away from them, at least. "There's no need for all this, you know. You're much too clever for me to try tricks on. That would be suicide, wouldn't it? And I've no intention of dying just yet. You're the one to die, not me. You, just like Torricelli, and Apramin."

"Silence!" Haberman stared at his wrist, counting with fractional jerks of his head. "Stupider holzkopf! You send me a warning notice, then march in here with a bag of tricks—do you think me a fool?"

"Oh, no! Quite the reverse, I assure you. As for the bag—" he made just the suspicion of a move to stoop for it and Haberman barked again.

"Stop! The one minute is over. Come here! No, leave the bag. We will deal with that later. Come!"

"All right!" Mellish shrugged and ambled towards the desk, veering to take the chair Haberman indicated, and sat. The German made a sign to one of his men. "Tie him to the chair. Make it good!"

Mellish had not bargained for that and his face must have shown it. Haberman smiled icily. "I have heard much about the code, and the code-men. Never have I believed it a joke, as others do. I know of some who have been removed. I know about Apramin, and Torricelli. I know your trick. To fake some kind of accident, I think, no? Well, now you are here, tied to that chair. Helpless. Let me see you now fake an accident, code-man. And be quick, because I also have a plan. I think I will make you talk, make you tell me everything you know about the inside workings of this code. And then I think we will change a few things. It is time this infamous code was put out of the way." He rose and came round the desk to stare down at Mellish in the chair. "Your tricks first, then it is my turn. Talk!"

"Gladly!" Mellish squirmed a little to ease the strain on his wrists. The roper had been rough, but not too expert, and he had some slack. Not a lot, but some. "My plan is a simple one," he said thoughtfully. "You're right
about the bag, of course. If anyone but me tries to open it, it squirts out high-pressure jets of highly inflammable liquid, which ignite and cause a vigorous fire.”

“A fire?” Haberman snorted. “Is that all? And how did you arrange it to burn me, and no one else? You are either a fool or a liar!”

“Neither, I hope.” Mellish sounded cheerful. “I’ve told you about the fire. Warned you. So I’m absolved from any charge of direct violence. That’s the first thing.”

“I will have the bag removed!” Haberman wheeled and went back round his desk urgently. Mellish watched him.

“The next thing,” he said, “is that your armored doors won’t move now. I did something to the lock.” This was true. The dossier had been explicit in detail, and his small vial of corrosive had been quite sufficient to ruin the catch mechanism beyond all hope of movement. He watched Haberman jabbing uselessly at the switch, and added, “There’s just one more thing. The bag also works on its own. It’s timed, from the moment I put it down, for three minutes. And that’s about—now!”

As he spoke, the bag emitted a squishy pop and two shaped jets of fluid sprang out and spread completely across the wall where the door was. A second later there was a click, and with one woofing roar the whole of that end of the room was in flames. Haberman stared, put up a palm to shield his face from the heat, and jabbed frantically at his button. Mellish felt the side of his face begin to scorch and knew he had to move fast or be roasted. One of the bodyguards, momentarily paralyzed by the leaping inferno, turned to shove Haberman aside and grope for the lever that would open the window.

“Come on, Herr Doktor!” he shouted. “We have to get out of here. We have no time to lose!”

Mellish winced as the sea of flames leaned over hungrily into the strong draft from the open window. Getting purchase with his feet, he kicked himself back and over, deliberately falling as heavily as he could. He felt a joint somewhere in the chair creak at this unfair treatment. He struggled, bouncing up and down. More joints went. He rolled over frantically, to slam against the desk and
further the ruin of the chair. Again, and one hand came slack. He heaved, strained, and got both hands free enough to be able to get up, coughing in the reek from the scorching carpet. Flailing bits of chair and trailing rope, he scuttled round the desk.

There, in the open window, Haberman fought like a trapped animal against the urgent assistance of his bodyguards. They were trying to drag him out, and he didn't want to go. Mellish spared no time to observe. Grabbing a moment, he wormed past and out to the narrow grid of the fire escape. Guns and mayhem were completely forgotten in their common peril. Haberman screamed and fought. The guards cursed and tried to drag him. And Mellish scurried down the first iron flight, shivering in the breeze, to pause and scream out “Fire! Fire!”

Then he got a good yawning look at the sheer nothingness that went on and on, right down to the ground below, and his stomach lifted vertiginously. He grabbed at the iron rail and hung on, shutting his eyes and sucking in deep breaths of the chill air. After a while he was steady and could go on down. At his back he heard the guards alternately pleading and cursing, and Haberman screaming in shrill terror.

Fading in like sound effects on some huge movie set he began to hear noises, the groan and roar of a gathering crowd, hoots and screeches of the traffic, and now the purposeful wail of sirens. By the time he reached good solid ground the audience was vast, and so intent on what was happening up there that no one noticed much what he did or cared. To lose himself in that crowd was no trick at all. Getting a vantage point from which to see was a lot harder, but he managed it, and watched. He saw one figure come stepping down that first ladder, black against the white wall, moving away from that window ledge where the thick gray-black smoke boiled out. But two figures remained there, still struggling. And now there was the spear and dart of angry red flame through the smoke. Near him, Mellish heard one aghast man demanding angrily:

“What are they doing up there? Why don't they come down?”
“I’m afraid,” he said, lowering his gaze and finding the speaker, “that one of them is scared of the height, afraid to move.”

“With the fire scorching his neck?”

“Even so. Fear of heights is a terrible thing.”

“Then he will be burned to death, for sure!”

“Yes, I’m afraid he will.”

The fire trucks growled and jockeyed for position. Ladders grew up high. Black figures began ascending to the rescue. The enraptured crowd saw one of the two struggling figures break free and come hurrying down, leaving the other to stand, only intermittently visible against the swirling smoke and darting flames. Then, all at once, the whole square of window gushed into bright flame, and the crowd let out a long-drawn sigh. Mellish sighed too, and went away.

Miss Santessi found him seated at the same table, at the same sidewalk cafe where she had originally challenged him. He smiled as she sat, and hailed the waiter for coffee.

“Good pictures?”

“Already sold. Very good. But once again, I kept some.”

“Souvenirs? That’s a bit morbid, isn’t it?”

“Enough to convict you for arson, maybe even murder!”

“Come on, now,” he grinned, “you know that’s not true. You saw me run away. And the others. Haberman could have run just as easily. I told him there was going to be a fire. Don’t try to bluff me, Miss Santessi, it’s not worth it.”

She eyed him long and hard, then hunched her shoulders. “You are right. You are too good for me. I think you are a devil. What did you do to him so that he could not escape?”

“Nothing at all. You know”—he stirred his coffee pensively—“almost everyone is afraid of something, has a neurosis or a phobia, and although the reasons are buried in the subconscious, we resent them. We constantly struggle against them. I suppose it’s like having a sore place. It hurts to touch, yet we keep touching it,
just to make sure it’s still there; the way a man who is scared of fire will defiantly play with matches. Or, like you for instance—"

“What about me?” she demanded instantly, and he smiled.

“You make a thing about snooping and probing into the privacy of other people. At a guess, I’d say there’s something in your own background you’d hate to have known.” She was halfway to her feet before he could soothe her. “It was just a guess, my dear. I have not been checking up on you. Please sit and accept my apologies. It’s a bad habit of mine, aiming at the heel.”

“What does that mean?” She sat uneasily.

“As I said, everyone has a fear, a neurosis, a phobia of some kind. A weak spot. An Achilles’ heel. That’s what I aim for. Haberman, you see, had acrophobia. Acutely. He knew it, resented it, and that was probably why he chose to live and have his office right at the top of the highest building in the city. Odd, isn’t it? Freudians would call it a death-wish, I imagine.”

“And you?” She was suddenly shrewd again. “What is your fear?”

“Oh, yes.” He nodded seriously. “I have one, but in my case it is a qualification. It’s the real reason why I’m in this job anyway. I have an acute aversion to violence of any kind. Think about it.” He rose, bowed to her in farewell and went sauntering away into the crowd. It took her quite a long time to work it out and see that he was absolutely right.

Fiesta Brava
Mack Reynolds

For once, Supervisor Sid Jakes of Section G, Bureau of Investigation, Department of Justice, Commissariat of Interplanetary Affairs, was flabbergasted. Gone as the snows of yesteryear was the easygoing, happy-go-lucky expression on his face.

32
He said blankly, "You mean Supervisor Li Chang Chu sent you people for this Falange assignment?"

The large one, who had named himself Dorn Horsten, nodded seriously. His facial muscles would perhaps have been hard put to register anything other than stolid sincerity. "That is correct, Citizen Jakes."

The Section G official looked at him in puzzlement. "Horsten . . . Horsten. Dorn Horsten. You're not Dr. Horsten, the algae specialist?"

"That is correct."

"But . . . but what are you doing in my office? In Section G? Li Chang was shaping up a small troupe for me to send to a far-out planet that's been giving us a hard time."

Horsten nodded. "I understand the size of your organization precludes you knowing all your agents, Supervisor Jakes. I was recruited by Ronny Bronston, after he had saved my life under somewhat remarkable circumstances. Although I embrace the purpose of Section G as ardently as any other agent, thus far I have been utilized on only two assignments."

Sid Jakes shook his head and turned to the middle-aged couple seated sedately before his desk. The woman was small and demure, the man on the plumpish side. There was the feeling of servants; long years in service—he perhaps a butler, she a maid or cook.

"And you two also are Section G agents?"

"We three," the man said.

Sid Jakes stared at the little girl in her pink go-to-party dress, a blue ribbon in her neatly combed blond hair to match her baby-blue eyes.

He blurted, "How in the world did you get past the Octagon guards with that child?"

The child tinkled a laugh.

The woman said, "Helen is . . . is it twenty-five?"

"Twenty-six," Helen said. She made a childish face at Sid Jakes, who blinked.

The woman, who had been introduced as Martha Lorans, said, "Helen isn't really our daughter, of course. It's camouflage. In putting the team together, Li Chang thought it would go far as protective coloring."
“Especially,” Helen said, “since otherwise I’m so conspicuous.”

“But... then you’re a midget,” Sid Jakes blurted.

“Not exactly,” the seeming child said, an element of irritation in her voice. “There’s a situation on our planet that thus far our research people haven’t solved. For that matter, we are not so sure we wish to solve it. What is the basis of this belief that people should strive to be taller? Why was the Viking the ideal, rather than the Japanese?”

“For one thing,” Dr. Dorn Horsten said, deadpanned, “the Viking could clobber the Japanese.”

She looked over at him and snorted. “Not always, you big lummox. It was the Jap who perfected judo and karate, remember. But even if it was true that in the old days of swords and spears the large man dominated the small, we don’t use such weapons today.”

“What started all this jetsam?” Sid Jakes said. The interview had a feeling of unreality so far as he was concerned. He had more than an averagely serious situation on his hands, and had requested a team of trained Section C operatives. His colleague, Li Chang Chu, had sent him what would appear an average middle-aged family, man, woman and eight-year-old, and a staid, though admittedly king-sized, scientist of interplanetary reputation.

Helen said, “I was just telling you that on my home planet, of Gandharvas, we are small in stature, as averages go, and we also are long-lived and mature rather slowly, insofar as appearance is concerned. In my case, and under these circumstances, I also, of course, am relying upon children’s clothes, a child’s hairdo, and even a certain amount of cosmetic to put over the effect desired.”

“The effect desired?” Sid Jakes said blankly. “What in the name of the Holy Ultimate did Li Chang think the effect desired was? I need a troupe of agents, tough agents, to lick the situation on Falange.”

“How tough?” Helen said sweetly. She had allowed the childish lisp to return to her voice.

It was a matter of exasperation now. Sid Jakes glared at her. “Tougher than any seeming eight-year-old kid
could handle,” he snapped. “Listen, they’re onto Section G on this planet Falange. We’ve lost three agents there in the past year and a half. In each case they were unmasked and brought to trial on trumped-up charges. One was accused of murder, one of subversion and the other disrespect of the Caudillo; all capital offenses. Their Policia Secreta is one of the most efficient in the some three thousand member worlds of United Planets. They ought to be, they’ve had enough practice. And now they’re just sitting there, waiting for the next batch of Section G operatives to show up.”

Sid Jakes came to his feet suddenly, paced around the desk and up and down the floor, in sheer disgust. “It’s going to be a neat trick to even land there, not to speak of overthrowing the crackpot government.”

“Overthrowing the government?” Pierre Lorans said interestedly. “Li Chang didn’t tell us what the assign- ment involved.”

The Section G supervisor turned on him. “I suppose that if you’ve made agent in this bureau, you must have something on the ball. What did you do before you were recruited?”

“I was, and am, a chef,” Lorans said.

“A chef?” Jakes rolled his eyes upward in search of di- vine guidance. Then he looked at the drab appearing woman. “And you?”

“I’m a housewife.”

“A housewife. Holy Jumping Zen. Except for the training I assume Li Chang put you through before making you a full agent, did you have any earlier back- ground that would . . .”

She shook her head. “No. Not exactly.”

He rounded the desk again and plumped himself down in his swivel chair. He closed his eyes and said, “I give up. I surrender. Three of our best agents down the drain and to replace them I get a double-domed scien- tist, a pint-sized girl in a baby getup, a chef and a housewife.”

Dr. Dorn Horsten lumbered to his feet. He was a big man, at least six-four and some two hundred and forty pounds. However, his conservative dress, his pince-nez
glasses and his scholarly facial expression, tended to offset his size.

He said gently, "Helen, I suppose we should make some effort to indicate why Li Chang Chu chose us for the assignment."

The little girl looked up at him in wide-eyed innocence. "Allez oop!" she tinkel suddenly.

In a blur of motion, the hulking scientist reached down and grabbed her by the feet, swung her mightily, in a giant circle, launched her brutally at the far wall, head first.

Sid Jakes's eyes bugged. He came halfway to his feet, froze there momentarily, sank back again.

She turned in the air, her small arms tucked around her knees, hit the wall, feet first, bounced upward, hit the ceiling, feet first, ricocheted off to a set of steel files, bounced onto the desk of the Section C supervisor, seemed to go up into the air and spin around three times. She wound up sitting on his shoulder, his paper-knife in her tiny, chubby hand. The point of the paper-knife was behind his right ear.

Dr. Dorn Horsten nonchalantly picked up Sid Jakes's ultra-large steel desk, tucked it under his left arm and walked over to the wall where he leaned, on his right hand, still holding the desk.

Horsten said mildly, "The widely held prejudice that double-domes—I believe was your term—don't have muscles fails to stand up on my home world of Ftörsta, Citizen Jakes. You see, we have a 1.6 G planet. On top of that, the original colonists were, ah, nature boys, I believe is the usual term of contempt. At any rate, in the same manner that Helen's world possibly has the smallest average citizen in United Planets, surely Ftörsta has the strongest."

Sid Jakes was still in a condition of shock.

He blatted, "You can't pick that up!"

Dorn Horsten let his eyebrows rise.

"It must weigh a ton!" Jakes protested.

"I doubt it," Horsten said. "It doesn't have the heft."

Helen, with a skip and a jump, bounced from her superior's shoulder to the floor and in a graceful, flowing motion, back into the chair she had originally occupied.
The overgrown doctor returned the desk to its place, an apologetic air about him. "It speeds things up, sometimes, to be a bit melodramatic," he said.

Sid Jakes closed his eyes and rubbed them with his right hand. He opened them again and looked accusingly at Mr. and Mrs. Pierre Lorans.

Pierre Lorans shifted in his chair slightly and said, "I throw things."

"I'll bet you do," Jakes muttered. And then, "What do you mean, you throw things? Why?"

"Well, it's always been a hobby. Ever since childhood I've got a kick out of throwing things." He came to his feet and approached the Section G official's desk. "For instance," he said and picked up the paperknife.

The office of Sid Jakes was done with a British Victorian revival motif. At the far end of the more than averagely large room was an antique calendar.

"For instance," Lorans repeated and suddenly flicked the paperknife. "It is, June 23rd; old calendar, isn't it?"

Jakes's eyes went to the calendar. "Hey," he said, "that's a collector's item!"

The professional chef took up an ancient pen, a decorative antique on the supervisor's desk. That flicked suddenly too, and also buried itself in the tiny square devoted to June 23rd.

He turned back to his superior. "Just about anything. Knives, spears, hatchets, meat cleavers..."

Jakes shuddered.

"... Ball-bearings..."

"Ball-bearings?" Jakes said.

"Hm-m-m," the plump man fished into his jerkin pocket and came forth with a shiny steel marble. "You'd be surprised what you can do with a ball-bearing. See the right eye in that portrait down there?"

"Oh no, you don't..." Jakes said much too late.

The ball-bearing instead of bouncing off, penetrated the eye completely and evidently imbedded itself in the wall.

"... Baseballs," Lorans was saying, "boomerangs, shovels, crowbars, wrenches—"

"Shovels!" Jakes said. "All right, all right. Sit down. Don't throw anything else. I accept your word." He bent
his eye on Mrs. Lorans. "Do you throw things, too, or is it only a one-member-of-the-family vice?"

"Oh, no," she said primly. "Pierre and I met at the Special Talents class of Supervisor Li Chang . . ."

"Is that where she dug you all up?" he muttered. "I'm going to have to find the time to look into that pet project of Li Chang's."

"We attended at the same time. I'd never seen anyone throw things before. Not like Pierre does. You should see him throw a fork."

Sid Jakes looked pained and muttered something about inviting the other to dinner, but then he said, aloud, "And your, ah, Special Talent?"

"Well," she came to her feet and approached the antique bookshelves, pursed her lips and selected a volume of the "Encyclopaedia Britannica."


"I wasn't going to throw it," she said. She put it down on the desk, opened it at random, spent possibly one flat second scanning the page and then pushed the book in front of Jakes and returned to her chair.

He stared at her.

Her eyes went vague and she began to recite. " . . . which is shown a lion holding a sword. The whole has a border of yellow. This flag was first hoisted on the morning of February 4, 1948, and became . . ."

She droned on and on.

Sid Jakes scowled, looked from one of the four to the other, finally looked down at the book. He blinked.

Mrs. Pierre Lorans was reciting, word for word, the "Encyclopedia's" article on flags-word for word and without a single mistake.

"All right," he interrupted finally. He looked at her accusingly. "You could do the whole page?"

"Yes."

"You could do the whole 'Encyclopedia'?" he said unbelievingly.

"If I scanned each page."

"Holy Ultimate, why don't you rent yourself out as a computer memory bank?"

"I have held somewhat equivalent positions," she said.
Sid Jakes sat there for a long moment, looking at them. Finally he said, "Forgive me, but frankly you four are the most unlikely set of freaks I've ever had in my office."

Dr. Dorn Horsten said stolidly, "Actually, we are not as far out as all that. It is just that you are seeing us all together. In truth, man has always been a freak among animals. Even right here on Earth, in the old days there were men who trained themselves to the point where they could pick up four thousand pounds—two tons. There were others who could run down a wild horse and capture it. There were gymnasts who could put a monkey to shame. There were others with eidetic memories, such as Lord MacCauley; still others with freak brains who could do fantastic mathematical problems in their heads. I will not even mention various well authenticated psi phenomena, ranging from levitation to clairvoyance."

Sid Jakes pushed his hand back through his hair and said, "All right. But the thing is, what'd Li Chang have in mind when she sent you here?"

Helen looked at him mockingly, her childish eyes bright. "But you have already mentioned the reason. How did you put it? The Policia Secreta of the planet Falange is onto Section G and they're just sitting there waiting for the next batch of agents to show up."

He blinked at her.

She shrugged tiny shoulders. "Did you expect your next troupe to be able to land with Model H guns and all the gadgets of the Department of Dirty Tricks? They'd be detected before the ship ever set down."

Some of Sid Jakes's natural exuberance returned to him. "Holy Ultimate," he muttered. "At least they're going to have some surprises coming. But what's the excuse for you going to Falange? They don't welcome strangers. Tourists are not allowed. They're one of the most backward worlds in United Planets and want to keep it that way."

Horsten said, "All worlds settled by man owe their existence to the chlorophyll containing plants. All of them have problems involving algae. Citizen Jakes, I do not
know of a world that has any science whatsoever that would not welcome a visit by Dorn Horsten. Excuse me, I speak in all modesty. The slightest drop of a hint to a colleague on Falange, and I would be overwhelmed with invitations.”

“Hm-m-m,” Sid Jakes said. “I suppose you’re right.” He looked at Pierre Lorans.

The plump man who loved to throw things, puffed out his cheeks. A certain Gallic quality seemed to come over him. He said pompously, “I am a Nouveau Cordon Bleu chef. One of my specialties is the dishes of the Iberian peninsula. I assure you, my paella is unsurpassed. At this time, however, many of the dishes once famed in Spain now continue only on the planet Falange where they were taken centuries ago when the world was colonized. Citizen Jakes, there are few, if any, worlds where a Cordon Bleu chef would be unwelcome. Haute cuisine is one of the gentler arts. I will arrive with the announced intention of studying the dishes of Falange, but I shall also give of my knowledge and skill to chefs residing there. I will, of course, be accompanied by my somewhat ah, forgive me Martha, colorless wife, and my little girl. What could be more innocent?”

Sid Jakes took them all in again, one by one. He grinned. “It’ll be a neat trick,” he said. Then, “Let me brief you on the situation.” He squirmed nervously in his chair, more his old self at last. He said, “You know, most people are in favor of progress. Of course, it’s an elastic term. For instance, some centuries ago early nuclear physicists devised a method of splitting the atom. Their discoveries were turned over to the military which utilized them to blow up a couple of cities. It all came under the head of progress. Earlier still, missionaries landed on the islandss of the South Pacific. Within a century, the populations had been decimated; however, they had been baptized before succumbing to tuberculosis, syphilis, measles and the wearing of Mother Hubbards in that climate, so the missionaries considered it progress.”

Martha Lorans laughed, displaying a desirable side of her that had thus far been hidden.

Sid Jakes said, “However, all people are not in favor
of progress. And the ruling elite of Falange are among them. Have any of you ever heard of the Spanish Civil War?"

The three Lorans shook their heads but Dr. Horsten scowled seriously and said, "Slightly. Nineteenth or twentieth century, old calendar, wasn’t it?"

Jakes said, "It was a strange war. Supposedly a civil war, it was actually a preliminary conflict preceding a global one. Spain was used as a proving ground for weapons and troops and tens of thousands of Europeans, Asiatics and Americans swarmed there to participate. It was a brutal war and devastated Spain. When the smoke cleared, the forces of der Führer and Il Duce had enabled the more reactionary elements to come to power under their own dictator, El Caudillo.

"However, no problem is ever settled until it is settled right, and the elements that had achieved power under the Caudillo were not those needed for the country to develop. The government and the socio-economic system were anachronisms and it began to show. While the rest of Europe snowballed into the Second Industrial Revolution, Spain remained stationary. Soon, the more intelligent and trained elements in the country realized the situation and began to take what action they could. The very things that El Caudillo had won on the battlefields, he lost in the day-by-day developments of civilian life. Uneducated peasants cannot be trusted to operate machinery. Schools had to go up. Underpaid workers are inefficient—they don’t eat well enough. Pay began to go up. Tourists don’t come to countries where there are terrifying secret police everywhere. The Guardia Civil was cut down numerically, and no longer paraded the roads and bridges openly armed with submachine guns. Slowly, the Caudillo’s victory was eroding away.

"Most of the Spanish, of course, were profiting by this and most were pleased. Spain eventually boomed to the point where it entered Common Europe. However, there was a hard core element that objected. They lived in the past and wanted to stay there. They had won their reactionary war behind the Caudillo and demanded that what they had won be forever observed. When this be-
came impossible, in Europe, they became one of the first groups to colonize another world—Falange.”

Little Helen was frowning. “I can see these stick-in-the-muds wanting to maintain their old privileges, their positions of power. I can see them deciding to migrate to a new planet where they could, uh, go to hell in their own way. But I can’t imagine them getting any peasants, servants and so forth to go with them. And a ruling elite is no longer a ruling elite, unless it has somebody to rule.”

Jakes chuckled. “Then you’re wrong, my dear. In any given social system, the majority of the ruled like to be ruled in the manner in which they are being ruled. Otherwise, they’d do something about it. Under slavery, the majority liked being slaves, or they would have taken measures to end the situation. Under feudalism, the serfs, the artisans in the towns, the middle-class merchants all liked being ruled by the aristocracy. When they stopped liking it they stormed the palaces and some clever chap invented the guillotine to speed matters up.”

Helen made a face. “I suppose you’re right,” she said, “but you’d have one damn rough time making a slave or serf of me.”

Jakes chuckled again. He was beginning to like this pint-sized operative. “I am sure you would either become free or die in the attempt, and, of course, a dead slave is not a slave. At any rate, our malcontents were able to recruit all the elements they needed for their new colony. Several thousand strong, they migrated. Their new society was dedicated to the past and the prevention of change. And there it is today.”

“And that’s where we come in,” Dr. Horsten said. “But why?”

Sid Jakes looked at him. “Surely you know that. You’re a Section G agent.”

Pierre Lorans said, “Obviously, we know the reason for the existence of this cloak-and-dagger department. It is to forward the progress of the worlds settled by man so that we will be as strong as possible, as a life form, when our inevitable confrontation with the intelligent
aliens beyond takes place. But why the need to over-
throw the government of Falange?"

The Section G supervisor nodded. "Whether they
want to be forwarded or not, and most of them don't,
our task is to push into progress our member planets.
Nothing is clung to so assiduously as socio-economic
systems, and nothing can become so detrimental to pro-
gress. The immediate factor that motivates us is that the
most highly industrialized planets, for example Avalon
and Catalina, are somewhat desperately in need of
various rare metals that are present in ample supply on
Falange. Mining methods are so primitive there that un-
less she is more highly industrialized and welcomes in
engineers from more advanced worlds, these minerals
will never be exploited."

Dr. Horsten had taken his pince-nez glasses from his
nose and was polishing them. "Very well, our task will
be to overthrow this restrictive government and estab-
lish a new regime more conducive to progress."

Sid Jakes looked at the four of them doubtfully. It
was, of course, partly their clothing and deliberate effort
to look harmless. But for the moment a more unlikely
group of revolutionists could hardly be imagined.

Pierre Lorans said, "Just what is their present govern-
mental form?"

rules for life."

Lorans said, "But the regime has been in power for
centuries. When the Caudillo dies, how does a new one
come in?"

Jakes looked around at them. "The best matador is
appointed."

The four stared at him.

"The what?" Helen demanded.

"The best bullfighter."

II

It had been decided that there was no particular reason
for them to avoid each other in the spaceship Golden
Hind. The most natural thing for the noted Dr. Dorn
Horsten, who was traveling alone, would be to strike up
a companionship with Chef Pierre Lorans and his wife, since they were all headed for a common destination, the planet Falange and its capital city, Nuevo Madrid.

So it was that early in the journey the doctor introduced himself and soon became the constant companion of the chef who specialized in Iberian dishes. They spent considerable time playing battle chess while Mrs. Lorans read through the ship’s tapes, and little Helen played with the scant supply of toys she had been allowed to bring along.

The child was a good-natured, cheerful tike, the other passengers decided, usually with a slight smile on her face as though she was amused by some inner thoughts. She was obviously too young to have much understanding of the world of adults; and businessmen discussing deals, or diplomats en route from one world to another, paid no attention to her if she sat at their feet during some discussion.

On the third day out, Helen came to where Martha Lorans was rapidly flipping through some tapes. It looked, to an outsider, as though she was quickly scanning, failing to find anything. The two men, as usual, had nothing, searching for something she wished to read but their heads over a battle chess board.

Helen said to Martha, “What are you sopping up?”

Martha looked at her, her eyes at first blank, but then clearing as she came into the here and now. “How to run this spaceship,” she said.

The little girl winced. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Martha laughed. As always, on her it looked particularly good. “You never know,” she said. “There is very little knowledge that is worthless.”

“Well, I hope that’ll remain so,” Helen said. “Look, how about you going to the captain and sending a subspace cable to Avalon for me?”

Dr. Horsten looked up and scowled at her. “Avalon? Why?”

“I want to buy in on a development there.”

They were all looking at her now. She looked down at her feet, shod in her little girl shoes, and looked like
nothing so much as an eight-year-old asking for a privilege she suspected was going to be denied.

She added, "I have some savings banked in the exchange computers on Terra. I’d like to have them transferred to Avalon and invested with the Sky-High Development Corporation."

Lorans’s eyes narrowed. "Why?"

“Oh, I just want to."

Dr. Horsten nodded sourly. "What is this corporation?"

“Oh, it’s just in the process of being organized."

"Hm-m-m. And why is it you’re so anxious to buy in?"

"Oh, there’ve been a few rumors around the ship."

Horsten shook his head. "You little sneak. I saw you playing with your doll under the table of those two sharpenies from Avalon. Now look, if Martha did make such a purchase then those two businessmen would know there’d been a leak on this ship. The Lorans family would come under suspicion. And we don’t want anybody to start wondering about the Lorans family, nor their friend, Dr. Horsten."

"Little sneak," she snorted. "Why, you big ox. I ought to clobber you."

Martha Lorans laughed. "That I’d like to see some day. But Don’s right, Helen."

Little Helen snorted again, but jumped up into one of the lounge’s chairs and spread her dress neatly, the way a precocious child spreads her skirt.

She snarled under her breath, "What the hell’s the use of getting onto a good thing, if you’re not allowed to profit by it? I could triple my exchange credits."

The others went back to their pursuits.

After a few minutes, Helen sighed and said, "I still don’t believe it. Martha, how about reciting that about the bullfighting again."

Martha looked up with a sigh. "All of it?"

"Not all the details about the history of the bullfight. Imagine! That relic of the Roman arena coming down to the twentieth century and beyond."

"Twentieth century," Lorans grunted. "All the way down to the present. At least on Falange."
“It’s unbelievable,” Helen said. “Imagine those cloddies going to the trouble of freighting enough of these, what was the name of the breed of bull, Martha?”

“Bos taurus ibericus.”

“Evidently useless for anything except the so-called fiesta brava. Shipping enough of them all the way from Earth, to stock bull farms.”


“Well,” Horsten said, “it’s still their national spectacle, their national fascination. Evidently, every Falangist on the planet is an aficionado, a bullfight buff.”

“But using it as a method of picking a Chief of State! When the Caudillo dies, that matador pronounced Número Uno becomes the new Caudillo. Why, that’s chaos! Nothing to do with education or intelligence quotient. Nothing to do with background in governing. Nothing to do with anything save bullfighting. Why, there’s nothing so silly in the whole of United Planets.”

“I don’t know,” Pierre Lorans said. “There’re some pretty silly methods of selecting those who govern.” He looked thoughtful. “A top matador would have to be in physically fine shape. He’d have to be sharp, quick, or he would never have become Número Uno. He couldn’t be stupid, either, because although a stupid person with good reflexes might survive in the ring for a time, the occasions would come up when he could save himself from disaster only by utilizing intelligence.”

“Anything for an argument, eh?” Helen snorted. “Defending the silliest method of selecting a dictator that’s ever come down the pike.”

Dorn Horsten put down the piece he was holding and said thoughtfully, “What I can’t understand is the danger the elite goes through of having one of the underprivileged classes win control. No power elite ever willingly gives up its position. Why, if the wrong man got in there—wrong from their view—he could upset their applecart for all time.”

Martha said, or rather recited, “Our information on this aspect of Falange government is scanty. It would seem that one of the factors that keeps the average Falangist contented with the status quo is that every per-
son on the planet, theoretically, has the chance to become Caudillo. When the old Caudillo dies, an enthusiasm sweeps the planet evidently beyond anything known elsewhere in the system in the way of fiestas, Mardi Gras, ferias, carnivals. For weeks, during which the fights are being held, contestants being eliminated, the planet Falange is in a state of euphoria difficult to conceive of on the part of anyone who has not witnessed it."

"That's a point," Horsten said. "If you condone the system, and even enjoy it, and especially if you take part yourself, or support a friend, relation or comrade in the fights, you can hardly protest the system later." He took up the chess piece again and muttered thoughtfully, "I still can't imagine the Falange powers that would be taking the chance of a peasant, or unskilled worker, becoming Caudillo."

Helen evidently grew suddenly bored and bounced down from her chair. "I think I'll go pester Ferd."

Dorn Horsten scowled at her. "Who?"

Martha looked at Helen. "You mean that brain surgeon?"

"Ferdinand Zogbaum," Helen said. "But he's not a brain surgeon, he's some sort of electronics wizard."

"Not necessarily mutually exclusive," Horsten said seriously. "What is the attraction of Citizen Zogbaum?"

Helen giggled. "Well, for one thing, he's the nearest thing to a man my size on board."

Pierre Lorans looked at her accusingly. "Pester him, is right. I saw you sitting on his lap yesterday, pulling at the poor cloddy's cravat and him trying to carry on a serious conversation with the second officer."

Helen said, "He's cute."

Martha snorted. "Cute! He looks like a half-sized Lincoln."

Helen started out the compartment entry. She said over her shoulder, "If he'd stop wearing those elevator heels, he'd be almost just right."

Pierre looked after her and said thoughtfully, "That little witch is going to make a mistake and bust up the whole act one of these days."

Horsten shrugged. "It must be difficult. She can't
allow herself to be seen participating in any adult activity. How would you like to be in a spot where you couldn’t even read? At least nothing but children’s tapes.”

The arrival at the Nuevo Madrid spaceport, the only entry point to Falange, was even less eventful than they had hoped for. Their coming, of course, was anticipated. Securing a visa at the Falange Embassy on Terra was no small matter. No one, but no one, arrived unannounced on Falange.

There was a delegation of biochemists from the University, breathless at meeting the celebrated Dr. Dorn Horsten. He was hustled off to a group of horse-drawn carruajes.

The Lorans family looked after him.

“Holy Ultimate,” Helen said under her breath. “I never expected to see a landau pulled by a span of horses anywhere except in a Tri-Di historical.”

“Well, get ready to ride in one,” Martha told her. “It seems to be the method of transportation locally.”

They were being approached by what were obviously Customs and Immigration officials, done up in costumes seemingly out of the Iberia of the nineteenth century, but also by two civilians wearing clothing of the diplomats of the Victorian period.

“Here we go,” Pierre Lorans said. He puffed his cheeks up and went into his Gallic facial expression.

Helen said to Martha, her voice still low, “Look. Evidently, Ferd Zogbaum has been snagged by the local fuzz-yoke.”

Martha turned her eyes in the indicated direction. The young electronics engineer, or whatever he was, was being marched in the direction of some very military looking buildings at the far end of the field. The guards, in their Guardia Civil uniforms, complete with hard, black hats, were, however, carrying his bags.

Martha said, “Probably some minor technicality in his papers. He doesn’t seem particularly worried.” Their own delegation was nearly to them. Martha’s voice changed in caliber. “Now sweetie, be quiet for a while.
Mummie and Daddy have to talk to these nice gentlemen."

"Curd," Helen said under her breath.

The uniformed men, after well executed bows and murmured politenesses, took over passports, interplanetary health cards and the rest of the red-tape documents involved in aliens landing upon the planet Falange. The civilians, it turned out, were members of the cultural affairs department of the Caudillo's government.

While the papers were being perused and stamped, they made meaningless conversation and minor gushings of welcome. When the papers were obviously approved, the gushing became more pronounced.

Martha even got her hand kissed.

In a sudden childish burst of enthusiasm, Helen jumped up and put her arms around the neck of one of the Falangists, her sturdy little legs about his waist.

"Oh, isn't he a nice man!"

Martha said, "Helen!"

The cultural aide blinked, smiled in attempted acceptance, and put his hands under the little girl's bottom, as though to support her weight. The vaguest of incomprehensible expressions crossed his face momentarily.

Pierre Lorans grabbed Helen and pulled her away. "Don't be so impulsive, chocolate drop," he scolded.

Evidently, the Terran Embassy of Falange had forwarded full information on the highly noted *Nouveau Cordon Bleu* chef, Pierre Lorans. It was a pleasure to welcome such an artist of haute cuisine to Falange. It was thought possible that he would be invited to an audience with El Caudillo himself.

El Caudillo was extremely fond of Basque cuisine. Perhaps Senor Lorans . . .

Senor Lorans puffed out his cheeks. "Gentlemen, I am perhaps the most proficient preparer of *bacalao a la vizcaina* and *angulas a la bilbaina* in all the United Planets."

The one who had introduced himself as Manola Camino, looked blank. "But Senor Lorans, we have neither codfish nor eels on Falange. These dishes we know of only through traditions and the writings brought with us from Earth."
Loans glared at him in indignation. "No bacalao, no angulas! Are you barbarians? How can your . . . ah . . . Caudillo, or whatever you call him, be a connoisseur of Basque food if you have no bacalao, no angulas?" He sneered openly. "Next you will tell me you have no beans for fabada!"

The Falangist winced, opened his mouth unhappily, closed it again.

The other cultural aide said hurriedly, "Perhaps we had better proceed to the Posada."

They led the way, the Lorans’ trailing after.

Martha said from the side of her mouth, "Listen, you show-off cloddy, aren't you overdoing it?"

"No," he said back. "It's all in character."

Helen skipped as they went, singing, in her tinkle of a child's voice, something about three little girls in blue.

Senor Manola Camino led the way to two of the horse-drawn carriages which seemed the local equivalent of taxis and they were shortly under way. There were comparatively few powered vehicles on the streets of Nuevo Madrid, and it came to them that these few must be imports and almost exclusively for police, military and, perhaps, the highest ranking authorities. The planet Falange lived in the day of the horse.

It came to them, also, that the Posada San Francisco was the only hotel in the city that catered to aliens. Either that, or it was the best hostelry in town and VIPs were automatically taken there. At any rate, they could see Dr. Horsten at the desk, still surrounded by his bevy of welcoming scientists. And while they went through their own routine of registering, they saw Ferdinand Zogbaum enter, still accompanied by his two police.

Their schedule didn’t begin until the next day, when Lorans was to have a tour of the leading restaurants of Nuevo Madrid. As soon as they were delivered to their suite, and their guides had bowed their way out, they began to make the usual sounds of unpacking.

The rooms were monstrous in size. A living room, two bedrooms and a rather antiquated bath. The antiquated quality prevailed in general, giving the impression it was deliberately laid on. Even the furniture was Victorian in design. The ceilings were more than thrice as high
as could have been expected in population packed Earth and there was a wood-burning fireplace.

While Martha and Helen did the unpacking, Pierre made a tour of the suite, jabbering along as he went.

"Now dear," Martha said shrilly, "please stay out of Mother's way."

Helen snarled softly at her.

Pierre said, "Did you hear that drivel? Do they think me a dunderhead? How can one cook in the fashion of the Basques without bacalao?"

"Now dear, you know perfectly well they were very pleasant. And it was nice to meet us out there on that terrible expanse of cement and all."

Helen shrilled, "Three little girls in blue, tra la. Three little girls in blue!"

Pierre spotted what he was looking for. At the very top of the chain from which the chandelier was suspended. Right at the ceiling, a good twenty feet above them. He pointed and they looked up.

There was no apparent way in which any of them could reach the bug. No combination of furniture, piled atop each other. Martha nodded to Pierre.

Pierre Lorans took a ball-bearing from his pocket. Seconds later, he said with satisfaction, "I doubt if there's any more."

Helen said, "Look, for a day or two, we're going to be safe. They won't get around to suspecting a thing, not even a broken bug. And until tomorrow, when you'll have your time monopolized, we're free. We better get busy tonight."

"At what?" Martha said. "They didn't give us a clue on how we were to begin this big subversion fling, back on Earth. You'd think Jakes would have something for us to start with. Somebody to see."

Helen snapped chubby fingers. "That's it. We've got to find the local underground."

Pierre Lorans looked at her. "Wonderful. How do we go about that? What local underground?"

"There must be one. Given any government at all and there's some opposition. It might be large or it might be small, but somewhere on Falange there's an underground."
Martha said slowly, "You're probably right, but how to get in touch is another thing. If the Policia Secreta can't find them, how can we?"

Something came to Helen. "Those former three agents from Section G. What was it Sid Jakes said happened to them?"

Martha's eyes took on their empty look. She recited, "In each case they were unmasked, in one manner or the other, and brought to trial on trumped-up charges. One was accused of murder; one of subversion; and the other disrespect of the Caudillo; all capital offenses."

"O.K.," Helen said, an edge of excitement in her voice. "That's it. One of them was charged with subversion. A man doesn't commit subversion on his own. He works with a group, a party, an underground organization of some sort or other."

"So," Lorans scowled.

"So that Section G operative wasn't tried alone. There had to be others involved. Others captured at the same time. It's almost sure to be."

"Perhaps," Martha said. "But, if so, what of it? Surely they've all been executed by now."

"Not necessarily," Helen insisted. "They would execute the Section G agent quickly before United Planets took some measures to free him. But their own citizens they might keep alive in hopes of squeezing information out of them."

"Hm-m-m," Lorans said.

Martha said, "But what of it?"

"Don't you see? Somewhere there are trial records. If we can get hold of them, we can locate where these companions of our Section G agent are. What prison they're in."

Martha and Pierre Lorans were both unhappy now. They thought about it.

"We don't even know where the court records might be—if any," Lorans objected. "For all we know, the trial was secret."

Helen said decisively, "That's for you to find out. This afternoon take a guided tour. Those culture department aides are just dying to show you the sights. Among them will be the Caudillo's palace, the post office, the muse-
um and city hall. If you can, worm out of them just where the archives are. It shouldn’t be too hard if you blather along like usual sightseers. And the Holy Ultimate knows, no two persons in United Planets can blather like you two.”

Pierre Lorans aimed a backhanded swipe at her, knowing perfectly well it would never connect.

Helen bounced back, tinkling laughter.

Martha said, “How about you?”

“Tell them I’m tired and don’t want to leave the hotel. You might even hint it’s a relief to get away from me, after the long trip. Meanwhile, I’ll see Dorn and tell him what’s up.”

Martha and Pierra Lorans looked at each other. “I can’t think of anything else,” he admitted.

Helen was already out of the room and on her way down to the lobby.

She met Ferdinand Zogbaum coming up the wide stairway, the two police and several bellhops with luggage trailing him.

She grabbed him about the waist. “Uncle Ferd, why are those nasty policemen always following you?”

Martha had been right. Ferdinand Zogbaum looked nothing so much as the youthful Lincoln, cut down almost half in stature. Now he was flushing. He looked apologetically over his shoulder at the two Guardia Civil. The whole party had ground to a halt under the child’s assault.

He patted her on the head. “Now, now, Helen. I’m not being arrested. They’re friends.”

“They’re policemen,” Helen shrilled. “Mommy told me they were policemen. Why are they following you, Uncle Ferd?”

One of the guards was grinning his amusement, the other was only bored.

Ferd Zogbaum cleared his throat unhappily, and patted her head again. “They’re guarding me, honey. Don’t you worry. Your Uncle Ferd is a very important man brought all the way from Terra for a special job, so he had to have these big policemen guard him so he can’t come to any harm.”
"Is that straight?" she said under her breath into his ear.

He blinked. "What?" he said, unbelievingly.

"I love you, Uncle Ferd," she said, her voice high again. "You be sure you say good-bye to me before you go anywhere away from the hotel. Or I'll go run to the United Planets Embassy and tell everybody you've been kidnapped. I can lie real good."

The bored guard became animated enough to scowl.

Ferd said, "Don't worry. If I leave here, I'll say good-bye to you first."

She pressed her full, cupid bow lips to his cheeks and released him and headed down the steps again. For a moment, he looked after her, a strange look on his face. But then he shook his head unbelievingly and resumed his way to his suite, followed by his entourage.

III

Helen skipped into the lobby and up to the desk of the concierge.

"Where's Uncle Dorn?" she trilled.

He looked over the desk and down at her. "Who, senorita?"

"Uncle Dorn!"

An inconspicuous type who had been standing at a nearby pillar next to a potted fern, strolled over and murmured to the hotel employee.

"Ah, the Senor Doctor. He has retired to his room, little Senorita."

Helen cocked her blond head to one side and eyed him speculatively. Finally she said in her childish treble, "What's all this Senorita and Senor jetsam?"

He looked a bit startled. "Jetsam?"

She looked at him as unblinkingly as only a child can look.

The concierge cleared his throat. "Little girl, when our people came from Earth, long, long ago, Earth-Basic was already the language all spoke. However, as a concession to our traditions we have maintained a few words of the old tongue. Do you understand?"

"No," Helen said flatly. "Where is Uncle Dorn?"
The concierge maintained his official aplomb. "He is in Suite A, little Senorita, but I do not think he would wish to be disturbed."

She snorted at that opinion. "He is my Uncle Dorn," she informed him and headed for the stairs. The concierge shrugged and looked at the inconspicuous representative of the Policía Secreta who shrugged as well and obviously forgot about it.

Helen located Suite A and pounded a tiny fist on the door. It was answered by one of the Falange scientists who had met the visiting celebrity at the spaceport. Helen slipped under his arm before he had actually seen her.

Dorn Hornsten was seated in a Victorian style easy chair, evidently in the midst of earnest conversation with two of the other local biochemists.

"Ah, the little Princess. Are you also stopping at this hotel, my dear? How are your good parents?"

Helen bent a blue eye on him. Obviously, both questions were of too little importance to require answer. She said, "Uncle Dorn, I want a bedtime story."

"A bedtime story?" He looked at his colleagues in apology, and then out the window. "But, little Princess, it is still only afternoon."

"Mommy and Daddy have gone off to look at the buildings or something and left me all alone to take a nap and I want a story."

"But, Helen, I am busy with these gentlemen."

She began to pucker up.

Dorn Horsten cleared his throat and came to his feet. "Now . . . now . . ." he began.

"I don't like it here," she wailed. "I wanna go home!"

"Now, now, Helen. Your mother and father will . . ."

"I wanna bedtime story!" she wailed.

Dorn Horsten looked apologetically at the Falangists. "Senores, if you will pardon me. In actuality, I am a bit weary myself. Perhaps we could postpone our discussion on the phylum Thallophyta until tomorrow."

They had all come to their feet before his first three words were out. In moments they were gone.

Horsten glared down at the diminutive agent and began to say, "What in the . . ."
She had a finger to her lips.
"... What kind of bedtime story did you have in mind, little Princess?"

She sneered at him, held her peace for a moment while her baby-blue eyes searched the room. Finally, she located the bug. It was in approximately the same position as the one in the Lorans's suite which Pierre had broken with his ballbearing. She pointed it out to him with a chubby finger.

Horsten took off his pince-nez glasses and wiped them, his eyebrows up.

"Would you like the story about Allez oop?" he said in the tone one uses with an eight-year-old.

"No, no, Uncle Dorn. That's the one you always tell. I want a different one. You come to our place and tell me a different one."

He sighed deeply. "All right, all right, little Princess."

"I'm not so little, Uncle Dorn." As though to prove it, she went over to the table bearing the bottle of cognac, poured herself a hefty slug and knocked it back.

He followed her to the door and down the hall toward the Lorans's suite.

"There was one in our place, too," she said lowly. "Pierre broke it. It would be too much of a good thing if we broke the one in your suite as well."

He grunted concern. "I don't like this. Rooms bugged already. You think they suspect us?"

She shrugged tiny shoulders. They were proceeding down the hall, hand in hand, a pretty picture of an oversized man and a trusting child. "They probably keep a twenty-four hour watch on every alien on Falange. They didn't particularly pick on us."

He growled, "That'll mean we'll have tails, too. Restrict our movements."

They reached the door of the Lorans's suite and entered.

Helen told him where Pierre and Martha had gone and he thought about it a while and nodded acceptance. "It'll probably come to nothing, but I admit I can't think of anything else." He walked over to the window and stared out as though unseen, and she joined him,
standing at her side, her head barely high enough to see over the sill.

She said, "It's not an unattractive city, Dorn. It's like, well, a Tri-Di historical set."

He said, "It looks like prints I've seen of nineteenth century Madrid. See that area down there? It's almost a replica of the Plaza Mayor."

"It's beautiful," she said with unwonted softness.

"Yes, perhaps. The original Plaza Mayor is where the Inquisition held its famed autos-de-fé. I wonder what the equivalent is here?"

She looked up at him. "Does there have to be an equivalent?"

"I'm afraid yes. For centuries this culture hasn't moved an iota, either up or down. It's not a natural trait in civilized man. There's only one answer. When someone attempts to move it, he's clobbered. They've built up an efficient machine to do the clobbering. It was no mistake that the Policía Secreta detected our first three agents and eliminated them. Section C operatives are supposedly the most effective in United Planets but thus far it's been unable to make a dent in this throwback society."

She sighed. "But still it's a beautiful city, something like a museum."

Dorn Horsten grunted and his eyes went up to the sky. "Out there," he said, "are the Dawn Planets. Frighteningly near. Sooner or later, man will be face to face with that alien race. As things stand now, we know only that they are mega-years in advance of us. The longer we can put off the confrontation, the better, but it is a matter of time."

"I know, I know. And we can't afford anachronisms such as Falange. It is later than we think."

He turned back to the room. "What did you have in mind, if and when we are able to locate the trial papers pertaining to our subversive colleague?"

Helen plopped herself into a chair and frowned prettily. "We didn't take it any further than that."

At the dinner table in the hotel restaurant that evening,
Pierre Lorans stared down at the soup plate the waiter had put before him.

“What,” he demanded, “is that?”

The waiter said anxiously, “It is gazpacho, Senor Lorans. The chef is awaiting your verdict.”

“Then,” Lorans said ominously, “he will wait until Mercury freezes over.”

Martha said, “Now, Pierre.”

Helen giggled.

Lorans ignored his family and held up his fingers to enumerate for the squirming waiter.

“Gazpacho is without doubt the most superlative cold soup ever devised. It is basically oil and vinegar, but it is not gazpacho until finely strained tomatoes, garlic, bread crumbs, chopped cucumber, green pepper and sometimes onions are added. I myself am not strongly opinionated on the matter of the onions; over the years I have vacillated. Immediately before serving the gazpacho, croutons are added.”

The waiter squirmed, his eyes went around the dining room. Those at the nearer tables were listening. Lorans was making no attempt to keep his voice low.

“Yes, Senor Lorans,” the waiter said. And he made the mistake of repeating, “The chef is anxious to have your opinion.”

“My opinion is that he is an idiot,” Lorans said flatly. “Where, in the name of the Holy Ultimate, are the cucumbers?”

“Cucumbers?”

The plump man glared at him.

The waiter closed his eyes in suffering and said, “I do not know what these cucumbers are.”

Lorans took a deep breath, as though restraining himself. “I am sure you don’t. Please, take this swill away. No eels on this forsaken planet, no dried cod, and now no cucumbers! Away with it. Away!”

The waiter took up the plate of chilled soup and began to return in the direction of the kitchen.

Lorans said imperiously, “And that for my wife and daughter as well. I refuse to allow them to eat swill.”

“Now, Pierre,” Martha said. “It isn’t as bad as all that. I tasted it.”

58
"Silence. I insist. No swill."

Helen giggled. "I don't like soup anyway," she tinkled. She evidently spotted Dr. Dorn Horsten for the first time. He was seated at a table on the other side of the room.

Helen waved at him. "Uncle Dorn! Uncle Dorn!"

It seemed to all but break his face, but he managed a stolid smile and a slight wave in return. He was evidently nearly through his meal.

The Lorans's table maintained a chilly quiet while awaiting the next course. Even the exuberant Helen seemed frozen to silence by her father's irritation.

When the waiter returned he was accompanied by the head waiter, who hovered about while his underling served the new dish.

"And what is this?" Pierre Lorans demanded.

The head waiter bowed. "The Posada's specialty, Senor Lorans. Pastel de Pescado."

"Fish pie, eh? Then you do have fish on this forsaken world?"

"Yes, Senor Lorans. If I am not mistaken, the white fish utilized by the chef in Pastel de Pescado is remarkably similar to the sole of Earth."

Pierre Lorans touched the plate the waiter had put before him and seemed somewhat mollified when he found it so hot as to be almost untouchable.

He waited until the others had been served and then cautiously tasted. The head waiter held his breath. Lorans tasted again.

Martha and Helen were eating rapidly, as though they had been through this before and knew what was coming.

Pierre Lorans, his face expressionless, put down his fork. He said to the head waiter, "I am willing to give the chef the benefit of the doubt. Everybody has an off day. Undoubtedly it is an off day. Possibly he is seriously ill. On the verge of death. Martha! Helen!"

He came to his feet.

Martha and Helen, both with a sigh, put down their own utensils and stood also.

The head waiter wrung his hands, his Iberian face in agony.
Lorans said, “We shall resort to our emergency supplies.” He turned and stalked toward the door, followed by Martha, apology all over her face, with the rear brought up by Helen who had snagged a hard roll from the table before leaving.

All eyes followed the interplanetary celebrated chef. Half the guests looked down into their dishes, suspiciously, which was not missed by the headwaiter, who once again closed his eyes in agony.

Pierre Lorans hesitated at the table of Dr. Horsten. He stared down at the dessert the other was about to eat. “Is that supposed to be Spanish flan?” he said.

The doctor looked a bit startled. “Why, I believe so.” He looked at the menu. “Yes, flan.”

“My dear Doctor, it will poison you. I am convinced. Do me the honor to adjourn to our rooms with us. I have been through this before. We never travel without our emergency supplies. Among other items I have a few tins of Camembert. Real Camembert from Normandy. I have also a bottle or two of stone-age Martell cognac. You can finish your, ah, meal with us. Camembert, rather than pseudo-flan. While we make do as best we can.”

“Why... why—” the doctor hesitated.

Behind her husband, Martha was nodding emphatically for the other to accept the invitation. On the face of it, she didn’t want to be alone with her enraged spouse.

“Very well, very gracious of you, I am sure,” Dorn Horsten said, putting down his napkin and coming to his feet. “Very old Martell, eh? Imagine that. It’s been years. Actually real cognac, not the synthetic?”

Pierre Lorans looked at him, his lips beginning to go pale.

The doctor cleared his throat. “Hm-m-m, yes, of course. It wouldn’t... ah, couldn’t be anything else but genuine cognac.”

Lorans turned on his heel and marched out, followed now by Martha, then Dr. Horsten, with Helen bringing up the rear. She managed to snag another roll from the doctor’s table as she passed. Obviously, Helen was an old hand at this emergency.
In the Lorans’s suite, Pierre Lorans darted a look up at the bug he had smashed earlier. He looked at Helen, then Dorn Horsten, even as he was talking at full pitch about something involving eels, codfish and cucumbers.

Helen hissed, “Allez oop!”

The hulking doctor grabbed her about the waist and tossed her aloft. Her head all but touched the ceiling, a chubby hand went out and, briefly, grasping the chain that held the chandelier, she seemed to be poised in the air.

She said, “It hasn’t been repaired,” twisted her body and fell gracefully into the arms of the big man beneath.

Lorans, still mouthing his rage and dwelling now upon the allegedly inedible fish pie he had been served, darted a look at his watch.

“All right,” he whispered. “Fifteen minutes.” Then he went back to his loud monologue which most certainly could have been heard through the suite’s door to the hall.

Dr. Dorn Horsten went over to the window, flung it open and vaulted out.

Martha winced. “I’ll never get used to seeing him do that,” she said.

Helen jumped up on the window-sill and peered down. “It’s only four floors,” she said. “Besides, there’s a lawn down there. After all, he comes from a high-gravity planet. Bye, bye.”

She launched herself after Horsten.

And Martha winced again.

Down below, the doctor caught his diminutive partner neatly and they started hurrying their way through the small park that edged the Posada San Francisco on this side. He didn’t bother to put her down. Her small legs weren’t up to the pace.

He said, “How in the world did they locate this place? Sheer luck?”

“Evidently couldn’t have been easier,” Helen said. “They took a tour of the city, and one of the first things the guide pointed out was the Policía Secreta headquarters. Pierre and Martha were suitably impressed and the flunky blabbered out just about everything they
wanted to know; they had no trouble guiding his conversation. They asked why it was necessary to have such a large police, and he told them all about the subversives who had recently been caught. Standing there in the street, he pointed out a window where interrogations were alleged to take place. Pointed out a window which was the only one, evidently, opening into the vaults where the police archives were kept. Oh, he was most helpful."

The doctor grunted. He was walking at a rapid pace now, the girl on his shoulder. A passer-by would probably have smiled at the pleasant picture they made. However, there were no other pedestrians at this hour. The Falangists supped late and went almost immediately to bed afterwards.

"I hope we find what we’re looking for," he said. "But I doubt it. You brought that supposed toy of yours, didn’t you? The rings that actually unfold into a set of knuckledusters?"

"You think I’m stupid, you big lummox?"

"No," Dorn Horsten sighed. "I don’t think you’re stupid. But I’m certainly glad you’re the size you are."

"Why?" she said suspiciously.

"Because if you were my size, I might ask you to marry me, and the very thought changes my muscles to water."

"Why, you overgrown oaf!"

"That must be it, up ahead," he said. "No other building would be quite so large and quite so grim looking. Now, let me remember how Martha told me to locate that window."

They found the spot from which the Lorans had observed the building earlier.

Helen said, "You think there’s a guard there?"

"Evidently. It’s one of the few windows in the building with a light. This whole wing is dark except for it." He sized up the situation. "I hope they didn’t repair the window as yet."

Helen was on the ground now, chubby fists on her hips. "Not in this country. One of the things they brought from Terra most enthusiastically was the do-it-
mañana philosophy. I've already noticed that. How in the world did Pierre manage to break it, anyway?"

Horsten was still casing the situation. He said absently, "You know him. He simply waited until nobody else was around, and then, while Martha distracted the guide's attention, he reached down, picked up a half brick or some other stone, and heaved it. Evidently, a few minutes later a couple of Guardia Civil came dashing from the building, but didn't even bother to question the Lorans. The guide was mystified by them. When they pointed out the window, high above, the guide said reasonably that nobody could throw a brick that high, and anyway, they hadn't seen any young people, or criminal types loitering around."

He came to a decision. "I think I can make it up that wall, the gravity on this planet seems to be a mite less than even Earth and that brickwork will give hand- and toe-holds. However, I can't go into that window and get down into the room beyond if there's an armed guard there. He'd zap me before I could get to him."

"Funker," Helen sneered. "Put all the strongarm stuff onto a little girl."

"All right, all right," he said. "Got any better ideas?"

"No," she said. And then, "Allez oop!"

He swung the miniature gymnast and acrobat around several times before releasing her. She sailed in an impossible flight to the iron bars that sheltered the small window. Tiny hands shot out and grasped them.

There was ample room to squeeze her childish body through. She paused a moment there, turned and made an age-old gesture to the man below, a circle with thumb and forefinger. He lumbered quickly to the wall and started scrambling up. He could see her tiny body swing through and cursed beneath his breath that she had gone on ahead before he arrived on the scene.

He reached the ten-story-high window and, supporting himself with one hand, tore the iron bars off with the other. He knocked what was left of the glass out of the way and squeezed through. He dropped to the floor.

Helen stood there, absently shining the brass knucks on her chubby right hand with the palm of her left. She
said, her voice at its most childish treble, “Where’ve you been so long, you slow-moving cloddy?”

He stared about the room. It was obviously devoted to special records. A sort of file-within-files arrangement. He looked down at the uniformed man who was stretched out on the floor.

“What did you do to him?” he said.

“Nothing much,” Helen said modestly. “He was something startled to see me dropping out of the heavens.”

Horsten grunted. “What I wanted to know was, will he revive fairly soon?” He squatted next to the Falangist guard and slapped his face back and forth stingingy.

The other’s eyes opened and at first expressed disbelief and then suddenly widened into terror. He reached clumsily for his side arm.

Horsten took it gently from his hand. It was a long barreled 9 mm. military pistol of a period so remote that on Earth it would have taken its place in a museum. Horsten bent the barrel and made a knot in it and handed it back.

He said to the guard gently, “Where are the records of the subversion trial of the Earthling?”

The other was bug-eyeing the gun.

Horsten said, “Please, Senor, you would not want me to have to . . .” He let the sentence dribble away.

The guard said, “No. No, no. I do not know what you want. But it is impossible.”

“What’s impossible?”

“I do not have the combination.”

Horsten took the gun back again and bent the barrel into a sort of pretzel shape, to the other’s horrified fascination.

“I didn’t ask you that, did I?”

The guard pointed weakly at a large, iron safe. “Those are the top secret files pertaining to attempts to overthrow the government of El Caudillo.”

Horsten came to his feet, and looked down at the other contemplatively. Helen had been scouting the room, now she took her place beside him.

“We should crisp him,” the scientist muttered.

She took a deep breath and held her elbows tightly against her sides, in feminine rejection.
He looked at her in disgust. "All right, all right, I haven't got the guts either." He bent quickly and seemingly tapped the fallen man across the jawbone. Eyes rolled upward.

Horsten growled, "Look around for some wire, or rope . . . anything to tie him with."

"Telephone over here," she said.

He went over and ripped it out and returned to tie the guard.

Moments later, that worthy revived enough, once more, to see his assailants leaving. The man with the six hundred pound safe under one arm, the little girl seated on a shoulder.

She saw the eyes open and waved and lisped, "Goo'bye, Mr. Policeman."

He closed his eyes again and started in on several prayers he had not said since childhood.

IV

Colonel Inspector Miguel Segura looked about the room unbelievingly. His eyes finally came back to the Guardia Civil private. He said, "The story again?"

"Senor Colonel, I do not know how many of them there were, nor even where they came from. I was here, wide awake. Suddenly, they were upon me. There must have been at least six."

One of the colonel's assistants said, "I would think so, if they managed to get that safe out of here and all the way down and out of the building."

The colonel growled, "Quiet, Raul. Go on with the story."

"I fought as best I could. There were too many. They beat me unconscious and tied me. When I awoke, the safe was gone."

The colonel looked at the other unbelievingly and uncomprehendingly. He pointed to the broken window above. "The bars are broken from that window. Why? How? Surely they couldn't have done that without you hearing. But even if they could have, why? The safe was too large to have been let out there."
"Senor Colonel," the Guardia Civil told him. "I do not know. It is all as though the work of devils."

The colonel sighed deeply. "If it was not for the fact that the safe has been found, the door torn off, in a park, I could hardly credit a word of this."

Another aide came in. The colonel inspector looked at him. "Yes?"

"The clerks have been through the papers contained in the safe. There are only a very few missing."

"Well?"

"They pertained to the recent trial of the suspected Section G agent and his accomplices."

The colonel shook his head and stared at the guard. "Where did you say they came from? Supposedly the door was locked from inside, but you say they burst suddenly upon you."

The subject of interrogation squirmed. "Senor Colonel, I do not know. The door was locked. Uhhh, it was as though they descended from the heavens."

Colonel Inspector Miguel Segura—chief inspector of the Nuevo Madrid Policía Secreta and rumored to be one of the handful of men who spent their evenings with El Caudillo in the Presidential Palace playing cards, sipping sherry and Fundador imported from Terra, and being entertained by flamenco dancers noted more for their pulchritude than their competence at the Iberian entertainment—had sent his card in formally.

He was in full uniform and accompanied only by his youthful aide, Teniente Raul Dobarganes, also in formal attire. Their manner was grave and, if anything, overly polite.

Dr. Horsten had been located and brought to the Lorans’s suite so that all could be addressed at once. They were seated, save Helen, who stood, toes pointed in, and staring up at Teniente Dobarganes, unblinkingly. It had to be admitted, the dress uniform of the Policía Secreta was not exactly drab.

The two police officers had hardly more than presented their stiff bows than Pierre Lorans shot to his feet dramatically. He crossed his arms over his chest. "I confess," he blurted. "I admit everything."

Inspector Segura stared at him. "You do?"
"Yes! Everything! I should never have come to this barbarian planet. Police everywhere. No freedom for the artist. I should have known better. It is impossible for me to equivocate. Impossible. I am a *Nouveau Cordon Bleu* chef. I am willing to die."

He shut his mouth and stood there defiantly.

Martha began to cry.

Helen didn’t even bother to turn. She continued to stare up at the lieutenant, stationed no more than three feet from him.

The doctor looked blank.

The inspector raised eyebrows to his assistant, who shrugged a shrug that would have done every Spaniard since the Phoenicians first came to trade for tin, full proud.

The inspector turned his eyes back to the defiant chef.

"Ah, what do you confess?" he said cautiously.

"To insulting this benighted, probably starving planet! Its food, its chefs, its lack of even such simplicities as bacalao, eels, cucumbers. Its . . ."

The inspector held up a hand to stem the tide.

"Please, Senor Lorans, will you be seated? This is a very serious matter."

The lips of Senor Lorans began to go pale.

Martha said hurriedly, "Now, Pierre. Please sit down. You are not being insulted. We must at least hear what Sergeant What’s-his-name wants. And nobody is arresting you, Pierre."

The inspector shot a look from the side of his eyes, but the face of Raul Dobarganes was without expression.

When Lorans had been urged back into his chair, the colonel inspector took up again, though not without misgivings. He began, "Dear guests of Falange . . ."

Helen said, "I think you’re pretty." But she was talking to *Teniente* Dobarganes, not the inspector, not even the mother of whom would have possibly considered the description.

Raul Dobarganes could feel the pink ascending from his tight collar.

"Gosh, you even blush pretty," Helen told him with satisfaction.
Martha said, "Helen, you be quiet now. The gentlemen have something to say." She smiled sweetly at the inspector. "You go right ahead, Sergeant."

Inspector Segura opened his mouth, closed it again. Paused for a long moment, then started all over.

He said to Pierre Lorans, "There is complete freedom on Falange, Senor. You have not observed correctly. This is the most stable socio-economic system ever devised. All are happy. All are in their place. Those whom the Holy Ultimate meant to administrate, do. Those whom fate meant to serve, serve. Everybody is satisfied with their lot on the planet Falange. Of how many of our sister members of United Planets can you say the same, eh?"

"Why, it sounds very nice," Martha nodded encouragingly.

Helen piped up. "Then how come you got so many cops everywheres?"

Both the colonel and his aide looked at her blankly for a long frustrated moment.

"Ah," Dr. Horsten murmured, "an interesting point. Out of the mouths of babes, so to speak." His stolid face took on an absentminded quality. "It seems to me I can think of a, uh, parallel some few centuries back on Earth. A period during which the leading nations paraded about in great style loudly boasting of their degrees of freedom and how highly they valued peace and despised aggression. However, somehow, those who disclaimed loudest of their love of democracy, peace and freedom had the largest police forces, secret police, intelligence agencies, armies and navies. Such nations as Switzerland and the Scandinavian, who didn't need to talk about their internal freedoms, invariably had small police forces and military, even judged on a per capita basis."

The inspector said, his voice verging on the snappish now, "Forgive me. Somehow we seem to have gotten off on a tangent. I must get to the point. Last night a major crime was committed. One of such nature that only an alien could possibly be interested. You are some of the few aliens registered in this vicinity and, by coincidence,
you arrived only yesterday, from Terra, the planet involved."

"Terra? Mother Earth!" Pierre Lorans blurted, unbelievingly.

The inspector said dryly, "Rumors are beginning to go through the member planets of United Planets that Mother Earth seems to have developed into a strange parent. However, the point is that you are within a quarter mile of the scene of the crime, and you have just arrived from Terra."

Dr. Horsten said vaguely, "Crime. When did this, uh, crime take place, my dear Inspector?"

Segura said, "At almost exactly eleven o'clock."

The heavy-set scientist scowled and tried to remember. "I am afraid I have no . . . ah, what do they say in the crime tapes on Tri-Di? Ah, yes. No alibi."

The inspector looked at Raul Dobarganes who had at long last escaped the fascinated stare of little Helen. His assistant brought forth a report.

"At eleven o'clock last night, Doctor, you were right here in this room. Senor Lorans had been dissatisfied with his evening meal."

"Hal!" Lorans blurted and began to come to his feet. His wife restrained him.

"You are right," Dr. Horsten exclaimed. "I was right here with the Lorans family. A perfect alibi. I couldn't possibly have committed this terrible crime." A fascinated gleam came to his eyes behind their pince-nez glasses. "I love Tri-Di crime shows," he confided. "What happened last night? Mass murder? An armed romp? Perhaps . . ."

"Romp?" the inspector said blankly.

"A caper. A job! Perhaps they knocked off the National Treasury, uh?" He came to his feet, portraying more excitement than anyone had ever expected this staid looking scientist to project. He held his hands as though cradling a two-handed weapon. "Muffle guns," he said. "Come driving up in fast hovercars. Leave a lookout outside. The rest go charging in, cutting down the guards . . ."

The inspector, stricken to silence, had closed his eyes
in the Iberian expression of agony the Section G operatives were beginning to get used to.

It was Dobarganes who took over. He put a hand on the excited doctor’s arm. “Please, Senor Horsten, it was not that at all. Please be seated.” He got the good doctor into his chair and turned back to his superior. There was a strained element in his voice as well, by this time. “Senor Colonel?” he said.

The colonel had obviously decided to get it over with. He said, “The maids reported this morning that there was ash in your fireplace, as though papers had been burned there. It was, so far as we could analyze, paper of the type stolen last night. Undoubtedly, you have some explanation.” He added, sotto voce, “Some weird explanation.”

All except Helen looked blank. Helen was beginning to eye the colonel malevolently.

Martha said, “Why, why, I burned some papers last night. Heaven only knows why I ever brought them along when I packed.”

“Senora, this paper was of the type stolen last night. Our laboratories . . .”

Dr. Horsten had recovered from his enthusiasm. He grunted deprecation. “My dear Inspector Sorghum . . .”

“Segura,” Raul Dobarganes said quickly.

“. . . I suspect your paper manufacturers produce many of the types originated by Earth. Undoubtedly, Mrs. Lorans, among her other effects, brought an identical, or at least similar, paper along with her.”

The inspector was scowling.

The scientist went on, a certain impatience in his voice now. “Otherwise, you could always put the Senora under, ah, what is the term they use on the crime shows? Scop. Yes, Scop, truth serum, uh? Surely you will be able to, ah, dig out of her the method by which she sneaked from this fourth floor suite down through the hotel, captured these documents, or whatever, smuggled them back and then burnt them to hide the crime.” He looked at Martha. “My dear Mrs. Lorans, you have not seen enough Tri-Di spy tapes. You must chew up and swallow such secret papers.”
Martha’s face revealed that she didn’t understand what either of them were talking about.

The inspector gave up. He was wondering why he had bothered to come here when any of a hundred underlings could have checked the remote lead. He began making his preliminaries toward leaving. However, he reckoned without Helen.

She had evidently come to her decision and advanced on the quick to deal him a sharp kick on the shin. Startled, he bent to grab the leg assaulted.

She demanded in her childish treble, “What did you do to my Uncle Ferd? Did you go around arresting him, too? Don’t you dare hurt my Uncle Ferd.”

The inspector looked appealingly at his aide who came forward hurriedly to the rescue, however, Helen had already been snatched away by her mother.

“Don’t you dare arrest my Uncle Ferd!” Helen shrilled.

For a moment, the inspector thought he might have something. He snarled, “Who’s Uncle Ferd?”

His lieutenant cleared his throat. “Probably the technician for the corridas, Senor Colonel. He arrived on the same spaceship, you’ll recall. Senor Zogbaum.”

“Oh, yes.” The colonel inspector straightened and did his gentlemanly best to smile at the child. “Your Uncle Ferd is very safe, little Senorita. He was in custody . . . ah, that is, he was guarded by friends all night, so he couldn’t possibly be involved, uh, that is, couldn’t be one of the gang of bad men. And now, Senora, Senores, little Senorita, forgive the Teniente and I for interrupting you. Hasta luego.”

He and his aide got out more speedily than protocol usually called for on Falange.

Back in the suite, Martha gestured upward at the bug.

Pierre Lorans took a pocketknife from his clothes and opened what would ordinarily have been the small blade, the end of which had been filed off to make a small screwdriver. He handed it to Helen.

Helen said, “Allez oop,” and in a moment duplicated her performance of the day before, poising for a long moment, partially supported by a tiny hand grasping the
chandelier chain. The other hand darted out with the improvised screwdriver, loosened a screw slightly, then she fell over gracefully and back down into the arms of her partner.

Horsten tossed her high again, she gave the screw another turn. On the third attempt, she pulled loose a wire before dropping away.

She muttered with satisfaction. “I’ll bet whoever’s in charge of bugging is going slowly drivel-happy.”

Back in chairs, they looked around at each other.

Horsten looked at Martha. “You memorized the whole trial before burning it?”

“Of course I did,” Martha said.

“Why didn’t you flush away all the ashes?”

“Because to hide all signs of my burning some paper would have been practically impossible. By leaving a little ash, the fact of a considerable burning was hidden. My story held up.”

“I suppose so,” he said. “Some time today, Martha, it might be a good idea, while Pierre is busy with his colleague chefs, for you to go to a public library and memorize the Falange legal code. We might need it.”

Helen said thoughtfully, “And while you’re at it, all rules pertaining to the bullfights during this fantastic selection of their Caudillo.”

“I think you’re right,” Martha said. “I’ll do it.”

Horsten looked at the plumpish Lorans. “At the rate you’re going, they’ll shoot you, or kick you off the planet, even before they find you’re a Section G agent.”

Lorans grinned one of his rare grins, which gave him an impish quality. “No. I’m impressing them more by the minute. They wouldn’t dream of expelling such an obviously temperamental artist, until I have at least produced one complete repast. They recognize my type too well, not to understand it. At this point, they’re in awe. The present El Caudillo evidently considers himself a gourmet. Heads would roll if anything happened to me before he could get his undoubtedly rounded belly under a table provided by my art.”

Helen said, “The problem now is how do we get these two underground fellas out of the deep freeze?”

Martha looked at her. “Deep freeze?”
“That Alcazar political prison.”

The doctor said unhappily, “And what do we do with them once we get them out? We don’t know where their friends may be, if they have friends. Very possibly they have no place to go to ground.”

Helen said, “Why not here?”

And at their reception of that, snarled, “I’m not as simple as all that. Today, Pierre goes out to buy some clothes suitable to Falange fashion. He buys several suits, including three that are semi-formal and very similar to the sort that the Posada waiters wear. Ready-made—he hasn’t time for tailoring. One suit will be slightly too large, one just right, one for a slimmer man. Most of these Falangists seem of average size. O.K., we liberate the two former companions of our Section G agent who was shot as a subversive, bring them here and dress them in Pierre’s suits. We should be able to get some sort of fit.

“We keep them around the suite. If the police come in, they walk out, with trays, or towels, or whatever. Who ever looks at a hotel waiter?”

Lorans said skeptically, “Suppose a real waiter comes in?”

“There are four rooms, including the bath. We’ll shuffle them around from room to room, in closets, under beds. Maybe we’ll put over the idea that Martha doesn’t like maids to make her bed, or even clean her room. She wants to do it herself. Hotels have more eccentric guests than that. We can keep our refugees hidden in her room when the maids come in.”

Lorans wiped a hand over his brow. “Talk about the Purloined Letter!”

Horsten said, “It’s a rather desperate expedient.”

Helen snapped, “All right, double-dome, think up something better.”

Lorans said, “How are we going to get out of here to raid the prison? And, if we do, how will we locate them? What were their names, Martha?”

Martha said, “Bartolomé Guerro and José Hoyos.” She looked thoughtful. “I could probably find some sort of prison plan in the National Library.”

“Hmm-m-m,” the doctor said. “I wonder if at the same
time you could find a plan of the power plant serving
Nuevo Madrid.”
Helen looked at him speculatively. “I don’t trust you,”
she said.
He beamed at her.

Colonel Segura, making his way with the use of an old-
fashioned flashlight, covered the small room thoroughly.
He was beginning to doubt, these days, the reports of
his own senses. The place was a shambles.
Finally, Raul Dobarganes bringing up the rear, the
colonel returned to where two of his plainclothesmen
had the hotel electrician pinned to a chair.
The colonel inspector glowered down at that unfortu-
nate. “You are under arrest,” he snapped, “And will
probably be shot for sabotage of government property.
The Posada is government property. The Posada is gov-
ernment operated by the Policía Secreta to keep an eye
on aliens and other suspects, as you well know.”
The electrician groaned his misery and one of the
plainclothesmen backhanded him across the mouth.
The colonel went on ominously. “You have one chance.
Tell us the purpose of your crime and reveal all ac-
complices.”
The technician shook his head in mute denial and hope-
less appeal for mercy.
The colonel, directing the beam of the electric torch
full into the other’s face, said, “Every light in the build-
ing has been extinguished and every device dependent
on electricity is disrupted. Why? What did you expect
to accomplish?”
The other moaned his misery and the plainclothesman
slapped him again.
The colonel sighed deeply. “Tell me your lie again . . .
traitor.”
“I am not a traitor. I am no traitor . . .”
He received another stinging slap across the mouth.
“Senor Colonel, I swear by the United Temple, by the
Holy Ultimate, it is exactly as I have told you. A
strange, whirling something came in through the door.
Even as it whirled, it moved slowly and in . . . in a half
circle around the room. I was spellbound, hypnotized.
In all my life, Senor Colonel, I have never seen such a strange thing. I was paralyzed. It came in through the door, went down the room, whirling, whirling, and then came back and . . . 

"And hit you on the back of the head, you fool."
"Yes, Colonel," the other said in misery.
"And when you finally awoke what . . ."
"When I awoke, the control room was a mess. Everything capable of being smashed was smashed. It could have been but moments, but when I awoke there was damage of an extent I would have thought would have taken hours."

The colonel boiled inwardly in his frustration, directed the beam of his flashlight upward. "There. That device, up near the ceiling, whatever it is. You can hardly see it from here. A group of saboteurs desiring to smash that would have had to have a ladder. Are you suggesting they marched through the halls of this hotel carrying a ladder?"

"No, Senor Colonel," the electrician moaned. "I don't know . . . ."

Another vicious slap.

The colonel snarled, "These whirling mysteries of yours are an attempt to hide the true facts. Something is going on here. You have accomplices. Several of them must have come here and joined with you to wreck your charge."

"No . . . no . . . ."

Another Policía Secreta underling came hurrying into the room. Raul Dobarganes met him and spoke briefly in a low whisper. The teniente approached his superior. The colonel looked up at him, impatiently.

Dobarganes said unhappily, "Senor Colonel, the electricity is now off all over the city. It is in darkness. Only the palace of El Caudillo, with its private power plant, has lights."

The colonel stared at him, as though his lieutenant was an idiot. "A temporary power break."

"No, Senor Colonel. From what this man says, there has been unprecedented sabotage of the power plant."

"Are you insane! There are a hundred guards!"

"Yes, Senor Colonel."
"Come along! Madre de Dios! the world goes mad!" The colonel stormed for the door.

Behind him, the electrician sighed in relief and, as though in reflex, the plainclothesman smashed him across the mouth again.

V

As they made their uncomfortable way across the open field, Lorans growled, "I suppose we should count our blessings. El Caudillo's government concentrates practically everything here in Nuevo Madrid. Suppose this confounded political prison was all the way on the other side of the planet?"

Helen said, "I still don't know how we're going to locate them." She was perched up on Dorn Horsten's shoulder, as always when time had to be made.

Horsten said, "If we have this right, they keep their prime state prisoners in the left wing. Martha memorized it at the library."

Helen said, "Great, but there might be a thousand of them."

The doctor half stumbled over an unseen obstacle, caught himself and said, "No. Contrary to belief, police states don't necessarily have their prisons chock full. The worst political prisoners they shoot, the least dangerous they send off to slave labor projects. Why feed them in prison? Put them to work. Those in between are kept in jail until they decide if they belong to the first category, or the second."

They had come to a wall. Pierre Lorans took a rope he had been carrying and handed it to Helen. She wrapped it about her tiny waist and turned to Horsten and said, "Allez oop!"

He caught her, whirled her, released her. She shot upward.

Lorans growled, "I wish I hadn't lost my boomerang, back there at the power station. What'll they think when they find it?"

"They won't," Horsten grunted, peering upward after his diminutive partner. "Until you showed me that confounded thing, I'd never even heard of a boomerang,
and I still don’t quite believe the things you can do with it. There’s no reason to believe they’ve ever heard of them, either.”

Lorans complained. “It was my favorite little tool. And one of the few we could take a chance on and bring along—in Helen’s box of toys, of course. What’s taking that girl so long?”

At that very moment, the end of the rope slithered down.

Without further word, Dr. Horsten gave it a sharp tug or two, to make sure Helen had it well anchored, shoved his glasses firmly back on his nose, and then started up, hand over hand, his feet braced against the prison wall.

A few minutes later, the end of the rope jerked up and down, in signal. Lorans took it and tied a loop in the end and put one foot inside. He gave a sharp double tug and was drawn upward to where the others awaited him on the wall top.

It was pitch dark.

Horsten whispered. “All right, let’s go. We’ve seen a few prison guards going about below with improvised lights. Evidently, the place is in a tizzy.”

Helen whispered, “Down this way, according to that chart Martha drew for us. The left wing is down this way.”

They came to a barred door.

Horsten came to the front and inspected it. “The best thing,” he murmured, even as his big hands went out, “is simply to break the”—he grasped two of the heavy bars near the lock and suddenly pulled them toward him—“lock.” With a rip of tortured metal, the door came open toward him.

“How about alarms?”

“Don’t be silly,” Helen told him. “What do you think we fouled up that power plant for? Now let me go ahead and scout this out.”

The two men pressed back against a wall while she reconnoitered. She took longer to return than they found reasonable, so when she did show, both felt relief. She was breathing deeply.

“What happened?” Lorans demanded.

“I ran into two guards and had to clobber them.”
The doctor looked down at her tiny figure and shook his head. "I'll never get used to it," he muttered under his breath.

Helen said, "I found out where they are."

"Where who are?"

"Dont be dense. Our boys. Hoyos and Guerro."

The two men stared at her. "How'd you find that out?" Lorans said.

"Oh, one of the two guards," Helen said lightly. "Down this way."

"Just a minute. What did you do to the guard? I want to know what's behind me."

She tried to brush it off. "I just kind of twisted his arm a little."

For a brief moment, Dr. Horsten had before his eyes the picture of this seemingly sweet little girl putting strongarm methods to work on a tough, burly prison guard until the other divulged information.

He said, "You mean you let him see you, clearly?"

Helen shrugged it off. "So what? You think he's going to report to his chief that an eight-year-old girl put the slug on him?"

They followed her. From time to time, through windows overlooking the prison yard below they could see guards, or other prison employees, going this way and that with lanterns, flashlights or torches. Civilized institutions fall apart drastically without power.

Helen whispered, "This way, I think."

Back at the hotel, they returned to the Lorans's suite by much the same manner as they had scaled the prison wall. But this time there were an extra two members in the party.

After Horsten had made it up the wall, he hauled the others after him, one, two, three. Helen, of course, had gone first, propelled by her hefty partner.

Martha was there, ready with a drink all around.

Pierre Lorans said to her, "Anything while we were gone?"

"No. Not so much as a knock on the door."

Lorans turned to the two newcomers. "If you'll come this way, we'll get some new clothes on you. Later, eith-
er the doctor or I will take those you're wearing and dis-
pose of them." He led the continually surprised Fa-
langist underground men to his bedroom.

Meanwhile, Dorn Horsten opened the door to the hall
and bellowed out into the darkness. "Hollo! Confound
it, how long is this fantastic situation going to last! We
want lights, food, something to drink! Hollo!"

Eventually, a hotel servant bearing a heavy candle
came scurrying and the scientist made a big to-do about
sitting around in the dark for the past couple of hours,
and that they demanded some service.

The servant scurried off again. He gave the impres-
son of having been doing a lot of scurrying all evening.

The doctor gave a grunt of satisfaction and turned
back to Martha and Helen. "It'll never occur to anybody
that we haven't been here all evening," he said.

"We hope," Helen muttered.

Lorans returned with the two liberated prisoners and
the next fifteen minutes were expended explaining to the
revolutionaries the purpose of the Lorans-Horsten team
and the scheme to keep the two safely hidden by their
remaining out in the open, disguised as waiters.

The older of the two, Bartolomé Guerro, was quite
tall, all but gaunt, dark of complexion, inclined to flare
in his speech. He was obviously a leader of men. The
other, to the surprise of the Section G operatives, was a
youngster, certainly not beyond his early twenties. Of
medium height, he moved with a litheness seldom found
in men and he seemed incapable of making an awkward
movement.

It came out in moments. José Hoyos, full matador at
the age of eighteen, had been the last, despairing hope
of the Lorca Party, an illegal underground organization
dedicated to the overthrow of the entire El Caudillo sys-
tem. Even before the coming of the Section G operative
who had worked with them, they had sought out this
potential champion from the ranks of the organization.
José was a third-generation son of a family devoted to
the building of a new world-government to supersede
the present system on Falange. His reflexes were fast,
his appearance strikingly handsome, his grace, superla-
tive. Helen could hardly keep her eyes off him.
They had groomed him for the next series of national games, when the old Caudillo had died and a new one was to be selected. The idea was to have him acclaimed El Caudillo and then to make sweeping changes from within. They had gathered funds to see him through the best of the planet’s bullfighting schools. They had gone to the expense of advancing his career through the novillero years, when as an amateur it was so difficult for the usual torero to find fights, it often being necessary that the young hopeful buy his own bull.

They had backed his career for years, waiting, waiting. And step by step José Hoyos had reached prominence, until in the opinion of most aficionados, he was Número Tres, third man from the top in the lists of matadors. The two above him were gentlemen toreros, both at least ten years his senior and both the epitome of the hero of the fiesta brava, national spectacle of the planet Falange.

They had arrived at a position of having only to wait for the demise of the present Caudillo, for José to have his chance. Needless to say, El Caudillo was in no hurry.

The lean Bartolomé Guerro looked around at the Section G operatives. “It was then your colleague, Phil Birdman, came to Falange and stressed the importance of dispatch. He couldn’t wait for the Caudillo’s natural death.”

Martha said, “You mean he favored assassination?” There was discomfort in her voice.

The Falangist looked at her. “Not necessarily. It would be impossible to assassinate El Caudillo. His security is simply too embracing. Birdman was trying to find some other method of speeding things.”

Horsten shook his head. They were talking now by the light of a small fire Lorans had built in the fireplace.

“Any public figure can be assassinated, given a determined enough group, with adequate resources.”

The youthful Hoyos, usually silent, spoke up. “Not El Caudillo,” he said. “His police are thick as soup.”

The doctor grunted. “Of course, I don’t advocate political assassination,” he said, “but listen to this one. Some centuries ago on Earth a desperate radical politi-
cal group decided it was necessary to kill a titled foreigner who was to have a parade in their city. Troops and police, they knew, would be present in literally tens of thousands. So twenty-five of their number gathered in a room and drew straws and the five who had the shortest were given bombs or pistols and were told where to spot themselves along the path of the parade. Then they left. Those twenty remaining drew straws. The five with the shortest were given pistols and instructed to place themselves behind the appointed assassins, in the crowd. If, when it came the turn of one of the assassins to make his try at the victim, he failed to try, then the man stationed behind him was to shoot him. Those five then left and the remaining men drew straws and the five with the shortest were given pistols and instructed to stand behind the second man. If the first man failed to make his try, and the second man failed to shoot the first man, then it was the task of the third to shoot the second. These five left and straws were chosen again. The five short ones were issued pistols and instructed to stand behind the third man in the crowd, if the first man failed to make his try and the second man failed to shoot him and the third man failed to shoot the second, then the fourth man's task was to shoot the third. The five remaining men need, of course, draw no straws. They issued themselves guns and left to assume their posts—behind the fourth man."

The doctor let his eyes go around the group. "Next day, the parade started on schedule. The automobile containing the titled victim and his wife reached the first assassin who attempted to throw his bomb but was caught. The police then reached the second assassin who tried to shoot them with his pistol, but was pulled down by the surrounding mob. They reached the third assassin—and got no further."

Horsten held his peace for a moment, and then said, "The assassins claimed their victim, but they didn't know what the cost was to be. His name was Archduke Ferdinand and his death precipitated the first of the World Wars."

Bartolomé Guerro thought about it. Finally he said, "Why do you tell us of this?"
The scientist shrugged. "Merely pointing out that dedicated men can do what must be done. Your problem here, of course, is different."

"Yes, of course." The Falange revolutionist stirred in his chair. "José and I must get out and re-establish our contacts, get in touch with the cells of our Nuevo Madrid organization. Our arrest caused considerable disruption of long-laid plans."

Horsten said, "One thing. Our central offices have decided that the government of El Caudillo stands in the way of progress, but there is no point in tearing down one socio-economic system if a superior one is not available to take its place. What is your own philosophy of government, Señor Guerro?"

The gaunt man took his time. Finally, he said, "Government should be by the elite, nothing else makes sense. Who wishes to be led by someone competent only to bring up the rear? But each generation must find its own elite. They are not automatically the children of the last generation's, nor are they necessarily to be found among those with titles, great traditions behind them, nor accumulated wealth."

Both Horsten and Lorans were nodding basic agreement. The doctor said, "And your method of selecting your governing elite?"

The Falangist looked full into his eyes and said very slowly, "This is an internal problem of our world. We will solve it based on local conditions, needs, traditions—all the factors that make Falange unique." His voice went slower still. "We do not need the assistance of even friends from worlds beyond, where our institutions are not fully understood. We thank you for your assistance in destroying the corrupt government of El Caudillo, but we must insist on being the engineers of our future."

"Damn well put," Helen said.

"And now we must go," Guerro said.

Martha said worriedly, "You'll be safe? We planned to keep you here for the time."

Guerro and Hoyos came to their feet. "We'll be as safe as can be expected," Guerro said. "Your group will be here?"

"Yes," Horsten said. "Our cover is excellent. When
your people have come to some plan of action, let us know. Meanwhile, we shall put our own minds to the situation."

José Hoyos was looking down at Helen speculatively. There was an element of apology in his voice when he said, "How old are you truly?"

Helen said snappishly, "That is a question no man should ever ask a woman."

He looked down at her again, taking in the little girl's dress, sprinkled with wild flowers, at the blonde hair caught up in its ribbon. He shook his head.

"You want to Indian wrestle?" she snarled.

"I beg your pardon?" The good-looking torero was confused.

"Leave him alone, Helen," Martha said.

"I'll clobber him," Helen muttered under her breath. "How long am I supposed to go between dates in this damned Section G? I'm a normal young woman."

They saw the two Falangist citizens to the door, the doctor checking the hall up and down, before letting them go.

"Holy Jumping Zen," Helen said, "but he's beautiful. You should have seen his eyes pop when I wiggled through the bars of his cell."

Colonel Inspector Segura did what little there was in his power to make his voice soothing. He was seated in the gray drabness of his office, his heavy Castilian style desk a litter of papers and reports, a heavy military revolver used as a paperweight to hold down a pile to his right.

He said now, "No loyal ciudadano need fear the officials of El Caudillo's government. They need only tell the truth and receive the acclaim of El Caudillo's faithful servants."

The man before him squirmed. In his time, the other had run afoul of El Caudillo's so-called faithful servants before. Never seriously, though any contact at all with the Policía Secreta was serious enough. But he had never dreamed—save possibly in nightmare—that he would ever confront Miguel Segura himself. One heard stories of Miguel Segura.
"Now," the colonel inspector said in heavy gentleness, "just what was it you saw?"

"Señor Colonel, I was taking a walk through the park . . ."

"So I understand. At perhaps two o'clock in the morning."

The other squirmed again. "Señor Colonel, I can explain. My wife and I . . ."

Segura held up an impatient hand. "I am not at present interested in why a supposedly honest ciudadano might find fit to prowl the streets in the dead of night. Get to your story."

"Señor Colonel, it is unbelievable."

The colonel was beginning to lose patience. "There have been many unbelievable things happening in this city recently. Quickly now!"

"Señor Colonel, your excellency. I was not drunk."

"Your story!" the colonel roared.

The other faltered, took a deep breath. "Señor Colonel, I saw a man walk up the side of the Posada San Francisco."

"You saw what?"

"Señor Colonel, I was not drunk. I insist. When I told my wife, she told a neighbor. Soon it had spread throughout the block and the Guardia Civil came to question me, as they always come if there is the slightest deviation from everyday routine."

"All right. What do you mean, you saw a man walk up the side of the Posada? You mean he was climbing up the side of the hotel, do you not?"

"Señor Colonel, it was at a distance, one admits. It was none too clear. But it was a man, and he was not climbing. Not in the ordinary sense. He was walking up the wall. He got to the fourth, or perhaps the fifth floor and then disappeared."

"Disappeared? You mean he went into a window?"

"Perhaps. For me, he simply disappeared."

The colonel stared at the other for a long unprofitable minute. He said finally, "Could it have been that he had a rope suspended from the window and was climbing it, walking up the wall holding onto such a rope?"
“Perhaps, Colonel. It was at a distance, as one has said.”

“Get out,” the colonel said. “Leave your complete story with the secretary outside. And now get out.”

After his informant had left, the colonel inspector sat for a long time, staring unseeingingly into a far corner of the office. A light flashed on his desk. He pressed a button.

_Teniente_ Raul Dobarganes entered, a curved piece of wood in his hand. The thing might have been a yard in length in all, might have been a club, but, if so, an unlikely looking one.

Segura growled a sour welcome, then, “Well?”

“It is a boomerang.”

The colonel looked at him.

Raul Dobarganes cleared his throat. “A weapon of the Australian Aborigines.”

“What in the name of the Holy Ultimate is an Australian whatever-you-said?”

“A very primitive people of Earth. Evidently, according to my historical informant, the device also showed up on other parts of Terra. They were found in Egyptian tombs. One form of the boomerang was more a toy than anything else. You threw it and it made a large circle out into the air and then returned to you.”

The colonel looked at the instrument again as though unbelieving but kept his peace.

His lieutenant went on. “The hunting and war boomerangs were different. They were meant to strike the game, or enemy, at a distance and with great accuracy and force.”

“You mean you simply threw the thing? Why should it be any more accurate than any other . . . well . . . club?”

“It twirls in the air.” The young aide demonstrated. “Going around and around like this. The way it’s twisted, the wood . . . it evidently acts as some sort of airfoil.”

“Let me see that damned thing,” the colonel snapped.

He stared down at it.

Finally he snapped, “Get me the customs report on the possessions brought in by Pierre Lorans and his
family and by Dr. Horsten. Check back to make double sure that the inspection was as thorough as usual. I want to know if as much as a single toothpick could have gotten past undetected."

"Yes, Colonel Segura."

When the reports came, the colonel poured over them with a feeling of frustration. He didn't know what he was looking for. Nevertheless, eventually he found it.

He stabbed with his finger, accusingly. "A box of toys."

Raul Dobarganes looked blank.

"What toys?" the colonel rasped.

"Why . . . why, a girl's toys, I suppose," his aide said.

"Toys for that little girl, dolls and so forth."

"Ha!" the colonel said. "Put a man in the Lorans's suite at the first opportunity. When they are at dinner, or something. I want to know what's in the box of supposed toys. Also check thoroughly on that confounded microphone that is continually breaking. And another thing, Raul. That electrician from the Posada. Have him in here. And that guard of the archives who had the fanciful story of a half dozen or more men descending upon him from the skies. Bring him here. And those hysterical guards from the Alcazar Prison. I want them, too. On the double, Raul!"

His assistant was interrupted for one last order. "And Raul. You might get in touch with that Temple monk assigned to the task of exorcising the poltergeists at the city power plant. You can tell him it won't be necessary."

"Yes, Colonel Segura," Raul Dobarganes said, bewildered.

Colonel Inspector Miguel Segura bent a baleful eye on the night guard of the archives of the Policía Secreta. He said, infinite cold in his voice, "This time I want the real story of what happened that night the safe was robbed."

"Señor Colonel . . ." There were blisters of cold sweat on the man's forehead. If anything, he seemed more distraught than he had been the night of the crime. Evidently, he'd had time to think it over in detail and the
thinking hadn't reassured him. Which was interesting, the colonel decided.

The colonel said, "Your life is at stake. I want the truth."

"Senor Colonel, I told the truth. Most of it is a mystery to me. They descended upon me from I know not where. Seemingly from the air. I was helpless, immediately."

"How many of them did you say there were?"

The guard's eyes darted, but there was no escape. "I . . . I don't know, Senor Colonel."

The colonel leaned forward. "Were there only two . . . or three?"

The blisters of sweat were such now that the man had to wipe them away desperately.

The colonel's eyes shot suddenly to his lieutenant. "Put him to the question!" he rasped.

"No . . . no . . .!" the guard squealed.

"Torture him. I want every tiny detail of what really happened in that archives room."

"Yes, Colonel," Raul Dobarganes said unhappily. He didn't like this phase of his work. He put his head out the office door and summoned four plainclothesmen.

"No . . . no . . ." the victim was still squealing as they hauled him off.

The colonel's mouth worked. "Now those prison wardens who allowed the subversives to escape. Bring them in. I want a rehash on that story, too."

Martha Lorans looked out the window and said, "Oh, oh."

"What's the matter?" Helen said.

"Come here, quick. That line of men, crossing the park."

Helen took one look, said, "Get Pierre," and darted for the hall and the suite of Dorn Horsten.

She made it only halfway. Suddenly, from around a corner of the hotel corridor, two brawny Policía Secreta, both carrying pistols, grabbed her up.

Kicking and squealing, she was carried unceremoniously off.
Back in the Lorans’s apartment, Pierre entered from an inner room. “What’s the matter?”

Martha said hurriedly, “Pierre, armed men are closing in from all sides. It must be for us. Is there any last thing we can do? Are there any papers to burn or . . .”

“No, of course not. All our papers are in your head. Where’s Helen, Dorn . . .”

“She’s gone to get him. You think we can get out of here?”

“No. But we can try. Come on, Martha!”

He headed for the door, she immediately behind him.

It opened and they were confronted by Colonel Inspector Miguel Segura. Behind him were at least a dozen armed men.

“Oh,” the colonel said politely, “the Cordon Bleu chef who doesn’t appreciate the cuisine of Falange, eh? We shall see what you think of the food we serve the inmates of Alcazar Prison, especially those sentenced to be shot for illegal activities against the government of El Caudillo.”

There were sounds of a battle royal going on down the hall; great shouts, breaking of furniture, cries of agony.

The colonel turned coldly to one of his minions. “Take four more men with stun guns. A freak who can carry a six hundred pound safe down ten flights of stairs and then tear the door off, evidently with his bare hands, can take a lot of subduing. Be sure not to kill him.”

He turned back to the Lorans. “You will accompany me to the Policía Secreta headquarters for interrogation.”

Pierre Lorans said, “This is an outrage. I wish to inform the United Planets Embassy of my arrest, so that I can arrange for an attorney for my defense.”

Some police underling in the background chuckled at that.

The colonel said formally, “Pierre Lorans, you are unfamiliar with Falange legal procedure. The court will appoint an attorney to handle your defense.”

“A Falange attorney?” Lorans snorted, drawing himself up in his Gallic stance. “I want a United Planets lawyer!”
Martha said lowly, “That’s their law, Pierre. The court appoints defense attorneys in cases involving subversion and espionage.”

They were marched into the hall where they were met by another delegation of Policía Secreta, these carrying a trussed-up Helen. Still further along the hall came two more Guardia Civil, looking the worse for wear. They carried a stretcher and upon it, unconscious and breathing deeply, Dr. Dorn Horsten.

A service elevator took them down to street level, and they emerged into an alley behind the hotel. Police limousines awaited them there and they were whisked to the large gray, dominating Policía Secreta building which Helen and Horsten had penetrated so short a time ago, looking for the court records of the trial of the Section G agent.

They were hurried through passages, into a large gloomy interrogation room.

The others were pushed into chairs. The colonel eyed the now stirring Dr. Horsten. He said to his bully-boys, “Two of you station yourselves across the room with your guns trained on him. If he shows any belligerence at all, stun him again.”

The doctor, groaning from the aftermath of the blast he had received earlier, revived rather quickly, once the process had started. His bones felt as though he had suffered rheumatism and arthritis for a decade and more. He rubbed them painfully, even as he looked up.

He managed to get out, in indignation: “What is the meaning of this? You have a warrant for this outrage?”

“A technicality we dispense with on Falange, and as temporary residents, you come under our legal code. All our laws apply to you,” the colonel told him smoothly. “And now, just so as not to waste time, let me inform you that your trial will take place within the hour, and you will be shot this afternoon, at latest. Between then and now, you will be placed on Scop, truth serum, to reveal any accomplices you may have had in your vicious schemes.”

“Some trial that’s going to be, if you already know we’re going to be shot,” Helen said bitterly. She made no effort to maintain her childish treble.
The colonel looked at her and made a mocking bow. “I have not forgotten the kick you gave me, Senorita Lorans.” He afforded a light laugh. “Our investigations tell us that there is a whole planet of people such as yourself, though evidently you are one of the top gymnasts. A champion acrobat on a world that loves gymnastics. It explains a great deal of what would have seemed unexplainable.” He turned to the doctor. “And you, Dorn Horsten. We have a bit of information on your own home planet, ah, Ftörsta. It must be a strange world, indeed.”

The doctor said, “I’d like to get just two fingers around your neck.”

“I am sure you would. But time presses. The court is being set up for your brief trial. Immediately, we will resort to our Scop . . .”

Teniente Raul Dobarganes burst open the door and came in, his face ghost-pale.

“What in the name of the Holy Ultimate is wrong?” his superior growled.

Raul Dobarganes shook his head, as though to achieve clarity. “El Caudillo,” he whispered. “El Caudillo has been shot.”

VI

“Shot!” the colonel rasped.

“Dead. Shot dead. The parade in Almeria. The parade in honor of the glorious matadors who have fallen in the arena. The assassins were stationed all along the route of the parade. There must have been at least five of them in all. The fourth gunman got him. El Caudillo is dead.”

Horsten winced. He muttered, “I didn’t expect them to be so susceptible, when I told them that story.”

Helen looked at him, speculatively. “Are you sure?”

“I don’t know,” he said defensively. “I suppose it doesn’t make much difference now.”

The colonel had sped from the room, roaring orders right and left.

Pierre Lorans found the courage to laugh. “Well, at least it will probably give us a respite for an hour or so.”
Martha said, “More than that.” Her eyes seemed to go empty and she recited, “Falange Legal Code, Article Three, Section Three. During the National Fiesta Brava and until the new Caudillo is confirmed, there are no criminals on the planet Falange. Each resident must be free to compete as a torero if such is his desire.”

Horsten looked his astonishment. “You mean to say they open the prisons?”

“Evidently. It must be a madhouse.”

Helen growled, “Let’s get out of here and back to the hotel. Evidently, there’s nothing to stop us.” She looked over at Raul Dobarganes. “Is there, cutey?”

He had been taking in their conversation, blankly. In actuality, the last National Fiesta Brava had been held while he was still so young that few of the details remained with him. All he could recall was the great excitement. Now, he was almost as confused as the Section G operatives by the sudden change in the situation.

However, he knew the law. He shook his head. “No. There is nothing to stop you. There are no criminals on Falange. But as soon as the new Caudillo has been selected, you will again be apprehended and your trial will take place.”

Helen winked at him. “Let’s go, folks.”

They stood on the balcony of the Lorans’s suite at the Posada San Francisco and looked glumly down at the merrymaking crowds.

“Look at those costumes,” Martha said. “You would have thought that it would take weeks to make some of them.”

Horsten grunted. “They were out on the streets within half an hour of the flashing of the news of El Caudillo’s death.”

Bartolomé Guerro was with them, his expression sour. “For some of them, it is the one real excitement of their lives. The world turns upside down. The peon is free to leave the finca and journey into town for the local corridas. If he has the wherewithal, he can even make the trip here to Nuevo Madrid for the finals. The poorest laborer, in costume in the fiestas, rubs shoulders with the
wealthiest hidalgo; may steal a kiss, if he’s handsome enough, from a titled lady.”

Helen said, staring down at the mobs of dancing, running, laughing, drinking, milling Falangists, “This going on all over the planet?”

Guerro nodded. “Everywhere. There are few towns so small as not to have a bullring. It is the Falange equivalent of the Roman circus, and serves the same purpose. So long as the people are completely caught up in the fiesta brava, they have little time to realize the inadequacies of the life they lead. And this is the fiesta of all fiestas. The National Fiesta Brava, seldom witnessed more than once or twice in a single man’s lifetime.”

Horsten said, “And the elimination fights are taking place throughout the planet?”

“That is correct. Local toreros fight in their local arenas. The best is then sent to the county seat, where he competes with those others who have survived the local corridas. From hence, he goes to the nearest large city, and eventually here to Nuevo Madrid for the finals. Thousands of corridas are being held all over Falange at this very moment.”

Pierre Lorans said, “How is it decided who wins? It would seem to me that it could be rigged by the judges.”

The Falangist shook his head. “No, that is not where the rigging comes in. It is the crowd that decides, by popular acclaim, and no judge would dare go against it. If a torero fights well, he is awarded an ear, if he fights superlatively he will get two ears. If he triumphs, he gets two ears and a tail. On the rarest of occasions, he is awarded a hoof on top of all the rest.”

Horsten was looking at him. “Where does the rigging come in?” he said. “I’ve wondered about this before. How can the ruling class take the chance that some peon, or other lower caste member, might win and upset the applecart?”

The other grunted depreciation. “Theoretically, it’s all fair. However, the sons of the elite finca owners begin playing with fighting bulls when they are two or three years old—and the bulls one or two days old. By the time they’re ten, instructed by the most competent vet-
erans of the arena, they fight calves. By the time they're twelve, they are fighting small bulls at tientas, the testing of the young bulls. At about the same time they are allowed to kill steers at the ranch slaughterhouse, literally by the hundreds, learning every trick of the game. Ah, believe me, my friends, by the time our young hidalgo is sixteen, he knows just about everything there is to know about the *Bos taurus ibericus* and the fiesta brava."

The Section G agents had been interested. Lorans said, "Any other way they have of getting an advantage?"

Guerro made his very Iberian shrug. "Well, the mator’s cuadrillas; his assistants; picadors, banderilleros, and peons. They have a double purpose: one, to come to his rescue when he's in trouble; and, two, to make him look good in there. If a man can afford the most expensive cuadrilla that it is possible to hire, then he has a big advantage. On the face of it, one of Falange's ruling elite can so afford, and some youngster up from the slums hasn't got a chance of acquiring top assistants."

Helen said suddenly, "How's José Hoyos doing?"

Guerro pulled a great gust of air down into his lungs. "He is doing . . . adequately. The crowds call him Joseito and he is still *Número Tres*. Number One and Number Two, hidalgos named Perico and Caritos by their fans, have been shifting back and forth as favorites, but Joseito has consistently remained third in popularity. None of these top three has had a serious goring yet, they've all been lucky."

"Third place, eh? How about his, what did you call it, his assistants?" Horsten said.

"His cuadrilla? Top men. All members of the Lorca Party, all professional toceros. They're nearly as good as those of either *Número Uno*, or *Número Dos.* There was a shine in the gaunt man's eyes. "For once, we have possibly an even chance. For once, one of ours will at least participate in the finals. If he could only make it! El Caudillo! One of our party!"

The sounds of the mob dancing in the streets wafted up to them.

Helen said, "Is it going to be possible for us to watch the final fights?"
"Why not? It is simply a matter of being willing to pay enough for tickets. People have been known to sell their homes, beggar themselves, to buy a ticket for the final corrida. The arena sits but fifty thousand, and all Falange would like to attend. However, I imagine with United Planets resources behind you . . ."

Martha said grimly, "We have to be there to cheer on Joseito. If he wins, we’ve got it made, mission accomplished and everything. If he loses, Colonel Segura will have us back in the Alcazar before we can blink."

Guerro looked at her, frowning. "Couldn’t you make a run for it now?" He looked around at the others.

Horsten grunted. "Run to where? They certainly aren’t going to let us get aboard a spaceship, even if there were one available, and there isn’t."

Whatever the moral implications of the fiesta brava, either in the old days in Spain and Mexico, or on the planet Falange, a colorful spectacle beyond compare it most certainly is.

Fifty thousand persons packed the seats, and another ten thousand, perhaps, stood in the rear and in the aisles. All dressed in their most colorful best. All brimming with excitement. The bands blared out the "Diana," hawkers took beer, soft drinks, nuts and other edibles through the crowd, friends screamed greetings at each other over the heads of intervening hundreds. Fans and handkerchief-flappers fluttered. Masculine aficionados cheered each time a youthful senorita found it necessary to hike full skirts a fraction in order to climb over stone seats, seeking her own reserved space.

The Section G operatives, still accompanied by Bartolomé Guerro, had superlative seats right on the barrera, immediately above the callejón, the passage which circles the arena proper and behind which the toreros, not immediately in action, shelter themselves during the corrida. It would have been impossible to have been any closer to the action without joining it. Immediately to their left was the gate of the bull, which led back from the arena to the toril, the bull’s enclosure.

None of them, save Guerro, had ever seen a corrida, with the exception of portions in a Tri-Di historical tape on earth, or one of the other advanced planets.
He explained procedure to them as the afternoon wore on. There were three matadors, Carlitos, Perico and Joseito, who had wound up in the finals, Números Uno, Dos and Tres. Joseito, the Lorca Party champion, was Número Tres, as he had been consistently through the preliminary fights.

Carlitos, a tall, beautifully graceful man of possibly thirty, was to have the first bull. Scion of one of the planet's wealthiest rancher families, he had for years been one of Falange's most popular matadors and was by far and gone the favorite of the crowd.

Perico, a smaller, dark complexioned man, was not nearly the physical specimen of his opponent, but evidently, from what Guerro said, was noted for the impossible chances he took, the desplantes he indulged in so arrogantly, the adornos. He was famous for taking the tip of a dominated bull's horn in his mouth, to the horror of the crowd. A sudden flip upward of the horn and his brain would have been pierced. He, too, was of one of the very best families.

The preliminary parade, each matador followed by his cuadrilla, brought the audience cheering to its feet, each shouting the name of his champion.

To the swinging strains of "La Golondrina," that song of the torero come down through the centuries, they marched to the judge's stand and made their salute, in dim, dim memory of the gladiators who once stood and shouted, "We who are about to die . . ."

The cuadrillas dispersed, most to take their places in the callejón until it was time for their own performances. The peons of Carlitos remained in the ring waiting for the first bull.

He came exploding into the ring, half a ton and more of deliberately bred trouble. Deliberately bred for thousands of years to meet death in the afternoon, in the arena.

Carlitos stood alone in the ring center, cape in hands. The bull spotted him and again exploded.

Helen sucked in her breath.

Guerro explained. "He is noted for his Veronicas. Some say he is the greatest master of the Veronica since
the legendary Manolete of Spain. It is the most graceful of cape passes and the basic of them all."

Carlitos made no preliminary passes to gauge the bull's mettle. The first pass was taken inches from the bull's horns and the second, and the third. The crowd screamed its olés.

Guerro wiped his brow with a handkerchief. "He is unbelievable," he said. "Joseito could never present such Veronicas."

Helen looked at him. "So far we're losing, eh?"

"Nobody on Falange could perform such Veronicas, save Carlitos," Guerro said unhappily.

Lorans growled. "Why does the confounded bull charge so straight? The slightest deviation and our torero would have a horn in the guts."

"It is a perfect bull," Guerro admitted. "They are bred to run straight. When a matador has such a bull, he is assured of a triumph. Carlitos is fortunate. His bull is perfect. We can only pray that Joseito has similar fortune."

The matador passed the animal eight times before finally bringing it to a frustrated standstill and stalking arrogantly away, not bothering to look over his shoulder to see if the animal was making one last charge.

The fight proceeded through the quarter of the pica-dors, through the quarter of the banderilleros.

Guerro wiped his forehead again. "Perfect," he said. "Everything perfect. It is possibly the most superlative corrida I have ever seen."

"We're losing, eh?" Helen said lowly. "And our boy hasn't even been to bat yet."

For the moment, the bull stood immediately below them, breathing deeply from his exertions, waiting while Carlitos selected his sword and muleta. Waiting while Carlitos dedicated the animal to the three judges of the National Fiesta Brava finals. The matador wound it up by tossing his hat back over his shoulder into the stands and advanced toward the animal.


Guerro looked at him. "Beef animals no longer have
such horns, it is true. But they are especially bred fighting bulls, these, and the wide horn spread and length are necessary for a proper corrida.”

“It is not that,” Lorans grumbled. “As an apprentice at the Cordon Bleu, I had to become a butcher. One cannot cook if one does not know what he cooks. Each Cordon Bleu chef is a butcher as well as many other things. And I say . . .”

He lost the attention of his listeners as Carlitos went into his faena, the final series of passes that culminated in the moment of truth, the bull’s death.

The kill was perfect, the bull dropped as though he had been poleaxed. Carlitos paraded the ring, the crowd cheering. He and his assistants held up his award, two ears, the tail and a hoof.

“The highest possible award,” Guerro told them, wiping his mouth in despair with his handkerchief.

Perico had the next bull, a cárdeno, Guerro explained, an animal with a black and white coat.

The dark complexioned matador lived up to his reputation for foolhardy chances by beginning the fight on his knees, his cape spread before him, his arms spread wide, as though in supplication to the bull. Immediately upon entering the ring, it spotted him and banged in his direction.

Helen closed her eyes; seemingly, there was no chance of the avoiding of destruction. At the last split second, the matador grabbed up the cape and fluttered it to one side, and the animal exploded past. The crowd screamed itself hoarse.

Perico was awarded two ears and a tail. Not quite as much as Carlito had taken, but each had one more bull to fight.

It was the turn of Joseito. Elements in the crowd yelled, “Lorca! Lorca!”

Dorn Horsten looked at Guerro, who shook his head. “They take their chances, but the rumor has been deliberately spread. They know Joseito is the champion of the Lorca Party and what it means if he is proclaimed El Caudillo.”

Martha was looking about the stands, in this short
period between fights. She said to Helen, "I wonder where your boyfriend is; the brain surgeon."

Something came to Helen out of the blue.

She muttered, "Brain surgeon, electronics technician." She turned to Martha quickly. "When Colonel Segura and his stooge were interrogating us about the ash in the fireplace, what was it that aide said about Ferd Zogbaum?"

Martha scowled momentarily, but then her eyes went empty and she recited, "The assistant said, "Probably the technician for the corridas, Senor Colonel. He arrived on the same spaceship, you'll recall, Senor Zogbaum.'"

"Technician for the corridas," Helen snarled. "What kind of technician? A brain surgeon!"

Lorans hadn't been listening. He was scowling at the new bull, Joseito's bull, that had just come dashing into the ring in a great swirl of dust. "As a butcher," he muttered, "they are the strangest horns I have ever seen. They are not . . ."

"They're not horns, they're radios!" Helen snapped suddenly. "Come on, Pierre! Those animals are being controlled, the deck's stacked! Come on, Dorn! Martha, you stay here and keep your eyes open." With no more than that, the diminutive acrobat vaulted over the barrera wall into the callejón below, the two masculine Section G operatives only split seconds behind her.

Startled ring attendants reacted too slowly to halt the progress of the unlikely three. The little girl, the hulking six and a half footer wearing pince-nez glasses, the puffing, heavy-set, servant type bringing up the rear. They ducked, dodged and elbowed their way around the wooden shelter.

Horsten, who had immediately accepted her words, as had Lorans, called, "What are we looking for?"

"It must be somewhere right on the ring, where the fight can be watched. Some kind of a control room. What's that?" She skidded to a halt.

"One of the infirmaries," Lorans puffed. "Cuerro pointed it out. For emergency gorings. Behind this one is the chapel of the United Temple."

Two Guardia Civil attempted to stop them, and nearly had their chests caved in by the sweeping arm of Dorn Horsten. The door was heavy, closed and evidently barred from within.

"Dorn!" Helen said.

His heavy shoulder crashed into the wooden barrier.

Behind them, the crowd had gone hysterical, shouting over and over, "Olé! Olé! Olé!" at whatever it was Josteto was doing with his bull.

The door caved in, even as Guardia Civil and Policía Secreta approached at the double, guns drawn.

Inside, Ferd Zogbaum looked up and blinked. He was seated at a control board, a headset over his ears, a dozen dials and an equal number of switches, before him.

At one of the windows, binoculars to eyes, stood a uniformed comandante of the Policía Secreta. As the trio burst unceremoniously in, he was saying, "The right horn, a quick toss!"

Ferd Zogbaum's small hands were dancing over the control switches.

Helen snapped, "Pierrel!"

The ball-bearings came so fast that seemingly there were a score of them in the air at once. Tubes crashed, dials shattered, Ferd Zogbaum's headset was torn magically from his head. In split seconds, the room was an electronic shambles.

Helen stood there, hands on hips and glared at Zogbaum. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

He blinked. He blurted, "To tell the truth, yes. But there was nothing I could do. I wasn't quite clear on what this job was when they hired me, but the pay was fantastic. The old technician died. He was from Earth, too. They hire you for life, they don't have men here capable of operating this equipment, and they use it at every major fight in this arena."

Horsten was staring around the room. He looked out the one-way window, after brushing the startled Policía Secreta comandante to one side.

"I knew it!" he growled. "It had to be something like this. The big corridas rigged. Electrodes attached to the
brain of the animal. Radio impulses from this control booth, causing the bull to dash straight ahead, without veering, or to toss right or left, as electronically ordered."

Martha and Guerro entered from behind them. Her face was gray. "Whatever you've found, it's too late," she said.

"What do you mean!" Helen said.
"Joseito," Guerro said emptily. "He has taken a cornado."
"A what?"
"He has been gored. Seriously. He is out of the running."
"Then... then we can't possibly win."

A new voice came from the door. It was Colonel Inspector Segura, military revolver in hand. "No," he said. "You can't possibly win, you of the Lorca Party, you of Section G. You have lost. Within fifteen minutes, the fight will be decided. Either Carlitos or Perico will be declared the new El Caudillo and all of you will be brought to trial on subversion charges."

Helen glared at him. "Not quite yet, you funker. Come on Dorn, Pierre, Martha. To the judges' stand!"
"Why?" Lorans said, hope gone from his voice.
"Because I just remembered something Martha recited to us from the Tauromachy Code."

Dorn led the way again, pushing through police and ring attendants, finding an exit that led upward into the stands. They pushed and wedged themselves through packed aisles on the way to the box of the presiding judges of the National Fiesta Brava.

A bevy of Guardia Civil was the ultimate obstacle to their getting through. Dorn Horsten brushed them aside. Helen, chubby hands on hips, confronted the three aged judges.

She said shrilly, "I declare myself a contestant and demand the right to fight!"

There was only astonishment in the faces of the three Falangists. Colonel Segura had scurried to the box. He bent over the judges and whispered to them.

One went to the trouble of saying, "Please, Senorita,
this is a most serious event. It is no time for jest. Joseito has been eliminated from the corridas, but two bulls remain to be fought.”

“I’m not joking,” Helen bit out. “I demand the right to participate.”

“Hey,” Horsten said. “What about me?”

“You lumbering ox,” Helen growled under her breath. “Support me. I’ve got an idea.” She turned back to the judges. “We quote from the Tauromachy Code. Martha! That section on discovery of fraud in the National Fiesta Brava.”

Martha’s eyes went lackluster. She said, “Tauromachy Code. Article Eight, Section Two. If a participant can prove fraud in the National Fiesta Brava, he may demand to enter the eliminations on the level the fraud was revealed—even though already eliminated.”

“That’s it!” Helen said. “I declare myself a participant. The evidence of fraud is there to be seen in the supposed infirmary. The bulls were being directed by radio, through electrodes embedded in their skulls.”

The judges stared at each other. Colonel Inspector Segura bowed over them again and whispered.

One said snappishly, “You’re a woman!”

“Martha!”

“There is nothing in the Tauromachy Code preventing a woman from fighting in the National Fiesta Brava. Women matadors are not unknown. I quote from the Juno 335, of the year of Falange, issue of El Toro magazine. The Senorita Octoviana Gonzales participated as a rejoneador and cut two ears at the Plaza de Toros in the town of Nuevo Murcia today. The occasion was . . .”

One of the judges leaned forward angrily. A deep hush had fallen over the arena, as though the sixty thousand spectators were attempting to hear what was being said—an impossibility.

The judge said, “Admittedly, women have on rare occasion, and usually on their own fincas, very informally, participated in corridas . . .”

“There is nothing in Falange law preventing a woman from participating in the National Fiesta Brava,” Martha said stubbornly.
"You are a criminal alien!" the third of the judges barked, breaking his silence for the first time.

"There is nothing in Falange law to prevent a criminal from participating, nor need I be a citizen. I am a temporary resident of Falange and eligible to participate."

"Why, you're not even a woman," the first judge bleated indignantly.

Helen flushed her anger. "I am a normal woman and citizen of the planet Gandharvas where my size is ordinary," she flared. "But now I am a resident of Falange and demand my right to participate in the eliminations."

The third judge turned sly. "Very well, Senorita. However, you must realize that there are certain requirements, instituted to eliminate some of the early would-be contestants so as to speed up the National Fiesta Brava. Our national spectacle is highly stylized. Each participant must fight in a given school. What school do you choose?"

"School?" Helen said blankly

The judge was triumphant "We do not let the fiesta brava become a comic farce. Do you fight La Ronda style, Seville style, or Madrid style? If you choose one, then you must stick to that school of bullfighting."

Helen's eyes darted around desperately. Her face pleaded at Dorn Horsten, then Pierre Lorans. Both shook their heads, blankly.

The judge whinnied amusement "Come, What style, Senorita?"

She snapped, "I fight Cretan style!"

They gaped at her.

Helen said, "Surely anybody claiming a knowledge of the history of bullfighting realizes that the earliest style of all is that once practiced at the Minoan palace of Knossos on the island of Crete, two thousand and more years before the fiesta brava was ever dreamed of in Spain."

Deep rumblings were going through the crowd, even as Martha and Helen improvised a Cretan kilt for her costume. Rumors were evidently flying, and Guerro's underground adherents of the Lorca Party were doing their best to make hay.

102
Dorn Horsten was to act as her sobresaliente, her sole assistant in the ring. There was no time for costume for him. He peeled down to trousers and shirt, which he left open at the neck, and kicked off his shoes, the better to operate in the sand of the arena.

She dashed out into the ring, followed by the lumbering Dorn Horsten, even as the Bos taurus ibericus came charging in from the other side.

Diminutive she still was, fearfully so in view of the size of the rampaging animal, but child she was no longer. That was obvious to all.

She sped toward the beast. He spotted her. Changed slightly his line of charge, and with the speed of a locomotive came storming down.

The shouts from the crowd were of horror.

The bull was scant feet away, animal and tiny human still heading full toward each other. It lowered its head to toss, and for a moment they seemed to blend.

Small chubby hands went out, seized horn tips. The bull tossed, she spun over his head in a somersault, landed on her feet on his back, facing toward his hind quarters. She somersaulted again, off his back and to the sands beyond. Dorn Horsten caught and steadied her.

The mob in the arena stands screamed disbelief, thrill and applause.

The bull was heading back. The performance was repeated. And again and again.

At long last, the bewildered animal was exhausted, run to a standstill. It stood there, head bowed, tongue hanging out, breathing deeply, confused, utterly dominated.

The stands were a madhouse. The stands were screaming confusion. The stands were bedlam.

There was nothing more that could be done with the exhausted animal. Helen began a tour of the ring, in somewhat the fashion the matadors had done earlier when they had been awarded the ears, tails and hoofs of their fallen victims.

But she did it with a difference. She toured the ring like a pinwheel, a top, a bouncing, spinning, cartwheeling demonstration of acrobatics such as had never been seen on the staid old planet of Falange before.
And behind her, running as the assistants of the mata-
dors had run behind their principals earlier, came the
lumbering Dr. Dorn Horsten.

Only with a difference. He did not carry the awarded
ears, tail and hoofs as had the assistants of Carlitos and
Perico, to hold up to the view of the crowd.

Slung over his shoulders he carried the bewildered
bull.

The stands were now screaming laughter.

Afterward

They were rehashing the details in the suite of the Po-
sada San Francisco. The Section G operatives were pres-
ent, Bartolomé Guerro, a highly bandaged José Hoyos
and a dozen of the upper echelons of the once under-
ground organization of the Lorca Party.

Dorn Horsten was summing it up. “No government
can stand in the face of the onset of farce, of ridicule.
No government can stand without dignity. Any govern-
ment that becomes farcical, falls. Nero with all his
power, with all the traditions of the deified Caesars be-
hind him, fell when he allowed himself to appear the
clown.”

Guerro was nodding agreement. “How quickly the in-
stitution of El Caudillo became a laughingstock when a
tiny girl took over the title after first revealing the games
rigged and then making a mockery of the national spec-
tacle.”

Helen entered the room, dressed now not as an eight-
year-old, but in the latest of Falange style, including fla-
meno style high heels and a touch of lipstick.

Horsten looked at her, somewhat taken aback. “Where
are you going?”

She said snappishly, “What business is it of yours, you
overgrown lummox? But if you must know, I have a
date with Ferd Zogbaum. First, I’m going to give the
cloddy a knockdown, drag-out dressing down. Then I’m
going to relent. After all, he is the nearest thing to a
man my size for a couple of hundred light-years.” She
added, a devilish glint in her eyes, “And I suspect he has
new opinions about little Helen since seeing me in that
Cretan costume.”
“There is no justice!” screamed a woman.

“You are quite right,” said the Administrator. “All we have is law. We are gathered here for this departure ceremony when all of us would rather be elsewhere. You have had your day of judgment, and you now have the choice of psychological treatment, or participation in the new-worlds program. In either case you will get some detachment, a little distance on the reasons you are here. You have noticed the two doors? One leads to the Rehabilitation Clinic and the other to Space Services. You will please make your choice. By your actions, you have forfeited any options. You have no room for maneuver. It is one or the other. Any undecided person will opt for Rehabilitation.”

Day Layard was at the rear of the crowd and he rubbed his head in exasperation. A consensus society demands talk, talk, talk. The best thing about being a criminal was that he no longer had a public communicator, and no longer was his opinion required on a thousand questions about which he knew nothing. Interminable questions were the curse of education, and especially now that he had begun to suspect how little he knew. Was the highwater mark of human achievement the sheer volume of voices gabbling into a master computer?

A man said, “What to do, what to do, oh what to do!”

The woman beside him said, “Go let the psychologists bugger around in your brain, you crazy fool,” and she wedged her way toward the door marked Space Services.

“Dirty rotten,” said another woman under her breath. “Dirty rotten.” She peered under her eyebrows and scuttled through the crowd to the Rehabilitation door.

“A little distance,” quoted a fat man beside Layard. “Hoak-hoak-hoekl Twenty light-years, a little distance, well-well.”
"You know where we're going?" asked Layard.

"We are going to take a walk over an unknown planet," said the fat man. "An outing tour in exotic surroundings with all expenses paid. Hee-hee-hee." He seemed genuinely amused. His eyes crinkled and his shoulders shook when he chuckled.

"But twenty light-years—"

"Or two hundred twenty. Who cares? It's going to take you four weeks subjective time." He was the fattest man Layard had ever seen, not tall and not flabby, but with an immense waistline. "For the trip they put you in stasis. You could be back here in three elapsed months, or two years. For any one point destination in Gonzalan space, the longest recorded trip is two hundred eighty-four days. Where have you been, boy? You must be a Boondocker."

"What are the chances of getting back?"

"It's been running nine point four the last five years. But there was a planet sixteen years ago where only one man made it. The explorers took a fair good look, but there was a seasonal hatch of desiccated bug whose first requirement for survival was liquid, and it wasn't particular what. About as big as a sparrow and teeth enough for a tiger. Nasty round sucking mouth. Blood killed the bug, but that wasn't much consolation to a drained corpse. Ho-ho," he sighed, "sixteen years ago."

"How come you know so much about it?" The crowd was thinning away from the Space Services door toward the security of the other.

The fat man did not smile. "I spent two weeks in a river."

Layard was so interested that he did not notice when they passed through Space Services to a long narrow room walled with doors. Men and women were standing in front of each door. Down the center of the room was a table with boxes on it.

The Administrator was standing halfway along the room waiting for the last stragglers. "Close up and leave no blanks. Choose a box and write your name on it. Put your number in the indicated space. When you have done this, take off your clothing and put it into the box."
Step into the cubicle, take a deep breath and close the door behind you. You will be totally surrounded by temperagel and the cubicle will be placed in stasis.”

Because the fat man did so, Layard wrote his name on a box, but he could not bring himself to undress. His vision was blurred. There were pink bodies all around him. He had been raised in a restricted little community of 400,000 near the south pole. Their ways were different from the temperate zoners.

“Strip, Boondocker!” said the fat man, and this time the word was an insult that shook him. “They’d love to get a kid like you in Psych. They’d unwrap you fast enough. A skin complex! Shuck off those clothes and hide behind the door!”

Layar had been deeply afraid, but he threw his clothes into the box, wheeled to the cubicle, took a deep breath and pulled the door to him. Immediately the floor arose, the roof came down and he was intimately engulfed from all sides by a cool plastic material. He could not move against it . . .

. . . Until he let out his breath and stepped from the cubicle into a gray corridor he had never seen before, changed in a subjective instant from the long narrow room. He found himself in a line of bodies walking toward a fluctuating orifice.

“Stand on both feet and don’t move,” said a voice ahead. “You’ll get your clothes when you go through the door. All right, next. Stand on both feet and don’t move—”

“The good old universal automatic tailor,” said the fat man behind him. “Heek-keek-keek—it stuttered the last time I went through.”

Layar looked back and rubbed his head. The vast stomach quivered. The fat man winked at him so cheerfully that Layar risked a look at himself. He was deep red from his chest to his toes.

“Stand on both feet,” said a woman by the orifice. “Well, I’ve seen everything now . . . no, I haven’t. The redbest kid and the fattest man—that’s the lot.”

Finally dressed in a mottled green all-weather suit, Day Layard felt his temperature drop to normal. The crowd
was small, out in the open beside the ship. There were mountains around them and the air he breathed was light and sparkling, with an unknown bittersweet fragrance.

"You each have a pack," said the woman who herded them out of the ship. "The gun is a gun and the beads are loaded for the creatures of this planet. If you shoot each other, nothing is going to happen. Range is thirty meters dead-level accuracy. You have one thousand beads in clips of fifty. The heaviest item you will be carrying is a six kilo analog mill. Stuff the opening with meat, or grass, or fruit, or anything organic, and it will reduce the material to a paste containing analog proteins, fats, sugars and starches. While the mill is not delicate, if you break the case the energy is likely to be released at once. Each one of you has an air photo and a directional needle tuned to your pickup hut. All huts are equidistant in ease of march from this point, though some are farther in kilometers than others. It should take about fourteen days to reach them. The ship will make pickup thirty local days from now at the huts."

There was a babble of questions, but she turned and went up the ramp and it pulled in behind her. The cube ship honked twice and went null. A great square box, it drifted up and sideways, gravitated and was gone.

Layard was overcome with a feeling of desolation. The group of men and women seemed even smaller now that the ship had departed. The wind was louder.

The fat man took the gun out of his pack and shot at a nearby boulder. He put the gun into the clip on the side of his suit and sat on the rock. "Spit before you sit," he said obscurely. "Now look here, Boondocker, my map has a red circle for where we are now, and I'm keyed to a hut by a lake that looks like a fingernail. Yours the same? Well, let's team together. If this turns out to be a tough planet, two get a lot more sleep than one."

Layard rubbed his head with both hands. "Why did you shoot the rock?"

"There's a planet with a silicon life form that sticks tendrils right through your suit. Pretty soon you're sitting on a bunch of writhing needles and out you get.
Nakedest two weeks I ever spent. You look through your pack and I'll go check on the huts."

Layard had some doubts about teaming up with the fat man until he was left alone, and was suddenly homesick for the bland familiar world whose dangers he could comprehend. This place was alien and he had never thought of a rock being alive. He stood up quickly and brushed the seat of his coveralls. This embarrassed him, so he sat down gingerly and examined the contents of his pack. He slipped a string of beads into his gun and clipped it to his side. The analog mill was held in its special pouch and there were flavoring pellets in tubes around it: beef, ougel, chicken, tomato, govond, cheese, and fruit. There was an air absorption canteen with flavor buttons. There was a fire tube, soap, a towel, a mirror, a shaving pad, a pack of toilet plastic that fuzzed up when you waved a sheet in the air, a knife in a sheath and the direction needle with a wrist strap. He spread his map on the rock and oriented it with the help of the needle. The route to the hut lay directly over the range of mountains on the horizon. They would have to walk to the right, where the crest broke to a pass, before it ranged up again and went out of sight.

"Hoods and mittens!" yelled the fat man. The men and women had broken into discouraged little groups about the meadow, and some were already cutting vegetation for their food mills. Layard pulled the hood over his head and struggled with the mittens until he found the release under his wrists. Then he walked down to see what the trouble was. The fat man was standing beside the stream that looped through the meadow. The stream bed was paved with rocks, and bubbles were oozing between the rocks, rising through the clear water, breaking the surface and lifting into the air.

"Just bubbles. Some men are plain cowards."

"What a horrid world."

"They fly against the wind."

The fat man shot one just breaking the surface and it burned in a puff of blue flame. The almost transparent skin rose in the heat and consumed itself in the air. "Probably nothing to bother us," said the fat man, "but
they have acid fliers on Nigel that raise a two-week welt. People who settled there wear basic insufflators—no problem.”

“I don’t like it here,” wailed a woman. “I want to go home. My hair’s a mess and there’s no bathroom! I won’t breed bees again, honest!”

“We’re deprived of our natural rights,” said a man firmly. “No basic food, money, housing, or entertainment. This is rampant totalitarianism!”

“Why should we walk in peril of our lives? Let the explorers do it. That’s what they get paid for. Let’s have a meeting right now and register our protest. That’ll show them they can’t push us around. We’ll stay here!”

Layar wanted to watch the bubbles and listen to the people, but the fat man touched his arm and they walked across the level and up the slope. “Let us be on our way, Boondocker. I’ve heard this before. There’s not enough vegetation in five kilometers to support this sorry crowd, and when they find it out, do you think half of them will move away from their huts for solidarity’s sake? They told me what I want to know. There are twenty huts in this drop, and that figures out to six people per hut. I’ve got them marked on the map.”

He took the lead over a ridge and sidehill down to the bottom of a valley and up again. He walked quickly, almost daintily, through the wild countryside, avoiding the rocks and sparse brush, always seeking the easiest way. Layard assumed he could outpace the fat man, but they stopped only to assess the terrain and kept on walking.

Layar was very very weary and very hungry, but his pride kept him from speaking. The fat man was tireless. His eyes darted ahead, up and down, and when Layard was certain they would walk forever, the fat man drew his pistol and fired. There was a squawk and a limp body dropped through the branches of a tree. “Get grass,” said the fat man. “This stuff that looks like grass. Use your knife. Bring a bundle over there.” He nodded to a rock outcrop on the far side of the ridge, and walked over to the creature flopping like a broken umbrella at the tree’s base.

Layar sawed at the ground cover and found the
stems so tough that after he had accumulated a few handfuls, he broke branches from a clump of bittersweet shrubs instead. The fat man was sitting on the rock, stuffing the creature he had shot into the grid of the analog mill. Layard joined him with an armload of vegetation. His mouth watered at the sight of the square strip of heavy paste the mill was extruding. The waste side was chuffing out great quantities of dust and the fat man looked disgusted. As best Layard could judge, less than a tenth of the body weight was edible, and the vegetation produced less than half that much.

The fat man cut the strips precisely in two pieces and they ate their meal. It was like all analog food; no matter what moisture you dialed, it tended to stick to the roof of your mouth. Layard tripped his canteen twice to lemon to help cut the bland beef flavor.

“What was she talking about, bees?” Layard asked, rubbing his head.

“They found a crazy bee on some planet that stings you with a hallucinatory alkaloid instead of formic acid. Well, dopies are not very smart, so this is really a first-class method of market research. If we stupids can live here for a month, then it’s safe enough to set a couple of million colonists down. Why did they scoop you up, Boondocker?”

“Oh, I don’t know. They said I was a primitive. I broke a couple of arms in a little argument. Aggressive tendencies, I’ve got; they said.”

“Hoo-ha,” sighed the fat man, “youth. It’s been a long time since I broke an arm. It was mopey for years, and then I found out you could walk into the pokey easy enough, so I could forget the jackassery. It’s the walking out that . . . Don’t move!” His eyes had been busy and Layard was shocked to have missed seeing a creature coming toward them. It was the shape of a pancake and a meter in diameter. It moved by fluting its edges. It had two eyes in raised protuberances and the fat man put a pair of beads right between them. He nudged it with his toe, then rolled it into a tube and fed it into the analog mill.

“What is it?” asked Layard.
“Supper.” The boy looked shocked. “Oh, sure, it’s an interesting life form and I’ve never seen anything like it before. I think it’s a constrictor and not big enough to bother men. But I’m only exobiologist enough to know when to run, or when to stuff the thing down the food mill. Here, you carry your half. Let’s get going.”

They went over the pass the second day and followed the ridges into a wide valley where they slept that night. Their all-weather suits kept them warm, or cool, as the weather required, and every step they took on the cushion soles added to the power-charge of the suit. There was a variety of animal life and a fifty-centimeter burrowing creature with beady eyes and a chitinous snout provided the highest percentage of edible food, so they chiefly shot this species. They saw some six-legged animals no larger than themselves at a distance, but these were wary and ran off before they ever got close to them. They crossed a range of rounded hills and walked over an undulating plain. On the evening of the sixth day, they arrived at the orange plastic hut. It was pleasant to sit on something softer than rocks, to take a shower, to reconstitute a variety of food and sleep on a soft pad again.

“This seems to be a safe enough place,” said the fat man after breakfast the next morning, “but keep your eyes open. There were a bunch of beasts on Prabho who couldn’t get enough of the color orange. Strong, stocky brutes, and squatty. They crowded the huts until they pushed them over. The herds got under my hut and shoved it like a pushball, and finally tumbled it into a river. I had to find another hut by pickup time. That was not so nice. I didn’t know where the others were located, and the first two I found had been squashed by the beasts. Well, well. You have a nice time with the entertainment tapes. I’ll be back in time for pickup.”

“Wait a minute. I’ll go with you.”

“You won’t be alone long. There’ll be four more people coming in. I’m going to walk a long way.”

“I’d rather come with you.”

“Ha,” said the fat man, “hoo-ha. All right. Tell me why, first.”

“I know it sounds foolish when all we’ve been doing is
walking, and we're sort of idiot guinea pigs to see if we survive in field conditions, but for some reason this seems to be worth doing. In school I was better than most, but not as good as the best at any one thing. Oh, I could keep up with the math sharks and for a while I ran tape for tape with a double E. But who cares? You're supposed to settle down and get interested in one thing. I was not properly motivated... oh, hell.

"Hoo-ha," said the fat man thoughtfully. "This takes a little puzzling. I had a partner once before, but he got himself killed, on a planet named Louper. They never settled that place. Well, get your pack and let us go. There's a likely looking spot on the edge of the map. There's a big bay on the coast and a line of white mountains marches down to it, ducks into the water, and shoves up a round white island in the middle of the bay. It's the most distinctive landmark we can hope to reach."

"Why do we want to go there?"

The fat man smiled sadly. "I got interested in one thing, I can't get anybody else interested, so I do it myself. It's no great mystery. I want to find the Prodromals. Let us walk."

When they stopped for lunch, Layard asked if Prodromals were creatures with faceted jewels in their foreheads, were they fur-bearing, or some peculiar kind of organic mineral, or did they have glorious tail feathers, or what?

The fat man did not laugh as he explained that Prodromals were those Running Before, the Antecedents, the Precursors of man in space. Sometimes you found artifacts and they were usually inexplicable, or dangerous. In a stable society, anything that cannot be explained is proscribed, and that meant the whole subject was ignored, consigned to inconsequentiality. In a consensus civilization there were no funds available or laurels to be won in a search for the unprofitable, so the Prodromals were left to the unstable fringe of society that deals with ESP, religion and foretelling the future by the shape of paint splotches.

On the third day they floated across a wide river in
their suits and saw the white mountains looming on the horizon. On the evening of the fifth day, they reached the sea. It was an opaque blue and the shore was littered with flotsam. The fat man waited with avuncular patience while Layard went down the beach to put a hand in the water. The wind was cold and blustering. The sunset glow turned the white mountains to an ominous pink, and on the horizon, the island in the great bay was a small black patch, the only fixed thing in a world of tumbling water and scudding gray clouds.

“Ho-hal!” yelled the fat man. Layard followed the line of his outstretched arm and saw something in the ocean that appeared and disappeared in the crests and troughs. He ran up the beach and from the greater elevation he could see a dark object moving toward them across the wave pattern. “Let us get up higher,” said the fat man. “You never know what’s in an ocean until it bites.”

The cliffs were low, rarely over ten meters high, worn and broken by the wave action. They climbed through tumbled boulders to a section of fractured cliff and turned to look again at the sea.

Layard scratched his head. “Why did we come here?” he asked, not in complaint, but in the universal query of what-am-I-doing-here standing between day and night, earth and sky, land and sea.

“Prominent terrain feature. Easily identifiable from space. I asked myself where I would put something on a strange planet and the answer I got was, where I could find it again. We’ve got some paste left. Let us eat a little.”

They lost sight of the moving spot in the fading light and Layard was about to suggest they sleep on the beach, when his eyes caught movement a hundred meters away against the creaming waves. He was drinking from the canteen, and choked. He could not see for a moment as water spewed from his mouth and dribbled from his nose. This was instant terror. What came out of the ocean and shook itself was a phosphorescent creature with six short legs built low to the sand, with a curling mouth as wide as its body. Over the noise of the wind and the waves they could hear it snuffling.
“Freeze,” breathed the fat man. The sea creature ran with a lurching fluidity, a humping gallop down the beach where they had been. The fat man looked at the gun in his hand, drew it back as if to throw it away, and jammed it into the clip. “Poison beads,” he snarled. “This is where we go to the rocks, fast.”

They scrambled inland and it grew darker as they ran. They were masked from the immediate noise of the sea and across a boulder-strewn valley, when they heard the snuffling behind them during a brief shift in the wind. They scrabbled up a stony slope and found themselves at the foot of a rock face that loomed high above them.

“Fault here,” said the fat man, and Layard clawed after him diagonally up the cliff. He rammed into the fat man and nearly fell when they were only twenty meters up. “Ledge,” said the fat man. “We can go no farther. Light your fire tube and throw it down.”

The snuffling was close now, and when Layard twisted the firestick to a maximum and threw it over the edge, light sparkled from the teeth and eyes of the beast. It had swept up the rubble hill and stood on its four close-coupled rear legs below their ledge. Through a fluke, the fire tube stuck into the sand at the bottom of the slope and backlit the beast nicely.

“Maybe six meters long, counting the tail,” said the fat man. “I wondered why there were so few large surface animals, but I wonder no more.” He was shooting as he spoke, and Layard shot as well.

They reloaded and fired another string while the monster below them ranged the cliff face looking for a way up. The fat man tore savagely at his pack. “Let us see if the lady knew what she was talking about,” he said as the creature found the cleft. He threw the analog food mill at the beast. It stood erect and batted the mill beyond their sight. There was a brilliant flash and a sharp explosion. When their eyes recovered, the beast was no longer to be seen.

They rested then, on the ledge. The wind was beginning to spit rain. The fire tube still burned. “Hoo-ha,” said Layard bravely, “I hope he doesn’t have any friends.”

“I don’t know that he needs any,” said the fat man.
There was a noise of falling rocks off to their left, a
snuffling, and directly above them against the loom of
the night at the top of the cliff, was the grinning phos-
phorescent death head of the beast.

"T-take my food mill!" said Layard.

"And throw it up there? I'll tell you what. Over there
at the edge of the light in the valley is a boulder—or
something. I got a look at it when the mill blew up. See
over there? The rock, that rock, the one with the
pushed-down top. It's got a cleft, like a door, in the side.
Too small for Stumpy up there and maybe too small for
me. I don't think our friend is going to come down the
clash, but if he does, one man can dodge him on this
ledge. Two can't. If you don't want to run, I will."

"Here's my pack," said Layard, and he scrambled
down the fault.

There was a penetrating rumble of protest from the
clash top, an enraged coughing whine that sent him down
the steep boulder-strewn slope in a windmill of arms
and legs, balancing somehow to reach the valley floor.
Over the near sounds of his laboring lungs and pumping
legs he could hear rocks falling where the beast re-
turned to the break-in the clash and was making its way
down.

For a frantic moment he thought he had misidentified
the rock, that the barely seen cleft was only a shadow.
He slammed into a dark passage. There was the thump
of a heavy body behind him, the rattling of claws, an in-
timate snuffling whine.

Momentum carried him staggering into an open space
where he was seized by a vertigo that shook him. He
was in the grip of personal, terrifying forces. He was ex-
panded, warped, stretched, magnified, enlarged and
changed, immediately and purposefully.

He looked around and saw he was standing in a circle
of rock that came to his . . . knees. The valley and the
clash were reduced in scale. Swoopingly he dropped his
front legs to the ground and his four hind feet climbed
easily out of the rock. There was a snarling creature
snapping at him on the valley floor, and with a scoop of
his paw he caught it, raised on his hind legs and hurled
it into the sea. He turned his attention to the fat little
116
man on the face of the cliff just in time to catch the small black object between his paws, and set it gently to the ground. Then he settled comfortably on his four hind legs and ruffled the sleek fur on top of his head. The fat man nearly fell off of the cliff. "Hoak-keek-keek-oakahool!"

Two great beasts ranged the countryside, dispersed in the ocean, swam to the island, returned to the shore and headed inland. In the busy night they picked up the huts and carried them to the plain, squealing contents and all.

Two men walked back from the great bay. "I think they did it for fun," said the fat man. "All the equipment for a proper vacation ready at hand, vision into the infrared, ultra-sensitive nose, strength beyond belief, in-built empathic communication, travels with equal ease on land and sea. What more could you want? And all this from an automatic tailor powered by rain and spume. Trying to push anything else through the top is like pushing smoke through a tree. And nothing but a man can get through the door. How long has it been there? How old are the mountains? Or was it built last year?"

"I won't forget how it feels to be an environmental master."

"Any regrets at leaving it?"

"None. Let the specialists take over. You?"

"Hoo-ha," sighed the fat man. "It's a wise child who knows his parents, and I think we're the dull ones, the calm and stupid children—maybe the left-behind ones. I'll keep looking."

Two subjective months later, Day Layard stood at the rear of a large crowd. He was in no hurry. The ship would wait for him.

"Keek-ahoka-keek!"

"Hoo-ha, partner."
"Once there was a Slorin with a one-syllable name who is believed to have said: ‘niche for every one of us and every one of us in his niche.’"

—Folk saying of the Scattership People

There must be a streak of madness in a Slorin who’d bring his only offspring, an untrained and untried youth, on a mission as potentially dangerous as this one, Smeg told himself.

The rationale behind his decision remained clear: The colonial nucleus must preserve its elders for their detail memory. The youngest of the group was the logical one to be volunteered for this risk. Still . . .

Smeg forced such thoughts out of his mind. They weakened him. He concentrated on driving the gray motor-pool Plymouth they’d signed out of the government garage in the state capital that morning. The machine demanded considerable attention.

The Plymouth was only two years old, but this region’s red rock roads and potholes had multiplied those years by a factor of at least four. The steering was loose and assorted squeaks arose from front and rear as he negotiated a rutted downgrade. The road took them into a shadowed gulch almost bare of vegetation and across the rattling planks of a wooden bridge that spanned a dry creekbed. They climbed out the other side through ancient erosion gullies, past a zone of scrub cottonwoods and onto the reaching flat land they’d been crossing for two hours.

Smeg risked a glance at Rick, his offspring, riding silently beside him. The youth had come out of the pupal stage with a passable human shape. No doubt Rick would do better next time—provided he had the opportunity. But he was well within the seventy-five percent accuracy limit the Slorin set for themselves. It was a universal fact that the untrained sentience saw what it
thought it saw. The mind tended to supply the missing elements.

A nudge from the Slorin mindcloud helped, of course, but this carried its own perils. The nudged mind sometimes developed powers of its own—with terrifying results. Slorin had learned long ago to depend on the directional broadcast of the mind’s narrow band, and to locate themselves in a network limited by the band’s rather short range.

However, Rick had missed none of the essentials for human appearance. He had a gentle, slender face whose contours were difficult to remember. His brown eyes were of a limpid softness that made human females discard all suspicions while the males concentrated on jealousy. Rick’s hair was a coarse, but acceptable black. The shoulders were a bit high and the thorax somewhat too heroic, but the total effect aroused no probing questions.

That was the important thing; no probing questions.

Smeg permitted himself a silent sigh. His own shape—that of a middle-aged government official, gray at the temples, slightly paunchy and bent of shoulder, and with weak eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses—was more in the Slorin tradition.

*Live on the margins,* Smeg thought. *Attract no attention.*

In other words, don’t do what they were doing today.

Awareness of danger forced Smeg into extreme contact with this body his plastic genes had fashioned. It was a good body, a close enough duplicate to interbreed with the natives, but he felt it now from the inside, as it were, a fabric of newness stretched over the ancient substance of the Slorin. It was familiar, yet bothersome-ly unfamiliar.

*I am Sumctroxelunsmeg,* he reminded himself. *I am a Slorin of seven syllables, each addition to my name an honor to my family. By the pupa of my jelly-sire whose name took fourteen thousand heartbeats to pronounce, I shall not fail!*

There! That was the spirit he needed—the eternal wanderer, temporarily disciplined, yet without bounda-
ries. "If you want to swim, you must enter the water," he whispered.

"Did you say something, Dad?" Rick asked.

Ahhh, that was very good, Smeg thought. Dad—the easy colloquialism.

"I was girding myself for the ordeal, so to speak," Smeg said. "We must separate in a few minutes." He nodded ahead to where a town was beginning to hump itself out of the horizon.

"I think I should barge right in and start asking about their sheriff," Rick said.

Smeg drew in a sharp breath, a gesture of surprise that fitted this body: "Feel out the situation first," he said.

More and more, he began to question the wisdom of sending Rick in there. Dangerous, damnably dangerous. Rick could get himself irrevocably killed, ruined beyond the pupa's powers to restore. Worse than that, he could be exposed. There was the real danger. Give natives the knowledge of what they were fighting and they tended to develop extremely effective methods.

Slorin memory carried a bagful of horror stories to verify this fact.

"The Slorin must remain ready to take any shape, adapt to any situation," Rick said. "That it?"

Rick spoke the axiom well, Smeg thought, but did he really understand it? How could he? Rick still didn't have full control of the behavior patterns that went with this particular body shape. Again, Smeg sighed. If only they'd saved the infiltration squad, the expendable specialists.

Thoughts such as this always brought the more disquieting question: Saved them from what?

There had been five hundred pupae in the Scattership before the unknown disaster. Now, there were four secondary ancestors and one new offspring created on this planet. They were shipless castaways on an unregistered world, not knowing even the nature of the disaster which had sent them scooting across the void in an escape capsule with minimum shielding.

Four of them had emerged from the capsule as basic
Slorin polymorphs to find themselves in darkness on a steep landscape of rocks and trees. At morning, there'd been four additional trees there—watching, listening, weighing the newness against memories accumulated across a timespan in which billions of planets such as this one could have developed and died.

The capsule had chosen an excellent landing site: no nearby sentient constructions. The Slorin now knew the region's native label—central British Columbia. In that period of awakening, though, it had been a place of unknown dangers whose chemistry and organization required the most cautious testing.

In time, four black bears had shambled down out of the mountains. Approaching civilization, they'd hidden and watched—listening, always listening, never daring to use the mindcloud. Who knew what mental powers the natives might have? Four roughly fashioned hunters had been metamorphosed from Slorin pupae in a brush-screened cave. The hunters had been tested, refined.

Finally—the hunters had scattered.

Slorin always scattered.

“When we left Washington you said something about the possibility of a trap,” Rick said. “You don’t really think—”

“Slorin have been unmasked on some worlds,” Smeg said. “Natives have developed situational protective devices. This has some of the characteristics of such a trap.”

“Then why investigate? Why not leave it alone until we’re stronger?”

“Rick!” Smeg shuddered at the youth’s massive ignorance. “Other capsules may have escaped,” he said.

“But if it’s a Slorin down here, he’s acting like a dangerous fool.”

“More reason to investigate. We could have a damaged pupa here, one who lost part of the detail memory. Perhaps he doesn’t know how to act—except out of instincts.”

“Then why not stay out of the town and probe just a little bit with the mindcloud?”

Rick cannot be trusted with this job, Smeg thought.
He's too raw, too full of the youthful desire to play with the mindcloud.

"Why not?" Rick repeated.

Smeg pulled the car to a stop at the side of the dirt road, opened his window. It was getting hot—be noon in about an hour. The landscape was a hardscrabble flatness marked by sparse vegetation and a clump of buildings about two miles ahead. Broken fences lined both sides of the road. Low cottonwoods off to the right betrayed the presence of the dry creekbed. Two scrofulous oaks in the middle distance provided shade for several steers. Away on the rim of the batland, obscured by haze, there was a suggestion of hills.

"You going to try my suggestion?" Rick asked.

"No."

"Then why're we stopping? This as far as you go?"

"No." Smeg sighed. "This is as far as you go. I'm changing plans. You will wait. I will go into the village."

"But I'm the younger. I'm—"

"And I'm in command here."

"The others won't like this. They said—"

"The others will understand my decision."

"But Slorin law says—"

"Don't quote Slorin law to me!"

"But—"

"Would you teach your grandfather how to shape a pupa?" Smeg shook his head. Rick must learn how to control the anger which flared in this bodily creation. "The limit of the law is the limit of enforcement—the real limit of organized society. We're not an organized society. We're two Slorin—alone, cut off from our pitiful net. Alone! Two Slorin of widely disparate ability. You are capable of carrying a message. I do not judge you capable of meeting the challenge in this village."

Smeg reached across Rick, opened the door.

"This is a firm decision?" Rick asked.

"It is. You know what to do?"

Rick spoke stiffly: "I take that kit of yours from the back and I play the part of a soil engineer from the Department of Agriculture."

"Not a part, Rick. You are a soil engineer."

"But—"
“You will make real tests which will go into a real report and be sent to a real office with a real function. In the event of disaster, you will assume my shape and step into my niche.”

“I see.”

“I truly hope you do. Meanwhile, you will go out across that field. The dry creekbed is out there. See those cottonwoods?”

“I’ve identified the characteristics of this landscape.”

“Excellent. Don’t deviate. Remember that you’re the offspring of Sumctroxelunsmeg. Your jelly-sire’s name took fourteen thousand heartbeats to pronounce. Live with pride.”

“I was supposed to go in there, take the risk of it—”

“There are risks and there are risks. Remember, make real tests for a real report. Never betray your niche. When you have made the tests, find a place in that creekbed to secrete yourself. Dig in and wait. Listen on the narrow band at all times. Listen, that is all you do. In the event of disaster, you must get word to the others. In the kit there’s a dog collar with a tag bearing a promise of reward and the address of our Chicago drop. Do you know the greyhound shape?”

“I know the plan, Dad.”

Rick slid out of the car. He removed a heavy black case from the rear, closed the doors, stared in at his parent.

Smeg leaned across the seat, opened the window. It creaked dismally.

“Good luck, Dad,” Rick said.

Smeg swallowed. This body carried a burden of attachment to an offspring much stronger than any in previous Slorin experience. He wondered how the offspring felt about the parent, tried to probe his own feelings toward the one who’d created him, trained him, sealed his pupa into the Scattership. There was no sense of loss. In some ways, he was the parent. As different experiences changed him, he would become more and more the individual, however. Syllables would be added to his name. Perhaps, someday, he might feel an urge to be reunited.

“Don’t lose your cool, Dad,” Rick said.

“The God of the Slorin has no shape,” Smeg said. He
closed the window, straightened himself behind the steering wheel.

Rick turned, trudged off across the field toward the cottonwoods. A low cloud of dust marked his progress. He carried the black case easily in his right hand.

Smeg put the car in motion, concentrated on driving. That last glimpse of Rick, sturdy and obedient, had pierced him with unexpected emotions. Slorin parted, he told himself. It is natural for Slorin to part. An offspring is merely an offspring.

A Slorin prayer came into his mind: “Lord, let me possess this moment without regrets and, losing it, gain it forever.”

The prayer helped, but Smeg still felt the tug of that parting. He stared at the shabby buildings of his target town. Someone in this collection of structures Smeg was now entering had not learned a basic Slorin lesson: There is a reason for living; Slorin must not live in a way that destroys this reason.

Moderation, that was the key.

A man stood in the dusty sunglare toward the center of the town—one lone man beside the dirt road that ran unchecked toward the distant horizon. For one haunted moment Smeg had the feeling it was not a man, but a dangerous other-shaped enemy he’d met before. The feeling passed as Smeg brought the car to a stop nearby.

Here was the American peasant, Smeg realized—tall, lean, dressed in wash-faded blue bib overalls, a dirty tan shirt and tennis shoes. The shoes were coming apart to reveal bare toes. A ground green painter’s hat with green plastic visor did an ineffective job of covering his yellow hair. The visor’s rim was cracked. It dripped a fringe of ragged binding that swayed when the man moved his head.

Smeg leaned out his window, smiled: “Howdy.”

“How do.”

Smeg’s sense of hearing, trained in a history of billions of such encounters, detected the xenophobia and reluctant bowing to convention at war in the man’s voice.

“Town’s pretty quiet,” Smeg said.

“Yep.”

124
Purely human accents, Smeg decided. He permitted himself to relax somewhat, asked: "Anything unusual ever happen around here?"

"You fum the gov'ment?"

"That's right." Smeg tapped the motor-pool insignia on his door. "Department of Agriculture."

"Then you ain't part of the gov'ment conspiracy?"

"Conspiracy?" Smeg studied the man for a clue to hidden meanings. Was this one of those southern towns where anything from the government just had to be communist?

"Guess you ain't," the man said.

"Of course not."

"That there was a serious question you asked, then . . . about unusual thing happening?"

"I . . . yes."

"Depends on what you call unusual."

"What . . . do you call unusual?" Smeg ventured.

"Can't rightly say. And you?"

Smeg frowned, leaned out his window, looked up and down the street, studied each detail: the dog sniffing under the porch of a building labeled "General Store," the watchful blankness of windows with here and there a twitching curtain to betray someone peering out, the missing boards on the side of a gas station beyond the store—one rusty pump there with its glass chamber empty. Every aspect of the town spoke of heat-addled somnolence . . . yet it was wrong. Smeg could feel tensions, transient emotional eddies that irritated his highly tuned senses. He hoped Rick already had a hiding place and was listening.

"This is Waderville, isn't it?" Smeg asked.

"Yep. Used to be county seat 'fore the war."

He meant the War Between The States, Smeg realized, recalling his studies of regional history. As always, the Slorin were using every spare moment to absorb history, mythology, arts, literature, science—You never knew which might be the valuable piece of information.

"Ever hear about someone could get right into your mind?" the man asked.

Smeg overcame a shock reaction, groped for the proper response. Amused disbelief, he decided, and
managed a small chuckle. "That the unusual thing you have around here?"
"Didn’t say yes; didn’t say no."
"Why’d you ask then?” Smeg knew his voice sounded like crinkling bread wrapper. He pulled his head back into the car’s shadows.
"I jes’ wondered if you might be hunting fer a tele-path?"
The man turned, hawked a cud of tobacco toward the dirt at his left. A vagrant breeze caught the spittle, draped it across the side of Smeg’s car.
"Oh, dang!” the man said. He produced a dirty yellow bandanna, knelt and scrubbed with it at the side of the car.

Smeg leaned out, studied this performance with an air of puzzlement. The man’s responses, the vague hints at mental powers—they were confusing, fitted no pattern in Slorin experience.
"You got somebody around here claiming to be a tele-path?” Smeg asked.
"Can’t say.” The man stood up, peered in at Smeg. "Sorry about that there. Wind, y’ know. Accident. Didn’t mean no harm."
"Certainly."
"Hope you won’t say nothing to the sheriff. Got ‘er all cleaned off your car now. Can’t tell where I hit ‘er."

The man’s voice carried a definite tone of fear, Smeg realized. He stared at this American peasant with a narrow, searching gaze. Sheriff, he’d said. Was it going to be this easy? Smeg wondered how to capitalize on that opening. Sheriff. Here was an element of the mystery they’d come to investigate.

As the silence drew out, the man said: "Got ‘er all clean. You can get out and look for yourself."
"I’m sure you did, Mr. . . . ahh . . .”
"Painter, Josh’a Painter. Most folks call me Josh on account of my first name there, Josh’a Painter."
"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Painter. My name’s Smeg, Henry Smeg."
"Smeg,” Painter said with a musing tone. "Don’t rightly believe I ever heard that name before.”
“It used to be much longer,” Smeg said. “Hungarian.”

“Oh.”

“I’m curious, Mr. Painter, why you’d be afraid I might tell the sheriff because the wind blew a little tobacco juice on my car?”

“Never can tell how some folks’ll take things,” Painter said. He looked from one end of Smeg’s car to the other, back to Smeg. “You a gov’ment man, this car an’ all, reckoned I’d best be sure, one sensible man to another.”

“You’ve been having trouble with the government around here, is that it?”

“Don’t take kindly to most gov’ment men hereabouts, we don’t. But the sheriff, he don’t allow us to do anything about that. Sheriff is a mean man, a certain mean man sometimes, and he’s got my Barton.”

“Your Barton,” Smeg said, drawing back into the car to conceal his puzzlement. Barton? This was an entirely new term. Strange that none of them had encountered it before. Their study of languages and dialects had been most thorough. Smeg began to feel uneasy about his entire conversation with this Painter. The conversation had never really been under control. He wondered how much of it he’d actually understood. There was in Smeg a longing to venture a mindcloud probe, to nudge the man’s motives, make him want to explain.

“You one of them survey fellows like we been getting?” Painter asked.

“You might say that,” Smeg said. He straightened his shoulders. “I’d like to walk around and look at your town, Mr. Painter. May I leave my car here?”

“Tain’t in the way that I can see,” Painter said. He managed to appear both interested and disinterested in Smeg’s question. His glance flicked sideways, all around—at the car, the road, at a house behind a privet hedge across the way.

“Fine,” Smeg said. He got out, slammed the door, reached into the back for the flat-crowned western hat he affected in these parts. It tended to break down some barriers.

“You forgetting your papers?” Painter asked.

“Papers?” Smeg turned, looked at the man.
"Them papers full of questions you gov'ment people allus use."

"Oh." Smeg shook his head. "We can forget about papers today."

"You jes' going to wander around?" Painter asked.

"That's right."

"Well, some folks'll talk to you," Painter said. "Got all kinds of different folks here." He turned away, started to walk off.

"Please, just a minute," Smeg said.
Painter stopped as though he'd run into a barrier, spoke without turning. "You want something?"

"Where're you going, Mr. Painter?"

"Jes' down the road a piece."

"I'd . . . ahhh, hoped you might guide me," Smeg said.

"That is if you haven't anything better to do?"

Painter turned, stared at him. "Guide? In Wadeville?"
He looked around him, back to Smeg. A tiny smile tugged at his mouth.

"Well, where do I find your sheriff, for instance?" Smeg asked.

The smile disappeared. "Why'd you want him?"

"Sheriffs usually know a great deal about an area."

"You sure you actual' want to see him?"

"Sure. Where's his office?"

"Well now, Mr. Smeg. . . ." Painter hesitated, then: "His office is just around the corner here, next the bank."

"Would you show me?" Smeg moved forward, his feet kicking up dust puddles in the street. "Which corner?"

"This'n right here." Painter pointed to a field stone building at his left. A weed-grown lane led off past it. The corner of a wooden porch jutted from the stone building into the lane. Smeg walked past Painter, peered down the lane. Tufts of grass grew in the middle and along both sides, green runners stretching all through the area. Smeg doubted that a wheeled vehicle had been down this way in two years—possibly longer.

A row of objects on the porch caught his attention. He moved closer, studied them, turned back to Painter.

"What're all those bags and packages on that porch?"

"Them?" Painter came up beside Smeg, stood a moment, lips pursed, eyes focused beyond the porch.
"Well, what are they?" Smeg pressed.
"This here's the bank," Painter said. "Them's night de-
posits."
Smeg turned back to the porch. Night deposits? Paper
bags and fabric sacks left out in the open?
"People leaves 'em here if'n the bank ain't open," 
Painter said. "Bank's a little late opening today. Sheriff
had 'em in looking at the books last night."
Sheriff examining the bank’s books? Smeg wondered.
He hoped Rick was missing none of this and could re-
peat it accurately . . . just in case. The situation here
peared far more mysterious than the reports had indicat-
ed. Smeg didn't like the feeling of this place at all.
"Makes it convenient for people who got to get up
early and them that collects their money at night," 
Painter explained.
"They just leave it right out in the open?" Smeg asked.
"Yep. 'Night deposit' it's called. People don't have to
come around when—"
"I know what it's called! But . . . right out in the open
like that . . . without a guard?"
"Bank don't open till ten thirty most days," Painter
said. "Even later when the sheriff's had 'em in at night."
"There's a guard," Smeg said. "That's it, isn't it?"
"Guard? What we need a guard fer? Sheriff says leave
them things alone, they gets left alone."
The sheriff again, Smeg thought. "Who . . . ahh, de-
posits money like this?" he asked.
"Like I said: the people who got to get up early
and . . ."
"But who are these people?"
"Oh. Well, my cousin Reb: He has the gas station
down to the forks. Mr. Seelway at the General Store
there. Some farmers with cash crops come back late
from the city. Folks work across the line at the mill in
Anderson when they get paid late of a Friday. Folks like
that."
"They just . . . leave their money out on this porch."
"Why not?"
"Lord knows," Smeg whispered.
"Sheriff says don't touch it, why—it don't get
touched."
Smeg looked around him, sensing the strangeness of this weed-grown street with its wide-open night depository protected only by a sheriff's command. Who was this sheriff? What was this sheriff?

" Doesn't seem like there'd be much money in Wadeville," Smeg said. "That gas station down the main street out there looks abandoned, looks like a good wind would blow it over. Most of the other buildings—"

"Station's closed," Painter said. "You need gas, just go out to the fork where my cousin, Reb—"

"Station failed?" Smeg asked.

"Kind of."

"King off?"

"Sheriff, he closed it."

"Why?"

"Fire hazard. Sheriff, he got to reading the state Fire Ordinance one day. Next day he told ol' Jamison to dig up the gas tanks and cart 'em away. They was too old and rusty, not deep enough in the ground and didn't have no concrete on 'em. Sides that, the building's too old, wood all oily."

"The sheriff ordered it . . . just like that." Smeg snapped his fingers.

"Yep. Said he had to tear down that station. Ol' Jamison sure was mad."

"But if the sheriff says do it, then it gets done?" Smeg asked.

"Yep. Jamison's tearing it down—one board every day. Sheriff don't seem to pay it no mind long as Jamison takes down that one board every day."

Smeg shook his head. One board every day. What did that signify? Lack of a strong time sense? He looked back at the night deposits on the porch, asked: "How long have people been depositing their money this way?"

"Been since a week or so after the sheriff come."

"And how long has that been?"

"Ohhhhh . . . four, five years maybe."

Smeg nodded to himself. His little group of Slorin had been on the planet slightly more than five years. This could be . . . this could be—he frowned. But what if it wasn't?
The dull plodding of footsteps sounded from the main street behind Smeg. He turned, saw a tall fat man passing there. The man glanced curiously at Smeg, nodded to Painter.

"Mornin', Josh," the fat man said. It was a rumbling voice.

"Mornin', Jim," Painter said.

The fat man skirted the Plymouth, hesitated to read the emblem on the car door, glanced back at Painter, resumed his plodding course down the street and out of sight.

"That was Jim," Painter said.

"Neighbor?"

"Yep. Been over to the Widow McNabry's again . . . all the whole dang' night. Sheriff's going to be mighty displeased believe me."

"He keeps an eye on your morals, too?"

"Morals?" Painter scratched the back of his neck. "Can't rightly say he does."

"Then why would he mind if . . . Jim—"

"Sheriff, he says it's a sin and a crime to take what don't belong to you, but it's a blessing to give. Jim, he stood right up to the sheriff, said he jes' went to the widow's to give. So—" Painter shrugged.

"The sheriff's open to persuasion, then?"

"Some folks seems to think so."

"You don't?"

"He made Jim stop smoking and drinking."

Smeg shook his head sharply, wondering if he'd heard correctly. The conversation kept darting around into seeming irrelevancies. He adjusted his hat brim, looked at his hand. It was a good hand, couldn't be told from the human original. "Smoking and drinking?" he asked.

"Yep."

"But why?"

"Said if Jim was taking on new ree-sponsibilities like the widow he couldn't commit suicide—not even slow like."

Smeg stared at Painter who appeared engrossed with a nonexistent point in the sky. Presently, Smeg man-
aged: "That's the weirdest interpretation of the law I ever heard."

"Don't let the sheriff hear you say that."
"Quick to anger, eh?"
"Wouldn't say that."
"What would you say?"
"Like I told Jim: Sheriff get his eye on you, that is it. You going to toe the line. Ain't so bad till the sheriff get his eye on you. When he see you—that is the end."

"Does the sheriff have his eye on you, Mr. Painter?"
Painter made a fist, shook it at the air. His mouth drew back in a fierce, scowling grimace. The expression faded. Presently, he relaxed, sighed.
"Pretty bad, eh?" Smeg asked.
"Dang conspiracy," Painter muttered. "Gov'ment got its nose in things don't concern it."
"Oh?" Smeg watched Painter closely, sensing they were on productive ground. "What does—"

"Dang near a thousand gallons a year!" Painter exploded.
"Uhhh—" Smeg said. He wet his lips with his tongue, a gesture he'd found to denote human uncertainty.
"Don't care if you are part of the conspiracy," Painter said. "Can't do nothing to me now."

"Believe me, Mr. Painter, I have no designs on . . ."
"I made some 'shine when folks wanted," Painter said. "Less'n a thousand gallons a year . . . almost. Ain't much considering the size of some of them stills t'other side of Anderson. But them's across the line! 'Nother county! All I made was enough fer the folks 'round here."
"Sheriff put a stop to it?"
"Made me bust up my still."
"Made you bust up your still?"
"Yep. That's when he got my Barton."
"Your . . . ahhh . . . Barton?" Smeg ventured.

"Right from under Lilly's nose," Painter muttered. His nostrils dilated, eyes glared. Rage lay close to the surface.

Smeg looked around him, searching the blank windows, the empty doorways. What in the name of all the Slorin furies was a barton?
"Your sheriff seems to hold pretty close to the law," Smeg ventured.

"Hah!"

"No liquor," Smeg said. "No smoking. He rough on speeders?"

"Speeder?" Painter turned his glare on Smeg. "Now, you tell me what we'd speed in, Mr. Smeg."

"Don't you have any cars here?"

"If my cousin Reb didn't have his station over to the forks where he gets the city traffic, he'd be bust long ago. State got a law—car got to stop in jes' so many feet. Got to have jes' so many lights. Got to have windshield wiper things. Got to have tires which you can measure the tread on. Got to steer ab-so-lutely jes' right. Car don't do them things, it is junk. Junk! Sheriff, he make you sell that car for junk! Ain't but two, three folks in Wadeville can afford a car with all them things."

"He sounds pretty strict," Smeg said.

"Bible-totin' parson with hell fire in his eye couldn't be worse. I tell you, if that sheriff didn't have my Barton, I'd a run out long ago. I'd a ree-beled like we done in Sixty-one. Same with the rest of the folks here... most of 'em."

"He has their... ahhh, bartons?" Smeg asked, cocking his head to one side, waiting.

Painter considered this for a moment, then: "Well, now... in a manner of speaking, you could call it that way."

Smeg frowned. Did he dare ask what a barton was? No! It might betray too much ignorance. He longed for a proper Slorin net, all the interlocked detail memories, the Slorin spaced out within the limits of the narrow band, ready to relay questions, test hypotheses, offer suggestions. But he was alone except for one inexperienced offspring hiding out there across the fields... waiting for disaster. Perhaps Rick had encountered the word, though. Smeg ventured a weak interrogative.

Back came Rick's response, much too loud: "Negative."

So Rick didn't know the word either.

Smeg studied Painter for a sign the man had detected the narrow band exchange. Nothing. Smeg swallowed, a
natural fear response he'd noticed in this body, decided to move ahead more strongly.

"Anybody ever tell you you have a most unusual sheriff?" he asked.

"Them gov'ment survey fellows, that's what they say. Come here with all them papers and all them questions, say they interested in our crime rate. Got no crime in Wade County, they say. Think they telling us something!"


"Hah!"

"But there must be some crime," Smeg said.

"Got no 'shine," Painter muttered. "Got no robbing and stealing, no gambling. Got no drunk drivers 'cepting they come from somewheres else and then they is mighty displeased they drunk drove in Wade County. Got no ju-venile delinquents like they talk about in the city. Got no patent medicine fellows. Got nothing."

"You must have a mighty full jail, though."

"Jail?"

"All the criminals your sheriff apprehends."

"Hah! Sheriff don't throw folks in jail, Mr Smeg. Not 'less they is from over the line and needs to sleep off a little ol' spree while they sober up enough to pay the fine."

"Oh?" Smeg stared out at the empty main street, remembering the fat man—Jim. "He gives the local residents a bit more latitude, eh? Like your friend, Jim."

"Jes' leading Jim along, I say."

"What do you mean?"

"Pretty soon the widow's going to be in the family way. Going to be a quick wedding and a baby and Jim'll be jes' like all the rest of us."

Smeg nodded as though he understood. It was like the reports which had lured him here . . . but unlike them, too. Painter's "survey fellows" had been amused by Wadeville and Wade County, so amused even their driest governmentese couldn't conceal it. Their amusement had written the area off—"purely a local phenomenon." Tough southern sheriff. Smeg was not amused. He
walked slowly out to the main street, looked back along the road he'd traveled.

Rick was out there listening . . . waiting.

What would the waiting produce?

An abandoned building up the street caught Smeg’s attention. Somewhere within it a door creaked with a rhythm that matched the breeze stirring the dust in the street. A “SALOON” sign dangled from the building on a broken guy wire. The sign swayed in the wind—now partly obscured by a porch roof, now revealed: “LOON” . . . “SALOON” . . . “LOON” . . . “SALOON” . . .

The mystery of Wadeville was like that sign, Smeg thought. The mystery moved and changed, now one thing, now another. He wondered how he could hold the mystery still long enough to examine it and understand it.

A distant wailing interrupted his reverie.

It grew louder—a siren.

“Here he come,” Painter said.

Smeg glanced at Painter. The man was standing beside him glaring in the direction of the siren.

“Here he sure do come,” Painter muttered.

Another sound accompanied the siren now—the hungry throbbing of a powerful motor.

Smeg looked toward the sound, saw a dust cloud on the horizon, something vaguely red within it.

“Dad! Dad!” That was Rick on the narrow band.

Before he could send out the questioning thought, Smeg felt it—the growing force of a mindcloud so strong it made him stagger.

Painter caught his arm, steadied him.

“Gets some folks that way the first time,” Painter said.

Smeg composed himself, disengaged his arm, stood trembling. Another Slorin! It has to be another Slorin. But the fool was broadcasting a signal that could bring down chaos on them all. Smeg looked at Painter. The natives had the potential—his own Slorin group had determined this. Were they in luck here? Was the local strain insensitive? But Painter had spoken of it getting some folks the first time. He'd spoken of telepaths.

Something was very wrong in Wadeville . . . and the mindcloud was enveloping him like a gray fog. Smeg
summoned all his mental energy, fought free of the controlling force. He felt himself standing there then like an island of clarity and calm in the midst of that mental hurricane.

There were sharp sounds all around him now—window blinds snapping up, doors slamming. People began to emerge. They lined the street, a dull-eyed look of expectancy about them, an angry wariness. The appeared to be respectable humans all, Smeg thought, but there was a sameness about them he couldn’t quite define. It had something to do with a dowdy, slump-shoulder look.

“You going to see the sheriff,” Painter said. “That’s for sure.”

Smeg faced the oncoming thunder of motor and siren. A long red fire truck with a blonde young woman in green leotards astride its hood emerged from the dust cloud, hurtled down the street toward the narrow passage where Smeg had parked his car. At the wheel of the truck sat what appeared to be a dark-skinned man in a white suit, dark blue shirt, a white ten-gallon hat. A gold star glittered at his breast. He clutched the steering wheel like a racing driver, head low, eyes forward.

Smeg, free of the mindcloud, saw the driver for what he was—a Slorin, still in polymorph, his shape approximating the human . . . but not well enough . . . not well enough at all.

Clustered around the driver, on the truck’s seat, clinging to the sides and the ladders on top, were some thirty children. As they entered the village, they began yelling and laughing, screaming greetings.

“Thar’s the sheriff,” Painter said. “That unusual enough fer you?”

The truck swerved to avoid Smeg’s car, skidded to a stop opposite the lane where he stood with Painter. The sheriff stood up, looked back toward the parked car, shouted: “Who parked that automobile there? You see how I had to swing out to git past it? Somebody tear down my ‘No Parking’ sign again? Look out if you did it! You know I’ll find out who you are! Who did that?”

While the sheriff was shouting, the children were
tumbling off the truck in a cacophony of greetings—"Hi, Mama!" "Daddy, you see me?" "We been all the way to Commanche Lake swimming." "You see the way we come, Pa?" "You make a pie for me, Mama? Sheriff says I kin have a pie."

Smeg shook his head at the confusion. All were off the truck now except the sheriff and the blonde on the hood. The mindcloud pervaded the mental atmosphere like a strong odor, but it stopped none of the outcry.

Abruptly, there came the loud, spitting crack of a rifle shot. A plume of dust burst from the sheriff's white suit just below the golden star.

Silence settled over the street.

Slowly, the sheriff turned, the only moving figure in the frozen tableaux. He looked straight up the street toward an open window in the second story of a house beyond the abandoned service station. His hand came up; a finger extruded. He shook the finger, a man admonishing a naughty child.

"I warned you," he said.

Smeg uttered a Slorin curse under his breath. The fool! No wonder he was staying in polymorph and relying on the mindcloud—the whole village was in arms against him. Smeg searched through his accumulated Slorin experience for a clue on how to resolve this situation. A whole village aware of Slorin powers! Oh, that sinful fool!

The sheriff looked down at the crowd of silent children, staring first at one and then another. Presently, he pointed to a barefoot girl of about eleven, her yellow hair tied in pigtailed, a soiled blue and white dress on her gangling frame.

"You there, Molly Mae," the sheriff said. "You see what your daddy done?"

The girl lowered her head and began to cry.

The blonde on the truck's hood leaped down with a lithe grace, tugged at the sheriff's sleeve.

"Don't interrupt the law in the carrying out of its duties," the sheriff said.

The blonde put her hands on her hips, stamped a foot.
"Tad, you hurt that child and I won't never speak to you, never again," she said.

Painter began muttering half under his breath: "No... no... no..."

"Hurt Molly Mae?" the sheriff asked. "Now, you know I won't hurt her. But she's got to go away, never see her kin again as long as she lives. You know that."

"But Molly Mae didn't do you no hurt," the young woman said. "It were her daddy. Why can't you send him away?"

"There's some things you just can't understand," the sheriff said. "Grown up adult can only be taken from sinful, criminal ways a slow bit at a time 'less'n you make a little child of him. Now, I'd be doing the crime if I made a little child out of a grown-up adult. Little girl like Molly Mae, she's a child right now. Don't make much difference."

So that was it, Smeg thought. That was the sheriff's real hold on this community. Smeg suddenly felt that a Barton had to mean—a hostage.

"It's cruel," the blonde young woman said.

"Law got to be cruel sometimes," the sheriff said. "Law got to eliminate crime. Almost got it done. Only crimes we had hereabouts for months are crimes 'gainst me. Now, you all know you can't get away with crimes like that. But when you show that disregard for the majesty of the law, you got to be punished. You got to remember, all of you, that every part of a family is responsible for the whole entire family."

*Pure Solorin thinking*, Smeg thought. He wondered if he could make his move without exposing his own alien origins. Something had to be done here and soon. Did he dare venture a probe of greeting into the fool's mind? No. The sheriff probably wouldn't even receive the greeting through that mindcloud noise.

"Maybe you're doing something wrong then," the young woman said. "Seems awful funny to me when the only crimes are put right on the law itself."

*A very pertinent observation*, Smeg thought.

Abruptly, Painter heaved himself into motion, lurched through the crowd of children toward the sheriff.
The blonde young woman turned, said: "Daddy! You stay out'n this."

"You be still now, you hear, Barton Marie?" Painter growled.

"You know you can't do anything," she wailed. "He'll only send me away."

"Good! I say good!" Painter barked. He pushed in front of the young woman, stood glaring up at the sheriff.

"Now, Josh," the sheriff said, his voice mild. They fell silent, measuring each other.

In this moment, Smeg's attention was caught by a figure walking toward them on the road into the village. The figure emerged from the dust—a young man carrying a large black case.

_Rick_

Smeg stared at his offspring. The young man walked like a puppet, loose at the knees. His eyes stared ahead with a blank seeking.

_The mindcloud_, Smeg thought. _Rick was young, weak. He'd been calling out, wide open when the mindcloud struck. The force that had staggered a secondary ancestor had stunned the young Slorin. He was coming now blindly toward the irritation source._

"Who that coming there?" the sheriff called. "That the one parked this car illegal?"

"Rick!" Smeg shouted.

Rick stopped.

"Stay where you are!" Smeg called. This time, he sent an awakening probe into the youth.

Rick stared around him, awareness creeping into his eyes. He focused on Smeg, mouth falling open.

"Dad!"

"Who're you?" the sheriff demanded, staring at Smeg. A jolt from the mindcloud jarred Smeg.

There was only one way to do this, Smeg realized. Fight fire with fire. The natives already had felt the mindcloud.

Smeg began opening the enclosing mental shields, dropped them abruptly and lashed out at the sheriff. The Slorin polymorph staggered back, slumped onto the truck seat. His human shape twisted, writhed.
"Who're you?" the sheriff gasped.

Shifting to the Slorin gutturals, Smeg said: "I will ask the questions here. Identify yourself."

Smeg moved forward, a path through the children opening for him. Gently, he moved Painter and the young woman aside.

"Do you understand me?" Smeg demanded.

"I...understand you." The Slorin gutturals were rough and halting, but recognizable.

In a softer tone, Smeg said: "The universe has many crossroads where friends can meet. Identify yourself."

"Min...I think. Pzilimin." The sheriff straightened himself on the seat, restored some of his human shape to its previous form. "Who are you?"

"I am Sumctroxelunsmeg, secondary ancestor."

"What's a secondary ancestor?"

Smeg sighed. It was pretty much as he had feared. The name, Pzilimin, that was the primary clue—a tertiary ancestor from the Scattership. But this poor Slorin had been damaged, somehow, lost part of his detail memory. In the process, he had created a situation here that might be impossible to rectify. The extent of the local mess had to be examined now, though.

"I will answer your questions later," Smeg said.

"Meanwhile—"

"You know this critter?" Painter asked. "You part of the conspiracy?"

Shifting to English, Smeg said: "Mr. Painter, let the government handle its own problems. This man is one of our problems."

"Well, he sure is a problem and that's the truth."

"Will you let me handle him?"

"You sure you can do it?"

"I...think so."

"I sure hope so."

Smeg nodded, turned back to the sheriff. "Have you any idea what you've done here?" he asked in basic Slorin.

"I...found myself a suitable official position and filled it to the best of my ability. Never betray your niche. I remember that. Never betray your niche."

"Do you know what you are?"
“I’m ... a Slorin?”

“Correct. A Slorin tertiary ancestor. Have you any idea how you were injured?”

“I ... no. Injured?” He looked around at the people drawing closer, all staring curiously. “I ... woke up out there in the ... field. Couldn’t ... remember—”

“Very well, we’ll—”

“I remembered one thing! We were supposed to lower the crime rate, prepare a suitable society in which ... in which ... I ... don’t know.”

Smeg stared across the children’s heads at Rick who had come to a stop behind the truck, returned his attention to Pzilimin.

“I have the crime rate here almost down to an irreducible minimum,” the Slorin sheriff said.

Smeg passed a hand across his eyes. Irreducible minimum! He dropped his hand, glared up at the poor fool. “You have made these people aware of Slorin,” he accused. “You’ve made them aware of themselves, which is worse. You’ve started them thinking about what’s behind the law. Something every native law enforcement official on this planet knows by instinct, and you, a Slorin—inflicted or not—couldn’t see it.”

“See what?” Pzilimin asked.

“Without crime there’s no need for law enforcement officers! We are here to prepare niches in which Slorin can thrive. And you begin by doing yourself out of a job! The first rule in any position is to maintain enough of the required activity for that job to insure your continued employment. Not only that, you must increase your scope, open more such positions. This is what is meant by not betraying your niche.”

“But ... we’re supposed to create a society in which ... in which—”

“You were supposed to reduce the incidence of violence, you fool! You must channel the crime into more easily manageable patterns. You left them violence! One of them shot at you.”

“Oh ... they’ve tried worse than that.”

Smeg looked to his right, met Painter’s questioning gaze.

“He another Hungarian?” Painter asked.
“Ah-h-h, yes!” Smeg said, leaping at this opportunity. “Thought so, you two talking that foreign language there.” Painter glared up at Pzilimin. “He oughta be de-ported.”

“That’s the very thing,” Smeg agreed. “That’s why I’m here.”

“Well, by gollies!” Painter said. He sobered. “I better warn you, though. Sheriff, he got some kind of machine sort of that scrambles your mind. Can’t hardly think when he turns it on. Carries it in his pocket, I suspect.”

“We know all about that,” Smeg said. “I have a ma-chine of the same kind myself. It’s a defense secret and he had no right to use it.”

“I’ll bet you ain’t Department of Agriculture at all,” Painter said. “I bet you’re with the CIA.”

“We won’t talk about that,” Smeg said. “I trust, how-ever, that you and your friends won’t mention what has happened here.”

“We’re true blue Americans, all of us, Mr. Smeg. You don’t have to worry about us.”

“Excellent,” Smeg said. And he thought: How con-venient. Do they think me an utter fool? Smoothly, he turned back to Pzilimin, asked: “Did you follow all that?”

“They think you’re a secret agent.”

“So it seems. Our task of extracting you from this situ-ation has been facilitated. Now tell me, what have you done about their children?”

“Their children?”

“You heard me.”

“Well . . . I just erased all those little tracks in their little minds and put ’em on a train headed north, the ones I sent away to punish their folks. These creatures have a very strong protective instinct toward the young. Don’t have to worry about their—”

“I know about their instincts, Pzilimin. We’ll have to find those children, restore them and return them.”

“How’ll we find them?”

“Very simple. We’ll travel back and forth across this continent, listening on the narrow band. We will listen for you, Pzilimin. You cannot erase a mind without put-ting your own patterns in it.”

142
“Is that what happened when I tried to change the adult?”

Smeg goggled at him, senses reeling. Pzilimin couldn't have done that, Smeg told himself. He couldn’t have converted a native into a Slorin-patterned, full-power broadcast unit and turned it loose on this planet. No Slorin could be that stupid! “Who?” he managed.

“Mr. McNabry.”

McNabry? McNabry? Smeg knew he'd heard the name somewhere. McNabry? Widow McNabry!

“Sheriff, he say something about Widow McNabry?” Painter asked. “I thought I heard him—”

“What happened to the late Mr. McNabry?” Smeg demanded, whirling on Painter.

“Oh, he drowned down south of here. In the river. Never did find his body.”

Smeg rounded on Pzilimin. “Did you—”

“Oh, no! He just ran off. We had this report he drowned and I just—”

“In effect, you killed a native.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“Pzilimin, get down off that vehicle and into the rear seat of my machine over here. We will forget that I’m illegally parked, shall we?”

“What’re you going to do?”

“I’m going to take you away from here. Now, get down off of there!”

“Yes, sir.” Pzilimin moved to obey. There was a suggestion of rubbery, nonhuman action to his knees that made Smeg shudder.

“Rick,” Smeg called. “You will drive.”

“Yes, Dad.”

Smeg turned to Painter. “I hope you all realize the serious consequences to yourselves if any of this should get out?”

“We sure do, Mr. Smeg. Depend on it.”

“I am depending on it,” Smeg said. And he thought: *Let them analyze that little statement . . . after we’re gone.* More and more he was thanking the Slorin god who’d prompted him to change places with Rick. One wrong move and this could've been a disaster. With a
curt nod to Painter, he strode to his car, climbed into the rear beside Pzilimin. “Let’s go, Rick.”

Presently, they were turned around, headed back toward the state capital. Rick instinctively was pressing the Plymouth to the limit of its speed on this dirt road. Without turning, he spoke over his shoulder to Smeg.

“That was real cool, Dad, the way you handled that. We go right back to the garage now?”

“We disappear at the first opportunity,” Smeg said.

“Disappear?” Pzilimin asked.

“We’re going pupa, all of us, and come out into new niches.”

“Why?” Rick said.

“Don’t argue with me! That village back there wasn’t what it seemed.”

Pzilimin stared at him. “But you said we’d have to find their children and—”

“That was for their benefit, playing the game of ignorance. I suspect they’ve already found their children. Faster, Rick.”

“I’m going as fast as I dare right now, Dad.”

“No matter. They’re not going to chase us.” Smeg took off his western hat, scratched where the band had pressed into his temples.

“What was that village, Dad?” Rick asked.

“I’m not sure,” Smeg said. “But they made it too easy for us to get Pzilimin out of there. I suspect they are the source of the disaster which set us down here without our ship.”

“Then why didn’t they just . . . eliminate Pzilimin and—”

“Why didn’t Pzilimin simply eliminate those who opposed him?” Smeg asked. “Violence begets violence, Rick. This is a lesson many sentient beings have learned. They had their own good reasons for handling it this way.”

“What’ll we do?” Rick asked.

“We’ll go to earth, like foxes, Rick. We will employ the utmost caution and investigate this situation. That is what we’ll do.”

“Don’t they know that . . . back there?”

“Indeed, they must. This should be very interesting.”
Painter stood in the street staring after the retreating car until it was lost in a dust cloud. He nodded to himself once.

A tall fat man came up beside him, said: “Well, Josh, it worked.”

“Told you it would,” Painter said. “I knew dang well another capsule of them Slorin got away from us when we took their ship.”

The blonde young woman moved around in front of them, said: “My dad sure is smart.”

“You listen to me now, Barton Marie,” Painter said. “Next time you find a blob of something jes’ lyin’ in a field, you leave it alone, hear?”

“How was I to know it’d be so strong?” she asked.

Weyr Search
Anne McCaffrey

When is a legend legend? Why is a myth a myth? How old and disused must a fact be for it to be relegated to the category: Fairy tale? And why do certain facts remain incontrovertible, while others lose their validity to assume a shabby, unstable character?

Rukbat, in the Sagittarian sector, was a golden G-type star. It had five planets, plus one stray it had attracted and held in recent millennia. Its third planet was enveloped by air man could breathe, boasted water he could drink, and possessed a gravity which permitted man to walk confidently erect. Men discovered it, and promptly colonized it, as they did every habitable planet they came to and then—whether callously or through collapse of empire, the colonists never discovered, and eventually forgot to ask—left the colonies to fend for themselves.

When men first settled on Rukbat’s third world, and named it Pern, they had taken little notice of the stranger-planet, swinging around its primary in a wildly
erratic elliptical orbit. Within a few generations they had forgotten its existence. The desperate path the wanderer pursued brought it close to its stepsister every two hundred [Terran] years at perihelion.

When the aspects were harmonious and the conjunction with its sister-planet close enough, as it often was, the indigenous life of the wanderer sought to bridge the space gap to the more temperate and hospitable planet.

It was during the frantic struggle to combat this menace dropping through Pern’s skies like silver threads, that Pern’s contact with the mother-planet weakened and broke. Recollections of Earth receded further from Pernese history with each successive generation until memory of their origins degenerated past legend or myth, into oblivion.

To forestall the incursions of the dreaded Threads, the Pernese, with the ingenuity of their forgotten Yankee forebears and between first onslaught and return, developed a highly specialized variety of a life form indigenous to their adopted planet—the winged, tailed, and firebreathing dragons, named for the Earth legend they resembled. Such humans as had a high empathy rating and some innate telepathic ability were trained to make use of and preserve this unusual animal whose ability to teleport was of immense value in the fierce struggle to keep Pern bare of Threads.

The dragons and their dragonmen, a breed apart, and the shortly renewed menace they battled, created a whole new group of legends and myths.

As the menace was conquered the populace in the Holds of Pern settled into a more comfortable way of life. Most of the dragon Weyrs eventually were abandoned, and the descendants of heroes fell into disfavor, as the legends fell into disrepute.

This, then, is a tale of legends disbelieved and their restoration. Yet—how goes a legend? When is myth?

Drummer, beat, and piper, blow,
Harper, strike, and soldier, go.
Free the flame and sear the grasses
Till the dawning Red Star passes.
Lessa woke, cold. Cold with more than the chill of the everlastingly clammy stone walls. Cold with the prescience of a danger greater than when, ten full Turns ago, she had run, whimpering, to hide in the watch- wher’s odorous lair.

Rigid with concentration, Lessa lay in the straw of the redolent cheese room, sleeping quarters shared with the other kitchen drudges. There was an urgency in the ominous portent unlike any other forewarning. She touched the awareness of the watch-wher, slithering on its rounds in the courtyard. It circled at the choke-limit of its chain. It was restless, but oblivious to anything unusual in the pre-dawn darkness.

The danger was definitely not within the walls of Hold Ruath. Nor approaching the paved perimeter without the Hold where relentless grass had forced new growth through the ancient mortar, green witness to the deterioration of the once stone-clean Hold. The danger was not advancing up the now little used causeway from the valley, nor lurking in the craftsmen’s stony holdings at the foot of the Hold’s cliff. It did not scent the wind that blew from Tillek’s cold shores. But still it twanged sharply through her senses, vibrating every nerve in Lessa’s slender frame. Fully roused, she sought to identify it before the prescient mood dissolved. She cast outward, towards the Pass, farther than she had ever pressed. Whatever threatened was not in Ruatha . . . yet. Nor did it have a familiar flavor. It was not, then, Fax.

Lessa had been cautiously pleased that Fax had not shown himself at Hold Ruath in three full Turns. The apathy of the craftsmen, the decaying farmholds, even the green-etched stones of the Hold infuriated Fax, self-styled Lord of the High Reaches, to the point where he preferred to forget the reason why he had subjugated the once proud and profitable Hold.

Lessa picked her way among the sleeping drudges, huddled together for warmth, and glided up the worn steps to the kitchen-proper. She slipped across the cavernous kitchen to the stable-yard door. The cobbles of the yard were icy through the thin soles of her sandals and she shivered as the pre-dawn air penetrated her patched garment.
The watch-wher slithered across the yard to greet her, pleading, as it always did, for release. Glancing fondly down at the awesome head, she promised it a good rub presently. It crouched, groaning, at the end of its chain as she continued to the grooved steps that led to the rampart over the Hold’s massive gate. Atop the tower, Lessa stared towards the east where the stony breasts of the Pass rose in black relief against the gathering day.

Indecisively she swung to her left, for the sense of danger issued from that direction as well. She glanced upward, her eyes drawn to the red star which had recently begun to dominate the dawn sky. As she stared, the star radiated a final ruby pulsation before its magnitude was lost in the brightness of Pern’s rising sun.

For the first time in many Turns, Lessa gave thought to matters beyond Pern, beyond her dedication to vengeance on the murderer Fax for the annihilation of her family. Let him but come within Ruath Hold now and he would never leave.

But the brilliant ruby sparkle of the Red Star recalled the Disaster Ballads—grim narratives of the heroism of the dragon-riders as they braved the dangers of between to breathe fiery death on the silver Threads that dropped through Pern’s skies. Not one Thread must fall to the rich soil, to burrow deep and multiply, leaching the earth of minerals and fertility. Straining her eyes as if vision would bridge the gap between peril and person, she stared intently eastward. The watch-wher’s thin, whistled question reached her just as the prescience waned.

Dawnlight illumined the tumbled landscape, the unplowed fields in the valley below. Dawnlight fell on twisted orchards, where the sparse herds of milchbeasts hunted stray blades of spring grass. Grass in Ruatha grew where it should not, died where it should flourish. An odd brooding smile curved Lessa’s lips. Fax realized no profit from his conquest of Ruatha... nor would he, while she, Lessa, lived. And he had not the slightest suspicion of the source of this undoing.

Or had he? Lessa wondered, her mind still reverberating from the savage prescience of danger. East lay
Fax's ancestral and only legitimate Hold. Northeast lay little but bare and stony mountains and Benden, the remaining Weyr, which protected Pern.

Lessa stretched, arching her back, inhaling the sweet, untainted wind of morning.

A cock crowed in the stableyard. Lessa whirled, her face alert, eyes darting around the outer Hold lest she be observed in such an uncharacteristic pose. She unbound her hair, letting it fall about her face concealingly. Her body drooped into the sloppy posture she affected. Quickly she thudded down the stairs, crossing to the watch-wher. It lurred piteously, its great eyes blinking against the growing daylight. Oblivious to the stench of its rank breath, she hugged the scaly head to her, scratching its ears and eye ridges. The watch-wher was ecstatic with pleasure, its long body trembling, its clipped wings rustling. It alone knew who she was or cared. And it was the only creature in all Pern she trusted since the day she had blindly sought refuge in its dark stinking lair to escape Fax's thirsty swords that had drunk so deeply of Ruathan blood.

Slowly she rose, cautioning it to remember to be as vicious to her as to all should anyone be near. It promised to obey her, swaying back and forth to emphasize its reluctance.

The first rays of the sun glanced over the Hold's outer wall. Crying out, the watch-wher darted into its dark nest. Lessa crept back to the kitchen and into the cheese room.

From the Weyr and from the Bowl
Bronze and brown and blue and green
Rise the dragonmen of Pern,
Aloft, on wing, seen, then unseen.

F'lar on bronze Mnemeth's great neck appeared first in the skies above the chief Hold of Fax, so-called Lord of the High Reaches. Behind him, in proper wedge formation, the wingmen came into sight. F'lar checked the formation automatically; as precise as at the moment of entry to between.

As Mnemeth curved in an arc that would bring them
to the perimeter of the Hold, consonant with the friendly nature of this visitation, F'lar surveyed with mounting aversion the disrepair of the ridge defenses. The firestone pits were empty and the rock-cut gutters radiating from the pits were green-tinged with a mossy growth.

Was there even one lord in Pern who maintained his Hold rocky in observance of the ancient Laws? F’lar’s lips tightened to a thinner line. When this Search was over and the Impression made, there would have to be a solemn, punitive Council held at the Weyr. And by the golden shell of the queen, he, F’lar, meant to be its moderator. He would replace lethargy with industry. He would scour the green and dangerous scum from the heights of Pern, the grass blades from its stoneworks. No verdant skirt would be condoned in any farmhold. And the tithings which had been so miserly, so grudgingly presented would, under pain of firestoning, flow with decent generosity into the Dragonweyr.

Mnemethn rumbled approvingly as he vaned his pinions to land lightly on the grass-etched flagstones of Fax’s Hold. The bronze dragon furled his great wings, and F’lar heard the warning claxon in the Hold’s Great Tower. Mnemethn dropped to his knees as F’lar indicated he wished to dismount. The bronze rider stood by Mnemethn’s huge wedge-shaped head, politely awaiting the arrival of the Hold lord. F’lar idly gazed down the valley, hazy with warm spring sunlight. He ignored the furtive heads that peered at the dragonman from the parapet slits and the cliff windows.

F’lar did not turn as a rush of air announced the arrival of the rest of the wing. He knew, however, when F’nor, the brown rider, his half-brother, took the customary position on his left, a dragon-length to the rear. F’lar caught a glimpse of F’nor’s boot-heel twisting to death the grass crowding up between the stones.

An order, muffled to an intense whisper, issued from within the great court, beyond the open gates. Almost immediately a group of men marched into sight, led by a heavy-set man of medium height.

Mnemethn arched his neck, angling his head so that his chin rested on the ground. Mnemethn’s many faceted eyes, on a level with F’lar’s head, fastened with dis-
concerting interest on the approaching party. The dragons could never understand why they generated such abject fear in common folk. At only one point in his life span would a dragon attack a human and that could be excused on the grounds of simple ignorance. F'lar could not explain to the dragon the politics behind the necessity of inspiring awe in the holders, lord and craftsman alike. He could only observe that the fear and apprehension showing in the faces of the advancing squad which troubled Mnemeth was oddly pleasing to him, F'lar.

"Welcome, Bronze Rider, to the Hold of Fax, Lord of the High Reaches. He is at your service," and the man made an adequately respectful salute.

The use of the third person pronoun could be construed, by the meticulous, to be a veiled insult. This fit in with the information F'lar had on Fax; so he ignored it. His information was also correct in describing Fax as a greedy man. It showed in the restless eyes which flicked at every detail of F'lar's clothing, at the slight frown when the intricately etched sword-hilt was noticed.

F'lar noticed, in his own turn, the several rich rings which flashed on Fax's left hand. The overlord's right hand remained slightly cocked after the habit of the professional swordsman. His tunic, of rich fabric, was stained and none too fresh. The man's feet, in heavy wher-hide boots, were solidly planted, weight balanced forward on his toes. A man to be treated cautiously, F'lar decided, as one should the conqueror of five neighboring Holds. Such greedy audacity was in itself a revelation. Fax had married into a sixth... and had legally inherited, however unusual the circumstances, the seventh. He was a lecherous man by reputation.

Within these seven Holds, F'lar anticipated a profitable Search. Let R'gul go southerly to pursue Search among the indolent, if lovely, women there. The Weyr needed a strong woman this time; Jora had been worse than useless with Nemorth. Adversity, uncertainty: those were the conditions that bred the qualities F'lar wanted in a weyrwoman.
"We ride in Search," F'lar drawled softly, "and request the hospitality of your Hold, Lord Fax."

Fax's eyes widened imperceptibly at mention of Search.

"I had heard Jora was dead," Fax replied, dropping the third person abruptly as if F'lar had passed some sort of test by ignoring it. "So Nemorth has a new queen, hm-m-m?" he continued, his eyes darting across the rank of the ring, noting the disciplined stance of the riders, the healthy color of the dragons.

F'lar did not dignify the obvious with an answer.

"And, my Lord—if?" Fax hesitated, expectantly inclining his head slightly towards the dragonman.

For a pulse beat, F'lar wondered if the man were deliberately provoking him with such subtle insults. The name of bronze riders should be as well known throughout Pern as the name of the Dragonqueen and her Weyrwoman. F'lar kept his face composed, his eyes on Fax's.

Leisurely, with the proper touch of arrogance, F'nor stepped forward, stopping slightly behind Mnementh's head, one hand negligently touching the jaw hinge of the huge beast.

"The Bronze Rider of Mnementh, Lord F'lar, will require quarters for himself. I, F'nor, brown rider, prefer to be lodged with the wingmen. We are, in number, twelve."

F'lar liked that touch of F'nor's, totting up the wing strength, as if Fax were incapable of counting. F'nor had phrased it so adroitly as to make it impossible for Fax to protest the insult.

"Lord F'lar," Fax said through teeth fixed in a smile, "the High Reaches are honored with your Search."

"It will be to the credit of the High Reaches," F'lar replied smoothly, "if one of its own supplies the Weyr."

"To our everlasting credit," Fax replied as suavely. "In the old days, many notable weyrwomen came from my Holds."

"Your Holds?" asked F'lar, politely smiling as he emphasized the plural. "Ah, yes, you are now overlord of Ruatha, are you not? There have been many from that Hold."

152
A strange tense look crossed Fax's face. "Nothing good comes from Ruath Hold." Then he stepped aside, gesturing F'lar to enter the Hold.

Fax's troop leader barked a hasty order and the men formed two lines, their metal-edged boots flicking sparks from the stones.

At unspoken orders, all the dragon rose with a great churning of air and dust. F'lar strode nonchalantly past the welcoming files. The men were rolling their eyes in alarm as the beasts glided above to the inner courts. Someone on the high tower uttered a frightened yelp as Mnementh took his position on that vantage point. His great wings drove phosphoric-scented air across the inner court as he maneuvered his great frame onto the inadequate landing space.

Outwardly oblivious to the consternation, fear and awe the dragons inspired, F'lar was secretly amused and rather pleased by the effect. Lords of the Holds needed this reminder that they must deal with dragons, not just with riders, who were men, mortal and murderable. The ancient respect for dragonmen as well as dragonkind must be reinstalled in modern breasts.

"The Hold has just risen from the table, Lord F'lar, if . . ." Fax suggested. His voice trailed off at F'lar's smiling refusal.

"Convey my duty to your lady, Lord Fax," F'lar rejoined, noticing with inward satisfaction the tightening of Fax's jaw muscles at the ceremonial request.

"You would prefer to see your quarters first?" Fax countered.

F'lar flicked an imaginary speck from his soft wherhide sleeve and shook his head. Was the man buying time to sequester his ladies as the old time lords had?

"Duty first," he said with a rueful shrug.

"Of course," Fax all but snapped and strode smartly ahead, his heels pounding out the anger he could not express otherwise. F'lar decided he had guessed correctly.

F'lar and F'nor followed at a slower pace, through the double-doored entry with its massive metal panels, into the great hall carved into the cliffside.
"They eat not badly," F'nor remarked casually to F'lar, appraising the remnants still on the table.
"Better than the Weyr, it would seem," F'lar replied dryly.
"Young roasts and tender," F'nor said in a bitter undertone, "while the stringy, barren beasts are delivered up to us."
"The change is overdue," F'lar murmured, then raised his voice to conversational level. "A well-favored hall," he was saying amiably as they reached Fax. Their reluctant host stood in the portal to the inner Hold, which, like all such Holds, burrowed deep into stone, traditional refuge of all in time of peril.
Deliberately, F'lar turned back to the banner-hung Hall. "Tell me, Lord Fax, do you adhere to the old practices and mount a dawn guard?"
Fax frowned, trying to grasp F'lar’s meaning.
"There is always a guard at the Tower."
"An easterly guard?"
Fax's eyes jerked towards F'lar, then to F'nor.
"There are always guards," he answered sharply, "on all the approaches."
"Oh, just the approaches," and F'lar nodded wisely to F'nor.
"Where else?" demanded Fax, concerned, glancing from one dragonman to the other.
"I must ask that of your harper. You do keep a trained harper in your Hold?"
"Of course. I have several trained harpers," and Fax jerked his shoulders straighter.
F'lar affected not to understand.
"Lord Fax is the overlord of six other Holds," F'nor reminded his wingleader.
"Of course," F'lar assented, with exactly the same inflection Fax had used a moment before.
The mimicry did not go unnoticed by Fax but as he was unable to construe deliberate insult out of an innocent affirmative, he stalked into the glow-lit corridors. The dragonmen followed.

The women’s quarters in Fax’s Hold had been moved from the traditional innermost corridors to those at cliff-
face. Sunlight poured down from three double-shuttered, deep-casement windows in the outside wall. F'lar noted that the bronze hinges were well oiled, and the sills regulation spear-length. Fax had not, at least, diminished the protective wall.

The chamber was richly hung with appropriately gentle scenes of women occupied in all manner of feminine tasks. Doors gave off the main chamber on both sides into smaller sleeping alcoves and from these, at Fax's bidding, his women hesitantly emerged. Fax sternly gestured to a blue-gowned woman, her hair white-streaked, her face lined with disappointments and bitterness, her body swollen with pregnancy. She advanced awkwardly, stopping several feet from her lord. From her attitude, F'lar deduced that she came no closer to Fax than was absolutely necessary.

"The Lady of Crom, mother of my heirs," Fax said without pride or cordiality.

"My Lady—" F'lar hesitated, waiting for her name to be supplied.

She glanced warily at her lord. "Gemma," Fax snapped curtly.

F'lar bowed deeply. "My Lady Gemma, the Weyr is on Search and requests the Hold's hospitality."

"My Lord F'lar," the Lady Gemma replied in a low voice, "you are most welcome."

F'lar did not miss the slight slur on the adverb nor the fact that Gemma had no trouble naming him. His smile was warmer than courtesy demanded, warm with gratitude and sympathy. Looking at the number of women in these quarters, F'lar thought there might be one or two Lady Gemma could bid farewell without regret.

Fax preferred his women plump and small. There wasn't a saucy one in the lot. If there once had been, the spirit had been beaten out of her. Fax, no doubt, was stud, not lover. Some of the covey had not all winter long made much use of water, judging by the amount of sweet oil gone rancid in their hair. Of them all, if these were all, the Lady Gemma was the only willful one; and she, too old.

The amenities over, Fax ushered his unwelcome
guests outside, and led the way to the quarters he had assigned the bronze rider.

“A pleasant room,” F’lar acknowledged, stripping off gloves and wher-hide tunic, throwing them carelessly to the table. “I shall see to my men and the beasts. They have been fed recently,” he commented, pointing up Fax’s omission in inquiring. “I request liberty to wander through the crafthold.”

Fax sourly granted what was a dragonman’s traditional privilege.

“I shall not further disrupt your routine, Lord Fax, for you must have many demands on you, with seven Holds to supervise.” F’lar inclined his body slightly to the overlord, turning away as a gesture of dismissal. He could imagine the infuriated expression on Fax’s face from the stamping retreat.

F’nor and the men had settled themselves in a hastily vacated barrackroom. The dragons were perched comfortably on the rocky ridges above the Hold. Each rider kept his dragon in light, but alert, charge. There were to be no incidents on a Search.

As a group, the dragonmen rose at F’lar’s entrance.

“No tricks, no troubles, but look around closely,” he said laconically. “Return by sundown with the names of any likely prospects.” He caught F’nor’s grin, remembering how Fax had slurred over some names. “Descriptions are in order and craft affiliation.”

The men nodded, their eyes glinting with understanding. They were flatteringly confident of a successful Search even as F’lar’s doubts grew now that he had seen Fax’s women. By all logic, the pick of the High Reaches should be in Fax’s chief Hold—but they were not. Still, there were many large craftholds not to mention the six other High Holds to visit. All the same . . .

In unspoken accord F’lar and F’nor left the barracks. The men would follow, unobtrusively, in pairs or singly, to reconnoiter the crafthold and the nearer farmholds. The men were as overtly eager to be abroad as F’lar was privately. There had been a time when dragonmen were frequent and favored guests in all the great Holds throughout Pern, from southern Fort to high north Igen.
This pleasant custom, too, had died along with other observances, evidence of the low regard in which the Weyr was presently held. F’lar vowed to correct this.

He forced himself to trace in memory the insidious changes. The Records, which each Weyrwoman kept, were proof of the gradual, but perceptible, decline, traceable through the past two hundred full Turns. Knowing the facts did not alleviate the condition. And F’lar was of that scant handful in the Weyr itself who did credit Records and Ballad alike. The situation might shortly reverse itself radically if the old tales were to be believed.

There was a reason, an explanation, a purpose, F’lar felt, for every one of the Weyr laws from First Impression to the Firestones: from the grass-free heights to ridge-running gutters. For elements as minor as controlling the appetite of a dragon to limiting the inhabitants of the Weyr. Although why the other five Weyrs had been abandoned, F’lar did not know. Idly he wondered if there were records, dusty and crumbling, lodged in the disused Weyrs. He must contrive to check when next his wings flew patrol. Certainly there was no explanation in Benden Weyr.

“There is industry but no enthusiasm,” F’nor was saying, drawing F’lar’s attention back to their tour of the crafthold.

They had descended the guttered ramp from the Hold into the crafthold proper, the broad roadway lined with cottages up to the imposing stone crafthalls. Silently F’lar noted moss-clogged gutters on the roofs, the vines clasping the walls. It was painful for one of his calling to witness the flagrant disregard of simple safety precautions. Growing things were forbidden near the habitations of mankind.

“News travels fast,” F’nor chuckled, nodding at a hurrying craftsman, in the smock of a baker, who gave them a mumbled good day. “Not a female in sight.”

His observation was accurate. Women should be abroad at this hour, bringing in supplies from the storehouses, washing in the river on such a bright warm day, or going out to the farmholds to help with planting. Not a gowned figure in sight.
"We used to be preferred mates," F'nor remarked caustically.
"We'll visit the Clothmen's Hall first. If my memory serves me right . . ."
"As it always does . . ." F'nor interjected wryly. He took no advantage of their blood relationship but he was more at ease with the bronze rider than most of the dragonmen, the other bronze riders included. F'lar was reserved in a close-knit society of easy equality. He flew a tightly disciplined wing but men maneuvered to serve under him. His wing always excelled in the Games. None ever floundered in between to disappear forever and no beast in his wing sickened, leaving a man in dragonless exile from the Weyr, a part of him numb forever.

"L'tol came this way and settled in one of the High Reaches," F'lar continued.
"L'tol?"
"Yes, a green rider from S'lel's wing. You remember."
An ill-timed swerve during the Spring Games had brought L'tol and his beast into the full blast of a phosphene emission from S'lel's bronze Tuenth. L'tol had been thrown from his beast's neck as the dragon tried to evade the blast. Another wingmate had swooped to catch the rider but the green dragon, his left wing crisped, his body scorched, had died of shock and phosphene poisoning.
"L'tol would aid our Search," F'nor agreed as the two dragonmen walked up to the bronze doors of the Clothmen's Hall. They paused on the threshold, adjusting their eyes to the dimmer light within. Clows punctuated the wall recesses and hung in clusters above the larger looms where the finer tapestries and fabrics were woven by master craftsmen. The pervading mood was one of quiet, purposeful industry.

Before their eyes had adapted, however, a figure glided to them, with a polite, if curt, request for them to follow him.

They were led to the right of the entrance, to a small office, curtained from the main hall. Their guide turned to them, his face visible in the wallglows. There was that
air about him that marked him indefinably as a dragon-man. But his face was lined deeply, one side seamed with old burnmarks. His eyes, sick with a hungry yearning, dominated his face. He blinked constantly.

"I am now Lytol," he said in a harsh voice.

F'lar nodded acknowledgment.

"You would be F'lar," Lytol said, "and you, F'nor. You’ve both the look of your sire."

F'lar nodded again.

Lytol swallowed convulsively, the muscles in his face twitching as the presence of dragonmen revived his awareness of exile. He essayed a smile.

"Dragons in the sky! The news spread faster than Threads."

"Nemorth has a new queen."

"Jora dead?" Lytol asked concernedly, his face cleared of its nervous movement for a second.

F'lar nodded.

Lytol grimaced bitterly. "R'gul again, huh." He stared off in the middle distance, his eyelids quiet but the muscles along his jaw took up the constant movement. "You’ve the High Reaches? All of them?" Lytol asked, turning back to the dragonman, a slight emphasis on “all.”

F'lar gave an affirmative nod again.

"You’ve seen the women." Lytol’s disgust showed through the words. It was a statement, not a question, for he hurried on. "Well, there are no better in all the High Reaches," and his tone expressed utmost disdain.

"Fax likes his women comfortably fleshed and docile," Lytol rattled on. "Even the Lady Gemma has learned. It’d be different if he didn’t need her family’s support. Ah, it would be different indeed. So he keeps her pregnant, hoping to kill her in childbirth one day. And he will. He will."

Lytol drew himself up, squaring his shoulders, turning full to the two dragonmen. His expression was vindictive, his voice low and tense.

"Kill that tyrant, for the sake and safety of Pern. Of the Weyr. Of the queens. He only bides his time. He spreads discontent among the other lords. He”—Lytol’s laughter had an hysterical edge to it now—"he fancies himself as good as dragonmen."
"There are no candidates then in this Hold?" F'lar said, his voice sharp enough to cut through the man's preoccupation with his curious theory.

Lytol stared at the bronze rider. "Did I not say it?"

"What of Ruath Hold?"

Lytol stopped shaking his head and looked sharply at F'lar, his lips curling in a cunning smile. He laughed mirthlessly.

"You think to find a Torene, or a Moreta, hidden at Ruath Hold in these times? Well, all of that Blood are dead. Fax's blade was thirsty that day. He knew the truth of those harpers' tales, that Ruathan lords gave full measure of hospitality to dragonmen and the Ruathan were a breed apart. There were, you know," Lytol's voice dropped to a confiding whisper, "exiled Weyrmen like myself in that Line."

F'lar nodded gravely, unable to contradict the man's pitiful attempt at self-esteem.

"No," and Lytol chuckled softly. "Fax gets nothing from that Hold but trouble. And the women Fax used to take..." his laugh turned nasty in tone. "It is rumored he was impotent for months afterwards."

"Any families in the holdings with Weyr blood?"

Lytol frowned, glanced surprised at F'lar. He rubbed the scarred side of his face thoughtfully.

"There were," he admitted slowly. "There were. But I doubt if any live on." He thought a moment longer, then shook his head emphatically.

F'lar shrugged.

"I wish I had better news for you," Lytol murmured.

"No matter," F'lar reassured him, one hand poised to part the hanging in the doorway.

Lytol came up to him swiftly, his voice urgent.

"Heed what I say, Fax is ambitious. Force R'kul, or whoever is Weyrleader next, to keep watch on the High Reaches."

Lytol jabbed a finger in the direction of the Hold. "He scoffs openly at tales of the Threads. He taunts the harpers for the stupid nonsense of the old ballads and has banned from their repertoire all dragonlore. The
new generation will grow up totally ignorant of duty, tradition and precaution.”

F'lar was not surprised to hear that on top of Lytol's other disclosures. Yet the Red Star pulsed in the sky and the time was drawing near when they would hysterically reavow the old allegiances in fear for their very lives.

"Have you been abroad in the early morning of late?" asked F'nor, grinning maliciously.

"I have," Lytol breathed out in a hushed, choked whisper. "I have . . ." A groan was wrenched from his guts and he whirled away from the dragonmen, his head bowed between hunched shoulders. "Go," he said, gritting his teeth. And, as they hesitated, he pleaded, "Go!"

F'lar walked quickly from the room, followed by F'nor. The bronze rider crossed the quiet dim Hall with long strides and exploded into the startling sunlight. His momentum took him into the center of the square. There he stopped so abruptly that F'nor, hard on his heels, nearly collided with him.

"We will spend exactly the same time within the other Halls," he announced in a tight voice, his face averted from F'nor's eyes. F'lar's throat was constricted. It was difficult, suddenly, for him to speak. He swallowed hard, several times.

"To be dragonless . . ." murmured F'nor, pityingly. The encounter with Lytol had roiled his depths in a mournful way to which he was unaccustomed. That F'lar appeared equally shaken went far to dispel F'nor's private opinion that his half-brother was incapable of emotion.

"There is no other way once First Impression has been made. You know that," F'lar roused himself to say curtly. He strode off to the Hall bearing the Leathermen's device.

The Hold is barred
The Hall is bare.
And men vanish.
The soil is barren.
The rock is bald.
All hope banish.
Lessa was shoveling ashes from the hearth when the agitated messenger staggered into the Great Hall. She made herself as inconspicuous as possible so the Warder would not dismiss her. She had contrived to be sent to the Great Hall that morning, knowing that the Warder intended to brutalize the Head Clothman for the shoddy quality of the goods readied for shipment to Fax.

“Fax is coming! With dragonmen!” the man gasped out as he plunged into the dim Great Hall.

The Warder, who had been about to lash the Head Clothman, turned, stunned, from his victim. The courier, a farmholder from the edge of Ruatha, stumbled up to the Warder, so excited with his message that he grabbed the Warder’s arm.

“How dare you leave your Hold?” and the Warder aimed his lash at the astonished holder. The force of the first blow knocked the man from his feet. Yelping, he scrambled out of reach of a second lashing. “Dragonmen indeed! Fax? Ha! He shuns Ruatha. There!” The Warder punctuated each denial with another blow, kicking the helpless wretch for good measure, before he turned breathless to glare at the clothman and the two underwards. “How did he get in here with such a threadbare lie?” The Warder stalked to the great door. It was flung open just as he reached out for the iron handle. The ashen-faced guard officer rushed in, nearly toppling the Warder.

“Dragonmen! Dragons! All over Ruatha!” the man gibbered, arms flailing wildly. He, too, pulled at the Warder’s arm, dragging the stupefied official towards the outer courtyard, to bear out the truth of his statement.

Lessa scooped up the last pile of ashes. Picking up her equipment, she slipped out of the Great Hall. There was a very pleased smile on her face under the screen of matted hair.

A dragonman at Ruatha! She must somehow contrive to get Fax so humiliated, or so infuriated, that he would renounce his claim to the Hold, in the presence of a dragonman. Then she could claim her birthright.

But she would have to be extraordinarily wary. Drag-
onriders were men apart. Anger did not cloud their intelligence. Greed did not sully their judgment. Fear did not dull their reactions. Let the dense-witted believe human sacrifice, unnatural lusts, insane revel. She was not so gullible. And those stories went against her grain. Dragonmen were still human and there was Weyr blood in her veins. It was the same color as that of anyone else; enough of hers had been spilled to prove that.

She halted for a moment, catching a sudden shallow breath. Was this the danger she had sensed four days ago at dawn? The final encounter in her struggle to regain the Hold? No—there had been more to that portent than revenge.

The ash bucket banged against her shins as she shuffled down the low ceilinged corridor to the stable door. Fax would find a cold welcome. She had laid no new fire on the hearth. Her laugh echoed back unpleasantly from the damp walls. She rested her bucket and propped her broom and shovel as she wrestled with the heavy bronze door that gave into the new stables.

They had been built outside the cliff of Ruatha by Fax’s first Warder, a subtler man than all eight of his successors. He had achieved more than all the others and Lessa had honestly regretted the necessity of his death. But he would have made her revenge impossible. He would have caught her out before she had learned how to camouflage herself and her little interferences. What had his name been? She could not recall. Well, she regretted his death.

The second man had been properly greedy and it had been easy to set up a pattern of misunderstanding between Warder and craftsmen. That one had been determined to squeeze all profit from Ruathan goods so that some of it would drop into his pocket before Fax suspected a shortage. The craftsmen who had begun to accept the skillful diplomacy of the first Warder bitterly resented the second’s grasping, high-handed ways. They resented the passing of the Old Line and, even more so, the way of its passing. They were unforgiving of the insult to Ruatha; its now secondary position in the High Reaches; and they resented the individual indignities
that holders, craftsmen and farmers alike suffered under the second Warder. It took little manipulation to arrange for matters at Ruatha to go from bad to worse.

The second was replaced and his successor fared no better. He was caught diverting goods, the best of the goods at that. Fax had had him executed. His bony head still hung in the main firepit above the great Tower.

The present incumbent had not been able to maintain the Hold in even the sorry condition in which he had assumed its management. Seemingly simple matters developed rapidly into disasters. Like the production of cloth . . . Contrary to his boasts to Fax, the quality had not improved, and the quantity had fallen off.

Now Fax was here. And with dragonmen! Why dragonmen? The import of the question froze Lessa, and the heavy door closing behind her barked her heels painfully. Dragonmen used to be frequent visitors at Ruatha, that she knew, and even vaguely remembered. Those memories were like a harper's tale, told of someone else, not something within her own experience. She had limited her fierce attention to Ruatha only. She could not even recall the name of Queen or Weyrwoman from the instructions of her childhood, nor could she recall hearing mention of any queen or wyrwoman by anyone in the Hold these past ten Turns.

Perhaps the dragonmen were finally going to call the lords of the Holds to ask for the disgraceful show of greenery about the Holds. Well, Lessa was to blame for much of that in Ruatha but she defied even a dragonman to confront her with her guilt. Did all Ruatha fall to the Threads it would be better than remaining dependent to Fax! The heresy shocked Lessa even as she thought it.

Wishing she could as easily unburden her conscience of such blasphemy, she ditched the ashes on the stable midden. There was a sudden change in air pressure around her. Then a fleeting shadow caused her to glance up.

From behind the cliff above glided a dragon, its enormous wings spread to their fullest as he caught the morning updraft. Turning effortlessly, he descended. A
second, a third, a full wing of dragons followed in soundless flight and patterned descent, graceful and awesome. The claxon rang belatedly from the Tower and from within the kitchen there issued the screams and shrieks of the terrified drudges.

Lessa took cover. She ducked into the kitchen where she was instantly seized by the assistant cook and thrust with a buffet and a kick toward the sinks. There she was put to scrubbing grease-encrusted serving bowls with cleansing sand.

The yelping canines were already lashed to the spitrum, turning a scrawny herdbeast that had been set to roast. The cook was ladling seasonings on the carcass, swearing at having to offer so poor a meal to so many guests, and some of them high-rank. Winter-dried fruits from the last scanty harvest had been set to soak and two of the oldest drudges were scraping roots.

An apprentice cook was kneading bread; another, carefully spicing a sauce. Looking fixedly at him, she diverted his hand from one spice box to a less appropriate one as he gave a final shake to the concoction. She added too much wood to the wall oven, insuring ruin for the breads. She controlled the canines deftly, slowing one and speeding the other so that the meat would be underdone on one side, burned on the other. That the feast should be a fast, the food presented found inedible, was her whole intention.

Above in the Hold, she had no doubt that certain other measures, undertaken at different times for this exact contingency, were being discovered.

Her fingers bloodied from a beating, one of the Warder’s women came shrieking into the kitchen, hopeful of refuge there.

“Insects have eaten the best blankets to shreds! And a canine who had littered on the best linens snarled at me as she gave suck! And the rushes are noxious, the best chambers full of debris driven in by the winter wind. Somebody left the shutter ajar. Just a tiny bit, but it was enough . . .” the woman wailed, clutching her hand to her breast and rocking back and forth.

Lessa bent with great industry to shine the plates.
Watch-her, watch-her,
In your lair,
Watch well, watch-her!
Who goes there?

"The watch-her is hiding something," F'lar told F'nor as they consulted in the hastily cleaned Great Hall. The room delighted to hold the wintry chill although a generous fire now burned on the hearth.

"It was but gibbering when Canth spoke to it," F'nor remarked. He was leaning against the mantel, turning slightly from side to side to gather some warmth. He watched his wingleader's impatient pacing.

"Mnemeth is calming it down," F'lar replied. "He may be able to sort out the nightmare. The creature may be more senile than aware, but..."

"I doubt it," F'nor concurred helpfully. He glanced with apprehension up the webhung ceiling. He was certain he'd found most of the crawlers, but he didn't fancy their sting. Not on top of the discomforts already experienced in this forsaken Hold. If the night stayed mild, he intended curling up with Canth on the heights. "That would be more reasonable than anything Fax or his Wader have suggested."

"Hm-m-m," F'lar muttered, frowning at the brown rider.

"Well, it's unbelievable that Ruatha could have fallen to such disrepair in ten short Turns. Every dragon caught the feeling of power and it's obvious the watch-her has been tampered with. That takes a good deal of control."

"From someone of the Blood," F'lar reminded him.

F'nor shot his wingleader a quick look, wondering if he could possibly be serious in the light of all information to the contrary.

"I grant you there is power here, F'lar," F'nor conceded. "It could easily be a hidden male of the old Blood. But we need a female. And Fax made it plain, in his inimitable fashion, that he left none of the old Blood alive in the Hold the day he took it. No, no." The brown rider shook his head, as if he could dispel the lack of faith in
his wingleader's curious insistence that the Search would end in Ruath with Ruathan blood.

"That watch-where is hiding something and only some-
one of the Blood of its Hold can arrange that," F'lar said
emphatically. He gestured around the Hall and towards
the walls, bare of hangings. "Ruatha has been overcome.
But she resists ... Subtly, I say it points to the old Blood,
and power. Not power alone."

The obstinate expression in F'lar's eyes, the set of his
jaw, suggested that F'nor seek another topic.

"The pattern was well-flown today," F'nor suggested
tenatively. "Does a dragonman good to ride a flaming
beast. Does the beast good, too. Keeps the digestive pro-
cess in order."

F'lar nodded sober agreement. "Let R'gul temporize
as he chooses. It is fitting and proper to ride a fire-
spouting beast and these holders need to be reminded of
Weyr power."

"Right now, anything would help our prestige," F'nor
commented sourly. "What had Fax to say when he
hailed you in the Pass?" F'nor knew his question was al-
most impertinent but if it were, F'lar would ignore it.

F'lar's slight smile was unpleasant and there was an
ominous glint in his amber eyes.

"We talked of rule and resistance."

"Did he not also draw on you?" F'nor asked.

F'lar's smile deepened. "Until he remembered I was
dragon-mounted."

"He's considered a vicious fighter," F'nor said.

"I am at some disadvantage?" F'lar asked, turning
sharply on his brown rider, his face too controlled.

"To my knowledge, no," F'nor reassured his leader
quickly. F'lar had tumbled every man in the Weyr, effi-
ciently and easily. "But Fax kills often and without
cause."

"And because we dragonmen do not seek blood, we
are not to be feared as fighters?" snapped F'lar. "Are you
ashamed of your heritage?"

"I? No!" F'nor sucked in his breath. "Nor any of our
wing!" he added proudly. "But there is that in the atti-
dute of the men in this progression of Fax's that ... that
makes me wish some excuse to fight."
“As you observed today, Fax seeks some excuse. And,” Flar added thoughtfully, “there is something here in Ruatha that unnerves our noble overlord.”

He caught sight of Lady Tela, whom Fax had so courteously assigned him for comfort during the progression, waving to him from the inner Hold portal.

“A case in point. Fax’s Lady Tela is some three months gone.”

Fnor frowned at that insult to his leader.

“She giggles incessantly and appears so addlepated that one cannot decide whether she babbles out of ignorance or at Fax’s suggestion. As she has apparently not bathed all winter, and is not, in any case, my ideal, I have”—Flar grinned maliciously—“deprived myself of her kind offices.”

Fnor hastily cleared his throat and his expression as Lady Tela approached them. He caught the unappealing odor from the scarf or handkerchief she waved constantly. Dragonmen endured a great deal for the Weyr. He moved away, with apparent courtesy, to join the rest of the dragonmen entering the Hall.

Flar turned with equal courtesy to Lady Tela as she jabbered away about the terrible condition of the rooms which Lady Gemma and the other ladies had been assigned.

“The shutters, both sets, were ajar all winter long and you should have seen the trash on the floors. We finally got two of the drudges to sweep it all into the fireplace. And then that smoked something fearful ’til a man was sent up.” Lady Tela giggled. “He found the access blocked by a chimney stone fallen aslant. The rest of the chimney, for a wonder, was in good repair.”

She waved her handkerchief. Flar held his breath as the gesture wafted an unappealing odor in his direction.

He glanced up the Hall towards the inner Hold door and saw Lady Gemma descending, her steps slow and awkward. Some subtle difference about her gait attracted him and he stared at her, trying to identify it.

“Oh, yes, poor Lady Gemma,” Lady Tela babbled, sighing deeply. “We are so concerned. Why Lord Fax insisted on her coming, I do not know. She is not near
her time and yet . . . ” The lighthead’s concern sounded sincere.

F’lar’s incipient hatred for Fax and his brutality matured abruptly. He left his partner chattering to thin air and courteously extended his arm to Lady Gemma to support her down the steps and to the table. Only the brief tightening of her fingers on his forearm betrayed her gratitude. Her face was very white and drawn, the lines deeply etched around mouth and eyes, showing the effort she was expending.

“Some attempt has been made, I see, to restore order to the Hall,” she remarked in a conversational tone.

“Some,” F’lar admitted dryly, glancing around the grandly proportioned Hall, its rafter festooned with the webs of many Turns. The inhabitants of those gossamer nests dropped from time to time, with ripe splats, to the floor, onto the table and into the serving platters. Nothing replaced the old banners of the Ruath Blood, which had been removed from the stark brown stone walls. Fresh rushes did obscure the greasy flagstones. The trestle tables appeared recently sanded and scraped, and the platters gleamed dully in the refreshed glows. Unfortunately, the brighter light was a mistake for it was much too unflattering.

“This was such a graceful Hall,” Lady Gemma murmured for F’lar’s ears alone.

“You were a friend?” he asked, politely.

“Yes, in my youth,” her voice dropped expressively on the last word, evoking for F’lar a happier girlhood. “It was a noble line!”

“Think you one might have escaped the sword?”

Lady Gemma flashed him a startled look, then quickly composed her features, lest the exchange be noted. She gave a barely perceptible shake of her head and then shifted her awkward weight to take her place at the table. Graciously she inclined her head towards F’lar, both dismissing and thanking him.

F’lar returned to his own partner and placed her at the table on his left. As the only person of rank who would dine that night at Ruath Hold, Lady Gemma was seated on his right; Fax would be beyond her. The dragoonmen and Fax’s upper soldiery would sit at the lower
tables. No guildmen had been invited to Ruatha. Fax arrived just then with his current lady and two under-leaders, the Warder bowing them effusively into the Hall. The man, F’lar noticed, kept a good distance from his overlord—as well a Warder might whose responsibility was in this sorry condition. F’lar flicked a crawler away. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lady Gemma wince and shudder.

Fax stamped up to the raised table, his face black with suppressed rage. He pulled back his chair roughly, slamming it into Lady Gemma’s before he seated himself. He pulled the chair to the table with a force that threatened to rock the none too stable trestle-top from its supporting legs. Scowling, he inspected his goblet and plate, fingering the surface, ready to throw them aside if they displeased him.

“A roast and fresh bread, Lord Fax, and such fruits and roots as are left. Had I but known of your arrival, I could have sent to Crom for . . .”

“Sent to Crom?” roared Fax, slamming the plate he was inspecting onto the table so forcefully the rim bent under his hands. The Warder winced again as if he himself had been maimed.

“The day one of my Holds cannot support itself or the visit of its rightful overlord, I shall renounce it.”

Lady Gemma gasped. Simultaneously the dragons roared. F’lar felt the unmistakable surge of power. His eyes instinctively sought F’nor at the lower table. The brown rider—all the dragonmen—had experienced that inexplicable shaft of exultation.

“What’s wrong, Dragonman?” snapped Fax.

F’lar, affecting unconcern, stretched his legs under the table and assumed an indolent posture in the heavy chair.

“Wrong?”

“The dragons!”

“Oh, nothing. They often roar . . . at the sunset, at a flock of passing wherries, at mealtimes,” and F’lar smiled amiably at the Lord of the High Reaches. Beside him his tablemate gave a squeak.

“Mealtimes? Have they not been fed?”
“Oh, yes. Five days ago.”

“Oh. Five . . . days ago? And are they hungry . . . now?” Her voice trailed into a whisper of fear, her eyes grew round.

“In a few days,” F’lar assured her. Under cover of his detached amusement, F’lar scanned the Hall. That surge had come from nearby. Either in the Hall or just outside. It must have been from within. It came so soon upon Fax’s speech that his words must have triggered it. And the power had had an indelibly feminine touch to it.

One of Fax’s women? F’lar found that hard to credit. Mnemeth had been close to all of them and none had shown a vestige of power. Much less, with the exception of Lady Gemma, any intelligence.

One of the Hall women? So far he had seen only the sorry drudges and the aging females the Warder had as housekeepers. The Warder’s personal woman? He must discover if that man had one. One of the Hold guards’ women? F’lar suppressed an intense desire to rise and search.

“You mount a guard?” he asked Fax casually.

“Double at Ruath Hold!” he was told in a tight, hard voice, ground out from somewhere deep in Fax’s chest.

“Here?” F’lar all but laughed out loud, gesturing around the sadly appointed chamber.

“Here! Food!” Fax changed the subject with a roar.

Five drudges, two of them women in brown-gray rags such that F’lar hoped they had had nothing to do with the preparation of the meal, staggered in under the em-plattered herdbeast. No one with so much as a trace of power would sink to such depths, unless . . .

The aroma that reached him as the platter was placed on the serving table distracted him. It reeked of singed bone and charred meat. The Warder frantically sharpened his tools as if a keen edge could somehow slice acceptable portions from this unlikely carcass.

Lady Gemma caught her breath again and F’lar saw her hands curl tightly around the armrests. He saw the convulsive movement of her throat as she swallowed. He, too, did not look forward to this repast.
The drudges reappeared with wooden trays of bread. Burnt crusts had been scraped and cut, in some places, from the loaves before serving. As other trays were borne in, F'lar tried to catch sight of the faces of the servitors. Matted hair obscured the face of the one who presented a dish of legumes swimming in greasy liquid. Revolted, F'lar poked through the legumes to find properly cooked portions to offer Lady Gemma. She waved them aside, her face ill-concealing her discomfort.

As F'lar was about to turn and serve Lady Tela, he saw Lady Gemma’s hand clutch convulsively at the chair arms. He realized that she was not merely nauseated by the unappetizing food. She was seized with labor contractions.

F'lar glanced in Fax’s direction. The overlord was scowling blackly at the attempts of the Warder to find edible portions of meat to serve.

F'lar touched Lady Gemma’s arm with light fingers. She turned just enough to look at F'lar from the corner of her eye. She managed a socially-correct half-smile.

“I dare not leave just now, Lord F'lar. He is always dangerous at Ruatha. And it may only be false pangs.”

F'lar was dubious as he saw another shudder pass through her frame. The woman would have been a fine weywoman, he thought ruefully, were she but younger.

The Warder, his hands shaking, presented Fax the sliced meats. There were slivers of overdone flesh and portions of almost edible meats, but not much of either.

One furious wave of Fax’s broad fist and the Warder had the plate, meats and juice, square in the face. Despite himself, F'lar sighed, for those undoubtedly constituted the only edible portions of the entire beast.

“You call this food? *You call this food!*” Fax bellowed. His voice boomed back from the bare vault of the ceiling, shaking crawlers from their webs as the sound shattered the fragile strands. “Slop! Slop!”

F'lar rapidly brushed crawlers from Lady Gemma who was helpless in the throes of a very strong contraction.

“It’s all we had on such short notice,” the Warder squealed, juices streaking down his cheeks. Fax threw the goblet at him and the wine went streaming down
the man's chest. The steaming dish of roots followed and the man yelped as the hot liquid splashed over him.

"My lord, my lord, had I but known!"

"Obviously, Ruatha cannot support the visit of its Lord. You must renounce it," F'lar heard himself saying.

His shock at such words issuing from his mouth was as great as that of everyone else in the Hall. Silence fell, broken by the splat of falling crawlers and the drip of root liquid from the Warder's shoulders to the rushes. The grating of Fax's boot-heel was clearly audible as he swung slowly around to face the bronze rider.

As F'lar conquered his own amazement and rapidly tried to predict what to do next to mend matters, he saw F'nor rise slowly to his feet, hand on dagger hilt.

"I did not hear you correctly?" Fax asked, his face blank of all expression, his eyes snapping.

Unable to comprehend how he could have uttered such an arrant challenge, F'lar managed to assume a languid pose.

"You did mention," he drawled, "that if any of your Holds could not support itself and the visit of its rightful overlord, you would renounce it."

Fax stared back at F'lar, his face a study of swiftly suppressed emotions, the glint of triumph dominant. F'lar, his face stiff with the forced expression of indifference, was casting swiftly about in his mind. In the name of the Egg, had he lost all sense of discretion?

Pretending utter unconcern, he stabbed some vegetables onto his knife and began to munch on them. As he did so, he noticed F'nor glancing slowly around the Hall, scrutinizing everyone. Abruptly F'lar realized what had happened. Somehow, in making that statement, he, a dragonman, had responded to a covert use of the power. F'lar, the bronze rider, was being put into a position where he would have to fight Fax. Why? For what end? To get Fax to renounce the Hold? Incredible! But, there could be only one possible reason for such a turn of events. An exultation as sharp as pain swelled within F'lar. It was all he could do to maintain his pose of bored indifference, all he could do to turn his attention to thwarting Fax, should he press for a duel. A duel
would serve no purpose. He, F’lar, had no time to waste on it.

A groan escaped Lady Gemma and broke the eye-locked stance of the two antagonists. Irritated, Fax looked down at her, fist clenched and half-raised to strike her for her temerity in interrupting her lord and master. The contraction that contorted the swollen belly was as obvious as the woman’s pain. F’lar dared not look towards her but he wondered if she had deliberately groaned aloud to break the tension.

Incredibly, Fax began to laugh. He threw back his head, showing big, stained teeth, and roared.

“Aye, renounce it, in favor of her issue, if it is male ... and lives!” he crowed, laughing raucously.

“Heard and witnessed!” F’lar snapped, jumping to his feet and pointing to his riders. They were on their feet in the instant. “Heard and witnessed!” they averred in the traditional manner.

With that movement, everyone began to babble at once in nervous relief. The other women, each reacting in her way to the imminence of birth, called orders to the servants and advice to each other. They converged towards Lady Gemma, hovering undecidedly out of Fax’s range, like silly wherries disturbed from their roosts. It was obvious they were torn between their fear of their lord and their desire to reach the laboring woman.

He gathered their intentions as well as their reluctance and, still stridently laughing, knocked back his chair. He stepped over it, strode down to the meatstand and stood hacking off pieces with his knife, stuffing them, juice dripping, into his mouth without ceasing his guffawing.

As F’lar bent towards Lady Gemma to assist her out of her chair, she grabbed his arm urgently. Their eyes met, hers clouded with pain. She pulled him closer.

“He means to kill you, Bronze Rider. He loves to kill,” she whispered.

“Dragonmen are not easily killed, but I am grateful to you.”

“I do not want you killed,” she said, softly, biting at her lip. “We have so few bronze riders.”

174
F'lar stared at her, startled. Did she, Fax's lady, actually believe in the Old Laws?

F'lar beckoned to two of the Warder's men to carry her up into the Hold. He caught Lady Tela by the arm as she fluttered past him.

"What do you need?"

"Oh, oh," she exclaimed, her face twisted with panic; she was distractedly wringing her hands, "Water, hot. Clean cloths. And a birthing-woman. Oh, yes, we must have a birthing-woman."

F'lar looked about for one of the Hold woman, his glance sliding over the first disreputable figure who had started to mop up the spilled food. He signaled instead for the Warder and peremptorily ordered him to send for the woman. The Warder kicked at the drudge on the floor.

"You... you! Whatever your name is, go get her from the crafthold. You must know who she is."

The drude evaded the parting kick the Warder aimed in her direction with a nimbleness at odds with her appearance of extreme age and decrepitude. She scurried across the Hall and out the kitchen door.

Fax sliced and speared meat, occasionally bursting out with a louder bark of laughter as his inner thoughts amused him. F'lar sauntered down to the carcass and, without waiting for invitation from his host, began to carve neat slices also, beckoning his men over. Fax's soldiers, however, waited until their lord had eaten his fill.

Lord of the Hold, your charge is sure
In thick walls, metal doors and no verdure.

Lessa sped from the Hall to summon the birthing-woman, seething with frustration. So close! So close! How could she come so close and yet fail? Fax should have challenged the dragonman. And the dragonman was strong and young, his face that of a fighter, stern and controlled. He should not have temporized. Was all honor dead in Pern, smothered by green grass?

And why, oh why, had Lady Gemma chosen that precious moment to go into labor? If her groan hadn't dis-
tracted Fax, the fight would have begun and not even Fax, for all his vaunted prowess as a vicious fighter, would have prevailed against a dragonman who had her—Lessa’s—support! The Hold must be secured to its rightful Blood again. Fax must not leave Ruatha, alive, again!

Above her, on the High Tower, the great bronze dragon gave forth a weird croon, his many-faceted eyes sparkling in the gathering darkness.

Unconsciously she silenced him as she would have done the watch-wher. Ah, that watch-wher. He had not come out of his den at her passing. She knew the dragons had been at him. She could hear him gibbering in panic.

The slant of the road toward the crafthold lent impetus to her flying feet and she had to brace herself to a sliding stop at the birthing-woman’s stone threshold. She banged on the closed door and heard the frightened exclamation within.


“A birth?” came the muffled cry and the latches were thrown up on the door. “At the Hold?”

“Fax’s lady and, as you love life, hurry! For if it is male, it will be Ruatha’s own lord.”

That ought to fetch her, thought Lessa, and in that instant, the door was flung open by the man of the house. Lessa could see the birthing-woman gathering up her things in haste, piling them into her shawl. Lessa hurried the woman out, up the steep road to the Hold, under the Tower gate, grabbing the woman as she tried to run at the sight of a dragon peering down at her. Lessa drew her into the Court and pushed her, resisting, into the Hall.

The woman clutched at the inner door, balking at the sight of the gathering there. Lord Fax, his feet up on the trestle table, was paring his fingernails with his knife blade, still chuckling. The dragonmen in their wher-hide tunics, were eating quietly at one table while the soldiers were having their turn at the meat.

The bronze rider noticed their entrance and pointed urgently towards the inner Hold. The birthing-woman seemed frozen to the spot. Lessa tugged futilely at her
arm, urging her to cross the Hall. To her surprise, the bronze rider strode to them.

"Go quickly, woman, Lady Gemma is before her time," he said, frowning with concern, gesturing imperatively towards the Hold entrance. He caught her by the shoulder and led her, all unwilling, Lessa tugging away at her other arm.

When they reached the stairs, he relinquished his grip, nodding to Lessa to escort her the rest of the way. Just as they reached the massive inner door, Lessa noticed how sharply the dragonman was looking at them—at her hand, on the birthing-woman’s arm. Warily, she glanced at her hand and saw it, as if it belonged to a stranger: the long fingers, shapely despite dirt and broken nails; her small hand, delicately boned, gracefully placed despite the urgency of the grip. She blurred it and hurried on.

Honor those the dragons heed,
In thought and favor, word and deed.
Worlds are lost or worlds are saved
By those dangers dragon-braved.

Dragonman, avoid excess,
Greed will bring the Weyr distress;
To the ancient Laws adhere,
Prospers thus the Dragonweyr.

An unintelligible ululation raised the waiting men to their feet, startled from private meditations and the diversion of Bonethrows. Only Fax remained unmoved at the alarm, save that the slight sneer, which had settled on his face hours past, deepened to smug satisfaction.

"Dead-ed-ed," the tidings reverberated down the rocky corridors of the Hold. The weeping lady seemed to erupt out of the passage from the Inner Hold, flying down the steps to sink into an hysterical heap at Fax’s feet. "She’s dead. Lady Gemma is dead. There was too much blood. It was too soon. She was too old to bear more children."

F’lar couldn’t decide whether the woman was apologizing for, or exulting in, the woman’s death. She cer-

177
tainly couldn’t be criticizing her Lord for placing Lady Gemma in such peril. F’lar, however, was sincerely sorry at Gemma’s passing. She had been a brave, fine woman.

And now, what would be Fax’s next move? F’lar caught F’nor’s identically quizzical glance and shrugged expressively.

“The child lives!” a curiously distorted voice announced, penetrating the rising noise in the Great Hall. The words electrified the atmosphere. Every head slewed round sharply towards the portal to the Inner Hold where the drudge, a totally unexpected messenger, stood poised on the top step.

“It is male!” This announcement rang triumphantly in the still Hall.

Fax jerked himself to his feet, kicking aside the wailer at his feet, scowling ominously at the drudge. “What did you say, woman?”

“The child lives. It is male,” the creature repeated, descending the stairs.

Incredulity and rage suffused Fax’s face. His body seemed to coil up.

“Ruatha has a new lord!” Staring intently at the overlord, she advanced, her mien purposeful, almost menacing.

The tentative cheers of the Warder’s men were drowned by the roaring of the dragons.

Fax erupted into action. He leaped across the intervening space, bellowing. Before Lessa could dodge, his fist crashed down across her face. She fell heavily to the stone floor, where she lay motionless, a bundle of dirty rags.

“Hold, Fax!” F’lar’s voice broke the silence as the Lord of the High Reaches flexed his leg to kick her.

Fax whirled, his hand automatically closing on his knife hilt.

“It was heard and witnessed, Fax,” F’lar cautioned him, one hand outstretched in warning, “by dragonmen. Stand by your sworn and witnessed oath!”

“Witnessed? By dragonmen?” cried Fax with a derisive laugh. “Dragonwomen, you mean,” he sneered, his eyes blazing with contempt, as he made one sweeping gesture of scorn.

178
He was momentarily taken aback by the speed with which the bronze rider's knife appeared in his hand.

"Dragonwomen?" F'lar queried, his lips curling back over his teeth, his voice dangerously soft. Glowlight flickered off his circling knife as he advanced on Fax.

"Womenl Parasites on Pern. The Weyr power is over. Overl" Fax roared, leaping forward to land in a combat crouch.

The two antagonists were dimly aware of the scurry behind them, of tables pulled roughly aside to give the duelists space. F'lar could spare no glance at the crumpled form of the drudge. Yet he was sure, through and beyond instinct sure, that she was the source of power. He had felt it as she entered the room. The dragons' roaring confirmed it. If that fall had killed her . . . He advanced on Fax, leaping high to avoid the slashing blade as Fax unwound from the crouch with a powerful lunge.

F'lar evaded the attack easily, noticing his opponent's reach, deciding he had a slight advantage there. But not much. Fax had had much more actual hand-to-hand killing experience than had he whose duels had always ended at first blood on the practice floor. F'lar made due note to avoid closing with the burly lord. The man was heavy-chested, dangerous from sheer mass. F'lar must use agility as his weapon, not brute strength.

Fax feinted, testing F'lar for weakness, or indiscretion. The two crouched facing each other across six feet of space, knife hands weaving, their free hands, spread-fingered, ready to grab.

Again Fax pressed the attack. F'lar allowed him to close, just near enough to dodge away with a backhanded swipe. Fabric ripped under the tip of his knife. He heard Fax snarl. The overlord was faster on his feet than his bulk suggested and F'lar had to dodge a second time, feeling Fax's knife score his wherhide jerkin.

Grimly the two circled, each looking for an opening in the other's defense. Fax plowed in, trying to corner the lighter, faster man between raised platform and wall.

F'lar countered, ducking low under Fax's flailing arm, slashing obliquely across Fax's side. The overlord caught
at him, yanking savagely, and F’lar was trapped against the other man’s side, straining desperately with his left hand to keep the knife arm up. F’lar brought up his knee, and ducked away as Fax gasped and buckled from the pain in his groin, but Fax struck in passing. Sudden fire laced F’lar’s left shoulder.

Fax’s face was red with anger and he wheezed from pain and shock. But the infuriated lord straightened up and charged. F’lar was forced to sidestep quickly before Fax could close with him. F’lar put the meat table between them, circling warily, flexing his shoulder to assess the extent of the knife’s slash. It was painful, but the arm could be used.

Suddenly Fax scooped up some fatty scraps from the meat tray and hurled them at F’lar. The dragonman ducked and Fax came around the table with a rush. F’lar leaped sideways. Fax’s flashing blade came within inches of his abdomen, as his own knife sliced down the outside of Fax’s arm. Instantly the two pivoted to face each other again, but Fax’s left arm hung limply at his side.

F’lar darted in, pressing his luck as the Lord of the High Reaches staggered. But F’lar misjudged the man’s condition and suffered a terrific kick in the side as he tried to dodge under the feinting knife. Doubled with pain, F’lar rolled frantically away from his charging adversary. Fax was lurching forward, trying to fall on him, to pin the lighter dragonman down for a final thrust. Somehow F’lar got to his feet, attempting to straighten to meet Fax’s stumbling charge. His very position saved him. Fax overreached his mark and staggered off balance. F’lar brought his right hand over with as much strength as he could muster and his blade plunged through Fax’s unprotected back until he felt the point stick in the chest plate.

The defeated lord fell flat to the flagstones. The force of his descent dislodged the dagger from his chestbone and an inch of bloody blade re-emerged.

F’lar stared down at the dead man. There was no pleasure in killing, he realized, only relief that he himself was still alive. He wiped his forehead on his sleeve and forced himself erect, his side throbbing with the.
pain of that last kick and his left shoulder burning. He half-stumbled to the drudge, still sprawled where she had fallen.

He gently turned her over, noting the terrible bruise spreading across her cheek under the dirty skin. He heard F'nor take command of the tumult in the Hall.

The dragonman laid a hand, trembling in spite of an effort to control himself, on the woman's breast to feel for a heartbeat... It was there, slow but strong.

A deep sigh escaped him for either blow or fall could have proved fatal. Fatal, perhaps, for Pern as well.

Relief was colored with disgust. There was no telling under the filth how old this creature might be. He raised her in his arms, her light body no burden even to his battleweary strength. Knowing F'nor would handle any trouble efficiently, F'lar carried the drudge to his own chamber.

Putting the body on the high bed, he stirred up the fire and added more glows to the bedside bracket. His gorge rose at the thought of touching the filthy mat of hair but nonetheless and gently, he pushed it back from the face, turning the head this way and that. The features were small, regular. One arm, clear of rags, was reasonably clean above the elbow but marred by bruises and old scars. The skin was firm and unwrinkled. The hands, when he took them in his, were filthy but well-shaped and delicately boned.

F'lar began to smile. Yes, she had blurted that hand so skillfully that he had actually doubted what he had first seen. And yes, beneath grime and grease, she was young. Young enough for the Weyr. And no born drab. There was no taint of common blood here. It was pure, no matter whose the line, and he rather thought she was indeed Ruathan. One who had by some unknown agency escaped the massacre ten Turns ago and bided her time for revenge. Why else force Fax to renounce the Hold?

Delighted and fascinated by this unexpected luck, F'lar reached out to tear the dress from the unconscious body and found himself constrained not to. The girl had roused. Her great, hungry eyes fastened on his, not fearful or expectant; wary.
A subtle change occurred in her face. F’lar watched, his smile deepening, as she shifted her regular features into an illusion of disagreeable ugliness and great age.

“Trying to confuse a dragonman, girl?” he chuckled. He made no further move to touch her but settled against the great carved post of the bed. He crossed his arms sternly on his chest, thought better of it immediately, and eased his sore arm. “Your name, girl, and rank, too.”

She drew herself upright slowly against the headboard, her features no longer blurred. They faced each other across the high bed.

“Fax?”

“Dead. Your name!”

A look of exulting triumph flooded her face. She slipped from the bed, standing unexpectedly tall. “Then I reclaim my own. I am of the Ruathan Blood. I claim Ruath,” she announced in a ringing voice.

F’lar stared at her a moment, delighted with her proud bearing. Then he threw back his head and laughed.

“This? This crumbling heap?” He could not help but mock the disparity between her manner and her dress. “Oh, no. Besides, Lady, we dragonmen heard and witnessed Fax’s oath renouncing the Hold in favor of his heir. Shall I challenge the babe, too, for you? And choke him with his swaddling cloths?”

Her eyes flashed, her lips parted in a terrible smile.

“There is no heir. Gemma died, the babe unborn. I lied.”

“Lied?” F’lar demanded, angry.

“Yes,” she taunted him with a toss of her chin. “I lied. There was no babe born. I merely wanted to be sure you challenged Fax.”

He grabbed her wrist, stung that he had twice fallen to her prodding.

“You provoked a dragonman to fight? To kill? When he is on Search?”

“Search? Why should I care about a Search? I’ve Ruatha as my Hold again. For ten Turns, I have worked and waited, schemed and suffered for that. What could your Search mean to me?”
F'lar wanted to strike that look of haughty contempt from her face. He twisted her arm savagely, bringing her to his feet before he released his grip. She laughed at him, and scuttled to one side. She was on her feet and out the door before he could give chase.

Swearing to himself, he raced down the rocky corridors, knowing she would have to make for the Hall to get out of the Hold. However, when he reached the Hall, there was no sign of her fleeing figure among those still loitering.

"Has that creature come this way?" he called to F'nor who was, by chance, standing by the door to the Court.

"No. Is she the source of power after all?"

"Yes, she is," F'lar answered, galled all the more. "And Ruathan Blood at that!"

"Oh hol! Does she depose the babe, then?" F'nor asked, gesturing towards the birthing-woman who occupied a seat close to the now blazing hearth.

F'lar paused, about to return to search the Hold's myriad passages. He stared, momentarily confused, at this brown rider.

"Babe? What babe?"

"The male child Lady Gemma bore," F'nor replied, surprised by F'lar's uncomprehending look.

"It lives?"

"Yes. A strong babe, the woman says, for all that he was premature and taken forcibly from his dead dame's belly."

F'lar threw back his head with a shout of laughter. For all her scheming, she had been outdone by truth.

At that moment, he heard Mnementh roar in unmistakable elation and the curious warble of other dragons.

"Mnementh has caught her," F'lar cried, grinning with jubilation. He strode down the steps, past the body of the former Lord of the High Reaches and out into the main court.

He saw that the bronze dragon was gone from his Tower perch and called him. An agitation drew his eyes upward. He saw Mnementh spiraling down into the Court, his front paws clapping something. Mnementh informed F'lar that he had seen her climbing from one of
the high windows and had simply plucked her from the ledge, knowing the dragonman sought her. The bronze dragon settled awkwardly onto his hind legs, his wings working to keep him balanced. Carefully he set the girl on her feet and formed a precise cage around her with his huge talons. She stood motionless within that circle, her face toward the wedge-shaped head that swayed above her.

The watch-where, shrieking terror, anger and hatred, was lunging violently to the end of its chain, trying to come to Lessa's aid. It grabbed at F'lar as he strode to the two.

"You've courage enough, girl," he admitted, resting one hand casually on Mnementh's upper claw. Mnementh was enormously pleased with himself and swiveled his head down for his eye ridges to be scratched.

"You did not lie, you know," F'lar said, unable to resist taunting the girl.

Slowly she turned towards him, her face impassive. She was not afraid of dragons, F'lar realized with approval.

"The babe lives. And it is male."

She could not control her dismay and her shoulders sagged briefly before she pulled herself erect.

"Ruatha is mine," she insisted in a tense low voice.

"Aye, and it would have been, had you approached me directly when the wing arrived here."

Her eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"A dragonman may champion anyone whose grievance is just. By the time we reached Ruatha Hold, I was quite ready to challenge Fax given any reasonable cause, despite the Search." This was not the whole truth but F'lar must teach this girl the folly of trying to control dragonmen. "Had you paid any attention to your harper's songs, you'd know your rights. And," F'lar's voice held a vindictive edge that surprised him, "Lady Gemma might not now lie dead. She suffered far more at that tyrant's hand than you."

Something in her manner told him that she regretted Lady Gemma's death, that it had affected her deeply.

"What good is Ruatha to you now?" he demanded, a broad sweep of his arm taking in the ruined courtyard.
and the Hold, the entire unproductive valley of Ruatha.
"You have indeed accomplished your ends; a profitless
conquest and its conqueror’s death." F’lar snorted; "All
seven Holds will revert to their legitimate Blood, and
time they did. One Hold, one lord. Of course, you might
have to fight others, infected with Fax’s greed. Could
you hold Ruatha against attack... now... in her de-
cline?"

"Ruatha is mine!"
"Ruatha?" F’lar’s laugh was derisive. "When you
could be Weyrwoman?"
"Weyrwoman?" she breathed, staring at him.
"Yes, little fool. I said I rode in Search... it’s about
time you attended to more than Ruatha. And the object
of my Search is... you!"
She stared at the finger he pointed at her as if it were
dangerous.
"By the First Egg, girl, you’ve power in you to spare
when you can turn a dragonman, all unwitting, to do
your bidding. Ah, but never again, for now I am on
guard against you."

Mnementh crooned approvingly, the sound a soft
rumble in his throat. He arched his neck so that one eye
was turned directly on the girl, gleaming in the darkness
of the court.
F’lar noticed with detached pride that she neither
flinched nor blanched at the proximity of an eye greater
than her own head.
"He likes to have his eye ridges scratched," F’lar re-
marked in a friendly tone, changing tactics.
"I know," she said softly and reached out a hand to do
that service.
"Nemorth’s queen," F’lar continued, "is close to death.
This time we must have a strong Weyrwoman."
"This time—the Red Star?" the girl gasped, turning
frightened eyes to F’lar.
"You understand what it means?"
"There is danger..." she began in a bare whisper,
glancing apprehensively eastward.

F’lar did not question by what miracle she appreciated
the imminence of danger. He had every intention of tak-
ing her to the Weyr by sheer force if necessary. But something within him wanted very much for her to accept the challenge voluntarily. A rebellious Weyrwoman would be even more dangerous than a stupid one. This girl had too much power and was too used to guile and strategy. It would be a calamity to antagonize her with injudicious handling.

“There is danger for all Pern. Not just Ruatha,” he said, allowing a note of entreaty to creep into his voice. “And you are needed. Not by Ruatha,” a wave of his hand dismissed that consideration as a negligible one compared to the total picture. “We are doomed without a strong Weyrwoman. Without you.”

“Gemma kept saying all the bronze riders were needed,” she murmured in a dazed whisper.

What did she mean by that statement? F’lar frowned. Had she heard a word he had said? He pressed his argument, certain only that he had already struck one responsive chord.

“You’ve won here. Let the babe,” he saw her startled rejection of that idea and ruthlessly qualified it, “... Gemma’s babe ... be reared at Ruatha. You have command of all the Holds as Weyrwoman, not ruined Ruatha alone. You’ve accomplished Fax’s death. Leave off vengeance.”

She stared at F’lar with wonder, absorbing his words. “I never thought beyond Fax’s death,” she admitted slowly. “I never thought what should happen then.”

Her confusion was almost childlike and struck F’lar forcibly. He had had no time, or desire, to consider her prodigious accomplishment. Now he realized some measure of her indomitable character. She could not have been much over ten Turns of age herself when Fax had murdered her family. Yet somehow, so young, she had set herself a goal and managed to survive both brutality and detection long enough to secure the usurper’s death. What a Weyrwoman she would be! In the tradition of those of Ruathan blood. The light of the paler moon made her look young and vulnerable and almost pretty.

“You can be Weyrwoman,” he insisted gently.

“Weyrwoman,” she breathed, incredulous, and gazed
round the inner court bathed in soft moonlight. He thought she wavered.

"Or perhaps you enjoy rags?" he said, making his voice harsh, mocking. "And matted hair, dirty feet and cracked hands? Sleeping in straw, eating rinds? You are young... that is, I assume you are young," and his voice was frankly skeptical. She glared at him, her lips firmly pressed together. "Is this the be-all and end-all of your ambition? What are you that this little corner of the great world is all you want?" He paused and with utter contempt added, "The blood of Ruatha has thinned, I see. You're afraid!"

"I am Lessa, daughter of the Lord of Ruath," she countered, stung. She drew herself erect. Her eyes flashed. "I am afraid of nothing!"

F'lar contented himself with a slight smile.

Mnementh, however, threw up his head, and stretched out his sinuous neck to its whole length. His full-throated peal rang out down the valley. The bronze communicated his awareness to F'lar that Lessa had accepted the challenge. The other dragons answered back, their warbles shriller than Mnementh's bellow. The watch-her which had cowered at the end of its chain lifted its voice in a thin, unnerving screech until the Hold emptied of its startled occupants.

"F'nor," the bronze rider called, waving his wing-leader to him. "Leave half the flight to guard the Hold. Some nearby lord might think to emulate Fax's example. Send one rider to the High Reaches with the glad news. You go directly to the Cloth Hall and speak to L'to... Lytol." F'lar grinned. "I think he would make an exemplary Warder and Lord Surrogate for this Hold in the name of the Weyr and the babe."

The brown rider's face expressed enthusiasm for his mission as he began to comprehend his leader's intentions. With Fax dead and Ruatha under the protection of dragonmen, particularly that same one who had dispatched Fax, the Hold would have wise management.

"She caused Ruatha's deterioration?" he asked.

"And nearly ours with her machinations," F'lar replied, but having found the admirable object of his Search, he could now be magnanimous. "Suppress your
exultation, brother," he advised quickly as he took note
of F'nor's expression. "The new queen must also be
impressed."

"I'll settle arrangements here. Lytol is an excellent
choice," F'nor said.

"Who is this Lytol?" demanded Lessa pointedly. She
had twisted the mass of filthy hair back from her face.
In the moonlight the dirt was less noticeable. F'lar
cought F'nor looking at her with an all too easily read
expression. He signaled F'nor, with a peremptory ges-
ture, to carry out his orders without delay.

"Lytol is a dragonless man," F'lar told the girl, "no
friend to Fax. He will ward the Hold well and it will
prosper." He added persuasively with a quelling stare
full on her. "Won't it?"

She regarded him somberly, without answering, until
he chuckled softly at her discomfiture.

"We'll return to the Weyr," he announced, proffering
a hand to guide her to Mnementh's side.

The bronze one had extended his head toward the
watch-pher who now lay panting on the ground, its
chain limp in the dust.

"Oh," Lessa sighed, and dropped beside the grotesque
beast. It raised its head slowly, lurching piteously.

"Mnementh says it is very old and soon will sleep it-
self to death."

Lessa cradled the bestial head in her arms, scratching
it behind the ears.

"Come, Lessa of Pern," F'lar said, impatient to be up
and away.

She rose slowly but obediently. "It saved me. It knew
me."

"It knows it did well," F'lar assured her, brusquely,
wondering at such an uncharacteristic show of senti-
ment in her.

He took her hand again, to help her to her feet and
lead her back to Mnementh. As they turned, he
glimpsed the watch-pher, launching itself at a dead run
after Lessa. The chain, however, held fast. The beast's
neck broke, with a sickeningly audible snap.
Lessa was on her knees in an instant, cradling the repulsive head in her arms.

"Why, you foolish thing, why?" she asked in a stunned whisper as the light in the beast's green-gold eyes dimmed and died out.

Mnemeth informed F'lar that the creature had lived this long only to preserve the Ruathan line. At Lessa's imminent departure, it had welcomed death.

A convulsive shudder went through Lessa's slim body. F'lar watched as she undid the heavy buckle that fastened the metal collar about the watch-wher's neck. She threw the tether away with a violent motion. Tenderly she laid the watch-wher on the cobbles. With one last caress to the clipped wings, she rose in a fluid movement and walked resolutely to Mnemeth without a single backward glance. She stepped calmly to the dragon's raised leg and seated herself, as F'lar directed, on the great neck.

F'lar glanced around the courtyard at the remainder of his wing which had reformed there. The Hold folk had retreated back into the safety of the Great Hall. When his wingmen were all astride, he vaulted to Mnemeth's neck, behind the girl.

"Hold tightly to my arms," he ordered her as he took hold of the smallest neck ridge and gave the command to fly.

Her fingers closed spasmodically around his forearm as the great bronze dragon took off, the enormous wings working to achieve height from the vertical takeoff. Mnemeth preferred to fall into flight from a cliff or tower. Like all dragons, he tended to indolence. F'lar glanced behind him, saw the other dragonmen form the flight line, spread out to cover those still on guard at Ruatha Hold.

When they had reached a sufficient altitude, he told Mnemeth to transfer, going between to the Weyr.

Only a gasp indicated the girl's astonishment as they hung between. Accustomed as he was to the sting of the profound cold, to the awesome utter lack of light and sound, F'lar still found the sensations unnerving. Yet the uncommon transfer spanned no more time than it took to cough thrice.
Mnemeth rumbled approval of this candidate's calm reaction as they flicked out of the eerie between.

And then they were above the Weyr, Mnemeth setting his wings to glide in the bright daylight, half a world away from night-time Ruatha.

As they circled above the great stony trough of the Weyr, F'lar peered at Lessa's face, pleased with the delight mirrored there; she showed no trace of fear as they hung a thousand lengths above the high Benden mountain range. Then, as the seven dragons roared their incoming cry, an incredulous smile lit her face.

The other wingmen dropped into a wide spiral, down, down while Mnemeth elected to descend in lazy circles. The dragonmen peeled off smartly and dropped, each to his own tier in the caves of the Weyr. Mnemeth finally completed his leisurely approach to their quarters, whistling shrilly to himself as he braked his forward speed with a twist of his wings, dropping lightly at last to the ledge. He crouched as F'lar swung the girl to the rough rock, scored from thousands of clawed landings.

"This leads only to our quarters," he told her as they entered the corridor, vaulted and wide for the easy passage of great bronze dragons.

As they reached the huge natural cavern that had been his since Mnemeth achieved maturity, F'lar looked about him with eyes fresh from his first prolonged absence from the Weyr. The huge chamber was unquestionably big, certainly larger than most of the halls he had visited in Fax's procession. Those halls were intended as gathering places for men, not the habitations of dragons. But suddenly he saw his own quarters were nearly as shabby as all Ruatha. Benden was, of a certainty, one of the oldest dragonweyrs, as Ruatha was one of the oldest Holds, but that excused nothing. How many dragons had bedded in that hollow to make solid rock conform to dragon proportions! How many feet had worn the path past the dragon's weyr into the sleeping chamber, to the bathing room beyond where the natural warm spring provided ever-fresh water! But the wall hangings were faded and unraveling and there were
grease stains on lintel and floor that should be sanded away.

He noticed the wary expression on Lessa's face as he paused in the sleeping room.

"I must feed Mnemeth immediately. So you may bathe first," he said, rummaging in a chest and finding clean clothes for her, discards of other previous occupants of his quarters, but far more presentable than her present covering. He carefully laid back in the chest the white wool robe that was traditional Impression garb. She would wear that later. He tossed several garments at her feet and a bag of sweetsand, gesturing to the hanging that obscured the way to the bath.

He left her, then, the clothes in a heap at her feet, for she made no effort to catch anything.

Mnemeth informed him that F'nor was feeding Canth and that he, Mnemeth, was hungry, too. She didn't trust F'lar but she wasn't afraid of himself.

"Why should she be afraid of you?" F'lar asked. "You're cousin to the watch-pher who was her only friend."

Mnemeth informed F'lar that he, a fully matured bronze dragon, was no relation to any scrawny, crawling, chained, and wing-clipped watch-pher.

F'lar, pleased at having been able to tease the bronze one, chuckled to himself. With great dignity, Mnemeth curved down to the feeding ground.

By the Golden Egg of Faranth
By the Weyrwoman, wise and true,
Breed a flight of bronze and brown wings,
Breed a flight of green and blue.
Breed riders, strong and daring,
Dragon-loving, born as hatched,
Flight of hundreds soaring skyward,
Man and dragon fully matched.

Lessa waited until the sound of the dragonman's footsteps proved he had really gone away. She rushed quickly through the big cavern, heard the scrape of claw and the whoosh of the mighty wings. She raced down the short passageway, right to the edge of the yawning en-
trance. There was the bronze dragon circling down to
the wider end of the mile-long barren oval that was
Benden Weyr. She had heard of the Weyrs, as any Per-
nesa had, but to be in one was quite a different matter.

She peered up, around, down that sheer rock face. There was no way off but by dragon wing. The nearest
cave mouths were an unhandy distance above her, to
one side, below her on the other. She was neatly seclud-
ed here.

Weyrwoman, he had told her. His woman? In his weyr? Was that what he had meant? No, that was not
the impression she got from the dragon. It occurred to
her, suddenly, that it was odd she had understood the
dragon. Were common folk able to? Or was it the drag-
onman blood in her line? At all events, Mnementh had
inferred something greater, some special rank. She re-
membered vaguely that, when dragonmen went on
Search, they looked for certain women. Ah, certain
women. She was one, then, of several contenders. Yet
the bronze rider had offered her the position as if she
and she, alone, qualified. He had his own generous por-
ton of conceit, that one, Lessa decided. Arrogant he
was, though not a bully like Fax.

She could see the bronze dragon swoop down to the
running herdbeasts, saw the strike, saw the dragon
wheel up to settle on a far ledge to feed. Instinctively
she drew back from the opening, back into the dark and
relative safety of the corridor.

The feeding dragon evoked scores of horrid tales.
Tales at which she had scoffed but now . . . Was it true,
then, that dragons did eat human flesh? Did . . . Lessa
halted that trend of thought. Dragonkind was no less
cruel than mankind. The dragon, at least, acted from
bestial need rather than bestial greed.

Assured that the dragonman would be occupied a
while, she crossed the larger cave into the sleeping
room. She scooped up the clothing and the bag of
cleansing sand and proceeded to the bathing room.

To be clean! To be completely clean and to be able to
stay that way. With distaste, she stripped off the remains
of the rags, kicking them to one side. She made a soft
mud with the sweetsand and scrubbed her entire body.
until she drew blood from various half-healed cuts. Then she jumped into the pool, gasping as the warm water made the sweetsand foam in the lacerations.

It was a ritual cleansing of more than surface soil. The luxury of cleanliness was ecstasy.

Finally satisfied she was as clean as one long soaking could make her, she left the pool, reluctantly. Wringing out her hair she tucked it up on her head as she dried herself. She shook out the clothing and held one garment against her experimentally. The fabric, a soft green, felt smooth under her water-shrunken fingers, although the nap caught on her roughened hands. She pulled it over her head. It was loose but the darker-green overtunic had a sash which she pulled in tight at the waist. The unusual sensation of softness against her bare skin made her wriggle with voluptuous pleasure. The skirt, no longer a ragged hem of tatters, swirled heavily around her ankles. She smiled. She took up a fresh drying cloth and began to work on her hair.

A muted sound came to her ears and she stepped, hands poised, head bent to one side. Straining, she listened. Yes, there were sounds without. The dragonman and his beasts must have returned. She grimaced to herself with annoyance at this untimely interruption and rubbed harder at her hair. She ran fingers through the half-dry tangles, the motions arrested as she encountered snarls. Vexed, she rummaged on the shelves until she found, as she had hoped to, a coarse-toothed metal comb.

Dry, her hair had a life of its own suddenly, crackling about her hands and clinging to face and comb and dress. It was difficult to get the silky stuff under control. And her hair was longer than she had thought, for, clean and unmatted, it fell to her waist—when it did not cling to her hands.

She paused, listening, and heard no sound at all. Apprehensively, she stepped to the curtain and glanced warily to the sleeping room. It was empty. She listened and caught the perceptible thoughts of the sleepy dragon. Well, she would rather meet the man in the presence of a sleepy dragon than in a sleeping room. She started across the floor and, out of the corner of her eye, caught
sight of a strange woman as she passed a polished piece of metal hanging on the wall.

Amazed, she stopped short, staring, incredulous, at the face the metal reflected. Only when she put her hands to her prominent cheekbones in a gesture of involuntary surprise and the reflection imitated the gesture, did she realize she looked at herself.

Why, that girl in the reflector was prettier than Lady Tela, than the clothman’s daughter! But so thin. Her hands of their own volition dropped to her neck, to the protruding collarbones, to her breasts which did not entirely accord with the gauntness of the rest of her. The dress was too large for her frame, she noted with an unexpected emergence of conceit born in that instant of delighted appraisal. And her hair... it stood out around her head like an aureole. It wouldn’t lie contained. She smoothed it down with impatient fingers, automatically bringing locks forward to hang around her face. As she irritably pushed them back, dismissing a need for disguise, the hair drifted up again.

A slight sound, the scrape of a boot against stone, caught her back from her bemusement. She waited, momentarily expecting him to appear. She was suddenly timid. With her face bare to the world, her hair behind her ears, her body outlined by a clinging fabric, she was stripped of her accustomed anonymity and was, therefore, in her estimation, vulnerable.

She controlled the desire to run away—the irrational fear. Observing herself in the looking metal, she drew her shoulders back, tilted her head high, chin up; the movement caused her hair to crackle and cling and shift about her head. She was Lessa of Ruatha, of a fine old Blood. She no longer needed artifice to preserve herself; she must stand proudly bare-faced before the world... and that dragonman.

Resolutely she crossed the room, pushing aside the hanging on the doorway to the great cavern.

He was there, beside the head of the dragon, scratching its eye ridges, a curiously tender expression on his face. The tableau was at variance with all she had heard of dragonmen.
She had, of course, heard of the strange affinity between rider and dragon but this was the first time she realized that love was part of that bond. Or that this reserved, cold man was capable of such deep emotion.

He turned slowly, as if loath to leave the bronze beast. He caught sight of her and pivoted completely round, his eyes intense as he took note of her altered appearance. With quick, light steps, he closed the distance between them and ushered her back into the sleeping room, one strong hand holding her by the elbow.

"Mnemeth has fed lightly and will need quiet to rest," he said in a low voice. He pulled the heavy hanging into place across the opening.

Then he held her away from him, turning her this way and that, scrutinizing her closely, curious and slightly surprised.

"You wash up... pretty, yes, almost pretty," he said, amused condescension in his voice. She pulled roughly away from him, piqued. His low laugh mocked her.

"After all, how could one guess what was under the grime of... ten full Turns?"

At length he said, "No matter. We must eat and I require your services." At her startled exclamation, he turned, grinning maliciously now as his movement revealed the caked blood on his left sleeve. "The least you can do is bathe wounds honorably received fighting your battle."

He pushed aside a portion of the drape that curtained the inner wall. "Food for two!" he roared down a black gap in the sheer stone.

She heard a subterranean echo far below as his voice resounded down what must be a long shaft.

"Nemorth is nearly rigid," he was saying as he took supplies from another drape-hidden shelf, "and the Hatching will soon begin anyhow."

A coldness settled in Lessa's stomach at the mention of a Hatching. The mildest tales she had heard about that part of dragonlore were chilling, the worst dismayingly macabre. She took the things he handed her numbly.

"What? Frightened?" the dragonman taunted, pausing as he stripped off his torn and bloodied shirt.
With a shake of her head, Lessa turned her attention to the wide-shouldered, well-muscled back he presented her, the paler skin of his body decorated with random bloody streaks. Fresh blood welled from the point of his shoulder for the removal of his shirt had broken the tender scabs.

"I will need water," she said and saw she had a flat pan among the items he had given her. She went swiftly to the pool for water, wondering how she had come to agree to venture so far from Ruatha. Ruined though it was, it had been hers and was familiar to her from Tower to deep cellar. At the moment the idea had been proposed and insidiously prosecuted by the dragonman, she had felt capable of anything, having achieved, at last, Fax's death. Now, it was all she could do to keep the water from slopping out of the pan that shook unaccountably in her hands.

She forced herself to deal only with the wound. It was a nasty gash, deep where the point had entered and torn downward in a gradually shallower slice. His skin felt smooth under her fingers as she cleansed the wound. In spite of herself, she noticed the masculine odor of him, compounded not unpleasantly of sweat, leather, and an unusual muskiness which must be from close association with dragons.

She stood back when she had finished her ministration. He flexed his arm experimentally in the constricting bandage and the motion set the muscles rippling along side and back.

When he faced her, his eyes were dark and thoughtful.

"Gently done. My thanks." His smile was ironic.

She backed away as he rose but he only went to the chest to take out a clean, white shirt.

A muted rumble sounded, growing quickly louder.

Dragons roaring? Lessa wondered, trying to conquer the ridiculous fear that rose within her. Had the Hatching started? There was no watch-wher's lair to secrete herself in, here.

As if he understood her confusion, the dragonman laughed good-humoredly and, his eyes on hers, drew
aside the wall covering just as some noisy mechanism inside the shaft propelled a tray of food into sight.

Ashamed of her unbased fright and furious that he had witnessed it, Lessa sat rebelliously down on the fur-covered wall seat, heartily wishing him a variety of serious and painful injuries which she could dress with inconsiderate hands. She would not waste future opportunities.

He placed the tray on the low table in front of her, throwing down a heap of furs for his own seat. There was meat, bread, a tempting yellow cheese and even a few pieces of winter fruit. He made no move to eat nor did she, though the thought of a piece of fruit that was ripe, instead of rotten, set her mouth to watering. He glanced up at her, and frowned.

“Even in the Weyr, the lady breaks bread first,” he said, and inclined his head politely to her.

Lessa flushed, unused to any courtesy and certainly unused to being first to eat. She broke off a chunk of bread. It was like nothing she remembered having tasted before. For one thing, it was fresh-baked. The flour had been finely sifted, without trace of sand or hull. She took the slice of cheese he proffered her and it, too, had an uncommonly delicious sharpness. Made bold by this indication of her changed status, Lessa reached for the plumpest piece of fruit.

“Now,” the dragonman began, his hand touching hers to get her attention.

Guiltily she dropped the fruit, thinking she had erred. She stared at him, wondering at her fault. He retrieved the fruit and placed it back in her hand as he continued to speak. Wide-eyed, disarmed, she nibbled, and gave him her full attention.

“Listen to me. You must not show a moment’s fear, whatever happens on the Hatching Ground. And you must not let her overeat.” A wry expression crossed his face. “One of our main functions is to keep a dragon from excessive eating.”

Lessa lost interest in the taste of the fruit. She placed it carefully back in the bowl and tried to sort out not what he had said, but what his tone of voice implied.
She looked at the dragonman’s face, seeing him as a person, not a symbol, for the first time.

There was a blackness about him that was not malevolent; it was a brooding sort of patience. Heavy black hair, heavy black brows; his eyes, a brown light enough to seem golden, were all too expressive of cynical emotions, or cold hauteur. His lips were thin but well-shaped and in repose almost gentle. Why must he always pull his mouth to one side in disapproval or in one of those sardonic smiles? At this moment, he was completely unaffected.

He meant what he was saying. He did not want her to be afraid. There was no reason for her, Lessa, to fear.

He very much wanted her to succeed. In keeping whom from overeating what? Herd animals? A newly hatched dragon certainly wasn’t capable of eating a full beast. That seemed a simple enough task to Lessa . . . Main function? Our main function?

The dragonman was looking at her expectantly.

“Our main function?” she repeated, an unspoken request for more information inherent in her inflection.

“More of that later. First things first,” he said impatiently waving off other questions.

“But what happens?” she insisted.

“As I was told so I tell you. No more, no less. Remember these two points. No fear, and no overeating.”

“But . . .”

“You, however, need to eat. Here.” He speared a piece of meat on his knife and thrust it at her, frowning until she managed to choke it down. He was about to force more on her but she grabbed up her half-eaten fruit and bit down into the firm sweet sphere instead. She had already eaten more at this one meal than she was accustomed to having all day at the Hold.

“We shall soon eat better at the Weyr,” he remarked, regarding the tray with a jaundiced eye.

Lessa was surprised. This was a feast, in her opinion.

“More than you’re used to? Yes, I forgot you left Ruatha with bare bones indeed.”

She stiffened.

“You did well at Ruatha. I mean no criticism,” he added, smiling at her reaction. “But look at you,” and he
gestured at her body, that curious expression crossing his face, half-amused, half-contemplative. "I should not have guessed you'd clean up pretty," he remarked. "Nor with such hair." This time his expression was frankly admiring.

Involuntarily she put one hand to her head, the hair crackling over her fingers. But what reply she might have made him, indignant as she was, died aborning. An unearthly keening filled the chamber.

The sounds set up a vibration that ran down the bones behind her ear to her spine. She clapped both hands to her ears. The noise rang through her skull despite her defending hands. As abruptly as it started, it ceased.

Before she knew what he was about, the dragonman had grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her over to the chest.

"Take those off," he ordered, indicating dress and tunic. While she stared at him stupidly, he held up a loose white robe, sleeveless and beltless, a matter of two lengths of fine cloth fastened at shoulder and side seams. "Take it off, or do I assist you?" he asked, with no patience at all.

The wild sound was repeated and its unnerving tone made her fingers fly faster. She had no sooner loosened the garments she wore, letting them slide to her feet, than he had thrown the other over her head. She managed to get her arms in the proper places before he grabbed her wrist again and was speeding with her out of the room; her hair whipping out behind her, alive with static.

As they reached the outer chamber, the bronze dragon was standing in the center of the cavern, his head turned to watch the sleeping room door. He seemed impatient to Lessa; his great eyes sparkled iridescently. His manner breathed an inner excitement of great proportions and from his throat a high-pitched croon issued, several octaves below the unnerving cry that had roused them all.

With a yank that rocked her head on her neck, the dragonman pulled her along the passage. The dragon padded beside them at such speed that Lessa fully ex-
pected they would all catapult off the ledge. Somehow, at the crucial stride, she was a-perch the bronze neck, the dragonman holding her firmly about the waist. In the same fluid movement, they were gliding across the great bowl of the Weyr to the higher wall opposite. The air was full of wings and dragon tails, rent with a chorus of sounds, echoing and re-echoing across the stony valley.

Mnemeth set what Lessa was certain would be a collision course with other dragons, straight for a huge round blackness in the cliff face, high up. Magically, the beasts filed in, the greater wingspread of Mnemeth just clearing the sides of the entrance.

The passageway reverberated with the thunder of wings. The air compressed around her thickly. Then they broke out into a gigantic cavern.

Why, the entire mountain must be hollow, thought Lessa, incredulous. Around the enormous cavern, dragons perched in serried ranks, blues, greens, browns and only two great bronze beasts like Mnemeth, on ledges meant to accommodate hundreds. Lessa gripped the bronze neck scales before her, instinctively aware of the imminence of a great event.

Mnemeth wheeled downward, disregarding the ledge of the bronze ones. Then all Lessa could see was what lay on the sandy floor of the great cavern; dragon eggs. A clutch of ten monstrous, mottled eggs, their shells moving spasmodically as the fledglings within tapped their way out. To one side, on a raised portion of the floor, was a golden egg, larger by half again the size of the mottled ones. Just beyond the golden egg lay the motionless ochre hulk of the old queen.

Just as she realized Mnemeth was hovering over the floor in the vicinity of that egg, Lessa felt the dragonman’s hands on her, lifting her from Mnemeth’s neck.

Apprehensively, she grabbed at him. His hands tightened and inexorably swung her down. His eyes, fierce and gray, locked with hers.

“Remember, Lessa!”

Mnemeth added an encouragement, one great compound eye turned on her. Then he rose from the floor. Lessa half-raised one hand in entreaty, bereft of all sup-
port, even that of the sure inner compulsion which had sustained her in her struggle for revenge on Fax. She saw the bronze dragon settle on the first ledge, at some distance from the other two bronze beasts. The dragon-man dismounted and Mnementh curved his sinuous neck until his head was beside his rider. The man reached up absently, it seemed to Lessa, and caressed his mount.

Loud screams and wailings diverted Lessa and she saw more dragons descend to hover just above the cavern floor, each rider depositing a young woman until there were twelve girls, including Lessa. She remained a little apart from them as they clung to each other. She regarded them curiously. The girls were not injured in any way she could see, so why such weeping? She took a deep breath against the coldness within her. Let them be afraid. She was Lessa of Ruatha and did not need to be afraid.

Just then, the golden egg moved convulsively. Gasping as one, the girls edged away from it, back against the rocky wall. One, a lovely blonde, her heavy plait of golden hair swinging just above the ground, started to step off the raised floor and stopped, shrieking, backing fearfully towards the scant comfort of her peers.

Lessa wheeled to see what cause there might be for the look of horror on the girl's face. She stepped back involuntarily herself.

In the main section of the sandy arena, several of the handful of eggs had already cracked wide open. The fledglings, crowing weakly, were moving towards... and Lessa gulped... the young boys standing stolidly in a semi-circle. Some of them were no older than she had been when Fax's army had swooped down on Ruath Hold.

The shrieking of the women subsided to muffled gasps. A fledgling reached out with a claw and beak to grab a boy.

Lessa forced herself to watch as the young dragon mauled the youth, throwing him roughly aside as if unsatisfied in some way. The boy did not move and Lessa
could see the blood seeping onto the sand from dragon-inflicted wounds.

A second fledgling lurched against another boy and halted, flapping its damp wings impotently, raising its scrawny neck and croaking a parody of the encouraging croon Mnementh often gave. The boy uncertainly lifted a hand and began to scratch the eye ridge. Incredulous, Lessa watched as the fledging, its crooning increasingly more mellow, ducked its head, pushing at the boy. The child’s face broke into an unbelieving smile of elation.

Tearing her eyes from this astounding sight, Lessa saw that another fledgling was beginning the same performance with another boy. Two more dragons had emerged in the interim. One had knocked a boy down and was walking over him, oblivious to the fact that its claws were raking great gashes. The fledgling who followed its hatch-mate stopped by the wounded child, ducking its head to the boy’s face, crooning anxiously. As Lessa watched, the boy managed to struggle to his feet, tears of pain streaming down his cheeks. She could hear him pleading with the dragon not to worry, that he was only scratched a little.

It was over very soon. The young dragons paired off with boys. Green riders dropped down to carry off the unacceptable. Blue riders settled to the floor with their beasts and led the couples out of the cavern, the young dragons squealing, crooning, flapping wet wings as they staggered off, encouraged by their newly acquired weyr-mates.

Lessa turned resolutely back to the rocking golden egg, knowing what to expect and trying to divine what the successful boys had, or had not done, that caused the baby dragons to single them out.

A crack appeared in the golden shell and was greeted by the terrified screams of the girls. Some had fallen into little heaps of white fabric, others embraced tightly in their mutual fear. The crack widened and the wedge head broke through, followed quickly by the neck, gleaming gold. Lessa wondered with unexpected detachment how long it would take the beast to mature, considering its by no means small size at birth. For the
head was larger than that of the male dragons and they had been large enough to overwhelm sturdy boys of ten full Turns.

Lessa was aware of a loud hum within the Hall. Glancing up at the audience, she realized it emanated from the watching bronze dragons, for this was the birth of their mate, their queen. The hum increased in volume as the shell shattered into fragments and the golden, glistening body of the new female emerged. It staggered out, dipping its sharp beak into the soft sand, momentarily trapped. Flapping its wet wings, it righted itself, ludicrous in its weak awkwardness. With sudden and unexpected swiftness, it dashed towards the terror-stricken girls.

Before Lessa could blink, it shook the first girl with such violence, her head snapped audibly and she fell limply to the sand. Disregarding her, the dragon leaped towards the second girl but misjudged the distance and fell, grabbing out with one claw for support and raking the girl's body from shoulder to thigh. The screaming of the mortally injured girl distracted the dragon and released the others from their horrified trance. They scattered in panicky confusion, racing, running, tripping, stumbling, falling across the sand towards the exit the boys had used.

As the golden beast, crying piteously, lurched down from the raised arena toward the scattered women Lessa moved. Why hadn't that silly clunk-headed girl stepped aside, Lessa thought, grabbing for the wedge-head, at birth not much larger than her own torso. The dragon's so clumsy and weak she's her own worst enemy.

Lessa swung the head round so that the many-faceted eyes were forced to look at her ... and found herself lost in that rainbow regard.

A feeling of joy suffused Lessa, a feeling of warmth, tenderness, unalloyed affection and instant respect and admiration flooded mind and heart and soul. Never again would Lessa lack an advocate, a defender, an intimate, aware instantly of the temper of her mind and heart, of her desires. How wonderful was Lessa, the
thought intruded into Lessa’s reflections, how pretty, how kind, how thoughtful, how brave and clever!

Mechanically, Lessa reached out to scratch the exact spot on the soft eye ridge.

The dragon blinked at her wistfully, extremely sad that she had distressed Lessa. Lessa reassuringly patted the slightly damp, soft neck that curved trustingly towards her. The dragon reeled to one side and one wing fouled on the hind claw. It hurt. Carefully, Lessa lifted the erring foot, freed the wing, folding it back across the dorsal ridge with a pat.

The dragon began to croon in her throat, her eyes following Lessa’s every move. She nudged at Lessa and Lessa obediently attended the other eye ridge.

The dragon let it be known she was hungry.

“We’ll get you something to eat directly,” Lessa assured her briskly and blinked back at the dragon in amazement. How could she be so callous? It was a fact that this little menace had just now seriously injured, if not killed, two women.

She wouldn’t have believed her sympathies could swing to alarmingly towards the beast. Yet it was the most natural thing in the world for her to wish to protect this fledgling.

The dragon arched her neck to look Lessa squarely in the eyes. Ramoth repeated wistfully how exceedingly hungry she was, confined so long in that shell without nourishment.

Lessa wondered how she knew the golden dragon’s name and Ramoth replied: Why shouldn’t she know her own name since it was hers and no one else’s? And then Lessa was lost again in the wonder of those expressive eyes.

Oblivious to the descending bronze dragons, uncaring of the presence of their riders, Lessa stood caressing the head of the most wonderful creature on all Pern, fully prescient of troubles and glories, but most immediately aware that Lessa of Pern was Weyrwoman to Ramoth the Golden, for now and forever.
I

The gangly young man slumped limply on the white metal stool in the Strahorn’s sick bay. His mind was working frantically and repetitiously:

*My name is Dalton Mirni, and I am a ... My profession is ... I have finished my special training and am now a competent ...*

He could not remember the missing word. Gone with it was all the knowledge of the subject of ... schooling. The loss was too shattering to accept.

He was dimly aware that someone had joined him and the medic in the sick bay, and glanced up long enough to identify the man as the ship’s captain. He heard their conversation with scant attention.

“When did he get like this?” The captain’s voice was hard and cold.

“Just before I called you, sir. I was getting his history, and he told me he had been in a special kind of school since he was four. A very strange place, the way he described it. I asked him what he had studied there and he started to answer. Then he laughed and started to answer again, but didn’t. He seemed to be trying to remember. When I repeated the question I got no reply. He was almost catatonic when I called you, sir, but I noticed him raise his eyes when you came in.”

“Mirmi!” the captain barked sharply. Dalton Mirni heard but did not try to respond. His brain captured and echoed the sound “Mirmi!” complete with the commanding tone of the captain’s voice, and tried to use it to arouse his lost memories. “Mirmi!” he shouted silently. “Mirmi! ... Mirmi! ...” But the blank remained blank.

When he again noticed the conversation, the captain was saying impatiently, “Let me review for your benefit, Bolinski. First, we’re out in the Periphery, where the friends of Earth are few and questionable. Second, we
receive a distress call and home in on a survival capsule containing this whoever-he-is Mirni. Instead of a sick, scared castaway, he comes aboard as assured and beamish as a Vegan princeling—yet he claims to have been separated from ‘real’ humanity (whatever that means!) since he was four. And he says he can’t identify his home planet, so we have to send out the standard identification-query call, meaning we inform the universe at large that we have picked up a man named Dalton Mirni whose description is such-and-such!

"Now, after all this, our assured young princeling abruptly displays a lapse of memory and goes zombi on us! You can offer what explanation you like, Bolinski, but one alone sticks in my mind: We’re being had! Somebody’s playing a tricky game with us, and with no friendly intent! So why not use your investigatory drugs on this jerk and get to the bottom of it?"

“If you’ll make that an order, Captain Devista, O.K.,” the medic replied stubbornly. “But you know the restrictions on those drugs. Besides, if somebody is trying to sucker us, maybe they expect us to shoot the kid with a quizzer. But, if you’ll give me a direct order—”

“You’re getting close to insubordination, Bolinski!” the captain flared.

“I’m ready to obey orders, sir,” the medic returned tightly.

Dalton Mirni struggled part way out of the depths to say: “The drugs . . . may help.”

His speaking startled the two men. “You’ll volunteer to take them?” the captain demanded.

“Yes.”

“Get his authorization on a sealed tape, Bolinsky, and proceed,” the captain snapped.

The medic led Mirni across the room to a small, seamless metal box. “Hold this grip,” he said, “and answer this question: Do you, Dalton Mirni, voluntarily agree to submit to interrogation under medication?”

“Yes.”

“All right, you can turn loose, and sign your name through this slot.”

208
Miri accepted the pencil and signed. Captain Devista was watching over his shoulder.

"You speak and write Anglo-Ruski like an adult," the captain remarked. "That must have been part of your training."

"No. I was taught language by the play-people. Language, history, the arts, physical sciences, planetography... I remember all those."

"Who are the play-people?"

"They were the... the projections I lived among outside of school hours." Having started talking, Mirni found the conversation a comforting distraction from his mental turmoil. He continued as Bolinski placed an applicator against his bare arm and squeezed the trigger.

"I don't know the mechanics of the play-people projections—how the teachers made them. They seemed like real people, like you or me, and I was supposed to treat them as real, even though they weren't."

"How do you know they weren't?" asked Devista.

"Because when I was fourteen, going through a goofy stage, I got angry one day and told the play-people they were nothing, that I was the only real person and they should do as I told them. They became statues! Their bodies turned slick and hard, and I couldn't budge any of them, not even my baby cousin. It was spooky! That lasted all day and night, but everything was back to normal when I came home from school the next morning."

"You had a cousin there?"

"A play-cousin, of course, and an aunt and uncle I lived with. You see, the teachers didn't want me to become alienated from humanity, so they supplied a normal play-home and community for me to live in."

Talking grew increasingly easier for Mirni as the drugs took effect, and the thought of his loss was less disturbing.

"Then your teachers were not human?" the captain asked.

"Oh no! Nor any of the other students, either."

"What were the teachers like?"

"I don't know. They never showed me. Sometimes a teacher would appear as a human, sometimes like one of
the other students, and sometimes we wouldn’t see him
at all. We would just know he was there talking to us.”

“Talking about what?”
There was no hint of an answer in Mirni’s memory. “I
don’t know. That’s gone.”

“Why did you stop talking when Bolinski asked you a
similar question?”

“Because I didn’t realize until I tried to answer him
that I had forgotten. It was a shock to learn that.”

“Is it still a shock?”

“Yes, but the drug seems to help.”
The ship’s intercom buzzed and the captain answered,
“Sure?”

“Mirni identified, sir,” the speaker said. “He’s a citizen
of Earth and the only located survivor of the CES Gor-
man which was lost beyond Antares in 2707. He was on
board with his parents.”

“Acknowledged,” growled Devista.

“That fits with what I remember,” said Mirni, “and
what the teachers told me. They said the ship blew up,
and I was the only one they rescued.”

Bolinski remarked to the captain with evident enjoy-
ment, “It’s hard to see how anybody could embarrass an
Earth ship by planting an Earth citizen aboard, sir.”

The captain ignored the jibe. “Does that drug ever fail
to elicit the truth?” he demanded.

“Not when handled properly, sir. Mirni’s telling you
the truth as he knows it.”

“As he knows it,” the captain grunted. “He could have
been fed a cock-and-bull story under hypnosis. Would
that fool your drug?”

“Captain, I’m no psychographer,” retorted Bolinski. “I
can’t answer that.”

Desta paced the room, fuming. “Men have been
knocking about interstellar space for over five hundred
years,” he barked, “without seeing a sign of intelligent
extraterrestrial life! Then this boy comes drifting along
in a surcap with his tale of a race of super-teachers,
along with several student races—implying that we’re
among the latter. And very conveniently, he goes amne-
siac on the one subject that might prove his story! Do
you expect me to believe him?”

208
Bolinski shrugged. "I'm not saying I believe him myself, sir. I'm simply reserving judgment on his story."

Devista grunted. "Well, keep him confined under observation. I want a private word with him, so I'll see him to his cubicle."

"Yes, sir. He can go in Number Three."

Miri followed the captain through a hallway off sick bay and into an eight-foot cube room. "Sit down," said the captain. Miri sat on the bed and looked up at Devista, who was studying him with an annoyed frown.

"This is no luxury liner, Miri," the captain said harshly. "We're a Commercial Earth Spacer, as the Gorman was, but freight's our business and we have a minimal crew. We're not prepared to baby you all the way back to Earth! So no more of that deep-ending, understand?"

Miri nodded. "I'm under control now, captain, and I think I can stay that way. I realize you have plenty of problems without me, so—"

"Problems?" snapped Devista. "Why do you think I've got problems, and what business of yours is it if I have?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Miri answered contritely. "I don't mean to butt in. But I couldn't help noticing the way you spoke to Bolinski, and the way he spoke to you. It was easy to see there's trouble between you and your crew."

The captain stared at him. "For a kid who claims to have spent almost his whole life away from people," he grated, "you see a hell of a lot!"

"Being with the play-people accounts for that."

"That's no answer!" the captain replied. "People live together for years without knowing each other's problems!"

"But I was supposed to work at understanding the play-people," Miri explained. "That was so that, when I learned my ... my profession and came home, I would know how to stay on good terms with everyone, and my work would be accepted. It's important to be liked, no matter what job you're doing."

The captain nodded jerkily. "That's the truth! And
that’s the trouble on this ship! This is probably my last trip as a commanding officer!” He flopped tiredly on the bed and stared at the floor.

“What happened?” asked Mirni.

“A case of insubordination—Spaceman First Ferris. He’s the guy who brought in your capsule.”

“Oh, the big red-headed fellow,” recalled Mirni.

The captain nodded. “A week ago he gave me some back talk. The words got hotter until he made a remark no ship commander can afford to tolerate. I threw the book at him. He’s to stand trial before the adjutant of the next planetary base we reach. That’s on Fingal, four days from now.”

“This sounds more like trouble for Spaceman Ferris than for you,” Mirni observed. The tranquilizing effect of the drugs was wearing off, and he had to make an effort to attend the captain’s words.

“Except for one thing. Ferris intends to call half the crew as witnesses. There’s a rule in the Merchant Space- man’s Code that a crew member who has given unfriendly testimony about a superior officer cannot be re- quired to serve under him any longer. After that trial the Strahorn won’t have enough crew left to lift off of Fingal—unless I resign then and there! And there’s no recruiting on Fingal. It’s unfriendly to Earth. So I’ve been mousetrapped!”

Mirni nodded soberly. After a pause he asked, “Cap- tain, would it be impossible for you to drop the charges against Ferris? I can understand your moral objections to that idea, but if that’s the only way out for you—”

“Oh, I’ve thought of that! It’s out! Not so much on moral grounds, because . . . well, I am a hard man to get along with! The fault wasn’t all Ferris’s. But a captain can’t humiliate himself that way!”

“I don’t see why anybody can’t admit a mistake, or even apologize for one. Everybody makes them.”

“Well . . . if it would do any good, maybe. But it wouldn’t! If I withdrew the charges, and even apolo- gized to Ferris, next trip out I’d run into the same thing with Chief Engineer Thoms, or Zaffuto the cook, or somebody. Why postpone it?”

“Gosh, Captain, I hate to see this happen to you!” said
Mirni. "I imagine that, except for this problem with subordinates, you're an unusually capable ship commander."

"I have to be that or I wouldn't have lasted as long as I have!" Devista chuckled ruefully.

"It would be such a waste," Mirni nodded. "There ought to be a more lasting solution of some kind. Don't ships have executive officers to handle most business with the crews in place of the captains?"

"That's right," said Devista, "but in practice on a ship this size and type the captain acts as his own exec. If he turned the job over to someone else, ten percent of his pay would go with it. It just isn't done."

"Is the money that important?"

"Well... no, but it isn't done. But—" The captain hesitated. "If I apologized to Ferris and dropped the charges, and named somebody like Warrant Officer Soklov as exec... the men seem to like him—"

"That way you could concentrate on the things you do best," Mirni said.

The captain stood up, frowning thoughtfully. "Maybe it's worth thinking over. Now, son, as I said, this is no luxury liner, but we ought to be able to make you comfortable. Ask Bolinski for anything you need, and if he can't provide it tell him to call me. Or to call Soklov and he can call me."

"Thanks, Captain. I'll be O.K., I'm sure. One thing I'd appreciate. I want to thank Spaceman Ferris for hauling me in. So, if you or Soklov would ask him to drop by some time tomorrow—"

"Certainly. And, son, when you see him, I wonder if you would try to talk some reason into that mule head of his?"

II

The day after the Strahorn grounded on Fingal, Mirni was called to the bridge. Captain Devista greeted him with a worried expression.

"Mirni, the Fingalese are curious about you," he said. "They are demanding that I turn you over to them for examination."

"Do they have psychographers?" Mirni asked eagerly.
“The planet’s filthy with them!” growled the captain.
“O.K. I’m ready to go. Do they want me right now?”

The captain was startled. “You don’t understand, son! Fingal is under a monarchy, and the questioning methods here aren’t very gentle! I can’t expose an Earth citizen to that!”

“If I go willingly, you won’t be sending me,” Mirni pointed out. “Some way or other, Captain, I’ve got to get back what I’ve lost! I’m nothing without it! With it I was . . . I don’t know . . . something important. I can stand questioning under torture if that’s what it takes to get me free of this torment!”

As the captain started to reply Spaceman Ferris came storming up the ladder. “Captain,” he demanded hotly, “you’re not turnin’ the kid over to the Finks, are you?” Devista purpled.

“He’s not sending me out,” Mirni said quickly. “I’m going of my own accord.”

“What?”
“Maybe they can find out what I need to know.”
“Blips and stenchers! They’ll just torture you!”
Mirni shrugged. “Maybe that’s what it will take.”
“For a bright kid you’re talkin’ stupid!”

“Spaceman Ferris,” snapped the captain, “I agree with you completely, but I remind you that Mirni is a citizen of Earth and a passenger on this ship! We cannot legally stop him from going groundside if he wishes! And you are on the bridge without permission!”

“Huh? Oh. Sorry, sir. Look, if he’s going out, let me and some of the gang go along as a bodyguard!”

“That wouldn’t help. Not even your roughneck buddies can take on a whole planet! You would merely make the Fingalese suspicious, and probably harder on the boy. But the offer’s appreciated.”

Ferris’s thick shoulders slumped.

“Will you show me which port to use, Mr. Ferris?” Mirni asked him.

“Huh? Oh, sure kid. Come on.”

The Fingalese inquisitors were efficient but short on enthusiasm in their session with Mirni. The fact that he seemed a nice lad did not restrain them; they had
worked over nice lads before. But Mirni puzzled them, first with his unbelievably cooperative attitude and second with his hard-to-swallow life history.

Finally he managed to capture the imagination of one of them.

"Think of the possibilities!" this worthy enthused. "This boy may have a complete new science locked in some dark recess of his brain! Or else maybe some highly-developed extrasensory abilities! Whatever is there, Fingal must have it!"

A colleague complained, "But we've scopped him, infrahypped him, scanned him and electrocited him! With him trying to help, what's more! If he had secrets, we'd know them by now!"

"Not necessarily!" argued the excited one. "Obviously his so-called teachers used an erasure technique that goes deeper and is more selective than any method of ours. But it is a well-known fact, gentlemen, that no memory can be removed completely from a living organism! We must dig deeper to find it!"

"Dig with what?" another exploded. "And that 'well-known fact' of yours is just a well-known theory, based on what we can and can't do with our human skills! I say we quit wasting time and make out our report to the Foerst before he gets impatient!"

Mirni asked weakly, "Have you tried everything?"

"Everything but splinters under the fingernails," a glum inquisitor replied, "and they wouldn't help, either!"

Mirni was given a reviving drink and put in a comfortable room to rest. He slept poorly, but after he was wakened and given breakfast he felt generally recuperated from the effects of the questioning.

He was rushed immediately to the private audience chamber of Foerst Dolfuls IV, who turned out to be a spare man of middle age with a thin, pinched face, old-fashioned exterior spectacles, and cautious, compressed lips. Politely, Mirni gave Fingal's chief-of-state the prescribed chest salute and stood at attention between his guards.

The Foerst's frigid eyes studied him briefly before the
monarch spoke. His voice was dry and level, with only a hint of controlled anger.

"Dalton Mirni, you may report to your superiors that their little fraud did not work. Congratulate them for their skill in your preparation—my psychographers were nearly taken in! But I recognize you, of course, for the deception you are. The psychographers have been directed to ignore the content of your purported memory and to destroy all records of the questioning, as I will destroy the report they gave me. They will, however, conduct research on such deep-briefing techniques as have been used on you, and will not easily befooled again! You may return to your ship."

This speech left Mirni wide-eyed with puzzlement. "Pardon," he faltered. "Is one permitted to ask the Foerst a question?"

"Go ahead," said the Foerst.

"Thank you. I'm... not aware of any fraud, sire, but I suppose I would not be if your conclusions are correct. I would like to know the nature of this deception—what it is that I am supposed to fool you into believing."

The Foerst nodded indifferently and said, "Earth is obviously trying to revive the old 'alien menace' myth. You are allowed to fall in our hands with your absurd 'memory' of a super-race of aliens. The object is to scare the independent worlds into uniting—under Earth's leadership, it is hardly necessary to add—in defense against the aliens. But your superiors were too cheap to make your story convincing. They should have let you reveal some of Earth's scientific secrets to masquerade as alien knowledge."

"But... but, sire, there is no alien menace!" Mirni exclaimed.

"That I am sure of!" the Foerst replied with a humorless smile.

"That is I mean my teachers are no menace! They simply aren't constituted to threaten our sort of life! As for the students' various races, none of them live in this galaxy, and a teacher told me it will be at least seventeen thousand years before humans make broad contact with another intelligence!"

A fleeting look of uncertainty crossed the Foerst's
face, but he sneered, “You are backing down with a ven-
gence, now that Earth’s scheme is exposed!” He
 glanced at the guards and said, “Leave us. My defenses
are adequate.”

The guards saluted and left the Foerst alone with
Mirmi.

“Your words puzzle me, young man,” said the mon-
arch. “By admitting that no alien menace exists, you
have weakened Earth’s chance to succeed with a better-
planned effort to repeat this ruse. Why should you be
permitted to make such an admission?”

“I can only tell you what I remember, sire. I don’t
know why those memories are what they are.”

The Foerst was silent and expressionless for several
minutes and Mirmi took the liberty of relaxing his
stance.

“What are your views on Earth’s interstellar policies?”
the Foerst asked at last.

“They seem . . . mixed up, sort of . . . I don’t know
how to describe them, exactly. I don’t really know why
Fingal and Earth are mad at each other.”

After a flicker of a smile, the Foerst said, “The situa-
tion has complexities, but it is basically simple. Earth is
striving, with too much success, to keep all the inde-
dependent planets including Fingal in economic subjec-

“Oh,” Mirmi nodded. “What is it you need that Earth
won’t let you get?”

“Manpower!” grated the Foerst. “Manpower to sup-
port our own industrial economy!”

“But the guidebook says you have twenty-seven mil-
lion people,” objected Mirmi. “Isn’t that enough to build
from?”

“Our present population is not available for industry,”
the Foerst replied impatiently. “Are you familiar with
Fingal’s cultural pattern?”

“The guidebook calls it feudal-agricultural,” said
Mirmi.

The Foerst nodded grudgingly. “That’s close enough.
We have an enlightened nobility, the Firsters, the de-
scendants of the earliest settlers. Most of the later arriv-
als entered the services of the Firsters and the pattern
never changed. The result is a stable culture in which each person’s role is established before he is born. There is a minority of freemen—in crafts, trades and the like—but they are too few for industrialization. Also, they are needed in their present occupations."

"Then all of Fingal’s manpower is pre-empted by your present system?" asked Mirni.

"That’s the sum of it," agreed the Foerst.

"Why not bring in immigrants? Earth has too many people—"

"Impossible! Earthmen aren’t to be trusted! We will not open our planet to that scum! Also, immigrants would have to be assigned upon arrival to the various Firster states—all but the tenth my House could claim. They would only reinforce the established pattern."

Mirni looked sympathetic. "Tell me, sire, would something like this be possible: Fingal was settled by people from a Central European state, was it not?"

"That is correct."

"Then couldn’t you start a propaganda campaign, saying that Earth was discriminating against the people of the Central European province? You would have to be cagey about how you did it, because later on you would want to be very suspicious of the Central Europeans. The propaganda would stir the sympathy of your people for their old kindred on the mother planet, and build up a demand that the repressed people be offered refuge on Fingal.

"But you would be against that, because Earthmen can’t be trusted. Finally you would give in part way, and say Central Europeans could come in, but not under conditions that would allow them to subvert the Fingalese way of life. They would not be permitted to infiltrate the services of the Firsters—"

"The Firsters would not be allowed to grab them, you mean?" asked the Foerst with a glimmer of interest.

"Yes, but you would not put it that way, sire. The refugees would be let in only as wards of the planetary government, so they could be kept under strict surveillance. Of course, the refugees would be expected to earn their keep—I suppose you have title to enough land,
mineral rights and so on to provide industrial cities and raw materials?"

The Foerst nodded. He was eyeing Mirni with quizzi-cal approval. "You're a clever schemer, boy," he said. "How did you learn that in your school?"

"I didn't, sire. I learned such things from living with the play-people. Well—It was part of my training, in a way, because I would need to know how to handle people."

"So you manipulated the play-people for practice."

"Something like that, sire."

"Well, you need experience with real people," the Foerst told him with a dry chuckle. "Your scheme is clever, but it is nonsense! First, the Central Europeans are no more discriminated against than any other segment of Earth's population, and the 'big lie' propaganda campaign is an anachronism! The Earth government could kill such a campaign with a sealed-tape plebiscite that would prove the propaganda's falsity."

"By asking the Central Europeans if they were repressed?"

"Certainly!"

"But couldn't the propaganda make the people there think they were repressed?" Mirni persisted. "No planetary government can be so perfect that people can find nothing to complain about."

"That I will definitely grant you!" grunted the Foerst. "But your scheme is still impractical for more reasons than I care to detail. You are too lacking in experience, boy, to expect to solve a world's problems as if they were a puzzle-toy." He pressed a button on his chair arm and added, "But I have enjoyed this interview, young man. For an Earth citizen you are a most pleasant person—but then you say you weren't on Earth very long. If I were advising you, I would suggest that you never stay on that planet long enough to adopt the Earth viewpoint." The guards entered the room and the Foerst gave Mirni a cold, formal nod. "You are dismissed, Dalton Mirni."

Mirni saluted and departed.
After he reached Earth several weeks later, Mirni was questioned far longer and more intensively than on Fingal. This was what he had expected and hoped for. The psychographers of Earth were less inclined than those of Fingal to regard him as a possible source of militarily, or politically, useful knowledge, to be wrung from him and reported to the appropriate government branches. They were more inclined to take him at face value as a perhaps unique example of advanced psychometric manipulation, and thus as an unusually interesting research subject.

But their results were as disappointing to Mirni as were those of the earlier questionings. No concealed memories were nudged into consciousness. As test after test yielded nothing, he had to fight a growing sense of depression.

The months of examination produced occasional moments of excitement, though.

One came when a beet-faced security official barged into the Psychomed Center one day, storming angrily over Mirni’s “presumptuous interference in Earth-Fingal relations.” Mirni had, of course, recounted his interview with the Foerst, and his examiners had sent a transcript of it to Interstellar Affairs, and hence to Diplomatic Security.

“I’m very sorry, sir,” Mirni told the angry official. “I didn’t mean to interfere, but . . . well, the Foerst had problems, and his people had tried to help me with mine. So I tried to suggest something that might help him. But he didn’t consider my idea very plausible—”

“Oh, didn’t he!” growled the security man. “Then why has he sent Fingal’s worst muck-monger reporter into Central Europe to do a series of exposes on the so-called ‘Plight of the Homefolk’?”

“Then he is using my suggestions,” said Mirni, feeling cheered by the thought.

“He is,” the official snapped. “And now, since you were so helpful to the Foerst of Fingal,” he went on with heavy sarcasm, “perhaps you will also be so kind as
to suggest a way for your home planet to get out of the mess you’ve put us in!"

"I’ll be glad to help any way I can," Mirni replied earnestly, "but I don’t think you should worry about the discontent being stirred up in Europe. It will blow over soon—after the most dissatisfied people have left for Fingal. The easing of population pressure will have a soothing effect."

"You’re saying we should stand still for these insulting lies!" exploded the official. "These aspersions on the fairness of the government of Earth! And from a planet that keeps most of its people in serfdom!"

"You can’t win an argument by calling a liar a liar," said Mirni. "But, if Earth needs to strike back at Fingal, maybe the best way would be with jokes. The Foerst is a grim, humorless man, and he wouldn’t take jokes at all well. And jokes would imply that the whole Central European business was too trivial to be viewed seriously."

The security official stared at Mirni as if wondering about his sanity. "Jokes; huh? Could you suggest one to start with?"

Mirni shook his head. "I’m afraid I can’t . . . I’m not feeling very funny these days."

"This beats all!" yelled the official, spinning and stalking ferociously out of the lab.

One of the researchers, who had stood by taking all this in, said to Mirni, "That’s the first time I’ve ever seen you meet somebody and not win his friendship."

"Oh, he likes me all right," Mirni replied distractedly. "He just enjoys being angry."

Several days later he was called in to see the Psychomed Center’s research chief. She regarded him with soft, motherly eyes and fingered a report on her desk.

"This is only a preliminary summary of our examination of you, Dalton," she said. "The full analysis will take six or seven weeks yet. So don’t take this as the last word."

Mirni nodded glumly. She was trying to let him down easy.

"Our two basic findings are these," she continued. "First, your memories are accurate, so far as they go.
Our random cross checks indicate a consistency that could not be produced by any conceivable means of artificial memory-planting. You actually spent twenty years among extraterrestrials, with the companionship of the play-people. And you were being trained.

"Second, your lost memory of that training is, I'm afraid, total. It is not waiting in some corner of your brain to spring out when appropriately keyed."

Miri nodded. He expected this.

"That's about it, Dalton," the research chief concluded. "You can have a copy of this summary which, as I said, is not final. But now I think the best thing for you would be to exteriorize your interests — put these weeks of introspection behind you. Find something to do with yourself, and with your talents. Make a place for yourself in the society of people."

"My place has been erased," Miri objected dully.

"Then make yourself another," she urged him. "That might be easier than you think! There's a gentleman waiting in the next office who might help you do it. Go in and talk to him."

The man in the next office arose from the chair in which he had been fidgeting when Miri entered. He was a pink-skinned, vigorous oldster with a shock of white hair and a sunny expression.

"Miri?" he asked, extending his hand. "I'm Wilbert K. Neff, chairman of the Institute of Governmental Studies, which you've probably never heard of! Get your jacket and we'll get out of this sick-room smell. Let's hustle!"

Hustle they did, at a pace that left Miri excited and confused from being rushed into and out of a ground car and on to a noisy pub, where Neff led the way to a corner booth. A loud comic was holding forth on the 3V, and Miri caught a snatch of a gag that ended with "...flipped by the flexible finger of the Fourth Foerst of Fingal!" The resulting roar of laughter was cut off as Neff flicked on the booth's sound curtain.

The man chuckled as he punched an order for drinks. "That Fingal affair is funnier than the 3V comics realize!" he said. "I hear the squirmings in the President's
conference chamber were something to behold when the
council members sneered your 'joke' suggestion into ob-
livion and then 're-created' it out of their own ingenu-
ity!"

"They're doing what I suggested?" asked Mirni.
"Indeed they are! But don't expect credit for it—not
from them! What congratulations you get will have to
come from such unimposing persons as myself!"

"Your title sounds imposing," Mirni commented.
Neff sipped his drink and got down to business. "The
Institute of Governmental Studies is not government-
connected, nor confined to any one planet. It's a private
operation supported by a dozen foundations. It had its
beginnings way back in the pre-space era. Our work is
described by its name. The IGS collects data and, on re-
quest, makes studies of whatever governmental prob-
lems anybody cares to drop in our lap. When a study is
complete, we pass along the results and our recommen-
dations. I want you to come to work with us."

"Oh. What would my job be?"
Neff shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe to boot me out
and take over the whole show! I've learned a good bit
about you, Mirni, and you look ideal for our line of ac-
tivity. That training you got, manipulating your play-
people, seems to have given you a rare insight into po-
litical ways and means. I'm offering you a chance to de-
velop and use that insight!"

"To solve problems, the way I tried to for Fingal?"
"Yes, and the way you did for Captain Devista on the
Strahorn. You did better there, I would say, than on
Fingal—probably because you had more pertinent infor-
mation to use."

Mirni nodded guiltily. "I was sloppy in my thinking
about Fingal, I guess. I did need more information, and
maybe I was too anxious to please. I should have fig-
ured out something that wouldn't increase, even for a
moment, the hostility between Fingal and Earth. And I
shouldn't have left Fingal with a split-population prob-
lem in the making."

"But you got the immigrants moving away from Earth
en masse again, for the first time this century!" gloated
Neff. "The unpleasant side effects are trivial compared
to that! The people have to keep moving outward, or we'll wind up in a mess that nothing short of interstellar war can end! Conditions are already bad—everybody suspicious of everybody else."

"Yes, I know," Mirni agreed. "Is that the kind of thing IGS is concerned about?"

"Very much so!"

"Then I'll be glad to try to help," Mirni said.

IGS was small, with a staff of some four hundred persons, all of whom seemed to share Neff's inclination to hustle. Mirni hustled, too, although he soon realized the "hurry syndrome" was a response to a feeling of inadequacy. Relations between the human-settled planets were almost unanimously strained, and were worsening steadily. And the Institute, seemingly alone in its effort to find sound, unbiased resolutions to the vast complexity of discords, was indeed inadequate for the task.

So Mirni hustled. One of his first acts was to devise a means of getting IGS into action on urgent issues about which the Institute had not been consulted. This was his "review and insinuate" approach, in which IGS would inform some ex-client planet that a closed study had been re-examined in the light of recently-acquired data, and that additional recommendations were being dispatched. These recommendations would manage to touch upon—at least in passing—the urgent issue IGS wanted a hand in, thus "insinuating" the Institute into the role it desired.

And with the Institute's research facilities at his fingertips, Mirni soon proved his ability for finding useful means of settling troublesome disputes, some of which had lingered stubbornly for centuries. Also, he could phrase recommendations in ways that appealed to their recipients, and made their acceptance likely. This all but eliminated the most aggravating burden of any strictly advisory operation—that of convincing the clients they should heed the offered advice.

The task was endless, but with Mirni's arrival it soon ceased being hopeless. The Institute was making headway, and so were interstellar relations.

"You're a marvel, Mirni, my boy!" Neff enthused one
morning. "There's no stopping you! What's your objective—first President of the United Planets?"

Miri laughed, as he often did since joining the Institute. "Nothing like that, boss. I'm all for a United Planets, but the IGS gives me a better means of getting work done than any government position could. But watch yourself, sir, because I do have my eye on your job—and maybe on your grand-daughter!"

"You'll be welcome to both with my blessings, son," Neff grinned, putting his feet on his desk and relaxing. "Any time!"

His work and Patricia Neff had preoccupied Mirni so fully that the letter from the Psychomed Center caught him by surprise. It was a jolting reminder of an unhappy mental state that, while less than two months behind him, had seemed distant and almost forgotten. Unwillingly, he tore open the envelope and scanned the contents, picking out key passages:

"Our preliminary summary is fully supported by further study of the data . . .

"The obvious question is: Why did the 'teachers' choose to erase Mirni's training? Only one tenable answer presents itself, although we have searched diligently for an alternative explanation. To put it bluntly, Mirni flunked out of their 'school.' Presumably the nature of his studies was such that the non-graduates cannot be released with possibly dangerous partial knowledge. At any rate, we conclude that Mirni's performance was not satisfactory.

"This finding is in no way a criticism of Dalton Mirni. We consider him a superior person in every respect. If he flunked out of the 'school,' then the human race itself flunked out. Needless to say, we trust that this finding will not be communicated to the public, as it would be harmfully and pointlessly depressing.

"The detrimental effect on morale . . . has perhaps manifested itself in one researcher, DV, on our staff (See File DV-437). Unable to accept the evidence of humanity's poor rating in the estimation of the 'teacher' race, DV denies that Mirni flunked out. To support this belief, he states that the only knowledge Mirni lost was
theoretical, and that Mirni was permitted to keep skills derived from the theoretical training.

"As DV explains the case, Mirni can be compared to persons who are taught the 'theory of science' of some field to aid them in developing special skills which, once acquired, will function without further referral to theory. He cites artists and musicians as typical examples. When confronted by the fact that such persons remember their more academic preparatory work, he admits this is true, but argues that such retention is not essential to skilled performance.

"In Mirni's case, the theoretical training postulated by DV was in 'advanced political science,' from which working and retained skills were developed during the play-people 'lab course.'

"The essential failure of DV's hypothesis is that it offers no satisfactory reason for the removal of Mirni's memory. DV's only suggestion is that the teaching of 'advanced political science' is a role jealously guarded by the 'teachers;' that perhaps it is a role no 'student' could adequately fill. Thus, Mirni's theoretical knowledge was taken from him so that he would engage in no vain attempts to train others.

"This is far too conjectural, and too wishful, a line of thought to be taken seriously."

All this was not easy to take. It stirred a dull echo of that sick emptiness that had hit Mirni, months before, when he had first discovered his loss. Still, he was able to feel a wave of sympathy for the researcher DV, who was finding the situation so difficult to accept.

But of course DV was wrong. He had to be. Mirni's training—whatever it may have been—could hardly have been to prepare him for something as simple as this political work he was doing for IGS. Why, this was just play-people stuff! Satisfying, useful work, certainly, but work that could be done by anyone with the understanding needed to get along with people and to comprehend the mechanisms of society. There was no—no wisdom required. Definitely not a twenty-year accumulation of wisdom.

Still, DV could be right, Mirni mused. There was no
actual evidence to prove the man wrong. There was a possibility that Mirni was now engaged in precisely the kind of work for which the teachers had prepared him. It was a tempting idea, anyway, and—

And that was just the trouble with it, Mirni concluded with a feeling of impatience with himself. It was tempting! He, more than DV or anyone else, could fall very easily into the trap of wishful thinking on this subject! If he had learned any lesson well among the play-people, it was not to cling to some cherished notion despite abundant logic and evidence that the notion was wrong. Such clinging was the road to irrationality.

Disappointments had to be accepted, and lived with. And for that matter, he had no time to waste grieving over a lost dream—not with the chore of establishing peace and relative tranquillity among a hundred and sixty-two planets on his hands, plus a dinner date with Pat Neff.

Mirni stuffed the report in a bottom drawer and got to work.

The Last Command
Keith Laumer

I come to awareness, sensing a residual oscillation traversing my hull from an arbitrarily designated heading of 035. From the damping rate I compute that the shock was of intensity 8.7, emanating from a source within the limits 72 meters/46 meters. I activate my primary screens, trigger a return salvo. There is no response. I engage reserve energy cells, bring my secondary battery to bear—futilely. It is apparent that I have been ranged by the Enemy and severely damaged.

My positional sensors indicate that I am resting at an angle of 13 degrees 14 seconds, deflected from a base line at 21 points from median. I attempt to right myself, but encounter massive resistance. I activate my forward scanners, shunt power to my IR microstrobes. Not a
flicker illuminates my surroundings. I am encased in utter blackness.

Now a secondary shock wave approaches, rocks me with an intensity of 8.2. It is apparent that I must withdraw from my position—but my drive trains remain inert under full thrust. I shift to base emergency power, try again. Pressure mounts; I sense my awareness fading under the intolerable strain; then, abruptly, resistance falls off and I am in motion.

It is not the swift maneuvering of full drive, however. I inch forward, as if restrained by massive barriers. Again I attempt to penetrate the surrounding darkness, and this time perceive great irregular outlines shot through with fracture planes. I probe cautiously, then more vigorously, encountering incredible densities.

I channel all available power to a single ranging pulse, direct it upward. The indication is so at variance with all experience that I repeat the test at a new angle. Now I must accept the fact: I am buried under 207.6 meters of solid rock!

I direct my attention to an effort to orient myself to my uniquely desperate situation. I run through an action-status check list of thirty thousand items, feel dismay at the extent of power loss. My main cells are almost completely drained, my reserve units at no more than .4 charge. Thus my sluggishness is explained. I review the tactical situation, recall the triumphant announcement from my commander that the Enemy forces are annihilated, that all resistance has ceased. In memory, I review the formal procession; in company with my comrades of the Dinochrome Brigade, many of us deeply scarred by Enemy action, we parade before the Grand Commandant, then assemble on the depot ramp. At command, we bring our music storage cells into phase and display our Battle Anthem. The nearby star radiates over a full spectrum, unfiltered by atmospheric haze. It is a moment of glorious triumph. Then the final command is given—

The rest is darkness. But it is apparent that the victory celebration was premature. The Enemy has counterattacked with a force that has come near to immobilizing me. The realization is shocking, but the .1 second
of leisurely introspection has clarified my position. At once, I broadcast a call on Brigade Action wavelength:

"Unit LNE to Command, requesting permission to file VSR."

I wait, sense no response, call again, using full power. I sweep the enclosing volume of rock with an emergency alert warning. I tune to the all-units band, await the replies of my comrades of the Brigade. None answers. Now I must face the reality: I alone have survived the assault.

I channel my remaining power to my drive and detect a channel of reduced density. I press for it and the broken rock around me yields reluctantly. Slowly, I move forward and upward. My pain circuitry shocks my awareness center with emergency signals; I am doing irreparable damage to my overloaded neural systems, but my duty is clear: I must seek and engage the Enemy.

Emerging from behind the blast barrier, Chief Engineer Pete Reynolds of the New Devonshire Port Authority pulled off his rock mask and spat grit from his mouth.

"That's the last one; we've bottomed out at just over two hundred yards. Must have hit a hard stratum down there."

"It's almost sundown," the paunchy man beside him said shortly. "you're a day and a half behind schedule."

"We'll start backfilling now, Mr. Mayor. I'll have pilings poured by oh-nine hundred tomorrow, and with any luck the first section of pad will be in place in time for the rally."

"I'm ..." The mayor broke off, looked startled. "I thought you told me that was the last charge to be fired ..."

Reynolds frowned. A small but distinct tremor had shaken the ground underfoot. A few feet away, a small pebble balanced atop another toppled and fell with a faint clatter.

"Probably a big rock fragment falling," he said. At that moment, a second vibration shook the earth, stronger this time. Reynolds heard a rumble and a distant impact as rock fell from the side of the newly blasted excavation. He whirled to the control shed as the
door swung back and Second Engineer Mayfield appeared.

"Take a look at this, Pete!" Reynolds went across to the hut, stepped inside. Mayfield was bending over the profiling table.

"What do you make of it?" he pointed. Superimposed on the heavy red contour representing the detonation of the shaped charge of the tremor had completed the drilling of the final pile core were two other traces, weak but distinct.

"About .1 Intensity," Mayfield looked puzzled. "What..."

The tracking needle dipped suddenly, swept up the screen to peak at .21, dropped back. The hut trembled. A stylus fell from the edge of the table. The red face of Mayor Daugherty burst through the door.

"Reynolds, have you lost your mind? What's the idea of blasting while I'm standing out in the open? I might have been killed!"

"I'm not blasting," Reynolds snapped. "Jim, get Eaton on the line, see if they know anything." He stepped to the door, shouted.

A heavy-set man in sweat-darkened coveralls swung down from the seat of a cable-lift rig. "Boss, what goes on?" he called as he came up. "Damn near shook me out of my seat!"

"I don't know. You haven't set any trim charges?"

"No, Boss. I wouldn't set no charges without your say-so."

"Come on." Reynolds started out across the rubble-littered stretch of barren ground selected by the Authority as the site of the new spaceport. Halfway to the open mouth of the newly blasted pit, the ground under his feet rocked violently enough to make him stumble. A gout of dust rose from the excavation ahead. Loose rock danced on the ground. Beside him, the drilling chief grabbed his arm.

"Boss, we better get back!"

Reynolds shook him off, kept going. The drill chief swore and followed. The shaking of the ground went on, a sharp series of thumps interrupting a steady trembling.

"It's a quake!" Reynolds yelled over the low rumbling
sound. He and the chief were at the rim of the core now.

"It can't be a quake, Boss," the latter shouted. "Not in these formations!"

"Tell it to the geologists . . ." The rock slab they were standing on rose a foot, dropped back. Both men fell. The slab bucked like a small boat in choppy water.

"Let's get out of here!" Reynolds was up and running. Ahead, a fissure opened, gaped a foot wide. He jumped it, caught a glimpse of black depths, a glint of wet clay twenty feet below—

A hoarse scream stopped him in his tracks. He spun, saw the drill chief down, a heavy splinter of rock across his legs. He jumped to him, heaved at the rock. There was blood on the man's shirt. The chief's hands beat the dusty rock before him. Then other men were there, grunting, sweaty hands gripping beside Reynolds'. The ground rocked. The roar from under the earth had risen to a deep, steady rumble. They lifted the rock aside, picked up the injured man and stumbled with him to the aid shack.

The mayor was there, white-faced.

"What is it, Reynolds? If you're responsible—"

"Shut up!" Reynolds brushed him aside, grabbed the phone, punched keys.

"Eaton! What have you got on this temblor?"

"Temblor, hell." The small face on the four-inch screen looked like a ruffled hen. "What in the name of Order are you doing out there? I'm reading a whole series of displacements originating from that last core of yours! What did you do, leave a pile of trim charges lying around?"

"It's a quake. Trim charges, hell! This thing's broken up two hundred yards of surface rock. It seems to be traveling north-northeast—"

"I see that; a traveling earthquake!" Eaton flapped his arms, a tiny and ridiculous figure against a background of wall charts and framed diplomas. "Well . . . do something, Reynolds! Where's Mayor Daugherty?"

"Underfoot!" Reynolds snapped, and cut off.

Outside, a layer of sunset-stained dust obscured the
sweep of level plain. A rock-dozer rumbled up, ground to a halt by Reynolds. A man jumped down.

"I got the boys moving equipment out," he panted. "The thing's cutting a trail straight as a rule for the highway!" He pointed to a raised roadbed a quarter-mile away.

"How fast is it moving?"

"She's done a hundred yards; it hasn't been ten minutes yet!"

"If it keeps up another twenty minutes, it'll be into the Intermix!"

"Scratch a few million cees and six months' work then, Pete!"

"And Southside Mall's a couple miles farther."

"Hell, it'll damp out before then!"

"Maybe. Grab a field car, Dan."

"Pete!" Mayfield came up at a trot. "This thing's building! The centroid's moving on a heading of 022—"

"How far sub-surface?"

"It's rising; started at two-twenty yards, and it's up to one-eighty!"

"What have we stirred up?" Reynolds stared at Mayfield as the field car skidded to a stop beside them.

"Stay with it, Jim. Give me anything new. We're taking a closer look." He climbed into the rugged vehicle.

"Take a blast truck—"

"No time!" He waved and the car gunned away into the pall of dust.

The rock car pulled to a stop at the crest of the three-level Intermix on a lay-by designed to permit tourists to enjoy the view of the site of the proposed port, a hundred feet below. Reynolds studied the progress of the quake through field glasses. From this vantage point, the path of the phenomenon was a clearly defined trail of tilted and broken rock, some of the slabs twenty feet across. As he watched, the fissure lengthened.

"It looks like a mole's trail." Reynolds handed the glasses to his companion, thumbed the Send key on the car radio.

"Jim, get Eaton and tell him to divert all traffic from the Circular south of Zone Nine. Cars are already clogging the right-of-way. The dust is visible from a mile 230
away, and when the word gets out there’s something
going on, we’ll be swamped.”

“I’ll tell him, but he won’t like it!”

“This isn’t politics! This thing will be into the outer
pad area in another twenty minutes!”

“It won’t last—”

“How deep does it read now?”

“One-fivel” There was a moment’s silence. “Pete, if it
stays on course, it’ll surface at about where you’re
parked!”

“Uh-huh. It looks like you can scratch one Intermix.
Better tell Eaton to get a story ready for the press.”

“Pete—talking about newshounds,” Dan said beside
him. Reynolds switched off, turned to see a man in a
gay-colored driving outfit coming across from a battered
Monojag sportster which had pulled up behind the rock
car. A big camera case was slung across his shoulder.

“Say, what’s going on down there?” he called.

“Rock slide,” Reynolds said shortly. “I’ll have to ask
you to drive on. The road’s closed . . .”

“Who’re you?” The man looked belligerent.

“I’m the engineer in charge. Now pull out, brother.”
He turned back to the radio. “Jim, get every piece of
heavy equipment we own over here, on the double.” He
paused, feeling a minute trembling in the car. “The In-
termix is beginning to feel it,” he went on. “I’m afraid
we’re in for it. Whatever that thing is, it acts like a solid
body boring its way through the ground. Maybe we can
barricade it.”

“Barricade an earthquake?”

“Yeah . . . I know how it sounds . . . but it’s the only
idea I’ve got.”

“Hey . . . what’s that about an earthquake?” The man
in the colored suit was still there. “By gosh, I can feel
it—the whole bridge is shaking!”

“Off, Mister—now!” Reynolds jerked a thumb at the
traffic lanes where a steady stream of cars was hurrying
past. “Dan, take us over to the main track. We’ll have to
warn this traffic off . . .”

“Hold on, fellow,” the man unlimbered his camera. “I
represent the New Devon Scope. I have a few ques-
tions—”

231
“I don’t have the answers,” Pete cut him off as the car pulled away.

“Hah!” the man who had questioned Reynolds yelled after him. “Big shot! Think you can . . .” His voice was lost behind them.

In a modest retirees’ apartment block in the coast town of Idlebreeze, forty miles from the scene of the freak quake, an old man sat in a reclining chair, half dozing before a yammering Tri-D tank.

“. . . Grandpa,” a sharp-voiced young woman was saying. “It’s time for you to go to bed.”

“Bed? Why do I want to go to bed? Can’t sleep anyway . . .?” He stirred, made a pretense of sitting up, showing an interest in the Tri-D. “I’m watching this show.”

“It’s not a show, it’s the news,” a fattish boy said disgustedly. “Ma, can I switch channels—”

“Leave it alone, Bennie,” the old man said. On the screen, a panoramic scene spread out, a stretch of barren ground across which a furrow showed. As he watched, it lengthened.

“. . . Up here at the Intermix we have a fine view of the whole curious business, lazangemmun,” the announcer chattered. “And in our opinion it’s some sort of publicity stunt staged by the Port Authority to publicize their controversial Port project—”

“Ma, can I change channels?”

“Go ahead, Bennie—”

“Don’t touch it,” the old man said. The fattish boy reached for the control, but something in the old man’s eye stopped him.

“The traffic’s still piling up here,” Reynolds said into the phone.

“Damn it, Jim, we’ll have a major jam on our hands—”

“He won’t do it, Pete! You know the Circular was his baby—the super all-weather pike that nothing could shut down. He says you’ll have to handle this in the field—"
“Handle, hell! I’m talking about preventing a major disaster! And in a matter of minutes, at that!”

“I’ll try again—”

“If he says no, divert a couple of the big ten-yard graders and block it off yourself. Set up field ‘arcs, and keep any cars from getting in from either direction.”

“Pete, that’s outside your authority!”

“You heard me!”

Ten minutes later, back at ground level, Reynolds watched the boom-mounted polyarcs swinging into position at the two roadblocks a quarter of a mile apart, cutting off the threatened section of the raised expressway. A hundred yards from where he stood on the rear cargo deck of a light grader rig, a section of rock fifty feet wide rose slowly, split, fell back with a ponderous impact. One corner of it struck the massive pier supporting the extended shelf of the lay-by above. A twenty-foot splinter fell away, exposing the reinforcing-rod core.

“How deep, Jimi?” Reynolds spoke over the roaring sound coming from the disturbed area.

“Just subsurface now, Pete! It ought to break through . . .” His voice was drowned in a rumble as the damaged pier shivered, rose up, buckled at its midpoint and collapsed, bringing down with it a large chunk of pavement and guard rail, and a single still-glowing light pole. A small car that had been parked on the doomed section was visible for an instant just before the immense slab struck. Reynolds saw it bounce aside, then disappear under an avalanche of broken concrete.

“My God, Pete—” Dan blurted. “That damned fool newshound—!”

“Look!” As the two men watched, a second pier swayed, fell backward into the shadow of the span above. The roadway sagged, and two more piers snapped. With a bellow like a burst dam, a hundred-foot stretch of the road fell into the roiling dust cloud.

“Pete!” Mayfield’s voice burst from the car radio. “Get out of there! I threw a reader on that thing and it’s chattering . . .!”

Among the piled fragments, something stirred, heaved, rising up, lifting multi-ton pieces of the broken road, thrusting them aside like so many potato chips. A
dull blue radiance broke through from the broached earth, threw an eerie light on the shattered structure above. A massive, ponderously irresistible shape thrust forward through the ruins. Reynolds saw a great blue-glowing profile emerge from the rubble like a surfacing submarine, shedding a burden of broken stone, saw immense treads ten feet wide claw for purchase, saw the mighty flank brush a still, standing pier, send it crashing aside.

“Pete... what... what is it—?”

“I don’t know.” Reynolds broke the paralysis that had gripped him. “Get us out of here, Dan, fast! Whatever it is, it’s headed straight for the city!”

I emerge at last from the trap into which I had fallen, and at once encounter defensive works of considerable strength. My scanners are dulled from lack of power, but I am able to perceive open ground beyond the barrier, and farther still, at a distance of 5.7 kilometers, massive walls. Once more I transmit the Brigade Rally signal; but as before, there is no reply. I am truly alone.

I scan the surrounding area for the emanations of Enemy drive units, monitor the EM spectrum for their communications. I detect nothing; either my circuitry is badly damaged, or their shielding is superb.

I must now make a decision as to possible courses of action. Since all my comrades of the Brigade have fallen, I compute that the walls before me must be held by Enemy forces. I direct probing signals at the defenses, discover them to be of unfamiliar construction, and less formidable than they appear. I am aware of the possibility that this may be a trick of the Enemy; but my course is clear.

I re-engage my driving engines and advance on the Enemy fortress.

“You’re out of your mind, Father,” the stout man said. “At your age—”

“At your age, I got my nose smashed in a brawl in a bar on Aldo,” the old man cut him off. “But I won the fight.”

234
“James, you can’t go out at this time of night . . .” an elderly woman wailed.

“Tell them to go home.” The old man walked painfully toward his bedroom door. “I’ve seen enough of them for today.”

“Mother, you won’t let him do anything foolish?”

“He’ll forget about it in a few minutes; but maybe you’d better go now and let him settle down.”

“Mother . . . I really think a home is the best solution.”

“Yes, Grandma,” the young woman nodded agreement. “After all, he’s past ninety—and he has his veteran’s retirement . . .”

Inside his room, the old man listened as they departed. He went to the closet, took out clothes, began dressing.

City Engineer Eaton’s face was chalk-white on the screen.

“No one can blame me,” he said. “How could I have known—”

“Your office ran the surveys and gave the PA the green light,” Mayor Daugherty yelled.

“All the old survey charts showed was ‘Disposal Area.’” Eaton threw out his hands. “I assumed—”

“As City Engineer, you’re not paid to make assumptions! Ten minutes’ research would have told you that was a ‘Y’ category area!”

“What’s ‘Y’ category mean?” Mayfield asked Reynolds. They were standing by the field Comm center, listening to the dispute. Nearby, boom-mounted Tri-D cameras hummed, recording the progress of the immense machine, its upper turret rearing forty-five feet into the air, as it ground slowly forward across smooth ground toward the city, dragging behind it a trailing festoon of twisted reinforcing iron crusted with broken concrete.

“Half-life over one hundred years,” Reynolds answered shortly. “The last skirmish of the war was fought near here. Apparently this is where they buried the radio-active equipment left over from the battle.”

“But, that was more than seventy years ago—”

“There’s still enough residual radiation to contaminate anything inside a quarter mile radius.”
“They must have used some hellish stuff.” Mayfield stared at the dull shine half a mile distant.

“Reynolds, how are you going to stop this thing?” The mayor had turned on the PA Engineer.

“Me stop it? You saw what it did to my heaviest rigs: flattened them like pancakes. You’ll have to call out the military on this one, Mr. Mayor.”

“Call in Federation forces? Have them meddling in civic affairs?”

“The station’s only sixty-five miles from here. I think you’d better call them fast. It’s only moving at about three miles per hour but it will reach the south edge of the Mall in another forty-five minutes.”

“Can’t you mine it? Blast a trap in its path?”

“You saw it claw its way up from six hundred feet down. I checked the specs; it followed the old excavation tunnel out. It was rubble-filled and capped with twenty-inch compressed concrete.”

“It’s incredible,” Eaton said from the screen. “The entire machine was encased in a ten-foot shell of reinforced armo-crete. It had to break out of that before it could move a foot!”

“That was just a radiation shield; it wasn’t intended to restrain a Bolo Combat Unit.”

“What was, may I inquire?” The mayor glared.

“The units were deactivated before being buried,” Eaton spoke up, as if he were eager to talk. “Their circuits were fused. It’s all in the report—”

“The report you should have read somewhat sooner,” the mayor snapped.

“What . . . what started it up?” Mayfield looked bewildered. “For seventy years it was down there, and nothing happened!”

“Our blasting must have jarred something,” Reynolds said shortly. “Maybe closed a relay that started up the old battle reflex circuit.”

“You know something about these machines?” the mayor asked.

“I’ve read a little.”

“Then speak up, man. I’ll call the station, if you feel I must. What measures should I request?”
"I don't know, Mr. Mayor. As far as I know, nothing on New Devon can stop that machine now."

The mayor's mouth opened and closed. He whirled to the screen, blanked Eaton's agonized face, punched in the code for the Federation Station.

"Colonel Blane!" he blurted as a stern face came onto the screen. "We have a major emergency on our hands! I'll need everything you've got! This is the situation—"

I encounter no resistance other than the flimsy barrier, but my progress is slow. Grievous damage has been done to my maindrive sector due to overload during my escape from the trap; and the failure of my sensing circuitry has deprived me of a major portion of my external receptivity. Now my pain circuits project a continuous signal to my awareness center; but it is my duty to my commander and to my fallen comrades of the Brigade to press forward at my best speed; but my performance is a poor shadow of my former ability.

And now at last the Enemy comes into action! I sense aerial units closing at supersonic velocities; I lock my lateral batteries to them and direct salvo fire; but I sense that the arming mechanisms clatter harmlessly. The craft sweep over me, and my impotent guns elevate, track them as they release detonants that spread out in an envvelopmental pattern which I, with my reduced capabilities, am powerless to avoid. The missiles strike; I sense their detonations all about me; but I suffer only trivial damage. The Enemy has blundered if he thought to neutralize a Mark XXVIII Combat Unit with mere chemical explosives! But I weaken with each meter gained.

Now there is no doubt as to my course. I must press the charge and carry the walls before my reserve cells are exhausted.

From a vantage point atop a bucket rig four hundred yards from the position the great fighting machine had now reached, Pete Reynolds studied it through night glasses. A battery of beamed polyarcs pinned the giant hulk, scarred and rust-scaled, in a pool of blue-white
light. A mile and a half beyond it, the walls of the Mall rose sheer from the garden setting.

"The bombers slowed it some," he reported to Eaton via scope. "But it's still making better than two miles per hour. I'd say another twenty-five minutes before it hits the main ring-wall. How's the evacuation going?"

"Badly! I get no cooperation! You'll be my witness, Reynolds, I did all I could—"

"How about the mobile batteries; how long before they'll be in position?" Reynolds cut him off.

"I've heard nothing from Federation Central—typical militaristic arrogance, not keeping me informed—but I have them on my screens. They're two miles out—say three minutes."

"I hope you made your point about N-heads."

"That's outside my province!" Easton said sharply. "It's up to Brand to carry out this portion of the operation!"

"The HE Missiles didn't do much more than clear away the junk it was dragging," Reynolds' voice was sharp.

"I wash my hands of responsibility for civilian lives," Eaton was saying when Reynolds shut him off, changed channels.

"Jim, I'm going to try to divert it," he said crisply. "Eaton's sitting on his political fence; the Feds are bringing artillery up, but I don't expect much from it. Technically, Brand needs Sector O.K. to use Nu-clear stuff, and he's not the boy to stick his neck out—"

"Divert it how? Pete, don't take any chances—"

Reynolds laughed shortly. "I'm going to get around it and drop a shaped drilling charge in its path. Maybe I can knock a tread off. With luck, I might get its attention on me, and draw it away from the Mall. There are still a few thousand people over there, glued to their Tri-D's. They think it's all a swell show."

"Pete, you can't walk up on that thing! It's hot..." He broke off. "Pete—there's some kind of nut here—he claims he has to talk to you; says he knows something about that damned juggernaut. Shall I send...?"

Reynolds paused with his hand on the cut-off switch.
“Put him on,” he snapped. Mayfield’s face moved aside and an ancient, bleary-eyed visage stared out at him. The tip of the old man’s tongue touched his dry lips.

“Son, I tried to tell this boy here, but he wouldn’t listen—”

“What have you got, old-timer?” Pete cut in. “Make it fast.”

“My name’s Sanders. James Sanders. I’m . . . I was with the Planetary Volunteer Scouts, back in ’71—”

“Sure, Dad,” Pete said gently. “I’m sorry, I’ve got a little errand to run—”

“Wait . . .” The old man’s face worked. “I’m old, Son—too damned old. I know. But bear with me. I’ll try to say it straight. I was with Hayle’s squadron at Toledo. Then afterwards, they shipped us . . . but hell, you don’t care about that! I keep wandering, Son; can’t help it. What I mean to say is—I was in on that last scrap, right here at New Devon—only we didn’t call it New Devon then. Called it Hellport. Nothing but bare rock and Enemy emplacements . . .”

“You were talking about the battle, Mr. Sanders,” Pete said tensely. “Go on with that part.”

“Lieutenant Sanders,” the oldster said. “Sure, I was Acting Brigade Commander. See, our major was hit at Toledo—and after Tommy Chee stopped a sidewinder . . .”

“Stick to the point, Lieutenant!”

“Yes, sir!” the old man pulled himself together with an obvious effort. “I took the Brigade in; put out flankers, and ran the Enemy into the ground. We mopped ’em up in a thirty-three hour running fight that took us from over by Crater Bay all the way down here to Hellport. When it was over, I’d lost six units, but the Enemy was done. They gave us Brigade Honors for that action. And then . . .”

“Then what?”

“Then the triple-dyed yellow-bottoms at Headquarters put out the order the Brigade was to be scrapped; said they were too hot to make decon practical. Cost too much, they said! So after the final review . . .” He gulped, blinked. “They planted ’em deep, two
hundred meters, and poured in special High-R con-
crete."

"And packed rubble in behind them," Reynolds fin-
ished for him. "All right, Lieutenant, I believe you! But
what started that machine on a rampage?"

"Should have known they couldn't hold down a Bolo
Mark XXVIII!" The old man's eyes lit up. "Take more
than a few million tons of rock to stop Lenny when his
battle board was lit!"

"Lenny?"

"That's my old Command Unit out there, Son. I saw
the markings on the 3-D. Unit LNE of the Dinochrome
Brigade!"

"Listen!" Reynolds snapped out. "Here's what I intend
to try . . . " he outlined his plan.

"Ha!" Sanders snorted. "It's quite a notion, Mister, but
Lenny won't give it a sneeze."

"You didn't come here to tell me we were licked,"
Reynolds cut in. "How about Brand's batteries?"

"Hell, Son, Lenny stood up to point-blank Hellbore
fire on Toledo, and—"

"Are you telling me there's nothing we can do?"

"What's that? No, Son, that's not what I'm saying . . . "

"Then what!"

"Just tell these johnnies to get out of my way, Mister.
I think I can handle him."

At the field Comm hut, Pete Reynolds watched as the
man who had been Lieutenant Sanders of the Volunteer
Scouts pulled shiny black boots over his thin ankles, and
stood. The blouse and trousers of royal blue polyon
hung on his spare frame like wash on a line. He grinned,
a skull's grin.

"It doesn't fit like it used to; but Lenny will recognize
it. It'll help. Now, if you've got that power pack
ready . . . ."

Mayfield handed over the old-fashioned field instru-
ment Sanders had brought in with him.

"It's operating, sir—but I've already tried everything
I've got on that infernal machine; I didn't get a peep out
of it."

Sanders winked at him. "Maybe I know a couple of
tricks you boys haven’t heard about.” He slung the strap over his bony shoulder and turned to Reynolds.

“Guess we better get going, Mister. He’s getting close.”

In the rock car Sanders leaned close to Reynolds’ ear. “Told you those Federal guns wouldn’t scratch Lenny. They’re wasting their time.”

Reynolds pulled the car to a stop at the crest of the road, from which point he had a view of the sweep of ground leading across to the city’s edge. Lights sparkled all across the towers of New Devon. Close to the walls, the converging fire of the ranked batteries of infinite repeaters drove into the glowing bulk of the machine, which plowed on, undeterred. As he watched, the firing ceased.

“Now, let’s get in there, before they get some other scheme going,” Sanders said.

The rock car crossed the rough ground, swung wide to come up on the Bolo from the left side. Behind the hastily-rigged radiation cover, Reynolds watched the immense silhouette grow before him.

“I knew they were big,” he said. “But to see one up close like this—” He pulled to a stop a hundred feet from the Bolo.

“Look at the side ports,” Sanders said, his voice crisper now. “He’s firing anti-personnel charges—only his plates are flat. If they weren’t, we wouldn’t have gotten within half a mile.” He unclipped the microphone and spoke into it:

“Unit LNE, break off action and retire to ten-mile line!”

Reynolds’ head jerked around to stare at the old man. His voice had rung with vigor and authority as he spoke the command.

The Bolo ground slowly ahead. Sanders shook his head, tried again.

“No answer, like that fella said. He must be running on nothing but memories now . . .” He re-attached the microphone and before Reynolds could put out a hand, had lifted the anti-R cover and stepped off on the ground.

“Sanders—get back in here!” Reynolds yelled.
“Never mind, Son. I’ve got to get in close. Contact induction.” He started toward the giant machine. Frantically, Reynolds started the car, slammed it into gear, pulled forward.

“Better stay back,” Sanders’ voice came from his field radio. “This close, that screening won’t do you much good.”

“Get in the car!” Reynolds roared. “That’s hard radiation!”

“Sure; feels funny, like a sunburn, about an hour after you come in from the beach and start to think maybe you got a little too much.” He laughed. “But I’ll get to him . . .”

Reynolds braked to a stop, watched the shrunken figure in the baggy uniform as it slogged forward, leaning as against a sleetstorm.

“I’m up beside him,” Sanders’ voice came through faintly on the field radio. “I’m going to try to swing up on his side. Don’t feel like trying to chase him any farther.”

Through the glasses, Reynolds watched the small figure, dwarfed by the immense bulk of the fighting machine as he tried, stumbled, tried again, swung up on the flange running across the rear quarter inside the churning bogie wheel.

“He’s up,” he reported. “Damned wonder the track didn’t get him before . . .”

Clinging to the side of the machine, Sanders lay for a moment, bent forward across the flange. Then he pulled himself up, wormed his way forward to the base of the rear quarter turret, wedged himself against it. He unslung the communicator, removed a small black unit, clipped it to the armor; it clung, held by a magnet. He brought the microphone up to his face.

In the Comm shack Mayfield leaned toward the screen, his eyes squinted in tension. Across the field Reynolds held the glasses fixed on the man lying across the flank of the Bolo. They waited.

The walls are before me, and I ready myself for a final effort, but suddenly I am aware of trickle currents flowing over my outer surface. Is this some new trick of the
Enemy? I tune to the wave-energies, trace the source. They originate at a point in contact with my aft port armor. I sense modulation, match receptivity to a computed pattern. And I hear a voice:

“Unit LNE, break it off, Lenny. We’re pulling back now, Boy! This is Command to LNE; pull back to ten miles. If you read me, Lenny, swing to port and halt.”

I am not fooled by the deception. The order appears correct, but the voice is not that of my Commander. Briefly I regret that I cannot spare energy to direct a neutralizing power flow at the device the Enemy has attached to me. I continue my charge.

“Unit LNE! Listen to me, Boy; maybe you don’t recognize my voice, but it’s me! You see—some time has passed. I’ve gotten old. My voice has changed some, maybe. But it’s me! Make a port turn, Lenny. Make it now!”

I am tempted to respond to the trick, for something in the false command seems to awaken secondary circuits which I sense have been long stilled. But I must not be swayed by cleverness of the Enemy. My sensing circuitry has faded further as my energy cells drain; but I know where the Enemy lies. I move forward, but I am filled with agony, and only the memory of my comrades drives me on.

“Lenny, answer me. Transmit on the old private band—the one we agreed on. Nobody but me knows it, remember?”

Thus the Enemy seeks to beguile me into diverting precious power. But I will no listen.

“Lenny—not much time left. Another minute and you’ll be into the walls. People are going to die. Got to stop you, Lenny. Hot here. My God, I’m hot. Not breathing too well, now. I can feel it; cutting through me like knives. You took a load of Enemy power, Lenny; and now I’m getting my share. Answer me, Lenny. Over to you...”

It will require only a tiny allocation of power to activate a communication circuit. I realize that it is only an Enemy trick, but I compute that by pretending to be deceived, I may achieve some trivial advantage. I adjust circuitry accordingly, and transmit:
“Unit LNE to Command. Contact with Enemy defensive line imminent. Request supporting fire!”

“Lenny . . . you can hear me? Good boy, Lenny! Now make a turn, to port. Walls . . . close . . .”

“Unit LNE to Command. Request positive identification; transmit code 685749.”

“Lenny—I can’t . . . don’t have code blanks. But it’s me . . .”

“In absence of recognition code, your transmission disregarded.” I send. And now the walls loom high above me. There are many lights, but I see them only vaguely. I am nearly blind now.

“Lenny—less’n two hundred feet to go. Listen, Lenny. I’m climbing down. I’m going to jump down, Lenny, and get around under your force scanner pickup. You’ll see me, Lenny. You’ll know me then.”

The false transmission ceases. I sense a body moving across my side. The gap closes. I detect movement before me, and in automatic reflex fire anti-P charges before I recall that I am unarmed.

A small object has moved out before me, and taken up a position between me and the wall behind which the Enemy conceal themselves. It is dim, but appears to have the shape of a man. . . .

I am uncertain. My alert center attempts to engage inhibitory circuitry which will force me to halt, but it lacks power. I can override it. But still I am unsure. Now I must take a last risk, I must shunt power to my forward scanner to examine this obstacle more closely. I do so, and it leaps into greater clarity. It is indeed a man—and it is enclothed in regulation blues of the Volunteers. Now, closer, I see the face, and through the pain of my great effort, I study it . . .

“He’s backed against the wall,” Reynolds said hoarsely. “It’s still coming. Fifty feet to go—”

“You were a fool, Reynolds!” the mayor barked. “A fool to stake everything on that old dotard’s crazy ideas!”

“Hold it!” As Reynolds watched, the mighty machine slowed, halted, ten feet from the sheer wall before it. For a moment it sat, as though puzzled. Then it backed,
halted again, pivoted ponderously to the left and came about.

On its side, a small figure crept up, fell across the lower gun deck. The Bolo surged into motion, retracing its route across the artillery-scarred gardens.

“He’s turned it,” Reynolds let his breath out with a shuddering sigh. “It’s headed out for open desert. It might get twenty miles before it finally runs out of steam.”

The strange voice that was the Bolo’s came from the big panel before Mayfield:

“Command . . . Unit LNE reports main power cells drained, secondary cells drained; now operating at .037 percent efficiency, using Final Emergency Power. Request advice as to range to be covered before relief maintenance available.”

“It’s a long, long way, Lenny . . .” Sanders’ voice was a bare whisper. “But I’m coming with you . . .”

Then there was only the crackle of static. Ponderously, like a great, mortally stricken animal, the Bolo moved through the ruins of the fallen roadway, heading for the open desert.

“That damned machine,” the mayor said in a hoarse voice. “You’d almost think it was alive.”

“You would at that,” Pete Reynolds said.

*Dead End*

*Mike Hodous*

Kiirnemar Kluus lowered his centaurlike body to the soft cushions and leaned forward on the low table. He looked slowly and carefully around the room. Five pairs of eyes looked back at him.

“Yalkuus, you may as well begin. Keep your summary brief and to the point. Remember, this is only a preliminary hearing.” Kluus’s face darkened. “Although we
probably already know what we will recommend to the Joint Chiefs. Yalkuus?"

Kiirnemar Yalkuus rose to his feet. "The twelve ships appeared at approximately 10:47 hours Lydion standard on Zeerog 6 of this year. There was no warning. They were just suddenly there on the radar screens, about thirty-five hundred larques off the surface of Mera, slightly outside its orbit around Lydion; heading for Lydion at about five larques per second. We tried to signal them from Mera base, of course." He snorted. "I almost ordered our standard recognition pattern beamed at them. Shows how well I was thinking. One of the technicians came up with something a little better, though. Pulses counting out the prime numbers. Not that it did any good.

"Anyway, we kept trying to raise them on every frequency we could manage, including optical laser. No response. They just stayed right on their original course—for about three minutes, that is. By then they were almost straight above Mera main base. They turned; at more than eighty gravities acceleration, if you want to believe our computers. Just changed course and dived at us."

Yalkuus's voice hardened. "That did it. They were diving on our main base on Mera in what looked like attack formation. I ordered the Questors fired. All twenty of 'A' battery.

"Those blasted ships acted as if they were laughing at us. They just broke formation and dodged. Dodged our Questors! Maximum acceleration over a hundred gravities and those ghosts outmaneuvered them! But don't get the idea that the Questors would have done that much good even with another fifty gravities acceleration. As soon as one of them got within even ten larques of target it got blasted by some kind of countermissile. Nice hardware, those countermissiles," Yalkuus went on bitterly. "Half the size of our Questors, just as accurate, and warheads just as powerful. Oh, yes, and capable of boosting at well over two hundred gravities!"

Kluus looked at him wearily. "Are you through, or did you plan to resign your commission also?"

246
“Huh? Kiirnemar, if you’d been in command of that base—”

“All right!” Kluus went on more slowly, “If you don’t mind, I believe we are more interested in what happened than in your thoughts on these aliens’ sense of humor.”

“Y-yes, sir,” Yalkuus managed. “Well,” he said, regaining some of his poise, “after ‘A’ battery had gone off there was nothing to do but throw everything else we had at them. With exactly the same results: No hits. By then those ships were scattered all over the sky. One of them was down to fifty larges off the surface.” He smiled grimly. “And one of our Questors nailed it. Got within half a larq and detonated.”

He frowned again. “And that blasted boat just lost power. Any ship we’ve got would have been vaporized. This thing just stopped boosting. Luckily it was traveling at well over Mera’s escape velocity and tangent to the surface when it lost power. It just headed into orbit around the sun.

“The rest of those ships stopped dodging and turned and ran. They were all boosting at well over a hundred gravities now; needless to say we couldn’t touch them. As soon as they got about thirty-five hundred larges off-satellite they disappeared. Vanished. Just dropped off the radar screens.” Yalkuus shrugged. “All we could do was to send some of our ships after the one we crippled.”

Kalar broke the silence. “Those ships appeared that suddenly? They weren’t detected by Thura base? By anyone else?”

Yalkuus shook his head. “They were detected by Thura base—one and a half seconds after Mera picked them up. Which, considering where Mera and Thura were in their orbits, is just the time it took for a radar pulse to go from Thura to Mera and back again. Our other bases—nothing. Every other radar screen in the whole blasted solar system—nothing. As far as our instruments are concerned, until 10:47 and some odd seconds that day those blasted ships just weren’t.”

“All right, thank you, Yalkuus,” Kluus said. He turned to the being seated at his right. “Varak, what was left of
that ship when you and Lich reached it? Especially the drive system."

"Quite a lot. The drive field seems pretty much like our Uurlappen drive. Creates a unidirectional pseudo-gravitational field that accelerates every subnuclear particle within the ship at the same rate. Keeps the crew or anything else from feeling the acceleration; everything inside the field is in free fall. Power comes from a hydrogen fusion reactor; again, same as our ships." He got to his feet and began pacing clockwise around the table. "Only none of our boats is good for more than fifteen gravities acceleration. Unless you want to call the Questors boats. Anyway, they're rocket powered. Hardly the same as the Uurlappen drive."

"No mystery about that ship's performance, though. That bus simply has a fiendishly high power-to-weight ratio. Had. Not that much left of it. But that fusion reactor came through in relatively good shape."

Varak reversed course, began pacing counterclockwise. "Interesting piece of hardware. You all know the basic problem with our Zaldon ring fusion reactor, don't you? No? Up to about twenty KZX you get more effective power the more hydrogen you feed in to react. That's twenty KZX produced in the reactor. You've got to divert seven KZX of that into the stabilizer field coils to contain the reaction. Net power output, thirteen KZX."

"Fine. Feed in a little more hydrogen. What happens? More power, certainly. Say twenty-five KZX. But now it takes fourteen KZX to keep the reaction stable. Net power output, eleven KZX. Not so good, is it? Crank up your reactor to thirty-three KZX and it takes all thirty-three KZX just to keep the whole mess from blowing up in your face. And above thirty-three KZX you'd better have an outside source of power feeding into your stabilizer field coils, or what you have is no longer a reactor, but a rapidly expanding cloud of ionized plasma. You just don't get more than thirteen KZX out of a standard Zaldon reactor."

"I know, we can get twice that using Morlumm stabilizer units as we do with our planet-based power plants. So take a Zaldon reactor with Morlumm stabilizing coils plus accompanying gadgetry; net power output, thirty KZX."

248
Add a few things like missile launchers, instruments, radar, communications gear, computers, crews’ quarters, and slap a pressure hull around it. And you’ve got a ship with all the armament of a Xilon-class cruiser, more than twice the power, and only four times the mass.

“But these—invaders? Visitors? Whatever you want to call them—have that beat. They’ve got a set of stabilizing coils at least as efficient as our Morlunn units, but still a little smaller than what we use in our regular Zaldon shipboard reactors. I’d estimate the reactor on that ship as good for close to forty KZX.

“That’s half of that outrageous power-to-weight ratio. The other half is the mass of that ship—or lack of mass. That boat is almost as large as a Xilon-class job, but only a quarter as massive. The whole structure is ridiculously flimsy by our standards. The framework probably wasn’t stressed for more than one and a half gravities; just enough to support its own weight on the ground with the drive shut down. And that hull! The outer plating is barely enough to contain one atmosphere pressure. The ship isn’t even compartmentalized. Oh, it’s divided into compartments, but none of the bulkheads will stand up to anything faintly resembling one atmosphere pressure differential. One good-size puncture anywhere on the outer hull would depressurize the whole ship.”

“Rather an odd way to design a ship, isn’t it?” Khuus asked. “And could you stop that pacing? You’re wearing a path in the carpet.”

“Huh? Sorry. Odd? What’s odd about it? Nothing at all, with the drive field this boat had. I know, it sounds like building a pressure hull out of aluminum foil stuck together with glue. But somehow that barge took a very near miss with a fusion bomb and came through still recognizable as a ship.

“The drive field’s the whole thing. It seems it wasn’t only a drive field, it was also a combination energy screen and meteor bumper. The field produces some quasi-surface almost completely reflective to radiant energy. It must let some light or something through; this boat has to navigate somehow. But only some. Hit it with more than some—the field lets some through and reflects the rest. Touch off a fusion bomb a larq or two
away. Any of our ships would be vaporized. But against this field—well, you’re trying to burn through a mirror with a laser. The target just doesn’t soak up enough energy to hurt it.

“And that field must have been proof against meteors somehow; don’t ask me how. So we’ve only had three ships holed by meteors in the last ten years. Would you build a ship that would be completely disabled by one hit? Neither would our ‘invaders,’ I’ll bet.”

“All right,” Kluus said. “The ship was indestructible. How was it destroyed?”

“The same way you burn through a mirror with a laser—use a powerful laser. That Questor detonated half a large away. The drive field reflected almost all of the radiation. But not quite all. The field absorbed enough energy to cause an overload on the field generators. They couldn’t take it. They burned out.

“And they did so in a very spectacular manner. They not only practically destroyed themselves, but they did the same to most of the other power machinery on board. Not to mention such miscellaneous damage as blowing the hull wide open and depressurizing the whole ship, or producing enough hard radiation to wreck all the solid state electronics gear. And all the electronics gear was solid state. Computers, communications gear—just so much junk.

“Oh, and we found your countermissiles, Yalkuus. Or rather what was left of seventeen of them, plus two launchers. All very close to what used to be the drive-field generators. As to why one of them didn’t take out that Questor . . . no ideas. That explosion did so much damage it’s impossible to tell what kept them from firing. All we found out is that they’re not rocket-powered. They’re driven by a scaled-down version of the ship’s drive.”

Kluus sighed. His eyes turned toward Tul. “And what of the crew? I presume there were no survivors?”

“After that explosion and explosive decompression? Of course there weren’t. Those bodies could have been dead before that Questor hit for all we could determine. Except that I consider a ship manned by corpses unlike-
ly. But I imagine you’re more interested in what we did find out about them than in what we didn’t.

“Bipeds; body weight roughly half of ours; two arms; five-fingered hands; head quite like ours; brain case not as large. But among other things these creatures have one less pair of legs to worry about. All males; at least the forty-three bodies we found more or less intact. The bits and pieces in the near vicinity of the power machinery are anyone’s guess. Except why would these creatures have all their females, if any, standing watch down in the power room at the same time? Their biochemistry, carbon based, of course. And they were oxygen breathers.”

Tul examined the faces around him. “Correct, gentlemen. Either these ‘visitors’ came from Lydion itself or from somewhere outside our own solar system. And I doubt that they could have been hiding out on our home planet all this time without our knowing it, don’t you? So they came from another solar system somehow.” He smiled. “Perhaps Lich has some idea of how.”

Lich’s booming voice almost echoed from the heavily draped walls. “It’s been obvious ever since those ships started their appearing and disappearing act. Ronan’s theory of relativity notwithstanding, you can build a faster-than-light drive. Varak and I found it when we went through the ship; or what had better be it, because it’s the only piece of equipment we can’t identify as something else. And it doesn’t seem too badly damaged; the unit itself, at least.”

“And can you reconstruct this device?” Kluus asked.

“Quite possibly. No, don’t get your hopes up,” Lich went on. “So we can reconstruct it. Do you have any idea how much work we’ll have to do before we can use it? We have to know how much power this thing needs and how it’s supplied. We found a set of bus bars leading back to the fusion reactor—melted. Burned apart. We can’t tell what’s supposed to be hooked up to what. We have to know how to pick and choose our destination. That seems to have been controlled by the main computer—which, thanks to that explosion down in the power room, is now just a piece of junk.”
“But surely you have at least some idea of how this device operates.”

“It operates by moving itself and the ship around it from point A to point B in such a manner that the distance between point A and point B, divided by the elapsed time for the trip, is a number greater than the speed of light. And in spite of all the complimentary remarks Public Information Service may have made about the qualifications of our theoretical physicists in the service of our glorious People’s Commonwealth of Lydion, that’s all I’m saying until my crew and I get that thing back into some semblance of working order.”

Kluus’s voice was icy. “You seem unable to make an intelligent remark about the workings of this device, so you make do with a clever one. You call yourself a theoretical physicist! The Joint Chiefs, my friend, will want something more in your report than your attempted wit- ticismus.”

“If you’re so anxious for miracles, go make an offering in the Grand Temple. Don’t give me that outraged look! Any complaint about my ‘insubordination’ will have to go through the Marshal of Scientific Research and Development, and for some odd reason he seems more concerned about how well I do my work than about how nice I am to kiirmemars.”

Kluus took a deep breath. “I beg your pardon. Would you be so kind as to inform us to whatever observations regarding this device you might wish to hazard?”

“I’d be glad to. And don’t worry; we’ve got some idea of what this gadget can do, even if we don’t know how it does it. Those twelve ships were traveling at about five larques per second when they first appeared—one twenty-thousandth of the speed of light. They were moving a lot faster when the eleven of them disappeared, but hardly close to the speed of light. So you don’t have to get up to light-speed first before you activate this . . . hyperdrive. Comic book name, but we’ve got to call it something. Those ships appeared about thirty-five hundred larques off the surface of Mera; they disappeared at the same distance. That means this doesn’t work at less than a certain distance from a body
of planetary, or near-planetary, mass. Why not, I haven’t the foggiest. But, if they could have reactivated this hyperdrive when we started tossing Questors at them, why not do that instead of hanging around and getting shot at?”

“Why not?” Kalar said. “Why not a lot of things. Why not appear like that somewhere else in the solar system instead of right in our back yard? Why not take it a little slower approaching Mera base instead of practically asking us to open fire? Why not fire a few of those countermissiles at Mera base itself when the shooting started? Why not stay and fight when they could have mopped us up? And just what were we invaded by? A war fleet? A scientific expedition? A colonizing party?”

“With an all male crew?”

“So forget the colonizing party. But what in Lud’s name are we up against? What do these things do now? Mark us down as a menace to health and sanitation? Go back for the police? The Marines? The exterminators? Or do they just decide to stay out of our solar system until we learn some manners? I don’t know; none of this makes any sense. Anything we do will just be a shot in the dark.”

“Does that mean we should do nothing?” Kluus asked.

“No, of course not. But let’s face it. Whatever we do, we won’t really know what we’re doing.” Kalar sighed. “What are we doing, anyway?”

“Have we any choice?” Kluus said. “We must consider these beings hostile. Whatever their intentions, their mere existence is a threat to our security. We must prepare for a full-scale attack, whether they plan one or not.

“It goes without saying that in a major campaign our present weapons would be useless. We must rearm as soon as possible with as many new warships as we can produce. By an extraordinary stroke of good fortune we have been given an enemy vessel; damaged, but, hopefully, reparable. We must be able to duplicate its performance at the least; to improve upon it as much as possible.

“We must learn the workings of the faster-than-light drive. We now know nothing other than that it works.
We must learn how it works, why it works, and most important, how we may put it to use,” Kluus glared at Lich. “I hope it proves an interesting task.”

“There they are,” Parker said, his eyes still on the main radar screen of the battle cruiser Sirius.

“How many?” Taylor asked.

“Four so far... no, five now.”

“Chang. Anything from N’guri?”

“He’s sending now, captain.” Chang, the radioman, looked up, grinning. “Mission Accomplished!”

“Why can’t that guy come up with something original? Tell him I’ll be waiting for him down by the berths. How many now, Parker?”

“All eleven, sir. Last one only fifty kilometers out. They should all be in their berths in a few minutes. Not bad piloting.”

“Not bad,” Taylor agreed.

The crews were already filing out of the air locks when Taylor arrived on the berthing deck. He looked around, his eyes searching... there. “N’guri!”

“Hi, boss!” Weaving slightly, the tall figure strode toward Taylor. “Mission Accomplished!”

“You said that already. Are you drunk or something? You look like you’re ready to fall over.”

N’guri winced. “Two days of free fall in that tin can you mistakenly call a spaceship and this is the thanks I get. Two days, boss! I’m not used to it!”

“N’guri, you’re a disgrace to the memory of Project Apollo. Come on, let’s go up to my cabin. How did the drone handle? Any trouble switching it in or out of hyperdrive?”

“None. The drag field worked beautifully. The drone handled like another part of my own ship—which I guess it was. No trouble with any of the other equipment; that hyperdrive probably could have handled another drone. It still would have been nice if you could have tossed in a synthograv unit, though.”

“Fusion reactor,” Taylor began. “Normal space drive. Hyperdrive unit, big enough to handle your ship and the drone. Drag field, just to make sure the drone stays inside your ship’s hyperdrive field. And besides all that
junk you want us to fit a synthograv generator into a boat that size? Now what happened to the drone?"

"As planned. One of their missiles caught it about a hundred fifty kilometers off the surface of their inner moon. The drive-field generators blew, don't worry. Right now that thing's in orbit around their sun with some of their ships after it. They should catch up with it in another day or two." They reached Taylor's cabin. "Listen, boss, just how long do you think it'll take those polo ponies to figure out that that Kyrstron 'hyperdrive' is a dud?"

"Who knows?" Taylor said as they entered. "Maybe ten years, maybe fifty, maybe a hundred. How long did it take us to decide that that thing was a bad guess? Just wait until those characters try to make an analysis of the field that gadget produces—once they put it back together. Did you ever try disproving Kyrstron's equations?"

"What am I supposed to be, a weapons officer or a mathematical physicist? I never got past tensor calculus."

"They're a mess. To disprove them you've got to know Lorocco's transformation, which you learn by making an analysis of a Mark I, II, III, IV, V, or VI Hyperdrive Field Generator—or of one of the first working models thereof. Which, according to Kyrstron's equations, shouldn't work, even though it does, and which means that Kyrstron's unit just doesn't work, even though it should. Which means . . . never mind! Which means that after those polo ponies spend a few decades trying to get some action out of that 'hyperdrive' unit they'll be a little less pugnacious than they are now."

"Why did the Council decide to give them the treatment, anyway?" N'guri asked.

"Usual thing. Military government, in their case tied in with a state religion. 'The Grand Temple of Lud the Omnipotent, Holy Protector of the People's Commonwealth of Lydion.' We couldn't have translated that right; something that bad they'd never get away with. But haven't you seen some of our translations of their video broadcasts that our spycers picked up? Their good
old Public Information Service can come up with stuff as bad as something out of the Twentieth Century."

N’guri didn’t answer.

“Anything wrong?” Taylor asked.

“Huh? Sorry, boss.” N’guri paused. “I was just thinking about Carson and the rest of them on board the drone. Somehow that just doesn’t seem a proper way to give a man burial.”

“I know; but... ‘The dead don’t care.’ Your grandfather donated his body to a medical research lab, didn’t he? Is this any different?”


Taylor’s smile answered N’guri’s. “You knew Carson. Right now his ghost is off some place laughing to itself about the joke his deceased form helped to pull on some poor, unsuspecting centaurs.”

There Is A Crooked Man

Jack Wodhams

“There is less crime than there used to be,” Sacpole, head of Co-Ord said. “On the other hand, the quality of the crimes committed has risen to an unprecedented degree. The apprehension of wrongdoers in straightforward cases is virtually one hundred percent. Those who commit common murder, burglary, theft, assault and the like, are easily detected and restrained. Generally speaking, potential criminals are discouraged sufficiently to ensure their social cooperation. This, and the unwarranted fear of the three-month mental reclamation course, have increasingly affected the downward trend on the per-capita crime scale.

“Those members of the public who might be so inclined are thoroughly aware of Co-Ord’s formidable resources and know that the odds against successfully perpetrating a criminal act are very high. Take into account that offenders become model citizens after treatment, which eliminates the possibility of habituation, and it
might seem that the dwindling of common malpractice places Co-Ord on the road to redundancy.

"This is not so. The 'common' crime has become quite uncommon in recent times. But Co-Ord continues to expand. It needs to expand. It MUST expand. A whole new section is required to deal with Instravel alone..."

Mr. Frederic Traff looked down at himself and choked back a cry of dismay. He had been incorrectly re-assembled. His legs were on backwards and his toes pointed to the rear.

Mr. Traff teetered unfamiliarly.

His arms did not feel right. He examined them. His elbows pointed forward, his palms faced outward from his sides.

"Oh, God," he groaned unhappily. "Oh, God."

A tear overflowed his eye and trickled down the back of his neck.

The label round his wasted neck said that he was Obadiah Hoskings, forty-six years, one hundred twenty-two pounds, apathetic inadequate, opium degenerate.

"Excellent," said the celebrated Dr. Joynter, neurosurgeon and Professor of Anatomy. "Perfect. I wonder where they found him? No matter."

"Does the Psychotherapy Center know just exactly how you intend to rehabilitate him?" Leslie asked.

"Their concern is not with ethics but results. I have their trust. I will justify that trust..."

"It's an encephalograph, a completely new type, superior to anything in use today."

Frank was skeptical. "Small, isn't it? Does it work?"

"It should do," Clive Mossy said. "No reason why it shouldn't."

"You mean you haven't tried it out yet?"

"It's at the testing stage now. That's why I invited you up."

"Oh, yeah?" Frank said. "I'm no guinea pig. I've had some of your bright ideas. I remember 'Mossy's Improved Electroconvulsive Machine.'"

"What was wrong with it?" Clive asked, nettled. "It
worked, didn’t it? Steveson seemed glad enough to steal it and modify me out of it.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Frank said. “I know all about it. So it was great, yeah, and you’re a genius. But that doesn’t stop me from twitching every time I think about it. No. No dice. Find yourself another boy.”

“But, Frank . . .”

“What’s his name?”

“Frederic Traff. Oslo to Vienna.”

“Outside interference?”

Rasulko frowned at the report. “Can’t be sure. Take a look and see what you think.”

Mauriss crossed to the plate-glass window and peered in at the unfortunate Mr. Traff. “Hm-m-m. Not as mixed up as they usually are. Interesting. Check out Dispatch and Reception?”

“Co-Ord teams are there now.”

“Hm-m-m. Good. Should be a comparatively easy case. Shouldn’t take more than a week to straighten him out.”

“You see how I have enlarged the brain cavity, Leslie? Eh? Excellent. Perfect. It fits beautifully.”

His bifocals flashed. Sharply he said, “Watch his temperature, Leslie! It’s gone up a degree.”

“Yes, sir.”


“Yes, sir.”

“Keep an eye on the nutrient flow, Leslie,” the doctor warned.

“Yes, sir.”


“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Then we shall proceed with the vital fusion.”

The note informed Igor Bernhof that five thousand dollars had been placed in his Swiss account.

He smiled. It was easy for an Instravel operator to finely fumble the relays at a critical moment to ensure the incapacitation of a certain traveler.

Like Mr. Traff, for instance.

"Relax, Frank. You won't feel a thing, I promise."

"I'd better not feel a thing," Frank said ominously.

Clive smiled. "There is nothing to be afraid of. It is a measuring device, that's all. It's only on thirty-two volt power."

"O.K., O.K. Get on with it. Don't take all night. I got things to do. And any minute I'll start getting sensible and tell you to go to hell."


Clive switched on.

Hoskings opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling. Crisp sunlight angled through the bars and he thought, "Hell! They've got me in the jailhouse again."

Then he thought, "But I'm a registered incurable." He mulled this over. "Maybe I did some damage." But this raised the objection, "What damage could I do in the dope area?"

He stared at the ceiling. He saw a fly preening its wings and rubbing its hands over a precious find.

With a suddenness that awakened his very toes, he became aware that his sight was startlingly keen. Without glasses. And . . . his tongue felt odd. But his mouth was uncommonly fresh. In fact . . . in fact he felt fresh. He felt fresh all over. In fact . . . in fact he felt alive. Clear headed. Even alert. It was years since he felt so . . . so conscious.

What bright sunlight! What a beautiful day! It would be a shame to waste such a day of vibrant promise.

He swung his legs off the bed and stared down at himself to discover the reason for his awkwardness:
Short legs; long arms; a long-thumbed, long-palmed hand; and hair; thick black hair—all over.
Hoskins gazed in disbelief.
He had changed into some kind of monkey.

“Instravel is one of the most exciting and important breakthroughs of this century,” Sacpole said. “Teams of scientists worked years to produce it and perfect it.
“Now we have Instravel, safe, sure and reliable; growing all the time, expanding; shorter than a straight line when it comes to moving an object from point ‘A’ to point ‘B’. A wonderful discovery, and currently the greatest single device to tax and absorb the talents of Co-Ord.

“Of those persons studying electrophysics on the libri-tape circuit, you can be sure that a small percentage are seeking knowledge purely in order to cheat the legitimate sponsors of their due in matters of personal and goods transport; or to attempt privately to smuggle forbidden items; or again, to make efforts to obtain a deliberate malfunction of a licensed Instravel container in order, that the user might disappear permanently.

“Before Instravel came into operation, the method was exhaustively tested over and over again to establish beyond doubt its absolute safety-certainty. If Instravel fails, you can be sure that the failure is due to deliberately contrived outside interference.

“Remember ALSA-Ranns Transport, Inc. ran a shock pulsator that almost destroyed Instravel at its inception. A large company competitively threatened by Instravel, their criminally negative defensive tactics were fortunately quickly detected and nullified. However, this episode demonstrated that Instravel was not invulnerable to outside attention and, since that time, many attempts have been made to breach the Instravel frequency illegally...”

“Ready, is it?”

The technician grinned knowingly and winked. “All set and rarin’ to go,” he said.

Sir Edgar Smith chilled at the implied familiarity. His
nose rose. “Aligned correctly to Cairo Reception?” he said austerely.

Still grinning, the technician nodded. “Set it for auto any time you have to go there—on business.”

Sir Edgar viewed the man with well-bred distaste. The emphasis placed upon the word “business” was almost crude. It was distressing to have need of such people. “Very good,” he said without warmth.

He turned and led the way from the bedroom. “Your installation fee is ten thousand dollars, I believe? If you will follow me, I will give you a transfer slip.”

Cheekily the technician said, “Better make out half-a-dozen or so. Break it down. Doesn’t look so suspicious. I’ll give you the names to use.”

“Hm-m-m,” was how Sir Edgar acknowledged this blunt wisdom, and he quickened his pace, that the departure of his guest might be expedited.

“That’s odd. I’m getting no reading.” Clive paused, perplexed. He bent over his encephalogram. “Hold it, Frank, I’ll just check the wiring.”

“Huh?” Frank said. Clive looked up. “I said I’ll look over the circuits.”

Frank’s expression was most peculiar. “Frank? Hey, Frank! What’s the matter?”

“Where . . . where am I? Where . . . who are you? What’s going on? Where am I?”

“You’re testing my machine. Relax, Frank.”

“Frank? Who’s Frank?” Abruptly Frank stood up. His breath coming faster, he gazed abstractedly around the room. His hand went to his forehead. “I . . . I don’t know who I am. I . . . I can’t remember. I can’t remember anything. What’s going on? What’s happened to me?”

Taken aback, Clive said, “Take it easy, boy.” He looked at his machine. “It seems I may have stumbled upon some kind of freak contingency . . .”

“It came by Special Delivery this morning, sir,” she said. “What is it?” Dorphelmyer asked.

His secretary picked at the tag. “It’s from the Voyd Carpet Company,” she said. “Can you tell who sent it?”

261
“It doesn’t say. Shall I get Brigg in to open it?”

The man who had been working on the radiant complex in the ceiling stepped down from his ladder. “May I help?” he asked.

“Oh,” Dorphelmyer turned. “Why, thank you. They wrap things so markedly these days. Have you anything to cut the wire?”

The handyman produced a pair of snips. Dorphelmyer had not the perception to detect the glint of mockery behind the heavy glasses. The man cast the wrappings aside and unfolded the carpet within.

“My word,” Dorphelmyer said. “My word.”

His secretary stood dumbly by.

“It’s a beauty,” the man said, brushing up his luxuriant old-fashioned moustache. “Goes with the decor perfectly.”

“Most peculiar,” Dorphelmyer said. The man seemed dissatisfied. He looked about the office and pursed his lips. He moved his ladder. “It would look best about here, I think,” he said. He pulled the circular carpet in front of the desk, directly under the radiation complex.

“There. Don’t you think that is effective?”

Dorphelmyer was hesitant. “What is it? Is it a carpet, really? It looks . . . It looks . . . Is it there?”

The man smiled tightly. “Of course. The color is called abyss-black; though, in actual fact, it is not black at all but a nonrefractive combination of pigmentation that deceive the eye.”

He took a few paces to the center of the carpet. The secretary gave a small shriek, and Dorphelmyer gasped involuntarily.

“See?” the man said. “Firm and solid.”

“Amazing,” Dorphelmyer said. “You look as though you are standing on nothing.”


The man smiled dryly and turned to collect his ladder.
"Not too much paci-gas, Leslie. Just enough to cool him into amenability..."

Una Sayld stepped into the lab. "What is it you want, Richard?" she asked boredly. She glanced at her watch. "It's nearly five and I have a dinner engagement tonight and I don't intend to be late."

Richard Baseman wiped his hands down his protective clothing. "It'll only take a couple of minutes," he said. He flipped a switch on the bench. "Do you mind sitting on the couch for a moment?"

She viewed him with mild disdain, one eyebrow raised.

She gave a slight shrug and moved to the couch. She seated herself, carefully pulled at her hemline, raised her chin and waited.

Richard closed the second set of contacts.

Una blinked. Her mouth partly opened, then her eyes closed and slowly her head went back. "Aaaaaaaaaah...", she said.

Richard smiled shrewdly. "Good, huh?" He shut the lab door and locked it.

She spread her arms on the couch. "What is it?" she said. "It feels so... so glowing." She raised her head and her eyes opened wide. "What is it?"

His grin was knowledgeably lopsided. "It's a development from our electronic massage ray," he said. "Feels good, doesn't it? Clothes inhibit it a little. Take your coat off and feel it on your arms."

She looked at him, her eyes large now, her breathing quickening. "Maybe I will," she said.

She unbuttoned her coat and slipped from the sleeves. "Oh, my." She flexed her arms. "Lovely."

His lips twitched. He moved and knelt at her side. His fingers lightly pushed back the hem of her skirt. She did not seem to notice.

"The more you expose, the more wonderful you will feel," he said softly.

"I tingle all over," she said. "It's lovely. It's like bathing in concentrated sunlight."

Being careful not to shield her with his body, Richard reached to undo her blouse. "It's a tactilitator. It makes you feel vibrant and alive, doesn't it?"
“It does, it does,” she panted. Then, “What are you doing?”
“I want you to know the full benefit,” he said with smooth insistence.

“Peach Belle and Post Express are standing nicely now and... They're racing!
“And first to leave the barrier stalls is Demagogue, followed by Caveat, Dandy Boy and Musselman, with Co-Pilot hitting out for the inside. In behind him Peach Belle and Blue River with...”

Up on Peach Belle, jockey Squit Sheeter hit the catch at his belt and expanded helium hissed unnoticed into his billowing jacket. Powerful stuff. He gripped his knees into his special saddle and hung on...

“You see, Hoskings, we have done you no real harm, have we? Your human body was not exactly a desirable property, was it?”
Hoskings hung on the bars and shook his great head to clear it. “Uh, uh, uh,” he grunted. “Nut... ruht.” He had great difficulty with the unfamiliar vocal chords.

“Not right?” Dr. Joynter said. “Was it right to let you rot away? To let your hopeless self-denigration put you in an early grave? What were you? A nobody. An outcast. And now? Now you have a fine body, young, virile and strong. You are unique.”

“A gorilla,” Hoskings panted through the bars.

“Is that so bad?” Dr. Joynter asked. “Think about it. You are no longer a besotted husk of a man. You are fit, vital. You are magnificent, don’t you see?”
Hoskings frowned in concentration, his big ape’s nostrils flaring. “Dunno,” he managed.

“Just rest,” Dr. Joynter said. “The more you think about it, the more you will see that I am right. You have a bright future. I envisage a brilliant career for you.”

Leslie entered with his dinner. She eyes Hoskings with open admiration.
Immediately conscious that his hair did not provide adequate concealment, Hoskings hastily turned his back, only to be aware that the fresh view was hardly more prepossessing.

264
He snatched a blanket from the bed and wrapped it round himself.

Leslie approached the bars. She smiled. “Would you like a banana, Mr. Hoskins?” she asked sweetly.

“What I tell you? What I tell you?” Sy Zadly said exuberantly. “Six length anna course record. An’ they dunno nothin’.”

He jammed his smokka back between his teeth only to tear it out again and wave it about. “I tell you, boy, we got it made. Who gonna find out? Nobody, that who. We gonna clean up.”

Wilf Waijer had his sober word of caution. “We’ve only got Peach Belle. Folk’ll get suspicious, she keeps on winnin’. Anyway, the odds’ll shorten an’ it won’t be worth the risk.”

Sy regarded him pityingly. “You got rock in your boot where your brain s’posed to be. You dumb? We fix it, Peach Belle lose, right? An’ who say Peach Belle only one? Anytime Sheeter ride we can fix, right? O.K.”

“You’ll need other jackets,” Wilf objected. “You’ll need a whole range of owners colors.”

Sy circled his smokka airily. “O.K. We gonna make money, hey? Already we even. Boy, you gotta ’spectorate if you gonna ‘vacuate. Yes, sir.” With deep satisfaction he struck the smokka into his mouth and braced his hands behind his back.

Expansively he surveyed his world.

The cop waddled over from his jet scooter tagging his violation pad from his pocket. “O.K.,” he said. “I don’t have to tell you what you were doing wrong. You know the prescribed southbound height and the speed over dwelling areas. Let me see your license.”

Clive Mossy reached affably for his wallet. The cop bent to peer through the window. His head came in line with what looked like a speaker, angled from the roof.

The cop looked puzzled.

Clive eased his foot from the control switch. “Can I do anything for you?”

The cop straightened up. “Where... What...?”

Clive leaned over to the window. “Can I help you?”
"I . . . I don't know. Where am I? What am I?"

Clive chuckled sympathetically. "Lost, are you? Tut, tut. What you need is a policeman," he said and, with a friendly wave, he lifted to fifty feet and continued south.

"How beddy bore dibes?" Frederic Traff asked wearily.

"You'll have to be patient, sir," the technician glibly replied. "These things take time."

Mr. Traff sagged. "Well, ad leasd you cad dry do ged by dose the right way ub dexd dib. Blowig is bosed awgward."

"One thing at a time, sir," the technician said brightly. "You're coming along nicely, don't worry."

Mr. Traff ground his teeth, and winced with pain. He kept forgetting that his incisors had changed places with his molars.

"It is human nature," Sacpole said. "It is the nature of Man to use the machines of Man to bring about the destruction of Man.

"Did not a charioteer sometimes partially sever the harness of a rival's rig? Have not men been sent to sea in boats cunningly patched with clay? Why, when we were younger, were bombs not put aboard airplanes; automobile brakes tampered with; bath water electrified?

"The continuing expansion of our technology greatly increases the variety of criminal ways and means . . ."

"This drug is undetectable. At least, we have found no way of detecting it.

"You have seen its effect upon muscle tissue, and rigorous testing has failed to fault the product. Side effects are minimal and temporary. Undiscernible safety.

"Gentlemen, used with discretion, Aktiv can make this the foremost athletic nation in the world. And open warfare being obsolete, I do not have to impress upon you the enormous prestige that can be won upon the international sporting field . . ."

Dorphelmyer paced his office. " . . . Forthcoming, reluctantly compelled to foreclose, Yours, et cetera, et cetera."

266
He halted.
His secretary scribbled. He looked down at his feet—and center of the rug. The illusion of standing on nothing still sent a thrill through him. “Walking on air.”
“Pardon, sir?”
“Eh? Oh, nothing.” He looked at his watch. “That will be all, I think, Miss Tolbar. If there is nothing more, you may go.”
“Very good, sir. I’ll have these ready by ten tomorrow.”
“Yes, yes. Goodnight, Miss Tolbar.”
She gathered her notes. “Goodnight, sir.”
She timidly skirted the rug, flushing a little at the amusement in her employer’s eyes. I don’t care, she thought, and her chin came up. It’s just not natural to walk on nothing.
And she closed the door and went home.

Joe left his Instravel cubicle after a swift glance up and down the battery.
His bare feet made no sound as he ran to the curtain that cut off the women’s section. He drew the stiff folds to one side, peered cautiously and stepped through.
Very conscious of his nakedness, he hissed, “Anna? Anna, where are you?”
He opened one cubicle door with his slip key. “Sorry, ma’am,” he said, and hastily closed the door again.
“Joe! Joe! I’m in here.”
“Anna!” Quickly he released the catch and squeezed into the compartment with his girl.
“Oh, Joe, Joe,” she said, throwing her arms around him, “I thought you couldn’t make it.”
“So did I.”
They went.
“I tell you I don’t want a happill,” her husband snarled. “Can’t you get it through your head that I enjoy being miserable?”

Kaminsky banged the lectroorder and cried, “Hal!” Boisterously he turned to the witnesses. “You see, comrades? Do you see? Like a drosky on a glacier, hey?” He threw up his hands. “He clips seventeen seconds off
the five thousand meters, and he is only a third-rank, broken down Kazkhshtan blodder. What can a real runner do with a touch of Spert, hey?"

Kaminsky leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Comrades, an intelligent application of this drug will ensure that the Soviet Union gains complete ascendancy in the forthcoming Games."

"Can the drug be detected?"

"It is undetectable," Kaminsky said. "Pure, absorbed, used, gone."

"It will need careful handling," Bosgorov said.

Kaminsky's features stretched sideways, unaided by his fingers. "The utmost secrecy is being observed."

Bosgorov nodded at the runner, who was now doing push-ups on the track. "What about him?"

Kaminsky turned. He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his lightweight English thermo-coat. He shrugged carelessly. "From his performance, I think he is suffering from salt deficiency," he said.

"I'll let you out, if you'll promise that you'll behave," Leslie said.

Hoskings leaned forward on his knuckles. "Errggh," he said.

Taking this for assent, Leslie opened the door.

Hoskings shuffled out.

"There," Leslie said. "Now you have the run of the place." She reached to stroke his hairy arm. Her eyes glowing, she breathed, "You'll find that your change has its compensations . . ."

"Co-Ord needs a full department to watch over Instravel alone," Sacpole said. "Constant vigilance is required if we are to track the brief pulsations of unlicensed Instravel containers bringing in illegal migrants and undesirables; to track private installations of the OWTE (One Way Ticket to Eternity) type; to thwart any attempts made by outside parties who, for private or political reasons, administer dispersal jolt oscillations to bring about either the permanent disintegration of the traveler, or disorganize his regrouping to an extent that requires months of permutated calibrations to reestablish.

268
“Then again, moving away from deliberate interference, we have to deal with the deliberate victim. The latest teen-age cult is mutual entirety. This is a serious prank where a boy and a girl endeavor to occupy the same container. Separating those who succeed in this enterprise again requires months of computer hours to divide, evaluate and correctly realign . . .”

Mr. Traff stared horrified as they wheeled the new admission past his door. It was a grotesque human octopus, two bodies fantastically fused. He shuddered at the incongruous grins on two teen-age faces.

A hand on his arm, “We’ll try and get your toenails up on top where they belong, Mr. Traff.”

Mr. Traff gestured down the corridor. “What . . . was that?”

“Uh? Oh, that. Just a couple of kids. That’s the third pair in two weeks. New craze they have. They call it togetherness.”

“Where are we going?” Naomi asked.

“Over to my place,” Clive Mossy said.

“Your place? No thank you. I want to go home.”

“Just for a nightcap,” Clive said.

“No,” she said firmly. “I know you and your nightcaps. I’ve had some. Nothing doing. You just take me home. To my home.”

Clive made a face. “O.K.,” he said. His foot pressed the control switch.

Naomi frowned. She shook her head.

“What’s the matter, honey?” Clive asked.

She put her hands to her temples. “I . . . I don’t know . . .”

“Headache? We’ll soon be home.”


Clive tut-tutted. “You’ve had too much excitement today, darling.” He grinned. “Here’s our home. We can put our feet up and rest, alone together at last.”

“Alone together? Wait a minute. Who are you? What’s happening?”
Clive brought the craft to a halt at his third-floor bay. He slipped his arm around her. "Darling, you must be joking," he said. He kissed her. "Surely you remember that we were married this afternoon?"

"Married?" Naomi said weakly.

"Of course, sweetheart." He brushed her shoulder. "Look. Confetti everywhere. Oh, darling, darling, you're wonderful, wonderful . . ."

"Mr. Hoskins?" Dr. Joynter called. "Oh, there you are. If you will come down here for a moment. The tailor is here to measure you."

Hoskins swung out of the tree in two easy loops and came bounding over the grass, his outsize Bermuda shorts flapping.

The tailor yelped, dropped his bag, and took off.

"What seems to be the trouble then?" Dr. Cruss asked.

"My parents don't seem to understand me. My father won't let me read his newslap, and my libritape is kept on the juvenile channel."

"I see. I'll speak to your parents about it."

"I wish you would. I'm tired of pap."

"I'll see what I can do," Dr. Cruss said. "Anything else?"

"Not that I can think of just now."

"Very well. But do try to be patient with them, won't you?"

Three-year-old Jerry Knowles sighed. Resignedly he said, "O.K."

"Naturally, every woman wants a super-child. It's understandable. But the point is that we cannot inundate the world with genius. Despite automation, there are many jobs tolerable only to persons of mediocre intelligence. Also, if genius is to become standard, those of us not of like mental capacity must become substandard.

"No. In my opinion, the DNA adjustment process should be carefully restricted to selected persons. After all, how much genius can we use?"
In a large room, the improved and modified Instravel containers were ready for critical testing.

Professor Muldible made one last adjustment to his project, wired the time delay, and stepped, fully clothed, into the dispatch cabinet.

He watched the clock tick the seconds away. "... Seven ... Six ... Five ..." Professor Muldible counted. ... Two ... One ... Zero ... One? ... Two? ... Three? ...

He stared blankly. Something had gone wrong. He had not moved. A wave of keen disappointment swept through him.

His Instravel unit cut out and a green all-clear flashed on.

Professor Muldible stepped from the receiver cabinet smiling broadly at his success as Professor Muldible stepped from the dispatch cabinet slowly shaking his head in perplexity ...

Senator Hardman stubbed out his nicolette and dropped it in the swalla box. "Should leave the kids mingled," he said. "It would serve them right. Make an example of a couple. Put them on show, even. That would stop them."

Sacpole clucked disapprovingly. "That is a vengeful precept and exactly the kind of principle we are trying to eradicate from our society. We must try to be civilized, Senator, at all times."

Hardman scowled. "It's wasting good money on irresponsible kids."

"You were young once yourself," Senator Philson pointed out.

"Things were different then," Hardman snapped back.

Philson grinned, "I guess so. Do you remember that Jameson girl, and the night you let her drive so that she could knock down that stuffed pedestrian? Boy, how you rigged that case. You had her eating out of your hand."

Hardman looked suddenly sheepish. "It was just a lesson in applied psychology, that's all. There was no need to bring that up here."

"It's a lesson in teen-age high spirits," Philson said.
firmly, "and you know that it would be wrong to subject kids to harsh punishment for a juvenile escapade."


"What was that, Michael?" she said with fresh interest.
"I said, wouldn't you like your child to be a genius?"
"Don't tell me you have some DNA pills?"
He patted his pocket significantly and nodded.
She looked at him thoughtfully for some moments.
"Where did you get them?"
"I know a man who knows a man."
"How do you know that they are genuine?"
"They're genuine, don't worry about that," he said confidently.
She stood up. "I'll think about it," she said.
He shrugged. "There are other women."
She stopped. "You're being very blunt, Michael," she censured.
He smiled. "With these pills I can command a price for my services," he said. "You I like. You appeal to me. You've got something." He spread his hands. "O.K. To you for free. Just thought I'd let you know."
He reached for his hat.
She made a quick decision. She caught his arm.
"Don't go," she said. And then, "It might be fun. How long does it take for the pills to act?"
"Potency is after one hour through to the fifth."
"Really?" she said brightly. "Arthur will not be home till eight. If you take one now . . ."

"Are you sure no one will see you switching colors?" said Wilf Waijer doubtfully.
"Sure he sure," Sy Zadly said, his paternal pat on the back straightening Squit Sheeter's riding curve almost lethally. "What he got to worry? Who's looking? He draw color, he switch. He win. He switch back. Simple." He enveloped Squit's thin shoulders with his ample arm.
"Ain't that right?
"Yeah," the overpowered Squit said lugubriously. "Simple."
Advertisement in Male Telemag: No bachelor den should be without a Kress Tactilitator. Stimulating and safe, the Kress Seductobeam is a must for those candlelight moments. Revel in the sensational Glo! An Experience IN Experience!

“All countries now spend large sums on top-secret projects and, while nearly all countries have diabolical weapons and frightening means at their disposal, they have reason to be afraid that their enemies may be even more formidabley equipped. It is the fear of ignorance, of some awful and unexpected retaliation, that has kept the world at peace for so many years. We do not know exactly how advanced our neighbors are, and they, likewise, can only guess at our true strength. We are frightened that they may know some of the fantastic things we know, and they are frightened that we may have discovered the terrible forces that they have found. And we are all afraid that we might not know enough.

“Warfare today is as it should be, a nonviolent mental conflict that will give a bloodless victory to those most fitted to rule, the wisely intelligent people.”

“It is you that is the copy, not I,” Professor Muldible said. “I was in the dispatch box and never moved.”

“Nonsense,” Professor Muldible said. “The experiment went exactly as anticipated except that, for some reason—inverted compensatory diffraction perhaps—my duplicate formed instantaneously through reflectory ionization…”

“Rubbish,” Professor Muldible said. “I was molecularly assessed by the frequency atomizer, and some inhibitory factor, probably an inverse load on the quantum definator, projected a facsimile grouping…”

“No, no, no,” Professor Muldible said. “If that were the case, one of us would be insubstantial, a mere scope image, whereas I, at least, am whole and complete…”

“That is impossible. You feel whole and complete, maybe, but in reality you are a composition of photonic weld in static simulation,” Professor Muldible said. “Po-
larization would reduce your substance to a positive charge that . . .

"Poppycock," Professor Muldible said heatedly. "If such was the case, it would mean that if I tried to go through the machine again I would be dispersed, correct?" he snorted. "You are the one that would be absorbed, not I."

"Oh, come, come, don't be ridiculous," Professor Muldible said. "Your self-realization is illusory. You are a carbon copy without carbon . . ."

"Oh? Oh, you think so, do you?" Professor Muldible activated the machinery and reset the time-delay. "We'll see who disappears," he said, stepping once again into the dispatch cabinet.

Professor Muldible scowled. "Go ahead," he said. "Go on, go ahead. You'll see . . ."

"If we ever do have another war that requires a human army, the stuff might come in handy," Gregor said pessimistically. "Offhand, I can't think where it might be employed in peacetime."

Perrimont sighed. "I thought it might be useful."

"We'll keep it in reserve," Gregor said, "with the rest. Carry on with your work."

"Yes, sir." Perrimont left.

"Kreepi-gas." Gregor closed his eyes and shuddered.

"Where . . . Where am I?" Carol said, frightened. Her hand went to her mouth. "I've lost myself."

Clive leaned over. "You're not lost when you are with me, my darling." He kissed her shocked cheek. "Till death do us part," he murmured.

"What are you saying? Who are you?"

"Baby," he said with mock seriousness, "don't tell me you've forgotten your new husband already?"

"Husband?"

"Uh-huh. We were married this morning. Don't pretend you can't remember." He brushed. "Why, look at all the confetti on your coat still . . ."

Lady Violet Smith nestled closer to her lover. "What's the matter, darling? You seem preoccupied."
"I don’t know. I’m nervous, I guess. Are you sure Sir Edgar will be away some time?"

"Of course, darling. Eddy won’t be back till Wednesday at the earliest."

His sixth sense persisted. "There’s something wrong. I don’t know what it is."

"Not me, I hope," she said, her voice frosting.

He was instantly contrite. "Oh, no, my rose. You are perfect... perfect."

He kissed her but his eyes wandered about the air-conditioned four-poster.

"It’s this bed, I think," he said. He stared at the enfolding plastic drapes. "It looks somehow familiar..."

"Never mind that now." Lady Violet pulled him to her. "Kiss me, kiss me, kiss me, Robert."

Robert put his nagging hunch aside and obliged.

Sir Edgar cried, "Ha, you tramp!" and closed his personal Intravel circuit.

The couple on the bed disappeared.

Sir Edgar switched off his secret viewer. "If that doesn’t give me an uncontested divorce, I don’t know what will."

Highly satisfied, he poured himself a brando and syfe.

Loy Chi Fong never noticed the small metal disk that dropped into his pocket.

The festival was in full swing, the crowd jostling, the steamers blowing in the wind, the great dragon undulating across the road. Among the many firecrackers that popped and spat incessantly, one jumper was tossed by Gang Wa.

Bang! It jumped. Bang, bang, bang! It hopped across the road. Bang, bang! Two more jumps and it was at Loy Chi Fong’s feet.

Bang! The firecracker sprang at his pocket.

Loy Chi Fong lurched back too late.

Vooooooooomph!

Exit Loy Chi Fong.

"Right you are, Mr. Traff. Just sign these clearance papers, here, here, and here."

"What am I signing?"
"It's just to say that you are satisfied with the re-assembly job."

"I see," said Mr. Traff. "I intend to claim damages, you know."

"Of course, Mr. Traff. That is expected in a case such as yours."

"Tia. Well, I'm not signing anything till I see my lawyer and my own medical specialist."

"Oh."

Into the foyer, on a wheeled trolley, came another conglomerated couple. "Where from, Sam?" the reception clerk queried.

"Cairo," Sam said. "Came in on an illegal line, we think."

"O.K.," the clerk said. "Take 'em on up to Five."

Mr. Traff watched the trolley wheel away. He shook his head. "They're the oldest teen-agers I've ever seen," he muttered.

"Hosky, if you want me to tie your tie properly then you'll have to hold your chin up higher," Leslie said.

Hoskins lifted his chin. Leslie's fingers worked deftly. Hoskins' fingers worked less deftly.

"Aaaah!" She slapped his hand away. "Hosky, don't be naughty. There's a time and a place for everything." She straightened her skirt. "Now come along and behave yourself."

Meekly Hoskins took her hand and allowed her to lead him to the party.

"What you mean, you lost it?" Sy Zadly said. "How you lost it? What you done?"

"I don't know," Squit Sheeter said helplessly. "I think an apprentice took them. I put 'em on a hanger an' was only away a couple minutes . . ."

"Careless," Sy snapped. He rolled his eyes. "What in heaven I got to deal with people?" He glowered at Squit. "How come someone take 'em? What for? You been talking?" He balefaced his menage. "Anybody been talking?"

"I think an apprentice took 'em," Squit said unhappily. "See, young Donelli is on Costa this race, and that's a
Pocint gee, too. Same colors. So, by mistake, he musta took my silks . . .

Sy's eyes widened. "What? You mean he's out there in my special jacket?" He struck himself forcibly between the eyes. "Aye-yi-yi. What we do? What we do?"

The bell rang, and a voice droned, and they became aware that the race was on.

Of one accord they scrambled from the locker room to seek a point of vantage.

"Your signature there, Mr. Hoskins, please. And there also."

Hoskins' long ape fingers guided the pen expertly.

Dr. Joynter beamed. "You see? I told you you would have a great future." He clapped his hands. "A ten-year-contract, with options."

Hoskins smiled.

The lawyer blanched. "Please don't do that," he pleaded.

Dr. Joynter rubbed his hands. "And my modest ten percent should enable me to extend my laboratory."

Velupta Orcid, his first leading lady, put a caressing hand on Hoskins' shoulder and leaned sensuously forward. "I think we are going to be great . . . together," she said, her husky voice throbbing with meaning.

In the background Leslie simmered and tried to catch his eye.

But Hoskins' sensitive nostrils were arched to Velupta's perfume, his small ocularballs beedly intent upon his leading lady.

An ape's fingers tugged to loosen a constricting collar . . .

"I told you there was something wrong," Robert snarled.

"Oh, shut up, will you? Shut up. Shut up!" Lady Violet Smith said, her sweet voice lost in testy acid.

Ferro-plastic. Easy to pour and work, gloss finish, hard and practically indestructible. But a disrupter-drill can destroy the adhesion of the magnetized steel particles, and could be used to soften quite a large area.

It is a trick that a handyman would know.
"... The possessor of a new, powerful, three hundred pound body. In short, gentlemen, Hoskings adapted to his new form with surprising rapidity and soon regarded the surgeon, not with hate as an enemy, but with affection as a benefactor and friend.

"This attitude made Co-Ord's prosecution of the case very difficult, and the State's plaint lapsed for want of proof of malicious injury. Hoskings likes being a gorilla and there is little that Co-Ord can do except apply certain restraints upon the surgeon. On the other hand, had Hoskings not liked being a gorilla, the legal aspects would still have tangled sections of our judicial system.

"As it is, Hoskings has full human rights and though we have tried to play down the facts of the case, as he is now in show business, our efforts have been somewhat ineffectual.

"We are afraid that this might create a demand for transplant by consent and give us a society interspersed with social monkeys and ... and perhaps talking dogs. It can be done and, oddly enough, it has been assessed that few of those inclined to metamorphosis could be denied on the grounds of insanity.

"There are many features to consider..."

Expertly the thief broached the lock on the glidocar. He slid behind the control stick and ran through a half-dozen combinations before connecting with the correct starting range. He threw the switch.

Lock-bars thunked into the doors and windows, and a nerfroz capsule burst to fill the vehicle with paralyzing fumes.

In three seconds the thief was out cold and the signal bleep was sounding in the map room of the glidocar squad.

"We can rule out Instravel, solidless and mattamulse. Dorphelmyer got into the ceiling in some way we don't know about," Cranston Beever said.

"And what have you worked out?" Gil Prober asked.

"Well, on analysis, his body is smashed, consistent with a high fall. He had grass stains and dirt on his
clothing. I can only jump to the obvious conclusion: Somehow, by some disintegration or disorientation process, a vertical hole was made inside the building. Dorphelmyer stepped into it and fell to his death.”

“When the hole was restored again?”

“Yes. He fell from his own office. To be precise, he fell directly under a circular Voyd carpet that he had in front of his desk.”

“I see.”

“I thought you would,” Beever said. “We think the murder misfired. The dirt and grass stains suggest that Dorphelmyer landed on solid earth. This is quite a new block and, checking back, we found that they leveled a small hill to construct this building.”

“You’re working on a time-slot theory?”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense. I think the killer wanted Dorphelmyer to disappear, to be integrated in the foundations. He did not know about the hill. On the other hand, he might have hoped that the body would stay in the past. Whatever it was, I think he fouled it up.”

“Oh, brother,” Gil Prober said. “This is going to be a beauty.”

With unwarranted confidence, Beever said, “We’ll get him. We weren’t supposed to find the body. We have a few clues.”

Prober grimaced. “I admire your optimism,” he said.

“Cut!” the director roared. “Cut! Cut! CUT!” Passionately he threw his script to the ground. “Hoskings, can’t you control yourself? What’s the good of Make-up making you decent, if you can’t control yourself?”

“I’m sorry,” the gorilla grunted, abashed.

“Sorry? Huh! We can’t take that. We’d be banned from every scope in the country. Whoever heard of an ape being so sensitive that he has to keep grabbing bunches of leaves to cover himself? You’re supposed to be threatening her like a wild animal.” He gestured wildly. “Something’s got to be done. Something’s got to be done.”

Velupta adjusted her negligible plastic deerhide costume. “As I feel I must be equally responsible,” she
claimed throatily, "perhaps it might be better if he and I had a few days to adjust to one another."

The director scowled at her. "Adjust?"

"Familiarize," she said, her shallow eyes readily fathomable. "Say a week at my private retreat."

"You mean that place you go for your honeymoons?"

She cast down her eyes with arch demureness. "Yes," she said. "After all, the poor dear is obviously frustrated..."

"Crime today is specialized and is raising problems that are more beyond the accepted bounds of normality.

"Organized crime tends to betray itself, and lately we have been concerned almost exclusively with skillful and intelligent amateurs. Co-Ord's research and investigative facilities may seem to have a comprehensive variety fully adequate to deal with any contingency. This is not so.

"Every day, it seems, there are additions to the sum of human knowledge. And the public, generally, has access to this knowledge. It is inevitable that a percentage of our modern skills and discoveries should be misapplied, modified, and perhaps improved to suit a nefarious purpose. It is essential, therefore, that we be prepared to meet any novel circumstance, any challenge to our ingenuity..."

"...Two... One... Zero... One... Two..."

The green light flashed.

Professor Muldible triumphantly stepped from the receiver cabinet. "You see?" he said. "The same again."

Professor Muldible stepped out of the dispatch cabinet. "Well, I wasn't dispersed," he said.

Professor Muldible stared at his doubles. "Good heavens! You must have been right." He seemed stunned. "Most extraordinary," he muttered. "Most extraordinary."

"Yes, indeed," Professor Muldible said. "It would seem that a reactive discharge, possibly through the meson tube, causes the pattern sequence to be ejected to its source, to take visible shape."

"It is an unforeseen consequence," Professor Muldible
said, shattered. "That means that I... ah... we in the dispatch container are electrolytic representations, not truly life but cosmic creations without real substance."

"A very interesting phenomenon," Professor Muldible said clinically. "Your disintegration is inevitable. Even now you must be radiating irreplaceable energy and..."

"Yes, yes, yes," Professor Muldible said tartly. "We are doomed fabrications of tenuous consistency. Yet I do not feel like a mirage or a ghost. I came out of the receiver cubicle, re-entered the dispatch cubicle, and this time you came out of the receiver cubicle."

"No, no, no. I came out of the receiver cubicle, re-entered the dispatch cubicle and, naturally, came out of the receiver cubicle again."

"And it is your contention that if I activate this dispatch container again, that I would disappear?"

"I think you would be absorbed, yes," Professor Muldible said. "You see, your form of existence is purely..."

"You don't have to explain to me," Professor Muldible snarled. He closed the circuits and set the time-delay. He stepped into the dispatch container.

"... And first to leave the stalls is Red Strutter and Maori Minstrel, followed by Gamely, Top Choice, Costa, Billakin, then War Whoop, Conspicuous..."

Young Donelli kicked his heels and urged Costa over to the rails. His instructions were to stick with Top Choice. Don't hesitate to use the whip, the trainer had said. Costa was lazy.

Top Choice was on the inside and getting away. War Whoop was hustling to fill the gap. Donelli flailed, and his whip-butt clipped a concealed release. Expanded helium bloated his colors and, much to his surprise, his body lifted gently from the saddle. Before he had the wit to exert pressure with his legs, he was clear of the horse entirely and bobbing like a balloon on the end of the reins.

In the Paddock, Sy Zadly lowered his binoculars and let the agony of disaster screw his features into misery. "Aye-yi-yi," he groaned. "Aye-yi-yi."
Floating on air, and feeling extremely foolish in his novel position, Donelli let go of the reins.
Not a very bright lad, Donelli.

Incredibly the two runners put on speed. Already a full lap ahead of their nearest rivals, they turned into the straight and pulled out all the stops. Their legs pistoning to a blur, they both flashed through the tape, still accelerating.

In the Russian Bloc, Kaminsky tore off his hat and threw it against the wall. "Those Americans are cheating," he grated furiously. "They are using drugs. I am going to demand an examination!"

In the American Bloc, Sol Hardy smashed his fist into the table. "They're trying to be smart, huh? They're trying to pull a fast one, hey? Well, we'll see about that. We'll get the medicos' in . . .”


The specialist pushed his glasses up on his forehead. "Mr. Traff," he said, "I know you are a generous man who gives readily to charity, but I have to tell you this: Your heart is not in the right place."

Mr. Traff nodded gloomily. "I guessed as much. That means that I have to go back?"

"The only place," the specialist said.

"Cut!" the director roared. "Cut! Cut! CUT!" He came to his feet with a snap that sent his chair flying. "You're a gorilla, aren't you? I could climb that tree faster myself."

"I'm tired," Hoskings mumbled.
"Boy!" the director cried. "Pep pills, quick!"
Hoskings yawned. "Had some," he said lethargically.
The director looked hard at Velupta.
She shrugged her sleek shoulders. With amiable insouciance she said, "At least you're getting no censorship problems . . .”

"We avoid sensationalism. For obvious reasons, we dis-
courage emulation by minimizing the potential of the threat, and playing down the publicity, that our image as a competent and inescapable law force is strengthened. We try to ensure that the remarkable seems unremarkable, and to create the impression that our resources are inexhaustible, our knowledge complete and infinite.

"Unfortunately, this is not so. We have been tested to the limit of our ability, and have to be constantly on the alert. We literally do not know what might happen the next . . ."

Advertisement in a newsflap: "Suffer from insomnia? The Goodlife Enervator induces swift and complete relaxation. Portable, no bigger than a strip-tube. Can be clipped by sucaps in any position desired . . ."

"What we want to know," Officer Pyke said, "is where you get these secondhand parts." He picked up a hear unit. "Look at this."

"It's in good shape," DeCarlo said defensively. "Hardly used. Last for years yet."

"I know," Pyke said, "I know. That's what I mean. How come the last owner parted with it? Surely he didn't buy himself a new one? And this automatic liver. And this Mark III kidney filter. And this lung-air unit with a half-used refill. Where'd you get them? And what do you propose to do with them now that you've got them?"

"I have friends among the morticians."

"You mean these parts are stolen from the dead?"

"They are artificial, not true parts," DeCarlo argued.

"But what do you do with them?"

"The poor are still with us," DeCarlo said. "They just cannot afford brand-new medical sophistications . . ."

Headline: Costa Rider Losta.

"Last seen heading west and slowly gaining height, jockey Victor Donelli has been lost to sight in the twilight. Navy floaters are out with their scan pans and nets, and they welcome the diversion to indulge useful practical maneuvers."
"An inquiry into the matter is already under way but, until Donelli is recovered, we can only speculate . . ."

The delightful tingle in her arms warned her that she was moving into a Kress area. It felt good. On low power it was little more than detectable. She smiled at him.

Confidently he smiled back.

She let her stole slip from her shoulders. Lovely. Massage by a million tiny hands. He sat carefully beside her.

Under cover of the stole she fumbled in her bag. Her hand closed over her enervator. It took will power, but she stood up abruptly. "I must powder my nose," she said. "How about getting me a drink?"

Surprised, he said, "Why, sure thing. What would you like?"

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Nothing too strong." She tripped away to the bathroom.

He moved across into the kitchen. She paused, pressed the enervator against the wall, focused it, and clicked it on.

Back on the couch she noticed that the Kress radiation was slightly stronger. Delicious. So easy to revel in.

Again he settled beside her. "Your drink, ma'am," he said.

"Put it on the table, please. I'll have it in a moment."

Out of sight, his fingers turned the booster up. At the same time his other hand rose to cover a yawn.

She glowed. "Oh my, oh my." The desire to expose more flesh directly to the source was irresistible. She wriggled from her dress.

He blinked. He yawned again and shook his head and tried to keep his eyes open. A strange ennui slacked his muscles and doped his senses. She rolled under the radiation, kicking her heels, bathing in it.

His eyelids would not stay open and he sagged limply against the back of the couch. She cavorted, enjoying herself thoroughly till, sated, she rolled out of range.

Recovered from her wild abandon, she dressed swiftly, combed her hair, checked her makeup. Then she went through the flat with professional skill, collecting the more readily portable valuables, letting her expert
fingers finally go through the pockets of her snoring boyfriend.
A good haul.
Collecting her enervator, she left the flat.

"I'll never get used to it," Hoskings said, not unhappily.
I can't help being virile. It's natural to me as I am. And they like me."
The director stared at the repulsive face across the table. By what strange quirk did such ugliness magnetize women? Sans wig, teeth and corset, the director would admit that he himself was not particularly attractive. But he was not downright hideous.
His envy showed in his snarl. "We're going to fix you.
We're going to make a comedy, and you're going to wear clothes . . ."

"Well?" Superintendent of the Olympic Medical Committee, Brazilian Enrico Escola, tossed out the loaded one-word question.
Gruethner, Swedish specialist, wagged his head.
"Nothing."
Israeli Shylor Colom confirmed the negative with wry reluctance.
Other members of the team shrugged, or scowled annoyance at their defeat.
"We know there is something," Shylor Colom said.
"We must find what it is, or sporting achievements become meaningless." He scratched his ear. "I know it sounds foolish and naive," he said, "but we can appeal to the sporting instinct, to the sense of fair play, of those countries obviously involved."
"Aye-yi!" Escola said, and rolled his eyes.

"Why, Mr. Traff. Welcome back, sir."
Mr. Traff glared at him.
In a house ideally located in Brittany, in a direct line between New York and the Instravel receiver in Paris, 303 Spydor watched the clock with an intensity unmatched by any worker impatient for the knock-off whistle.


The synchronometer solenoid clacked sharply.

303 Spydor turned eagerly to the receiving cabinet.

He was there!

Triumphantly 303 Spydor ripped back the curtain. "Well, well," he said, grimly jubilant, "if it isn't Professor Sigstein Froymund. Welcome, Professor."

The professor started back. "No! No!"

303 Spydor took a firm grip on his arm and dragged him into the room. "It's no good, Professor, there's nothing you can do."

He jerked his head at 208 Spydor, who seized the professor's other arm. "We would enjoy your company, Professor, but your presence is required elsewhere, and our time is limited. I'm sure you understand."

The two agents bundled their protesting victim into a dispatch cabinet and locked the door.

For a moment 303 Spydor watched the professor hammer futilely on the hardened plastic. He nodded to 208. "The line is open and They will be waiting."

208 Spydor connected and the professor disappeared.

303 allowed himself a sigh of satisfaction. Then, "Let's get out of here."

They sprayed the telltale equipment with generous quantities of mattamulce—careless of its disastrous effects upon the building—and in five minutes were in their glidocar, well away from the scene of their coup.

When a drug had passed demanding preliminary trials and reached a stage where a human subject was required to experience and qualify its effects, the shrewd, but punctilious biochemist, Dr. Kurstead Schriff, refused the offers of his underlings. He felt that it was his duty to take whatever risk might be involved.

He settled himself comfortably on a settee. Dr. Cloth-
ilde Bell dabbed Colded on his arm. His assistant, Mayberry, inserted the hypo and squeezed 2cc. of catatonicine into his vein.

“Good,” Dr. Schriff said. “Good.”

“There are very few attempts at currency forgery these days. The disruptive influence of false currency was felt a few years ago, and the measures taken then have since been modified and constantly appraised in an effort to achieve perfection.

“The laminated shims that you carry in your pockets are works of art designed to protect you from the products of forgers. Every year you pay with your old shims and are issued new alloy-differentiated, code-pregnated, density radiated, intri-colored value shims.

“Under this system forgery is not impossible, but is very difficult. An issue of great importance is that this annual monetary rejuvenation has made hoarding an obsolete pastime and has ensured that no funds are undeclared. This makes disposal of illegally acquired monies a problem for the wrong-doer and, taxationwise, is most helpful.

“We are streamlining this method and…”

“Oh, Hosky, Hošky! You beast! You brute! You…”

Dr. Joyneter looked over his bifocals. “A gorilla, hey? They’re expensive, you know.”

“I can pay,” the director said. “Will you do it?”

Dr. Joyneter pinched his underlip. “Well, I don’t know. You are aware that I have a ten percent interest in Hoskings? Not as remunerative as I had hoped, though.”

“You can have ten percent of me if you like,” the director said slyly.

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to have two irons in the same fire,” the doctor mused. “Come on through to the sycan and I’ll run a fitness test on you…”

Sy Zadly tore the newsflap from the machine and crunched it into a ball. “Stupid bum,” he said sourly. “He should freeze, the dumkopf.”

But young Donelli was not freezing. On the contrary,
he was quite warm. No longer frightened, even enjoying his experience, he decided, at one thousand feet, to cool off in the night air. He loosened his jacket.

Not a very bright lad, Donelli.

"Hm-m-m. So now we have a successful tissue-restituant. This, with anesthetolin, will make our inculcation system well-nigh perfect. Without doubt our fighting services will be the most dedicated and fearless military in the world."

The marshal's aide frowned. "But will they ever be used, sir?"

"We have them," the marshal said. "We are prepared, that is important . . ."

"I'm the same as Hoskins, aren't I? So why do you shudder? How is he different from me?"

"Hosky has charm," Velupta said. "He's basically shy, even timid. He's glorious." Her eyebrows lifted professionally. "You, on the other hand, are you in any skin. Hosky is a gentleman, but you, you have always been a gorilla . . ."

"What have you got?" Cranston Beever asked.

The technician sat back. "Not a thing," he said. "We've tried it every which way and all it does is radiate . . ."

"My husband thinks as I do, don't you, George? And we agree that it would be most worth-while. How many divorces are there every year? A growing number. And what is the cause? Lack of understanding, isn't that right, George?"

"Yes, dear . . . of course I do."

Constance settled herself with assurance. "We are young, but even George and I do not understand one another. And can we ever? Can George ever understand a woman? Can I ever hope to understand a man? Of course not. But . . . suppose we could switch bodies? Would we not get to know each other in a way that would make each of us fully aware of the other? A
deeper understanding. George, how did you put it the other night? A mutuality of...of..."

George coughed. "A consciousness of opposite requirements," he said diffidently, "and..."

"Exactly. You see, my husband feels as I do."

"Only a temporary changeover, of course," George said. "We..."

"Just a week or two. That could be done, couldn't it? I mean, in the cause of better marital relations, this would be a great step, a unique opportunity for a woman to gain a masculine viewpoint, and for a man to begin to comprehend the complexities of female attitudes. Greater understanding, that is our aim."

"A temporary changeover," George said. "We...

"To realize each other's needs and feelings," Constance said. "We hope to learn of means whereby we may promote greater compatibility between the sexes. This is not just a whim. We have discussed this matter very thoroughly, haven't we, George? And we agree that our findings may be of great importance in regard to the conjugal happiness of married couples everywhere."

"We intend to write a book," George said: "We..."

"What we learn we will give to the world. In the interests of science and happier homes, we are willing to give of ourselves, to use ourselves as...as guinea pigs. We are prepared..."

Dr. Joynter held up a hand. "Please," he said, "if I may get a word in sideways..."

"My wife's as cold as a deprived brass monkey," the man said. "Have you got anything to warm her up?"

The pharmacist glanced up and down the counter. He leaned forward and brought up his cupped hand. "Have you tried this?" he asked.

The man looked down at the small bottle. "What is it?" he asked.


"Is it any good?"

"Guaranteed." The druggist deftly plain-wrapped. He slid the small parcel across. "Forty-five bucks," he said.
The man reached reluctantly for his wallet. "It'd have been cheaper to . . ."

"Rent? Certainly," Clive Mossy said. "Come in, won't you? Have I been here three months already? My, they should never oil clocks. Take a seat."

"Thanks." The landlord seated himself.

"I have only large shims," Clive said. "Do you have change?"

The landlord pulled out his wallet. "I think so," he said, then found himself staring at the wallet and wondering how it came to be in his hands.

Clive's finger left the button, and smoothly he took the wallet. "That's real Morocco leather," he said. "Old fashioned, maybe, but I like it. You noticed the feel of it?"

"Ah well . . . yes . . ." the dazed landlord said.

Clive tucked the wallet into his pocket. "Well," he said, "that's settled then. Sorry that I'm unable to help you, but you do understand, don't you?"

"I . . . well . . . uh . . ."

"My advice is just relax. Take it easy." Clive put a hand on the landlord's arm and led him to the door.

"But . . ." the landlord said. "But . . ."

"You'll be all right after a little rest," Clive said reassuringly. "Goodnight."

Helplessly, the landlord stared at the closed door. "Wait . . . Here . . ." He looked about him. He was utterly lost. He turned and slowly walked away.

His eyes wide in search of familiarity, he groped down the corridor . . .

"With the correct equipment, blowing up the area to make manipulation of the minitools easy, the operation immediately becomes less difficult," Dr. Joynter said.

His pupils listened respectfully.

"Here, you see, I cut and seal. Quite straightforward. A simple repetitive maneuver. Clifford, take over, will you, please?"

"Can we legally prevent an individual from becoming,
say, a lion in order to further a career in the entertainment world?

"Since Hoskins we have had two or three cases involving transplants. Already we cannot be sure of the number of transplants that have taken place. We frown on transplants, and discourage the practice, but active prevention—when the desire for a transplant is innocently motivated, for research, for aesthetic reasons, or as a means of escape to personal freedom—is not possible.

"The issue is bound to grow more and more complex as time goes on, and Co-Ord is working hard to anticipate some of the legal and material problems that may arise . . ."

"Now then," Professor Muldible said, "explain that, smart aleck."

Professor Muldible stayed dumb.

Professor Muldible scratched his head.

Professor Muldible said, "It is most peculiar, isn't it? You know, I think we may have been hasty."

"How do you mean?" Professor Muldible asked.

"I can see what he's getting at," Professor Muldible said. "We have not been approaching this problem in a scientific manner."

"You're right," Professor Muldible said. "Carried away by the simplicity of direct experimentation, I have multiplied myself by four."

"Not you. Me. After all, I am the original."

"What?" Professor Muldible cried. "Balderdash! Neither of you could possibly be the original, and it is likely that he is a copy, too."

"Oh?" Professor Muldible said coldly. "And how do you arrive at this conclusion?"

"The first time I went through to the receiver, right? Leaving you, wasn't it, in dispatch?"

Professor Muldible nodded.

"Good. You haven't been through again, have you?"

Professor Muldible shook his head and smiled.

"So. I went through again, and again left a copy behind. The one left behind had been through once and
therefore, failing the second time, is obviously a copy, right?"

"Ah . . . er . . . hm-m-m." Professor Muldible thought it out. Then he nodded gloomily. "That would be right. And if I am a copy and I was in dispatch, the original could not have come out of the receiver."

"Precisely. Which means that the original is either he or I. And I think that the odds favor me."

Professor Muldible smiled again. "I don't think so," he said. "You see, I have a gold tooth . . . ."

Much more than cosmetic surgery, a most promising and rewarding field for development. Instravel Re-Creative Physical Perfectionizing.

Surgical technician Rasulko unsealed the door of the adjustment box and threw it open. "Hullo, there, Mr. Wilt," he said, and beamed. "There you are, your club foot and your legs equalized. How does it feel?"

Mr. Wilt looked oddly unhappy, even agitated. "There's something wrong," he said.

"Wrong?" Rasulko said in surprise. "Wrong? We've given you five toes, haven't we?" He checked.

"It's not my feet," Mr. Wilt said. "They seem to be all right." His voice broke. "It's this arm."

Rasulko looked. "What's the matter with it? It seems a perfectly normal arm to me."

"Normal?" Mr. Wilt bit his lip. "It might be perfectly normal," he said, "but it's not mine!"

Rasulko raised his eyebrows. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure, you fool!" Mr. Wilt choked. "Look at the difference in my arms. Long, skinny, white, the other strong, brown and thick!"

"Don't shout, Mr. Wilt, please. Er . . . we'll do something about it, don't you worry . . . ."

"You the guy that messes round with brains?" Sy Zaddy asked bluntly.

"We do transplants here. Won't you sit down? I am Clifford Downey, Dr. Joynter's chief assistant. He's busy at the moment, so if you tell me what you have in mind . . . ?"

Sy grunted. He nodded to Wilf Waijer, who was hold-
ing the arm of a reluctant little man, and the trio became seated.

Over his clasped hands, Clifford said, "Well?"

"Yeah," Sy said. "It like this. Our friend here wants to be a horse, O.K.??"

"A horse?" Clifford said unsurprised. "Do you have your own animal?"

The blasé response upset Sy's speed. "Ah, sure. Sure, we got a horse. What else you want?"

"Not a great deal," Clifford said. "We must establish your friend's willingness to become a horse, test him for mental aberrations, and then, of course he must sign a responsibility waiver."

"That all?"

"Just about."

"He willing," Sy said. He turned to the little man. "Ain't you willing, Nye? 'Course you are!"

The little man stuck out his chin obstinately. "I want my own body," he said.

"Sure," Sy said. "They keep your body on ice, right?"

Clifford said, "It depends on the duration of transfer. For short experience periods, yes, but for longer terms we use suspended Instravel."

"Yeah, yeah," Sy said, "but he gets his body back when he wants it, right?"

"Oh, yes."

"See? Nothin' to worry 'bout."

Nye still looked doubtful.

"You'll make million bucks." Sy turned to Clifford. "Start fixing," he said with impatient authority. "He like idea. He just nervous . . . ."

Roy Halsey cleared 9'8" and Kaminsky glowered at Enrico Escola. "What? What? You see that? You see that?" He waved his hands angrily. "Don't tell us. Tell them." He pointed dramatically. "Tell them!"

"We have," Escola said patiently.

"Hal!" Kaminsky said.

Vladimir Olafskayer cleared 9'9" . . .

"Goodness gracious," Dr. Kurstedt Schriff said. His
closed eyes lent strangely to the wonderment on his face. "My goodness me . . ."

"Constance, don't do that. I'm tired and not in the mood."

"Oh, George, you're never in the mood. I was never like that to you, was I?"

"Sometimes."

"How am I going to know what a man feels like if you refuse to cooperate? You're being most selfish, George. After all, it is my body . . ."

Sy Zadly was irritated beyond measure. "Will you stop always complaining? All you think of is yourself, yourself!"

"A maaaaare!" Nye whinnied disgustedly. "A maaaaaare!"

"What the difference?" Sy cried. "You be mare forever? Huh? We fix. We make money. What the difference?"

Nye snorted and hung his head.

"We clean up. You go back. Why fuss? You do right," Sy said ominously, "or you'll go to the glue factory before."

Nye's head came up, ears pricked. Then the alarm died from his large wet eyes and he shuffled over to morosely nuzzle his hay. "A maaaaare," he said bitterly.

Sy thumped the stable door. "What for you horse?" he shouted passionately. "Sex life? You horse to fix race, got that?"

Nye turned his rear to the door. To point up his sentiment he began to relieve himself.

"I only winked at her, George."

"I don't care," George said stubbornly. "This experiment was just between us, wasn't it?"

"Yes, or course," Constance said, sweetly reasonable, "but I can't help it if your body is roused by the sight of another female. It all helps toward greater understanding."

"Huh!" George said. "I've had enough. The two weeks
are over tomorrow. We've learned enough. We can change back.”

Constance stared at him in amazement. “But, George, darling, we can't do that. We've hardly begun...”

Cranston Beever reported:

Dorphelmyer received the rug anonymously. Checking back, we found it was sent in the name of Koyoka Shubishu, a junior employee at 17 Overton Heights, which is the Nipponese Embassy. Inquiries at the Embassy brought denials that the rug had been sent, or that any contact had been made with Dorphelmyer.

We know that Dorphelmyer spent some years in Nippon and returned to this country for no clearly defined reason. We are also painfully aware that Nipponese technology may be in advance of our knowledge in certain fields.

Keeping in mind the delicacy of international relations, the Nipponese Embassy and personnel are being kept under unobtrusive autovigil, and the investigation is proceeding...”

“What we want is the feel of crime today,” Senator Hardman said. “Why is it so? Why do people commit crimes? And why, when organized crime is practically nonexistent, when crime is now the province of the rare amateur, why should crime prevention cost more?”

“Co-Ord's range is constantly being stretched,” Sacpole said. “For a standard crime we have a standard procedure, and the machinery of the law follows a tried path for moderate outlay. But dealing with a new type of crime calls for a new approach, calls possibly for extensive countermeasures. Large-scale preventive action may have to be undertaken. The crime has to be analyzed, documented, and the criminal action defined to ensure that it is indeed a criminal action...”

“How much?” Constance said, aghast.

The sweet young thing wriggled back into her shift. “Fifty dollars,” she said demurely.

“Just for that?” Constance asked, astounded.
A brittle edge came to the young lady's voice. "I'm not cheap, you know. And it was your idea..."

Mutely Constance counted out the money.

"O.K., Molloy, grab her arm and drag her into the bushes. Careful now. O.K., hold it. Look up now, and lick your lips. Now sniff her all over. That's it, that's it. O.K. Now hit hard to draw blood, and rip her clothes. O.K., O.K. Good. Terrific. O.K., now start in to gnaw her. Great. Great. Great! Magnificent!

"O.K., O.K. Cut! Cut!"

Molloy stopped his simulated gnawing and began to lick instead. His rough tongue made the girl squeal with indescribable emotion.

Molloy's new yellow eyes gleamed with satisfaction. From being a one hundred twenty-six pound weakling with a common nine to five job, he had, in one bold stroke, become a star. Buying a tiger to swap with was the best investment he had ever made.

Clive Mossy had what looked like a portable radio on his shoulder. He stepped in front of Garrards' pay clerk, who was on his way from the bank. The pay clerk had no time to do anything but gape.

"Don't stand there like an idiot, man," Clive said irritably. "Give me the bag."

Dazedly, the clerk looked down at the valise in his hand.

"Are you going to keep me waiting all day?" Clive said. He looked at his watch. "I'm fifteen minutes late already," he fumed.

"I... I..." the bewildered pay clerk said.

"And when you go back, you can tell Mr. Foster that I do not like to be kept waiting," Clive said, putting out his hand.

The stupefied pay clerk handed him the bag.

"I should think so," Clive said. He turned away, paused, and turned back. "Well, don't just stand there, man. Get back to your work."

"Yes," the unfortunate man said. "I'm sorry, I..."

Clive walked smartly away.
“What have you done to my arm? Mr. Frederic Traff said. “You’ve made it all short and hairy…”

“Georgina. I like that name,” Charley said. He reached across and took George’s hand. “I’m glad you decided to have dinner with me tonight. Have you enjoyed yourself?”

“Immensely,” George said.

Charley seemed pleased. “Ah… how about rounding the evening off, Georgie, with a nightcap at my place?”

George smiled inwardly at the ill-concealed overtones. He tweaked Charley’s ear. “Charles, I like you very much. You’re very sweet. Later in the week, perhaps?”

Charley masterfully tried to hide his disappointment. “What about your husband?” he said.

“I can handle him,” George said. He gazed soulfully into Charley’s eyes. “Darling, be patient.”

“That’s not easy with you, Georgie.”

George laughed. He leaned forward and kissed Charley lightly and jumped out of the car. “I’ll call you in the morning, Charles?”

Charley nodded numbly.

“It is the question of the withdrawal of your two countries, or the withdrawal of every other country,” the Olympic chairman said to the Russian and American representatives. “That is the ultimatum supported by all other competing nations.

“Under the circumstances, the Committee hereby disqualifies both the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. from further participation in these Games, and declares all results so far obtained null and void.”

“This is outrageous,” the Russian delegate spluttered. “You have no proof…”

The chairman rose with great dignity. “The proof lies in the superhuman capabilities of your athletes. Such extravagant superiority renders competition farcical. We do not know what you employ, or how you employ it. But we do know.

“In consideration to the host nation we cannot abandon the Games. But we can, and do, take the strongest
possible measures where we feel certain beyond a doubt that the Olympic spirit is being violated and mocked!"

The Russian delegate glared back into the chairman's fiercely reproving eye. "Hal" he said.

The man from the United States looked uncomfortable. He felt sticky. "Ah, Mr. Chairman," he said diffidently, "before you take action, I . . . ah . . . on behalf of my country . . . ah . . ." he squirmed. "Sometimes . . . national pride . . . ah blinds us . . . and . . . ah . . . in this matter. Ah . . . we have become aware . . ." He took a hold of himself. "Mr. Chairman, we will give you the facts and throw ourselves upon your mercy . . ."

He sprang at her from the thicket. She screamed involuntarily, and thumbed her signal-gard.

A silocar soundlessly swerved and homed on the stuttering blip.

"Who told you about me?" Oliver Goldstick said. "No matter. They call me a crank. They say it can't be done. I think differently."

"How close are you to success?" Cranston Beever asked.

Goldstick shrugged. "I can't say. Here you can see the physical paraphernalia of my prototype. I am constantly modifying." He made a weary gesture. "If I had funds . . . If I had backing from a large research organization . . . hrmph, who knows? But they laugh at me," he said without rancor. "I am a crank . . ."

Cranston was not encouraged, but he was desperate. He outlined the facts of the Dorphelmyer Case, then asked, "What do you think? Do you think that it would be possible to create such a time-slot?"

Goldstick smiled wanly. "My young friend, who is to say what is, and what is not, impossible?" Softly he said, "Time. Ah . . . haaaa. Time is a challenge, a powerful and inexorable adversary. But there are weaknesses. For example, Time exists. It is measurable. Therefore, it must once have started. Thus we can make the logical assumption that Time cannot be infinite. Somewhere, somehow, the first second passed . . ."

"Yes," Cranston Beever said, more curtly than he in-
tended. "Thank you for your help. You will excuse me? I hope I didn’t bother you too much . . .”

Cranston rudely took his leave, yet hating himself for the look of rejection he left on the older man’s face.

In the street he tried to rationalize his guilt. “He’s a nut. Sure, a nice old nut. But nevertheless he’s a nut . . .”

George hummed a little tune as he let himself into the flat.

“Where have you been?” Constance cried.

“Out,” George said. “Having a ball.”

“Oh, George, how could you?” She came over and took his hands. “George, I needed you.”

George disengaged himself. “Did you? All you think about is yourself, isn’t it? Gadding about with other women. Well, two can play at that game.”

Constance was distressed. “I’m sorry, George, truly I am. I’ve been thinking, and you are right. This experiment has gone on long enough.” She paused. “I have made arrangements with Dr. Joynter, and he has agreed to take us in tomorrow for changeback.”

George looked at her. He gave a short, nasty laugh. “Oh, you have, have you? When I have someone on a string who’s prepared to keep me in the manner to which I am unaccustomed—just beating his brains out to keep me happy? Oh, yeah. This is gravy. No more work for me. With my know-how I’ve got it made.”

Constance was shocked. “George!” she gasped. “George, what are you saying? You can’t mean that. We’ll change back.” Suddenly horrified, she said, “We have to change back!”

“Not me,” George said complacently. “I’m just beginning to like the way I am . . .”

“Your name is Clive Mossy?”

Clive studied the stranger in his two-view. He had Co-Ord agent screaming from every fiber of his conservative bloc-suit.

“That’s right,” Clive said. He pressed the tube release. “Come on up.”

“Thanks.”
Clive made arrangements for the discomfort of his guest.

Shortly the stranger faced him. Deadpan he said, "There are a few questions I'd like to ask you, Mr. Mossy. A certain pattern of incidents has brought me to you."

"Oh?" Clive said. "Would you like a drink?"

"Uh-uh, no thanks," the stranger said quickly.

"Not even coffee?"

"Uh-uh," the stranger said positively.

Clive frowned, then shrugged. "O.K.," he said. "Take a seat," indicating an armchair opposite the one he settled into himself.

The stranger hesitated a second, then bent at the knees and sank into comfort.

"Now then," Clive said pleasantly, "what's on your mind?"

"First visit to our country, I see?" the Immigration man said.

He stamped the visa of Carlich Nakaban. And so master-spy Alva Dakari, discovered, exposed, rejected, deported in disgrace, returned to the country of his dénouement in a younger body, the sacrificial frame hand-picked for perfect satisfaction.

Judge Mercier gazed dispassionately at the protagonists. "As the law stands," he said, "there is nothing to prevent willing parties, so inclined, from having their cerebral matter transplanted into whatever living vehicle they think fit. The law cannot be concerned in this matter with past agreements; each transplant, whether changeover or changeback, must accord with the wishes of both participants.

"In this case a state of unanimity is sadly absent, and it is the finding of this court that there is no legal redress where the matter cannot justly be decided without the mutual consent of both parties.

"I would like to add that those practicing this form of medicine are under threat of legal action if they use force or coercion, or fail to supply authoritatively wit-
nessed affidavits upon the mental state and precise re-
requirements of each of their clients . . .

George grinned, and winked at Constance.
Constance gnashed George's teeth.

"It looks like my arm, all right," Mr. Wilt said. "How'd
he come to get it?"

"A technical malfunction in the de-synchronized
closed circuit relays," Rasulko said soothingly. "An er-
rant overlap. The matter has been fully rectified."

"It has, has it?" Mr. Frederic Traff said angrily. "And
what happens now? Another month of flips, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, no," the medico said. "The transfer correction
should not be difficult. There is nothing wrong with the
arms, and the sequence flow for those members will be
complete . . ."

Dr. Kurstead Schriff frowned in distress. "Oh, really!
Oh, no."

Dr. Mayberry quizzed Dr. Bell with his eyes.
"It seems he is going through the hallucinatory syn-
drome much as expected," she said quietly.
"How is his heartbeat?"
"Regular." Dr. Bell checked. "Temperature normal,
respiration steady." She peered. "No irregularities in his
brain pattern, either."

Dr. Mayberry nodded. "As anticipated." He scribbled
in his notebook. "Climactic envisioning disassociated
from physical involvement, with no physical manifesta-
tions apart from facial expression and minor vocal com-
ment . . ."

"Well, really," Dr. Schriff muttered. "What a thing to
do . . ."

The Professors Muldible, now defined as P1, P2, P3 and
P4, were talking.
"We are flesh and blood," P3 said, "and we must have
come from somewhere."
"Obviously," P2 said dryly.
"We look alike, talk alike, are fully conversant with
this project, and have the same memories."
P2 said, "We even have the same wife."
They looked at one another. They brightened.
“I say, that’s true,” P3 said. “If we share her equally . . .”
“It would mean that we would only have to put up with her for a quarter of the time . . .”

“So,” Shylor Colom said with satisfaction, “it can be detected.”
“Sure,” Virgil replied, “provided you know what you are looking for. And provided you look for it before it can be used up by exertion . . .”
Honest merit was back in the Olympics again.

Mr. Traff stared at the Intravel medico with undisguised malignancy.
The medico gazed in silent discomfort at Mr. Traff’s two short, brown, hairy arms.
“Ah, yes,” Rasulko said at last. “You realize that electronic surgery is in its infancy. A great advance in medicine and we feel, ah . . . We’ll set it up again,” he said hurriedly, and moved as briskly as he could to beyond the range of Mr. Traff’s eyes.

Dr. Kurrstead Schriff’s eyes snapped open. “Good heavens,” he said, “the cunning devils.”
He abruptly sat up.
“How do you feel, sir?” Dr. Clothilde Bell asked.
“What was it like, sir?” Dr. Mayberry said.
“Uh? What? Oh. Don’t bother me now.” Dr. Schriff seemed preoccupied. He stood up. “You have the rest of the catatonicine here? Ah. Good.” He pocketed the bottle and the hypo. He strode to the door.
Without a backward glance he let himself out and moved purposefully away down the corridor.

Was it feminine wiles that came to her aid?
“I’m glad you lost Charley,” Constance said. “It was he more than anything else.” She poured herself a whiskey and splashed in some aerox.
“I’ll find somebody else,” George said confidently.
Constance looked miserable. “Do you have to?” Then,
to his consternation, George saw his face crumple and big tears start to leak out of his eyes.

"Here, here," he said, "don't do that."

"I... I c... c... can't help it," Constance sobbed. "I... I've been such a f... f... fool, George, and I d... d... do love you so..."

Embarrassed, George pulled a handkerchief from the breast pocket of the suit his body was wearing. "Here," he said. "Here. Dry your eyes. There, there..."

Constance cried brokenly on his shoulder, her hands moving with a subtlety George did not suspect till it was too late.

Even so, why should he care?

He did not know that Constance had swapped his contraceptive pills for aspirin...

At Canberra Instravel Reception the clerk was speaking to two Co-Ord agents. "Three of them, one after the other. Just failed to arrive..."

"A Dr. Kurstead Schriff to see you, sir."

"Kurstead Schriff?" Gil Prober said. "What does he want? Has he got an appointment?"

"No, sir, but he says it's urgent."

"It always is. Who is he, anyway? Anybody important?"

"I have his card, sir. It says he is the Director of the Psychiatric Drug Development Division of Principle Chemicals."

"Can't the juniors handle him?"

"He insists on seeing someone in authority, sir."

"What about?"

"He says about the disappearance of Sigstein Froymund, sir."

"Oh, very well. Let him through the screen," Gil Prober said petulantly, "but I'm warning you, if he's another half-wit, I'm going to have you vaporized..."

Clive Mosy opened the door to his flat, closed it and pressed the light button. Thus triggered, nerfroz gas capsules popped profusely in the hallway.
Clive spun frantically back to the door, clawed with putty fingers and collapsed.

"Sorry, Mr. Zadly, but we cannot allow your horse to run," the Co-Ord agent said unapologetically.


"That horse is a transplant," the agent said. "You intend, between you, to influence the result of the race. To cheat, in other words."

Sy gaped at him wordlessly.

"You withdraw the horse and restore him, and we will overlook the matter. If you persist in your attempts to defraud the racing public, proceedings will be taken against you."

"Aye-yi-yi," Sy said. "Don't cover me with spit. I know when I'm licked . . ."


To say Cranston Beever looked tired was the understatement of the year. He let his weary bones sag into a chair. Drained of his natural ebullience, an unaccustomed hopelessness shaded his troubled eyes, and his features were no longer boyish, but haggard and drawn.

"You've been working too hard, Cranston," Sacpole said. "Driving yourself twenty-four hours a day."

Cranston nodded glumly. Preliminary politeness, then, Sorry, Cranston, we'll put somebody else on the case. Why else would he be before the big boss?" Drink, Cranston?" Sacpole poured him one and took it over. "Here, you look as though you could do with it."

"Thanks," Cranston mumbled.

"Hear about Gil Prober picking up the fellow who was operating that amnesi-wave?"

"Yes," Cranston said, morosely sipping his liquor.

"Co-Ord has been enjoying a run of good fortune lately," Sacpole said. "We've caught four spies, brain-transplant boys, one of them an Alsatian dog. We've discovered and closed down thirty-seven illegal Instravel installations, and we've caught Mossy, the Memory Man."

"Yes," Cranston said shortly. "Everybody has been doing fine—but me."

304
Sacpole put a hand on his shoulder. "Cranston, you are in the depths, aren't you?" he said cheerfully. "What you need is a rest."

Cranston Beever thought, Here it comes.

"Go home and have a nice hot bath, and a good meal and a long sleep, and come back here again at ten tomorrow, eh?"

The teleview buzzed sounded. The Professors Mulibble looked at each other, commonly conjecturing.

"I'll take it," P1 said. He paused. "I think it would be best to present a singular appearance."

P2 and P3 and P4 grumbled, but moved out of teleview focus.

P1 depressed the answer switch.

Sir Clifton Gunfield, Managing Director of Instravel, Ltd. (Australia) filled the screen. "Hullo, Neil," he said. "Hope I'm not disturbing you? How's the research coming?"

"Quite well, quite well," P1 said.

"Good, good. Ah. Fact is, we're having a spot of trouble here in Canberra, Neil. Ah. You're not very far away and I was wondering perhaps, ah, if you'd look into it?"

P1 looked doubtful. "I'm fairly busy at the moment . . . ."

"I would deem it a great personal favor," Sir Clifton said meaningly.

"Well," P1 said, "I . . . er . . . What's the trouble at Canberra?"


"Failed to arrive? Have the interference recorders been checked?"

"Everything. It was a clear line. Nothing untoward at all. Very distressing. Some baggage, too. The chaps at Recept are most upset."

P1 stared blankly. An alarming thought had crept into his mind.

"I say, have you thought of something, Neil?"

P1's head did a very slow bob. "Yes, I've thought of something," he said dully . . .
“Marvelous,” Mr. Traff said, razor-sharp teeth on his biting sarcasm. “Absolutely brilliant. First, you gave me his arms; now you’ve given me his whole body . . .

“Ah, Cranston. You took my advice. You look much better,” Sacpole said. “I want you to meet Dr. Kurstead Schriff.”

Cranston shook hands with the doctor. It seemed expected.

“Come over here and sit down,” Sacpole said. “On the divan. That’s it. Now. I suppose you are wondering what this is all about?”

Cranston gave a noncommittal nod.

Sacpole smiled. “Dr. Schriff, would you care to explain?”

Dr. Schriff cleared his throat. “In the course of my studies I have discovered a certain drug, catatonicine. Basically an ataraxic, this drug was developed to relieve the psychoses of those suffering from schizophrenia. However, when I personally undertook initial testing of the drug, my reactions were remarkable. Remarkable indeed.”

“In what way?” Cranston asked.

“Well, you may remember that Professor Sigstein Froymund disappeared. He was a very good friend of mine, and his inexplicable exit upset me considerably.

“Now, under the influence of catatonicine, I gained some kind of super vision, and I saw clearly that he had been kidnapped. I saw the whole crime, was cognizant of every detail, and could recognize the agents involved.”

“And it checked out,” Sacpole said contentedly.

Cranston frowned. “You mean you became clairvoyant?”

“Clairvoyance, E.S.P, what you will,” Sacpole said. “It works. Why do you think Co-Ord has been so successful lately?”

“You mean . . . ?”

“Exactly. And that’s why you are here. Take off your coat and roll up your sleeve. You are steeped in the Dorphelmyer case. A shot of catatonicine and you’ll get the whole picture from beginning to end . . .”

306
"I used to work in Missing Persons," Garvey said.

"So what's that to me?" Sy Zadly said sourly. "I ain't lost."

"Listen, Sy," Wilf Waijer pleaded, picking up the bottle and filling the glasses again, "he's got something. And you know what I got? I got some of the stuff that put me out of work, that's what I've got."

"What's he talking about?" Sy said. "Why you bring this bum here?"

"Sy, will you listen for a minute...?" Wilf begged.

Garvey tugged at his side pocket and produced a small bottle. He waved it at Sy. "See this?" he said. "Know what it is. No, 'course you don't. It's Co-Ord Special, that's what it is. ESPEC." He glowered at the bottle. "Missing Persons," he said, "was a good job. Good gang. Then suddenly, nobody's missing any more. 'Cept me."

He put the small bottle down and turned back to his glass.

"An' what so special about this stuff?" Sy asked skeptically.


"What annoys me," Cranston Beever said, "is that he made such a fool out of me."

Gil Prober chuckled. "At some time we all get blinded by science."

Cranston gazed at his beer. "What an idiot I have been. I've had every department in Co-Ord searching frantically for a time-manipulator. We took that radiation complex apart, piece by piece." He smacked his palm down on the bar. "Damnit, Gil, he led me right up the garden path and drove me nearly crazy."

Gil laughed and raised his finger to the bartender for refills.
“Right under my nose all the time. The most obvious suspect and I discarded him. Why? Because he didn’t have the know-how, the scientific background, the technical knowledge.” Cranston groaned.

“Don’t take it so hard,” Gil said lightly. “After all, you weren’t alone. Everyone at Co-Ord thought the same way you did.”

“But we didn’t think of anything else,” Cranston said. “We ran around in circles looking for a genius who didn’t exist. How he must have laughed!”

“Ah, now,” Gil said, “I wouldn’t say that the genius didn’t exist. On the contrary, he displayed the true genius of simplicity.”

“Hm-m-m. I suppose so,” Cranston said grudgingly. Then he exploded, “But what a setup to lead us astray! The radiation-complex, the Voyd rug, the exact perpendicular location. And the grass stains!” He smacked the bar again. “The obvious clue, and I didn’t even check the lawn just outside the door!”

“Under the circumstances, I wouldn’t have either. He made you believe what he wanted you to believe. Anyway, he was a tidy worker and probably erased the signs.”

“We didn’t even notice that that section of the floor had only recently been laid.”

“Oh, that is a pardonable error,” Gil said. “The building is not very old and that honeycomb ferroplastic weld joints itself undetectably. No, our builder’s handyman was a master. He knew what he was doing when he knocked Dorphelmyer out and dropped him out the window . . .”

“That Truff character is a jinx. Thousands of people use Instravel without fuss or trouble. Yet him,” he shook his head. “Oh, boy! You know, I know it sounds crazy, but do you know what I think? I think it’s an allergy. Instravel doesn’t bring him out in a rash, or anything; it just scrambles him a little.”

“Pity we have had only negative results in our efforts to forecast the future,” Sacpole said. “However, that may come, eh?”
"A greater understanding of the drug is required," Dr. Kurstead Schriff said cautiously.

"Taken all round, I must say that your drug is the greatest single crime-preventive aid of the century," Sackpole said. "With concentration and catatonicine, I can see that there will be virtually no crime committed beyond our knowledge.

"We have closed the black market in DNA pills, have much greater Instravel security, can detect antisocial transplants and, most importantly, are now able to halt the progress of those, like Clive Mossy, who abuse a novel technical advance to achieve their own ends."

"Catatonicine can be abused, too," Dr. Schriff pointed out.

"Yes," Sackpole said, "we are well aware of that. We need to employ strict controls on its supply and use. Most rigid controls." He coughed. "Doctor, that is why you have been called here. The possibilities of this drug are incalculable. Already our Intelligence departments are demanding a higher quota. You can appreciate our desire for secrecy."

"I can indeed," Dr. Schriff said. "We can be thankful for industrial piracy. At Principle Chemicals we work under strict security. The product is safe and in few hands."

Sackpole smiled. "I can see that you have a sound grasp of the situation," he said.

Dr. Schriff smiled back. "As a major shareholder in the company, my interest is profound—not superficial," he said. "All we have need to discuss are the terms of a satisfactory agreement . . ."

Sy Zadly came awake. "Gorrum," he breathed.

He snapped upright. "Gorrum! I gorrum! I there. I see. I see plain!" He smacked his fat palms together. "We got it made. Quick! Write down before I forget."

The pen trembled in Wilf Waijer's fingers. "Go ahead," he said eagerly. "Go ahead."

"First race, Annabella, nina-two. Second race, Bubba, threeta-one. Inna third, Steamer Steven, twenny . . ." He stopped. For a moment his features retained a fixed parody of enthusiasm.
Wilf looked at him for reason, looked back to see what he had written. He felt himself begin to freeze as horror dawned.

With a bellow of rage, Sy Zadly sprang to his feet. "Yesterday already! I know yesterday!" Furiously he kicked the table with his stocking foot.

Which did not help matters.

Sir Clifton Gunfield looked at the Muldibles in dismay. "Are you sure that restoration is impossible?"

"The difficulties are insuperable," P3 said.

"The nearest we could get would be a photographic likeness of a stranger," P1 said.

The Professors Muldible were depressed and worried.

Sir Clifton turned to the Co-Ord agent. "Must there be publicity? Obviously it was an unfortunate accident. It won't happen again. What is done cannot be undone. Surely it would be better if the matter were handled quietly."

"It's not for me to decide," the agent said. "I only uncover the facts. I'll put in my report to the Chief, and he'll probably hand it over to the Legal Department to sort out . . ."

"ESPEC makes much of Co-Ord redundant," Sacpole said. "There is nothing beyond our comprehension. This had leaked out and is now general knowledge, which has had a marked effect upon the public consciousness. Crime, as such, cannot occur without being brought to light for scrutiny."

"Now we can truly say, 'Crime does not pay' . . ."

"Everybody thinks that this guy Goldstick is a crackpot, but he's a genius not a screwball. I met him, and he made so much sense to me that I started working with him. Between us we have overcome practically every obstacle. We can create a chronomorphous state, and our main difficulty now is period selectivity."

"All very interesting, Ray, but why have you called us in?"

Ray grinned. "Shortly we will be able to move around in Time. Do you know what that means?"

"Go ahead, elucidate."
“I'll explain it this way. Back in 1935, three men walked into the Cambridge and Citizens' Bank and carted away over one million dollars worth of bullion. Got it?”

“I... uh...” He whistled.

“You got it. Some kind of fancy knock-out gas was used and the three men got clean away. The case is still in the Unsolved file,” Ray said happily. “It’s perfect. Handled with care, no one should get suspicious...”

Carl Roeder was wondering how to murder his wife. He liked the idea of planting a crucial but natural posthypnotic suggestion, but the recent Irving Case had revealed that the least suspicion invited ESPEC. And if ESPEC saw nothing untoward, the obligatory truth session was an attendant check-out feature that could foil the most skillful histrionic performance.

Carl Roeder sighed. It had been much easier in the old days.

No suspicion. There must not be the least hint of suspicion.

A thought came to him and he sat up to help it mature. Why not use ESPEC itself? He could see Mayberry at the club. Maybe wangle some ESPEC with a good excuse. With a shot of ESPEC and a telekinetic booster...

He rubbed his chin. It might work. He could envision her whereabouts and influence something to fall on her. Or perhaps give her a push. Or maybe put a glidocar out of control and...

Col was breathing hard. He did not have much time.

Everything was in readiness. He put his forehead against his forbidden Mossy Memory Box. For some reason it successfully confused ESPEC culprit visualization. It was simple, but it had its disadvantages.

The shutter was on 1/50th, and he clicked it over.

Col stared blankly at the Memory Box. Stuck on it was a note that said: “See letter on table.”

Col turned, saw table and letter.

With agitated fingers he ripped the envelope open. He read:
“Your memory will be gone for about a week. Don’t worry. You did it yourself for a very good reason. Take it easy and try and relax. There is plenty of food in the kitchen cupboard and . . .”

Sy Zadly had learned something from his personal experience under the ESPEC drug, catatonicine. The picture came through clear and vivid, a startling presence, but too broad to cope with fine print. Also, the sound fell far short of hi-fi, and Sy laid his crafty plans accordingly.

Muffled unrecognizably, in a bare, undistinguished room, he made whispered blank-screen teleview contact with an equally circumspect ex-marine sharpshooter.

And so it came about that later, in a room on the tenth floor, overlooking the racecourse, the pair were huddled, effectively masked, at the window, as the first race was in progress.

“There he go,” Sy hissed. “Yellow. Blue cap.”

“So you keep tellin’ me,” the sharpshooter breathed patiently.

As the horses approached the home turn, the ex-marine raised his powa-punch-pac and carefully sighted through its telescope.

The horses turned into the straight.

“Now!” Sy said hoarsely. “Now!”

The ex-marine squeezed the trigger. His threepy gave its curious 1/10th second full range whine, “weEoo,” and a low-surge bolt needleed out to the rump of Sy’s selection.

“Again,” Sy whispered excitedly. “Again! . . .”

Wilf Wajjer, successfully disguised as a gentleman, watched the galvanized horse streak past the post, its frightened rider a blur of yellow.

He adjusted his monocle, twirled his cane, and contentedly went to collect . . .

“You might say that we have discovered the Philosopher’s Stone,” Sacpole mused.

Sir Clifton Gunfield savored his sherry. “You might say that.” He studied Sacpole. “You showed remarkable perspicacity, old chap.”
"I saw no reason why such a fortuitous discovery should become public property," Sacpole said mildly. "Competition would destroy its value. Too many commodity-duplicators, and operating benefits would be marginal."

"More sherry?" Sir Clifton filled his wineglass. "Odd, you know," he said, "it never crossed my mind. The productive potential, I mean. Materials to goods. My main concern was the Instravel image."

Sacpole laughed. "Lucky it was. It kept you quiet."

"And, thanks to your extraordinary foresight and promptness, the affair has been most satisfactorily resolved."

"Yes," Sacpole said. He rolled the wineglass between his fingers. "If you pay generous compensation to the dependents of the irrecoverable travelers, and I take care to close Co-Ord interest, only the Muldibles' remain. And they, with admirable co-operation, desire nothing more than privacy."

They sat for a while, both reflecting upon the promise of the future.

Sir Clifton broke the silence. "You are a powerful man," he said. "May I ask why you chose this powerful course?"

Sacpole sighed. "Powerful, but not wealthy," he said. "This golden egg will restore the family fortunes, yours and mine." He raised his glass. "Cheers, eh?"

There is always a crooked man.

---

**Elementary Mistake**

**Poul Anderson**

Hello, Bellegarde! Hello, Earth. Hello, Universe. And to hell with you.

World Federation, planet Earth, star Sol, Milky Way galaxy. Does every schoolboy write that kin'a 'dress on his books? Not that I'm a schoolboy now. Wish I was. . . . were? . . . yes, subjunctive, were. Ay-llow me t' in'er-duce m'self. William J. Lind, officer and putative gentle-
man of the Space Service, Pioneer Division, electronic aboard Widsith, seated at our primary transmitter on the planet they named, in the best romantic tradition, Guinevere—you should hear what we call it—with a lot of big ugly mountains staring over my shoulder and making rude remarks.

Nope, wrong verb form again. I was sitting here. A thing we might's well call a bird was flopping above the mast, in a purplish sky. It had long sweptback wings, sort o' like our aircraft, and they glinted reddish green. Sun did that, big orange disk, and it tinted the clouds gold, and the snows on the peaks around this here now valley where we're parked. (See, if I watch my tongue, I can still pronounce words good, but believe me, 's not easy to watch your own tongue without a mirror.) The shadows were bluish red, too. But the smoke from yonder volcano, black, black . . . Where was I? Oh, yes. The proper grammar. Past tense. You won't hear me for nigh on five years. By then I'll be, all ten of us'll be one with the beers of yesteryear.

So fly up, little maser beam. Compute, little computer. Keep me locked onto that relay satellite. It'll buck my words on to Bellegarde. Won't it? Sure it will. It passed on the information that got us into this mess in the first place, didn't it? Mean to say, look here, you smug idiots on Bellegarde, on Durindal, on Frodo, on every planet the human race has reached so far—whoa, there, Lind. Save words. The satellite'll be under the horizon pretty soon. Minimize redundancy. Neologize. So: look here, you smidiots, I'm gonna 'splain'a you jus' wha' y' done t' us. An' you'll hafta sit'n listen. How y' gonna discipline me, then? Ha?


Widsith. Spaceship. Null-null drive. Affect everything simultaneous. Push you up fast, just under speed of light, no acceleration pressure to worry about, good old-time dilation makes a five light-year hop go by in a cou-

314
ple of months. And meanwhile that lovely, lovely pay accumulating back at home. Good, no? No. Remember the power consumption. Think, just compute out, how many megawatts per ton you need. Stray radiation means heavy shielding, too, in a power factor of the power. And then, coasting across space? Uh-uh! Space is just full of hydrogen. One atom per cubic centimeter. At a speed of $c$, figure out the resistance. Figure out, also, what power you have to spend to keep those atoms at arm's length. A long, hairy, tattooed arm. Else the radiation from them will fry your aspidistra. Ergo, you needs lots or ergs to go. All engine, no comfort. Most certainly no extra isotopes for fueling a return trip, nor any gear for making 'em at the other end. Not when you're carrying a mattercaster.

Nice mattercaster. Good, friendly, obliging mattercaster. Set one up. Tune it. Step through the gate. Step out the other end, whatever other end has a receiver you're tuned for, Bellegarde, Earth, Hell. No transition time. Not whatsoever. One hyperphase step across the galaxy. The universe is ours. 'Course, you do have to erect your gadget first. No transmitter, no reception, right? And the gadget does have to have a strong gravitational field to work. Got to be on a planet.

So. From an advance base, as it might be Bellegarde, you send your roboprobes to the next likely-looking stars. They find the least horrible planet in the system. Take orbit. Maser back data. Mass, magnetic field, temperature, spectra, everything except what we really needed to know. Load up Widsith. Minimum 'caster. Minimum everything. All we have to do is get there; land; make a foundation and frame out of local materials; assemble our unit; walk back to Bellegarde and report. Then the parts for a big, industrial-type caster can get sent through—direct from Earth, if you want. So can men. So can any equipment they need, including women. No sweat. 'Nother planet conquered. Hurray.

Hurray for us, 'spesh'illy. 'Streetoners on Bellegarde analyzed this here now sun we're under, they did. Variant composition. Cosmic abundances just a statistical concept. Actual composition can vary like crazy. Look at the R Peculiar stars, fr example. Or look at this
one. High concentration Group Eight metals, platinum, palladium. Catalysts. (A catalyst is the gait of a drunken feline.) Looks like plenty of silver, too.

Like mother, like daughter. Planets oughta be loaded with these here now metals. Send roboprobe. Yep, planets, all right, all right. One of 'em even habitable. Earth size, Earth temperature, water oceans, oxynitro air, life, no sign of natives but reflection spectra show protein-based life. Given a li'l chemical apparatus, we could eat it. Not a full diet, but a dietary supplement, anyhow. Good. Ideal. Send Widsith off. Captain Ahmad Akbik, mattercaster engineer Miguel Ocampo, electronician William J. Lind...

Has my recital insulted you enough? Hope so. You killed me, you know. I am, I was sitting here in a valley grown over with spongy brownish-green plants. There're trees, of a sort, growing up the mountainsides. Above timberline, the rocks have funny colors, mostly bluish; they're not like any rocks I ever saw before. On the volcano cone, below the snowcap, I do rec'nize black lava and yellow sulfur. The air stinks. It's cool and damp and smells like old cigar butts. Or something. I'm breathing the air. And I'm drunk. Nearest liquor five light-years away, and I'm drunk. Funny? Merciful? Well, I can tell you what kind of gesture the hand of Providence is making at me. In fact, I will tell you—

No, here comes somebody, aircusted to the ears. He looks mad. Guess they heard me, over yonder in the ship. We got a hookup. I was out here to test the air. Chemical and biological tests said O.K., said the stink's just from the plants and harmless, but you never know. We gotta just breathe the air or we're done for. You see— Hell, with it. We're done for. How do you do, Captain Ahmad Akbik, sir? Shall we dance?

Until the holds were unloaded, the bunkroom was the sole place aboard where all ten men could be simultaneously, and then only if they planned each move in advance. Sleeping, of course, was done in relays. They crowded knee to knee on the four bunks, hunched beneath the low overhead, and stared into each other's face.
The captain would have liked to offer a prayer, when God seemed to be their last remaining friend, but Mecca was probably in a ridiculous direction. “How are you now, Fulgosi?” he asked.

“Quite well,” the mineralogist said. “No after-effects. To be sure, I didn’t become intoxicated like Lind—”

“Hey!” The electronician blushed.

“Don’t be so sensitive about that,” said the biochemist, Riese. “Not your fault. You merely showed a certain reaction, idiosyncratic but not unheard-of, to anesthesia.”

“Anesthesia?” Lind frowned.

“Sure, what else?” Fulgosi said. “When I tried breathing that stuff, I got too drowsy and thick-headed to think. Would’ve passed out before long if you hadn’t brought me back inside the ship. So what’s the cause, Riese?”

“I don’t know,” said the biochemist slowly.

“What?” Akbik exclaimed. “But you must! You’ve run a complete atmospheric analysis, haven’t you?” In the week since Widsith landed, each man had had so much preliminary work to do in his particular specialty that this was their first real chance to compare notes.

“Yes, sir. I found nothing significant that the robo-probe hadn’t already reported. The air had a rather high proportion of noble gases, but otherwise it’s quite Earth-like.”

Lind gagged. “Earthlike, you call those stenches?”

“Yes, what about them?” Ocampo asked. “By-products of a different biochemistry from ours. Couldn’t something, in trace amounts, have an anesthetic effect on the human nervous system?”

“I don’t know,” Riese admitted. “For heaven’s sake, my brain doesn’t have infinite storage capacity. And the reference works we could take with us, even in microspool form, are so limited. Surgical anesthesia has been entirely electronic for the past two centuries or more. Who could have foreseen any need for information about the chemical kind?”

“Could some sort of germ be responsible?” Akbik wondered.

“No, sir, that’s one possibility I swear we can rule out. No native life form can eat us for much the same reason
that we can’t eat it. The selenium and fluorine concentrations in the body of this planet are so high that they have become integral to the metabolism of everything.”

“How can you sit here,” the cyberneticist Pereira objected, “having barely seen a little of one valley, and talk about the entire planet?”

Riese shrugged. “If my computer doesn’t lie,” he said, “it’s traced out the fundamental cellular energy cycle. And that will not vary. Not unless the well-founded idea is totally wrong, that all life on a given world derives from the materials available there in the beginning. Our kind of organism uses—oh, hydrogen bonding, and phosphorus in ATP. Life here uses fluorine and selenium in its equivalents. I don’t need a large sample to prove that. So—every Guineverean plant or animal is violently poisonous to us because of those elements. But by the same token, the phosphorus and iron in our bodies makes us just as poisonous to them.”

“And this cuts our time even shorter,” the geologist Deschamps said unnecessarily.

“I wonder how you’d taste, sauteed in lubricant,” Lind murmured.

“Stop that!” Akbik said.

“Why, is man forbidden food?”

“Not explicitly,” grinned the chemosynthesist Nussbaum. “However, since man does not divide the hoof or chew the cud—”

“You’re hopeless,” Akbik said.

“I’m afraid that’s correct,” Lind said. Observing that the captain was in no mood to continue playing straight man, he hastily grew serious. “Sir, do we have to breathe that stink anyway? I mean, we can keep on wearing our aircuits outdoors, and recharge their bottles from the ship’s oxy renewal plant.”

“Unless we have to dismantle her,” Akbik said.

They stared at each other, ten men alone in unknownness. The silence and the metal shell around them seemed to press inward.

Widsith was a shining tower, tall in the valley. Lind looked up her hull, and up, and up, and reflected what a fraud the damned object was. Enormous fuel tanks:
empty. Engines, therefore, useless, aside from the auxiliary generator. Holds: big, yes, but barely able to contain the equipment necessary to establish a minimal space gate. As a result: living quarters, life support systems, rations, personal gear, cut to the bone.

And now, it turned out, Guinevere wasn’t going to furnish any supplements. No food, no air—

“And the ship’s not any cornucopia, either,” Lind said.

“Beg pardon?” Tao-Chi Huang, the chief mechanic, glanced from the robotractor he was assembling.

“Oh, I was thinking out loud,” Lind said. “The hull’s nothing but light metals, aluminum, magnesium, beryllium alloys. And those we can get right out of this planet. What we’ve got to have, that the planet doesn’t seem to have, is iron.”

“What for? Structural members?”

“Well, that was the original idea. Maybe we can use something else there. But we cannot replace iron—quite a bit of very pure iron—in things like the transformers and magnetic cores of the mattercaster circuits. Not without redesigning the entire system, which would take a special R & D team several years. We are not an R & D team, and we do not have several years.”

“I know Gilruth hasn’t found any native iron yet,” Tao-Chi said. “But there must be some in the planet!”

“So we assumed, before we arrived here. And, actually, I imagine there is some. Down in the core, if nowhere else. Bloated lot of good that does us. What we need is a workable deposit not too far underground. And we haven’t the time or the resources to scour an entire world searching for ore.”

“Hm-m-m.” Tao-Chi started to rub his chin thoughtfully, but his faceplate got in the way. “Maybe our trouble is due to a lack of ferric-reducing bacteria.”

“Maybe. Though wouldn’t you still get oxide in the soil? I think likelier the iron shortage is just another aspect of the weird element-abundance situation here.” Lind shrugged in his airsuit. “If we don’t find any, damn soon, we’ll have to cannibalize for it—like maybe your construction equipment.”

“That will be needed up to the last minute,” Tao-Chi protested, “and in any event, it’s mostly light alloys, too.
Besides, if you did take what steel parts there are, I doubt if you could purify the iron out of modern aligned-crystal materials with anything less than a gaseous diffusion plant.”

“Which is too much for us to build. Well, so we’ll have to steal from the ship. Take out its transformers and such. We can do that, of course. But, the ship is an integrated system. If we remove a vital unit from, say, the engine, then the oxy renewal plant will stop working.”

“I know. So Joe Riese had jolly well better find a way to make the local air breathable. Right?”

“Right. He’s working on it. Me, I got business in the shack.”

Burdened and uncomfortable in survival gear, Lind’s slender form walked on down the valley. Passing the maser mast where he had disgraced himself, he winced. Damn Guinevere! Damn the astronomers, and their bland assumption that every kind of atom would be available here even if the percentages varied. Damn his own foolishness in signing on for the expedition. At best, he’d come back to a list of female vidiphone numbers five years obsolete. At worst . . . what good was money to a skeleton? Even if the skeleton’s owner had died drunk.

A stream burbled along the path. It supplied water and waste removal to the gate construction site, and thus had lost its pristine freshness. Serve it right, Lind thought viciously. He proceeded to a wide plot which had been cleared of topsoil and was now being leveled. Dust smoked in the orange sunlight, up from a bulldozer which snorted back and forth. That was an automaton as was nearly every machine. Under no circumstances could ten men’s muscles do the brute labor of establishing a base on an uncharted planet. Nor could ten men’s brains do the innumerable necessary analyses of data and material samples. Humans were here to look at the instruments, program the robots, read the computer printouts, make the decisions, and perform the finer tasks of installation and adjustment as the mattercaster assembly grew.
Nice theory. Trouble was, Guinevere didn’t provide the stuff needed to make the theory work.

Lind entered a prefab which squatted ugly at the field’s edge. Sunlight through begrimed windows glittered red-gold off a clutter of apparatus. Ocampo and Fulgosi were turning away from a bulk that Lind identified as a furnace with attached spectroscope, pyrometer, and assorted things to which he could not put a name. Technology, he thought, had made technologists too blooming specialized.

“No.” Fulgosi’s helmet speaker needed some adjustment, Lind heard. What the mineralogist must have intended as a sigh emerged as a whistle. “This sample has essentially the same composition as the last. Nothing is different except the hydration and a few impurities.”

“But we must have calcium minerals!” Ocampo exclaimed.

“Take that up with a higher authority. All I can tell you is that none of the neighborhood rocks are limestone or gypsum or anything reasonable like that. They’re universally based on strontium. It must be vastly more common here.”

“Well, can’t strontium substitute for calcium? In human bones, I’ve heard—”

“Yes, there is chemical similarity. But not that close. Strontium carbonate won’t burn to the oxide at any temperature we can get with available equipment. And even if it did, the oxide won’t set to mortar. Nor, for that matter, will strontium sulfate make plaster of paris.” Fulgosi regarded the construction chief for a moment. “Must we actually have a massive concrete foundation for the ‘caster?”

“Hell, yes!” Ocampo said. “The thing won’t work unless it’s properly anchored to the planet. Reaction forces would tear it apart otherwise. Without a strong, water-proof setting—Ah, Lind. What brings you here?”

“I was after the latest analysis myself,” the electronician said.

Sweat glistened behind Fulgosi’s faceplate. “I’ll sure be glad when we do get our materials together, if we ever do,” he said. “Right now, Gilruth, Riese, and I are the only ones working, and we’re working our tails off.

321
The rest of you sit and feel sorry for yourselves ... No, my friend, we haven’t turned up any bismuth for you.”

“But I have been working,” Lind answered. “With references and my slipstick and—How about antimony? Found some antimony?”

“Why, uh, yes. Quite a bit of stibnite. What do you want it for?”

“Whew! I’m glad to hear that. You see, the tuning circuit calls for a large piece of bismuth, as being diamagnetic. But antimony is almost as good in that respect, and I’ve calculated we can substitute it.” Lind turned to Ocampo. “While I was at it, I checked some other possibilities. You need zinc for galvanizing, and we haven’t found any decent deposits, right? Well, cadmium will do the same job. You put it on by a different process, but it works fine.”

Fulgosi snatched a piece of paper off the bench. “Here,” he said with sudden excitement. “A list. What we’ve found in extractable form and quantity so far. Plenty of cadmium.”

“Plenty of gold, silver, platinum, manganese,” Ocampo said. His bitterness had not left him. “So we can make busbars of silver instead of copper—but we’d counted on that anyway. So manganese is a good structural metal—but in a moist oxygen atmosphere, it’ll crumble to oxide almost as fast as we can cast our members. Where’s the iron coming from for the foundation and framework? Not the ship. Barely enough iron in her for your circuits, Lind. Show me how to make concrete without calcium, and several tons of ribs and girders without iron, and a few such items, and I’ll kiss you.”

“Ugh,” said Lind. He studied the engineer’s miserable countenance. “You’ve let this get to you,” he said. “Your brain’s tramping in circles. Me, I dunno, maybe that anesthesia jag I went on cleared my head somehow. But seems obvious to me, we’ll do best to find substitutes for the stuff we can’t get.”

“I think that’s obvious even to a dolt like me,” Ocampo snorted. “Name a few.”

“I did. Antimony and cadmium. And then—Hm-m-m.” Lind went to the window and stared out. The volcano
lifted sheer before him. They'd landed here because they couldn't prospect an entire world and a plutonic re-
gion was likeliest to have a wide assortment of easily re-
finable minerals. Which this area did, to be sure; only they were the wrong minerals. Lind's forefinger doodled
on a dusty pane. "Why steel?" he murmured. "I mean, for the framework supporting the 'caster on its founda-
tion. You only want mechanical strength there. Why not stone?"

"No boulders are big enough, around here anyway, and we can't assemble smaller ones into a frame because we can't make mortar."

"But the lava up yonder. We should be able to cast it and machine it to shape. Don't you think so?"

"Well, I'll be—" Ocampo stood silent a while. Fulgosi
gulped. Hope had come like a blow.

"Y-yes," Ocampo said at length, quite softly. "For beams, as you say, and bedplates, and so forth. But not for the foundation. We're not set up to cast that big a piece of material with a high melting point; and, as I told you, without mortar—"

"So what else might serve?" Lind swung back. Inside his suit, he quivered. "Let's use our imaginations. Let's ask Gilruth what he's noticed on his exploring trips."

A teakettle whine cut through the sky. "Speaking about devils," Fulgosi said. The expedition's single aircraft, a hover job with considerable range and carrying capaci-
ty, bounced to a halt on the field. The three men hurried from the shack.

Gilruth was climbing out. "What'd you find?" Ocampo shouted.

"Brought home some assorted rocks for testing," the pilot said, working hard at imperturbability. "Doubt if they'll be any use, though. What spot checks I carried out, neutron activation and so forth, showed the same bloody distribution of elements upriver as here. No iron, no calcium, no copper, no nothing."

"Never mind, never mind." Lind seized his arm and dragged him away. "We want something different from you."
Gilruth looked alarmed. "Have you left your helmet off again?"

Ocampo explained. Gilruth had landed on the volcano some days ago, near the peak. Well, did the lava beds look mineable? And what else might he have noticed, paying no special heed at the time because what he saw hadn't been what he hoped to see? The conference lasted an hour, and all four returned to the spaceship still chattering into each other's mouth.

They cycled through the personnel lock, racked their suits, and encountered emptiness. Everyone must be outside, performing the jobs that had to be done before actual construction could start. No—a noise below decks—Ocampo's party squeezed down the companionway.

Now that most of the machinery had been unloaded, the holds were echoing caverns. Riese had taken one of them over for a workshop. He stood at a bench, a laser torch glaring in his hand, making a boxlike assembly.

"Hey, Joel" Lind cried. "Listen! Good news."

"I'm glad somebody has some," the biochemist grumbled. He switched off his torch, wiped his face, and sat down on the bench. It sagged under his weight, being little more than some cobbled-together alumalloy sheeting which wasn't needed elsewhere at the moment. He swore and stood again. "What's happened?"

"We've hit on the answer to our problem," Lind said. "For the native materials we need but don't find, we use ersatz."

"You've taken this long to realize that?"

"Oh, yes, the principle is obvious," Ocampo said, "but we didn't fully accept it until today. We kept hoping we'd be able to proceed according to the book. This afternoon, though, we took a hard look at the possibilities of using what we've actually got on Guinevere. And they seem very hopeful."

"Fine." Riese stared at the apparatus he was making and clicked his tongue. "Maybe I'd better turn this project over to one of you geniuses."

"What's the matter?" The question jerked from Gilruth. "Not working properly?"

"Not yet, anyhow. The basic idea is simple enough. Assuming that one or more of the trace gases, the bio-
compounds, in the atmosphere are responsible for anestheticizing us: how do we get them out? They're organic. So, in theory, we blow air through an electric arc energetic enough to break them down into CO₂ and such-like, and bubble the resulting gas through water. What comes out the other end should be good, pure air."

"It had better be," Gilruth said. "Once we've removed the iron from the ship's electrical system . . . well, I somehow can't visualize us, drunk, or dopey or unconscious, completing that matter gate. Can you?"

"No." Riese scowled. "My problem is this: apparently, whatever compounds affect us need only be present in micro quantities. Probably they act by inhibiting certain enzymes. Therefore, my purifier has to work perfectly. So it has to be continuously monitored by spectrographic and chromatographic instruments. Now, designing such circuits is not easy." He looked at Lind. "I think, if you can be spared, you'd better devote full time to helping me."

"I guess I'd better," Lind said in a small voice.

The others had too much to do to worry about whether they would have air to breathe toward the end of their tasks. That "too much" included, especially, worrying about every other problem. For their food supply, however rationed, was little more than sufficient to carry them through a set of standardized procedures evolved on familiar kinds of planet. Now they must invent a whole new set of ways to install a mattercaster. And a starving man can continue to work for a while, after a fashion, but he can't continue to produce bright ideas, or tinker with the thing he has built until it does what it is supposed to do.

Thus time was precious and the labor schedule brutal.

They did talk a little. Tamping an explosive charge into a lava bed, Fulgosi growled, "Nussbaum's sure got a soft touch."

"What's he doing?" Deschamps leaned wearily on his pick.

"Making glass epoxy out of silicates and organics. Solder substitute."

"Well, we've got to have that, too, and if Nussbaum's
the only one of us who can cook up a batch—One man can’t carry all human knowledge in his head.”

“Not even in his own specialty,” Fulgosi sighed. “I suspect that’s Joe Riese’s problem. If he had the right reference works, he could probably find out in ten minutes what’s wrong with the atmosphere and what to do about it. But no one thought to supply him with the one obscure bit of information he needs.” He straightened and looked around. Rockfields tilted dark, up beyond snows and glaciers to where the mountain lifted a skyward smoke plume. “O.K., let’s get back to the aircraft. When this charge blows, it could touch off an avalanche.”

Down in the valley, after nightfall, Gilruth shepherded a truckload of logs to the construction site. A stone-crushing mill thudded, a wood-pulping machine yelled, a chemical vat seethed—improvised, most of it, one way or another. Beyond the lampposts ringing the field could be seen the stars, cold and strangely constellated and terribly remote.

“How much more timber will you need?” he asked Ocampo. “Robot help or no, lumberjacking is hardly a sinecure.”

“Piloting is?” the engineer replied. “I think two more loads should end this job. We had to run quite a series of tests, but we seem to have found the right mixture now.”

“Some concrete, eh? Vegetable fiber and asbestos-like rock, bound together with molten sulfur and pour- I to make your foundation!”

“Well, it serves. In fact, it should be just as good as the ordinary cement-based kind.”

“What about reinforcing rods and conductive tie beams?”

“Haven’t you heard? No, I guess you’ve been in the outback too much. Alagau.”

“Alagau to you, too. Or was that a death rattle?”

Ocampo laughed a little. Some distance away, an arc furnace was uncovered, and the light glared off his faceplate. “Aluminum-silver-gold alloy,” he explained. “Nussbaum suggested it, and it seems to be hard and
tough enough for our purposes, in spite of having a mauve color. Al, Ag, Au, see?

After a moment, he added, “In fact, by now we have an astonishing collection of assorted ersatzes. Beryllium, titanium, lithium, magnesium, thorium, they’re more versatile than you’d think, in their different alloys. Then there are organics, plastics, tars—”

Gilruth slumped wearily in the cab and stared at the fire-trickle where molten metal ran into casting forms. “Won’t do us a lot of good if we can’t get pure air,” he said. “How’re Riese and Lind coming on that?”

“All right, I guess.”

“I was thinking. Suppose they fail. What then? Couldn’t we get oxygen by roasting ores?”

“Um-m-m . . . possibly. That’d be such a huge job, though. Only imagine what equipment we’d have to build, to operate on the scale necessary. We could easily starve to death before we finished. No, I think our friends have plain got to succeed.”

And a few mornings later, in Widsith’s hold, Riese and Lind beamed at each other. On the bench before them stood a cylinder, fantastically piped and wired. A fan whined at the open end, attached instruments certified that clean atmosphere, free of any organic taint except a normal amount of carbon dioxide, was being compressed into a bottle.

“The damned thing is finally in shape,” Lind breathed.

“I was beginning to think it never would be,” Riese said.

“Maybe now you understand why engineers draw high pay.” Lind yawned and stretched. “Me for some sleep, before Akbik puts me in one of the labor gangs!”

“Uh—” Riese hesitated. “A final test.”

“What?”

The biochemist took the bottle off the hose and attached it to the shoulder pack of an airsuit. “Take a few lungfuls,” he said. “Just to make sure.”

“But . . . I mean . . . oh, all right.” Lind grumbled his way into the suit, sealed the helmet, and cracked the valve on the bottle.

“Well?” asked Riese anxiously:
“Seems O.K. The stink is certainly gone.” Lind inhaled again, and again. “Yep, jus’ fine.” A wide and foolish grin spread over his features. “Won’erful. Great. What a team we are, you know ’at? C’mon, le’s dance.”

He walked out, alone, into darkness. Under a dim red moon, the valley dews, the stream, and the far snow-peaks glimmered. Somewhere an animal hooted. His footfalls made a hollow thudding.

He felt cold and tired. But sleep escaped him. Everyone else was sacked out, exhausted. Lind envied them. For the moment, they were free of the knowledge that their labor had been for naught and that Guinevere would never let them go.

They'd driven themselves as no one would dare drive a mule. (Of course, no one would care overly much if a mule didn’t come home.) Now time was hideously short. There simply weren't enough man-days left to build the oxygen-producing furnace which Gilruth had proposed. The food was practically gone. You could live a while, empty-bellied; but some of that while must go to completing and adjusting the space gate whose framework bulked yonder in the shadows of the field. Already Lind's stomach complained of underemployment.

Earth—prime ribs, baked potatoes smothered in sour cream and chives, apple pie à la mode . . . No, damn it, before he thought about such things he must think how to return to them.

Basic problem: find a way to get the anesthetic factor out of Guinevere's atmosphere. The way must needs be simple, the apparatus easy to build and operate. Thereafter everything else would be simple—shutting down the ship's oxy renewer, dismantling the electrical system, installing the needed iron parts in the mattercaster circuits, adding the parts hauled from Bellegarde, tuning and activating the gate and making one stride across the light-years to home.

Well, then, Billy Lind, solve the basic problem. It must have a perfectly easy solution. Given it as a question on an exam, not so long ago in college, you'd likely have seen the answer inside of five minutes.

But the situation was different here. Here, everybody
had worked too hard. Their brains were numb. He and Riese were the only men who'd been spared much physical labor—because their comrades trusted them to provide the air—and now their failure seemed to have stunned Riese into apathy.

Therefore, Billy Lind, the responsibility is yours. Certainly you're tired. Certainly you're also in a state of mild shock. But you're not too stupefied to think. Are you?

So. What are the facts? It had been obvious that organic compounds were acting as snooze gases. What else could? And yet... Guineverean air processed until sensitive instruments swore it was pure, kept right on kicking the human mind out of orbit. Therefore the taken-for-granted fact had not been a fact after all. So what other possible fact (or) was there?

Lind couldn't imagine. The noble gases? But they were inert! You could breathe oxyhelium without noticing any difference except that your voice sounded squeaky. Oh, yes, you could force one or two other members of that family to take on fluorine atoms or whatever, but they did it grudgingly, under very special laboratory conditions. How could—Lind cursed in the dark. Unfair to demand that he think. He was too tired, too hungry, even in his airsuit too cold.

Cold!

Hello, Earth. Hello, everybody. Whoops!

William J. Lind again. Call me Billy. Call me anything. Bee-cause by th' time you receive me on Belle-garde, I'll've been five years home an' inna diff'rent job an' you can't fire me 'cause I'll long've been in some other line uh work an' so to Guinevere wi' you.

Or else I'll be rich. Might be. Gotta lotta (hey, that rhymes!) gotta lotta new techniques here. Sure to be other planets like this'n. Hey? Hey-heyy. Maybe we can patent 'em. At leas' we can write a book. Bes' seller. "I Was Pumpin' On Guinevere." How's 'at sound? Thought so.

I was, y'know. Distillin’, anyway. An' then pumpin' the oxy an' the nitro into bottles. My idea. Very simple. You jus' liquefy your air. We'd enough stuff lyin' 'roun'
to make an air liquefaction unit. Then we did fractional distillation. Which, muh frien’s an' fellow citizens o' the gr-r-reat World Federation, is not distillin' fractions. What an image, though. Li'l numerators an' denominators boilin' off. But all we did was liquid air. I mean to say, now hear this, all we did was distill liquid air. After we'd made it inna firs' place. See? No sweat. Mos' absolutely no sweat, at minus 107 point one degrees Celsius.

Tha's the boilin' point o' xenon. Guilty party. We foun' out by tryin' different fractions on ourselves. Yep, xenon. Fine anesthetic. Oh, you knew that already didja? But you gotta big fat shelf uh references handy. So why didn' you tell us? Huh? Answer me that.

Guess we should’a thought o' it before. But so much else to do. An' whole situation complicated. So naturally we 'spect ed anesthesia problem 'ud be complicated, too. Wasted lotta time, we did, lookin' for complicated answer 'fore we hit on simple one. I did. Me. William J. Lind. I'm simple-minded. Ta-ra-la-la-i-tul I gloat! Hear me!

All set now. Ever' thing ready. Tomorrow we start the transmitter an' walk through to Bellegarde. Liquor on Bellegarde. Big celebration. But me, I get drunk on xenon, so why not start now? Whoops! How many moons this planet got, anyway?

Jus' one question, you fat smug people. (Dunno whether to call you smats or fugs.) One li'l bitty question. This here now funny elemental composition. Damn near killed us. Jus' a very slight shift in relative abundances, and k-k-kr-r-r! So I ask you. Think about this. Think good 'n hard, because nex' time aroun', you're not gonna have William J. Lind on deck. Nope, you're not. I'll be on Earth, livin' the life o' Riley, an' I don' 'magine Riley'll ever come home. Cause he's one o' these here now onward-the-march-o-mankind characters. He'll be pioneerin' the stars. I won't.

So, O.K., my question: What you gonna do when you hit the nex' crazy kind o' world?
Harpur peered uncertainly through the streaming windows of his car. There had been no parking space close to the police headquarters, and now the building seemed separated from him by miles of puddled concrete and parading curtains of rain. The sky sagged darkly and heavily between the buildings around the square.

Suddenly aware of his age, he stared for a long moment at the old police block and its cascading gutters, before levering himself stiffly out of the driving seat. It was difficult to believe the sun was shining warmly in a basement room under the west wing. Yet he knew it was, because he had phoned and asked about it before leaving home.

"It’s real nice down here today, Judge," the guard had said, speaking with the respectful familiarity he had developed over the years. "Not so good outside, of course, but down here it’s real nice."

"Have any reporters shown up yet?"
"Just a few so far, Judge. You coming over?"
"I expect so," Harpur had replied. "Save a seat for me, Sam."
"Yes, sir!"

Harpur moved as quickly as he dared, feeling the cool rain penetrate to the backs of his hands in his shower-proof's pockets. The lining clung round the knuckles when he moved his fingers. As he climbed the steps to the front entrance a preliminary flutter in the left side of his chest told him he had hurried too much, pushed things too far.

The officer at the door saluted smartly.

Harpur nodded to him. "Hard to believe this is June, isn’t it, Ben?"

"Sure is, sir. I hear it’s nice down below, though."

Harpur waved to the guard, and was moving along the corridor when the pain closed with him. It was very
clean, very pure. As though someone had carefully chosen a sterile needle, fitted it into an antiseptic handle, heated it to whiteness and—with the swiftness of compassion—run it into his side. He stopped for a moment and leaned on the tiled wall, trying not to be conspicuous, while perspiration pricked out on his forehead. I can't give up now, he thought, not when there's only another couple of weeks to go . . . But, supposing this is it? Right now!

Harpur fought the panic, until the entity that was his pain withdrew a short distance. He drew a shuddering breath of relief and began to walk again, slowly, aware that his enemy was watching and following. But he reached the sunshine without any further attacks.

Sam Macnamara, the guard at the inner door, started to give his usual grin and then, seeing the strain on Harpur's face, ushered him quickly into the room. Macnamara was a tall Irishman whose only ambition seemed to be to drink two cups of coffee every hour on the hour, but they had developed a friendship which Harpur found strangely comforting. He shook out a fold-up chair at the back of the room and held it steady while Harpur sat down.

"Thank you, Sam," Harpur said gratefully, glancing around at the unfamiliar crowd, none of whom had noticed his arrival. They were all staring towards the sunlight.

The smell of the rain-damp clothing worn by the reporters seemed strangely out of place in the dusty, underground room. It was part of the oldest wing of the police headquarters and, until ten years before, had been used to store obsolete records. Since then, except on special press days, its bare concrete walls had housed nothing but a bank of monitoring equipment, two very bored guards, and a pane of glass mounted in a frame at one end of the room.

The glass was of the very special variety through which light took many years to pass. It was the sort people used to capture scenes of exceptional beauty for their homes.

To Harpur's eyes, the view through this piece of slow
glass had no particular beauty. It showed a reasonably pretty bay on the Atlantic coast, but the water was cluttered with sports boats, and a garishly-painted service station intruded in the foreground. A connoisseur of slow glass would have thrown a rock through it, but Emile Bennett, the original owner, had brought it to the city simply because it contained the view from his childhood home. Having it available, he had explained, saved him a two-hundred mile drive any time he felt homesick.

The sheet of glass Bennett had used was ten years thick, which meant that it had had to stand for ten years at his parents' home before the view from there came through. It continued, of course, to transmit the same view for ten years after being brought back to the city, regardless of the fact that it had been confiscated from Bennett by impatient police officers who had a profound disinterest in his parental home. It would report, without fail, everything it ever saw—but only in its own good time.

Slumped tiredly in his seat, Harpur was reminded of the last time he had been to a movie. The only light in the room was that coming from the oblong pane of glass, and the reporters sat fidgeting in orderly rows like a movie audience. Harpur found their presence distracting. It prevented him from slipping into the past as easily as usual.

The shifting waters of the bay scattered sunlight through the otherwise dismal room, the little boats crossed and recrossed, and silent cars occasionally slid into the service station. An attractive girl in the extremely abbreviated dress of a decade ago walked across a garden in the foreground, and Harpur saw several of the reporters jot some personal angle material in their notebooks.

One of the more inquisitive left his seat and walked round behind the pane of glass to see the view from the other side, but came back looking disappointed. Harpur knew a sheet of metal had been welded into the frame at the back, completely covering the glass. The county had ruled that it would have been an invasion of the senior Bennetts' privacy to put on public view all their
domestic activities during the time the glass was being charged.

As the minutes began to drag out in the choking atmosphere of the room, the reporters grew noticeably restless, and began loudly swapping yarns. Somewhere near the front, one of them began sneezing monotonously and swearing in between. No smoking was permitted near the monitoring equipment which, on behalf of the state, hungrily scanned the glass, so relays of three and four began to drift out into the corridor to light cigarettes. Harpur heard them complaining about the long wait and he smiled. He had been waiting for ten years, and it seemed even longer.

Today, June 7th, was one of the key days for which he and the rest of the country had been standing by, but it had been impossible to let the press know in advance the exact moment at which they would get their story. The trouble was that Emile Bennett had never been able to remember just what time, on that hot Sunday, he had driven to his parents’ home to collect his sheet of slow glass. During the subsequent trial it had not been possible to pin it down to anything more definite than “about three in the afternoon.”

One of the reporters finally noticed Harpur sitting near the door and came over to him. He was sharply dressed, fair-haired and impossibly young looking.

“Pardon me, sir. Aren’t you Judge Harpur?”

Harpur nodded. The boy’s eyes widened briefly then narrowed as he assessed the older man’s present news value.

“Weren’t you the presiding judge in the . . . Raddall case?” He had been going to say the Glass Eye case, but immediately changed his mind.

Harpur nodded again. “Yes, that’s correct. But I no longer give interviews to the press. I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right, sir. I understand.” He went on out to the corridor, walking with quicker, springier steps. Harpur guessed the young man had just decided on his angle for today’s story. He could have written the copy himself:

Today Judge Kenneth Harpur—the man who ten
years ago presided in the controversial “Glass Eye” case, in which twenty-one-year old Ewan Raddall was charged with a double slaying—sat on a chair in one of the underground rooms at police headquarters. An old man now, the Iron Judge has nothing at all to say. He only watches, waits and wonders...

Harpur smiled wryly. He no longer felt any bitterness over the newspaper attacks. The only reason he had stopped speaking to journalists was that he had become very, very bored with that aspect of his life. He had reached the age at which a man discards the unimportant stuff and concentrates on essentials. In another two weeks he would be free to sit in the sun and note exactly how many shades of blue and green there were in the sea, and just how much time elapsed between the appearance of the first evening star and the second. If his physician allowed it, he would have a little good whiskey, and if his physician refused it, he would still have the whiskey. He would read a few books, and perhaps even write one...

As it turned out, the estimated time given by Bennett at the trial had been pretty accurate.

At eight minutes past three Harpur and the waiting newsmen saw Bennett approach the glass from the far side with a screwdriver in his hand. He was wearing the sheepish look people often have when they get in range of slow glass. He worked at the sides for a moment, then the sky flashed crazily into view, showing the glass had been tilted out of its frame. A moment later the room went dark as the image of a brown, army-type blanket unfolded across the glass, blotting out the laggard light.

The monitors at the back of the room produced several faint clicking noises which were drowned out by the sound of the reporters hurrying to telephones.

Harpur got to his feet and slowly walked out behind the reporters. There was no need to hurry now. Police records showed that the glass would remain blanked out for two days, because that was how long it had lain in the trunk of Bennett’s car before he had got round to installing it in a window frame at the back of his city home. For a further two weeks after that it would show
the casual day-to-day events which took place ten years before in the children's public playground at the rear of the Bennett house.

Those events were of no particular interest to anyone; but the records also showed that in the same playground, on the night of June 21, 1981, a twenty-year old typist, Joan Calderisi, had been raped and murdered. Her boy friend, a twenty-three-year-old auto mechanic named Edward Jerome Hattie, had also been killed, presumably for trying to defend the girl.

Unknown to the murderer, there had been one witness to the double killing—and now it was getting ready to give its perfect and incontrovertible evidence.

The problem had not been difficult to foresee.

Right from the day slow glass first appeared in a few very expensive stores, people had wondered what would happen if a crime were to be committed in its view. What would be the legal position if there were, say, three suspects and it was known that, five or ten years later, a piece of glass would identify the murderer beyond all doubt? Obviously, the law could not risk punishing the wrong person; but, equally obviously, the guilty one could not be allowed to go free all that time.

This was how tabloid feature writers had summed it up, although to Judge Kenneth Harpur there had been no problem at all. When he read the speculations it took him less than five seconds to make up his mind—and he had been impressively unruffled when the test case came his way.

That part had been a coincidence. Erskine County had no more homicides and no more slow glass than any other comparable area. In fact, Harpur had no recollection of ever seeing the stuff until Holt City’s electrical street-lighting system was suddenly replaced by alternating panels of eight-hour glass and sixteen-hour glass slung in continuous lines above the thoroughfares. That was several years after techniques had been developed for the mass production of slow glass, or—as it was officially known—retardite.

It had taken some time for a retardite capable of producing delays measured in years to evolve from the first sheets which held light back by roughly half a second.
The original material was developed by a glass manufacturer trying to produce a transparency which was both shatterproof and a really efficient insulator. Its unique properties might never have been noticed but for the fact that it was first used—unfortunately for a number of people—in automobile windscreens.

The auto manufacturer concerned spent upwards of half a million dollars trying to find out why one batch of one model had been involved in a statistically improbable number of accidents involving right-hand turns. Expensive as the investigation was, it paid off because retardite became a major industry in a matter of months.

"Scene-stealing" was one of the prime applications, and slow-glass farms sprang up at beauty spots all over the world. A large part of the commercial success of slow glass lay in the fact that there was absolutely no difference, emotionally, between owning a "scenedow" and owning the land which had charged it with light. The occupant of the most airless, glove-tight duplex in a city could look out on pine-clad valleys—and in every important respect they were his.

It was also discovered that, for many applications, cameras had become obsolete. All planetary expeditions, manned or robotic, carried practically weightless retardite slivers of appropriate periods. In any cinematic field, from industrial recording to bird-watching, where large footages had normally been wasted while waiting for an unpredictable key event, short-period slow glass was used instead. The cameras were turned on it—with comfortable hindsight—at the right moment. Spy cameras became tiny flecks of glass which operatives had been known to push into their pores, like blackheads.

But no matter how varied the purpose, all slow-glass applications had one thing in common. The user had to be absolutely certain of the time delay he wanted—because there was no way of speeding the process up. Had retardite been a "glass" in the true sense of the word, it might have been possible to plane a piece down to a different thickness and get the information sooner; but, in reality, it was an extremely opaque material. Opaque in the sense that light never actually got into it.

Radiations with wavelengths in the order of that of
light were absorbed on the face of a retardite panel and their information converted to stress patterns within the material. The piezoluctic effect by which the information worked its way through to the opposite face involved the whole crystalline structure, and anything which disturbed that structure instantaneously randomized the stress patterns.

Infuriating as the discovery was to certain researchers, it had been an important factor in the commercial success of retardite. People would have been reluctant to install scenedows in their homes, knowing that everything they had done behind them was being stored for other eyes to see years later. So the burgeoning piezoluctics industry had been quick to invent an inexpensive “tickler” by which any piece of slow glass could be cleaned off for reuse, like a cluttered computer program.

This was also the reason why, for ten years, two guards had been on a round-the-clock watch of the scenedow which held the evidence in the Raddall case. There was always the chance that one of Raddall’s relatives, or some publicity-seeking screwball, would sneak in and wipe the slate clean before its time came to resolve all doubts.

There had been moments during the ten years when Harpur had been too ill and tired to care very much, times when it would have been a relief to have the perfect witness silenced forever. But usually the existence of the slow glass did not bother him.

He had made his ruling in the Raddall case, and it had been a decision he would have expected any other judge to make. The subsequent controversy, the enmity of sections of the press, the public, and even some of his colleagues, had hurt at first, but he had got over that.

The Law, Harpur had said in his summing up, existed solely because people believed in it. Let that belief be shaken—even once—and the Law would suffer irreparable harm.

As near as could be determined, the killings had taken place about an hour before midnight.

Keeping that in mind, Harpur ate dinner early then showered and shaved for the second time that day. The
effort represented a sizable proportion of his quota for the day, but it had been hot and sticky in the courtroom. His current case was involved and, at the same time, boring. More and more cases were like that lately, he realized. It was a sign he was ready to retire, but there was one more duty to perform—he owed that much to the profession.

Harpur put on a lightweight jacket and stood with his back to the valet-mirror which his wife had bought a few months earlier. It was faced with a sheet of fifteen-second retardite which allowed him, after a slight pause, to turn around and check his appearance from the back. He surveyed his frail, but upright, figure dispassionately, then walked away before the stranger in the glass could turn to look out.

He disliked valet-mirrors almost as much as the equally popular truviewers, which were merely pieces of short-term retardite pivotal on a vertical axis. They served roughly the same function as ordinary mirrors, except that there was no reversal effect. For the first time ever, the makers boasted, you could really see yourself as others saw you. Harpur objected to the idea on grounds he hoped were vaguely philosophical, but which he could not really explain, even to himself.

"You don't look well, Kenneth," Eva said as he adjusted his tie minutely. "You haven't got to go down there, have you?"

"No, I haven't got to go—that's why I've got to go. That's the whole point."

"Then I'll drive you."

"You won't. You're going to bed. I'm not going to let you drive around the city in the middle of the night." He put an arm round her shoulders. At fifty-eight, Eva Harpur was on a seemingly endless plateau of indomitable good health, but they maintained a fiction that it was he who looked after her.

He drove himself into the city, but progress through the traffic was unusually slow and, on impulse, he stopped several blocks from the police headquarters and began to walk. Live dangerously, he thought, but walk slowly—just in case. It was a bright warm evening and, with the long daylight hours of June, only the sixteen-
hour panels slung above the thoroughfare were black. The alternating eight-hour panels were needlessly blazing with light they had absorbed in the afternoon. The system was a compromise with seasonal variations in daylight hours, but it worked reasonably well and, above all, the light was practically free.

An additional advantage was that it provided the law enforcement authorities with perfect evidence about events like road accidents and traffic violations. In fact, it had been the then brand-new slow-glass lighting panels in Fifty-third Avenue which had provided a large part of the evidence in the case against Ewan Raddall.

Evidence on which Harpur had sent Raddall to the electric chair.

The salient facts of the case had not been exactly as in the classic situation proposed by the tabloids, but they had been near enough to arouse public interest. There had been no other known suspect apart from Raddall, but the evidence against him had been largely circumstantial. The bodies had not been found until the next morning, by which time Raddall had been able to get home, clean himself up and have a night’s sleep. When he was picked up he was fresh, composed and plausible—and the forensic teams had been able to prove almost nothing.

The case against Raddall was that he had been seen going towards the public playground at the right time, leaving it at the right time, and that he had bruises and scratches consistent with the crime. Also, between midnight and 9:30 in the morning, when he was taken in for questioning, he had “lost” the plasticord jacket he had worn on the previous evening, and it was never found.

At the end of Raddall’s trial the jury had taken less than an hour to arrive at a verdict of guilty—but during a subsequent appeal his defense claimed the jury was influenced by the knowledge that the crime was recorded in Emile Bennett’s rear window. The defense attorney, demanding a retrial, put forward the view that the jury had dismissed their “reasonable doubt” in the expectation that Harpur would, at the most, impose a life sentence.

340
But, in Harpur's eyes, the revised legal code drafted in 1977, mainly to give judges greater power in their own courts, made no provision for wait-and-see legislation, especially in cases of first-degree murder. In January 1982, Raddall was duly sentenced to be executed.

Harpur's straightforward contention, which had earned him the name "Iron Judge," was that a decision reached in a court of law always had been, and still was, sacrosanct. The superhuman entity which was the Law must not be humbled before a fragment of glass. Reduced to its crudest terms, his argument was that if wait-and-see legislation were introduced, criminals would carry pieces of fifty-year retardite with them as standard equipment.

Within two years the slow-grinding mills of the Supreme Court had ratified Harpur's decision and the sentence was carried out. The same thing, on a microscopic scale, had occurred many times before in the world of sport; and the only possible, the only workable solution, was that the umpire was always right—no matter what cameras or slow glass might say afterwards.

In spite of his vindication, or perhaps because of it, the tabloids never warmed to Harpur. He began making a point of being indifferent to all that anybody wrote or said. All he had needed during the ten years was the knowledge that he had made a good decision, as distinct from a wrong one—now he was to discover if he had made a good decision, as distinct from a bad one.

Although this night had been looming on his horizon for a decade, Harpur found it difficult to realize that, in a matter of minutes, they would know if Raddall was guilty. The thought caused a crescendo of uncomfortable jolts in his chest and he stopped for a moment to snatch air. After all, what difference did it really make? He had not made the law, so why feel personally involved?

The answer came quickly.

He was involved because he was part of the law. The reason he had gone on working, against medical advice, was that it was he, not some abstract embodiment of Webster's "great interest of man on earth," who had passed sentence on Ewan Raddall. And he was going to
be there, personally, to face the music if he had made a mistake.

The realization was strangely comforting to Harpur as he moved on through the crowded streets. Something in the atmosphere of the late evening struck him as being odd, then he noticed the city center was jammed tight with out-of-town automobiles. Men and women thronged the sidewalks, and he knew they were strangers by the way their eyes occasionally took in the upper parts of buildings. The smell of grilling hamburger meat drifted on the thick, downy air.

Harpur wondered what the occasion might be, then he noticed the general drift towards the police headquarters. So that was it. People had not changed since the days they were drawn towards arenas, guillotines and gallows. There would be nothing for them to see, but to be close at hand would be sufficient to let them taste the ancient toy of continuing to breathe in the knowledge that someone else has just ceased. The fact that they were ten years out of date, too, made no difference at all.

Even Harpur, had he wanted to, could not have got into the underground room. Apart from the monitors, there would be only six chairs and six pairs of special binoculars with low magnifications and huge, light-hungry objective lenses. They were reserved for the state-appointed observers.

Harper had no interest in viewing the crime with his own eyes—he simply wanted to hear the result; then have a long, long rest. It occurred to him he was being completely irrational in going down to the police building, with all the exertion and lethal tension the trip meant for him, but somehow nothing else would do. I'm guilty, he thought suddenly, guilty as . . .

He reached the plaza in which the building was situated and worked his way through the pliant, strength-draining barriers of people. By the time he was halfway across sweat had bound his clothes so tightly he could hardly raise his feet. At an indeterminate point in the long journey he became aware of another presence fol-
lowing close behind—the sorrowful friend with the white-hot needle.

Reaching the untidy ranks of automobiles belonging to the press, Harpur realized he could not go in too early, and there was at least half an hour left. He turned and began forcing his way back to the opposite side of the plaza. The needle point caught up with him—one precise thrust—and he lurched forward clawing for support.

“What the . . . !” A startled voice boomed over his head. “Take it easy old-timer.” Its owner was a burly giant in a pale blue one-piece, who had been watching a 3-D television broadcast when Harpur fell against him. He snatched off the receiver spectacles, the tiny left and right pictures glowing with movement like distant bonfires. A wisp of music escaped from the earpiece.

“I’m sorry,” Harpur said. “I tripped. I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right. Say! Aren’t you Judge . . .”

Harpur pushed on by as the big man tugged excitedly on the arm of a woman who was with him. I mustn’t be recognized, he thought in a panic. He burrowed into the crowd, now beginning to lose his sense of direction. Six more desperate paces and the needle caught him again—right up to its antiseptic hilt this time. He moaned as the plaza tilted ponderously away. Not here, he pleaded, not here, please.

Somehow, he saved himself from falling and moved on. Near at hand, but a million miles away, an unseen woman gave a beautiful, carefree laugh. At the edge of the square the pain returned, even more decisively than before—once, twice, three times. Harpur screamed as he felt the life-muscle implode in cramp.

He began to go down, then felt himself gripped by firm hands. Harpur looked up at the swarthy young man who was holding him. The handsome, worry-creased face looming through reddish mists looked strangely familiar. Harpur struggled to speak.

“You . . . you’re Ewan Raddall, aren’t you?”


Harpur thought hard. “That’s right. You couldn’t be
Raddall. I killed him ten years ago." Then he spoke louder. "But, if you never heard of Raddall, why are you here?"

"I was on my way home from a bowling match when I saw the crowd."

The boy began getting Harpur out of the crowd, holding him up with one arm, fending uncomprehending bodies away with the other. Harpur tried to help, but was aware of his feet trailing helplessly on the concrete.

"Do you live right here in Holt?"

The boy nodded emphatically.

"Do you know who I am?"

"All I know about you, sir, is you should be in the hospital. I'll call an ambulance on the liquor store phone."

Harpur felt vaguely that there was some tremendous significance in what they had been saying, but had no time to pursue the matter.

"Listen," he said, forcing himself to stand upright for a moment, "I don't want an ambulance. I'll be fine if I can just get home. Can you help me get a cab?"

The boy looked uncertain, then he shrugged. "It's your funeral."

Harpur opened his door carefully and entered the friendly darkness of the big old house. During the ride out of town his sweatsoaked clothes had become clammy cold, and he shivered uncontrollably as he felt for the light switch.

With the light on, he sat down beside the telephone and looked at his watch. Almost midnight—by this time there would be no mystery, no doubt, about exactly what had happened in the Fifty-third Avenue playground ten years earlier. He picked up the handset, and at the same moment heard his wife begin to move around upstairs. There were several numbers he could ring to ask what the slow glass had revealed, but the thought of talking to any police executive or someone in City Hall was too much. He called Sam Macnamara.

As a guard, Sam would not know the result officially, but he would have the answer just the same. Harpur tried to punch out the number of the direct line to the
guard kiosk but his finger joints kept buckling on impact with the buttons, and he gave up.

Eva Harpur came down the stairs in her dressing gown and approached him apprehensively.

"Oh, Kenneth!" Her hand went to her mouth. "What have you done? You look . . . I'll have to call Dr. Sherman."

Harpur smiled weakly. *I do a lot of smiling these days*, he thought irreverently, *it's the only response an old man can make to so many situations.*

"All I want you to do is make me some coffee and help me up to my bed; but first of all get me a number on this contraption." Eva opened her mouth to protest, then closed it as their eyes met.

When Sam came to the phone Harpur worked to keep his own voice level.

"Hello, Sam. Judge Harpur here. Is the fun all over yet?"

"Yes, sir. There was a press conference afterwards and that's over, too. I guess you heard the result on the radio."

"As a matter of fact, I haven't, Sam. I was . . . out until a little while ago. Decided to ring someone about it before I went to bed, and your number just came into my head."

Sam laughed uncertainly. "Well, they were able to make a positive identification. It was Raddall, all right—but I guess you knew that all along."

"I guess I did, Sam." Harpur felt his eyes grow hot with tears.

"It'll be a load off your mind all the same, Judge."

Harpur nodded tiredly, but into the phone he said, "Well, naturally I'm glad there was no miscarriage of justice—but judges don't make the laws, Sam. They don't even decide who's guilty and who isn't. As far as I'm concerned, the presence of a peculiar piece of glass makes very little difference, one way or the other."

It was a good speech for the Iron Judge.

There was a long silence on the line then, with a note of something like desperation in his voice, Sam persisted, "I know all that, Judge . . . but, all the same, it must have been a big load off your mind."
Harpur realized, with a warm surprise, that the big Irishman was pleading with him. *It doesn't matter any more,* he thought. *In the morning I'm going to retire and rejoin the human race.*

"All right, Sam," he said finally. "Let's put it this way—I'll sleep well tonight. All right?"

"Thank you, Judge. Good night."

Harpur set the phone down and with his eyes tightly closed, waited for peace.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B60-1071</td>
<td>THE FROZEN PLANET</td>
<td>A.J. Merak</td>
<td>60¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>An unknown world beyond the Frozen Planet and its lure for one brave explorer.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B60-1080</td>
<td>THE DARK MILLENNIUM</td>
<td>A.J. Merak</td>
<td>60¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Earth is overrun by barbarians and a strange experiment is carried out in deep space.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B75-1085</td>
<td>INVADERS ON THE MOON</td>
<td>Kris Neville</td>
<td>75¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Man confronts non-human aliens on the moon—aliens programmed to to destroy Earth.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B75-1088</td>
<td>THE ACCIDENTAL EARTH</td>
<td>Leo P. Kelley</td>
<td>75¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A fantastic and dangerous world where illusion and reality merge—set in the Caribbean today.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B75-2002</td>
<td>THE WARRIORS OF TERRA</td>
<td>John Faucette</td>
<td>75¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Two warring Empires of the future join forces for Universal peace.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B75-2003</td>
<td>AGENT OF CHAOS</td>
<td>Norman Spinrad</td>
<td>75¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Violence and chaos on Earth when a brotherhood of dictators try to control the Universe.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B75-2015</td>
<td>WIZARD OF STORMS</td>
<td>Dave Van Arnam</td>
<td>75¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tassoran and Bowman in a well-written novel of magic, adventure, swordplay, and love.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B75-2016</td>
<td>GATE OF TIME</td>
<td>Philip Jose Farmer</td>
<td>75¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American Indian travels through time to a Parallel Universe and fights a battle of wits against a primitive people.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B75-1091</td>
<td>OVER THE EDGE</td>
<td>Harlan Ellison</td>
<td>75¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sci-fi collector's item—a new collection of odd and compelling stories by a famous author.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B75-1093</td>
<td>THE MIND CAGE</td>
<td>A.E. Van Vogt</td>
<td>75¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classic novel about a brain transplant—a loyal man's mind is locked in the body of a traitor.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B75-2024</td>
<td>THE MOON PEOPLE</td>
<td>Stanton Coblentz</td>
<td>75¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First in a new youth-oriented sci-fi series. Two Earthlings meet the inhabitants of the moon's dark side.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Price</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B75-1068</td>
<td>THE REVENGE OF INCREASE SEWILL</td>
<td>Heinrich Craat</td>
<td>75¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Modern-day witchcraft casts an evil shadow over a quiet New England town.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B60-1067</td>
<td>QUEST OF THE DARK LADY</td>
<td>Quinn Reade</td>
<td>60¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wulf, the mighty bladesman, is in conflict with evil powers. Fine fantasy adventure.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B60-1069</td>
<td>THE CASE OF CHARLES DEXTER WARD</td>
<td>H.P. Lovecraft</td>
<td>60¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>By popular demand, the master of supernatural horror is back with one of his best novels.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B75-1081</td>
<td>THE WORLD OF THE WEIRD</td>
<td>Brad Steiger</td>
<td>75¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amazing, macabre collection of documented stories by the well known writer.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B95-2009</td>
<td>DRAGON FEAST</td>
<td>John Elliott</td>
<td>95¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chilling, realistic action novel of the occupation and destruction of California in the year 1976.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B95-2010</td>
<td>BLOOD WEDDING</td>
<td>Simeon Brooks</td>
<td>95¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Haunting, gripping occult novel of a family cursed by violence and tragedy.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B75-2007</td>
<td>THE DARK WATCH</td>
<td>Genevieve St. John</td>
<td>75¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Young girl in rural New York meets a strange, fierce man in a lonely, old house.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B75-1095</td>
<td>VAMPIRE'S MOON</td>
<td>Peter Saxon</td>
<td>75¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Two American girls visit an isolated Rumanian village terrorized for centuries by vampires.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B75-1096</td>
<td>THE HOUSE ON SKY HIGH ROAD</td>
<td>Isabel Stewart Way</td>
<td>75¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A young girl is employed at a mysterious house in the California wilderness.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B60-2025</td>
<td>THE TUNNEL</td>
<td>Anthony Bristowe</td>
<td>60¢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Young Annora Sullivan finds malice and menace at Merton Manor.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Order your favorites from Belmont today. Use the convenient order blank at the back of this book.
B12-1065 THE ORDEAL
—John London
Society's big spenders—men and women fighting for power with sex as their weapon.

B12-1076 CONFESSIONS OF A PIMP
—Anonymous
Shocking underworld expose of a pimp and his girls—their lives, loves, and adventures.

B95-1082 THE CONTRACT
—Ovid Demaris
Block-buster novel of the Mafia. The lusty, violent epic of Carlo Vincent, Godfather of the Syndicate.

B60-1086 LOGAN
—Alan Joseph
Seafaring adventurer sails into—and out of—trouble as fast and easily as he finds money and women.

B12-1087 THE LOVE BROKER
—Sumner King
How a pimp feels about his work and his girls.

B95-1072 THE GARDEN OF EARTHY PLEASURES
—Ary C. Phillips
Autobiographical story of a Tangiers harem girl—carnal delights of harem life.

B95-2000 BLACK VENDETTA
—Matt Gattzden
A black soldier returns from Vietnam and finds his father framed for cop-killing—he uncovers crooked cops, Mafia plots, dope, and murders.

B75-2001 THE LEMMINGS
—Charity Blackstock
White college professor learns to love his beautiful African student.

B95-2008 THE COPULATION EXPLOSION
—Rod Gray
Eve Drum, the Lady From L.U.S.T., is hard at it again—this time capturing alive the man-beast creation of the bionics lab.

B95-1092 THE DREAM PEDDLERS
—Norman Phillips
Hollywood's leading man is involved in a strange, ritualistic mass murder.

B75-1094 THE MAFIA
—Noel Clad
Mafia hired killer loves his intended victim.
BELMONT'S BEST IN
ADVENTURE AND MODERN ROMANCE

B95-2017 THE MASK
—Stuart Cloete
Love and passion against a background of war and violence in colonial South Africa.

B75-2018 THE WIDOW
—Charity Blackstock
Modern psychological novel of a widow in Australia by a well-known author.

B95-2019 THE SEDUCTION OF LUCY MATTSON
—Dell McLaren
Sex and adventure in a small Georgia swamp town—local beauty loves the Northern stranger.

B95-2020 LUST, BE A LADY TONIGHT
—Rod Gray
Eve Drum, the Lady From L.U.S.T., is the world's sexiest spy.

NEW BELMONT NON-FICTION RELEASES

B12-1083 DR. BAUER'S BABY BOOK
—Charles H. Bauer, M.D.
The latest word in infant and child care by one of America’s leading authorities.

B95-1074 THE KENNEDY CURSE
—Richard Marvin
The Kennedys had everything but luck. They were the Golden People—but, one by one, the Kennedy Curse claimed them.

B75-1075 EAT YOUR TROUBLES AWAY
—Lelord Kordel
A famous nutrition expert offers advice for health and virility, secrets for living a fuller and more vibrant life. Included is his famous fifteen-day diet.

B75-1001 THE NEW ASTROLOGY
—Creighton La Barr
Best-selling book for today's ten-million astrology buffs—gives a new twist to an ancient science. Use the stars for guidance, sex, success, and power.

Order your favorites from Belmont today. Use the convenient order blank at the back of this book.
THE KENNEDY CURSE

Richard Marvin

DEATH, MADNESS, DISGRACE

The Kennedys had everything but luck. They were the Golden People, but one by one the Kennedy Curse claimed them. They knew of the curse and tried to ignore it, because for people like the Kennedys there was nothing else to do. From the death of Joe, Jr., to the disgrace of Senator Ted, this book tells the whole tragic story.

16 PAGES OF PHOTOGRAPHS

Belmont B95-1074

95¢
Please allow 3 weeks for filling orders.

Belmont Productions, Inc., 185 Madison Ave.
New York, N.Y. 10016

Please send me the books circled above.

Amount enclosed: $.............(Please add 15¢ per book for handling and postage.)

ORDER BY BOOK # ONLY

CIRCLE THE NUMBER OF BOOKS WANTED

In the event we are out of stock of any of your choices, please underline the alternative numbers.

Name

(Please print.)

Address

City .................................................... Zone

State

"high quality"
—Denver Post

"varied, well-chosen assortment."
—The Booklist

The seventh annual anthology from Analog, best-selling science fiction magazine, offers a spell-binding assortment by the best writers of the day.

Contents

AIM FOR THE HEEL . . . . . . . John T. Phillifent
FIESTA BRAVA . . . . . . . . . . Mack Reynolds
FREE VACATION . . . . . . . . . W. Macfarlane
THE FEATHERBEDDERS . . . . . . . Frank Herbert
WEYR SEARCH . . . . . . . . . . Anne McCaffrey
LOST CALLING . . . . . . . . . . Verge Foray
THE LOST COMMAND . . . . . . . Keith Laumer
DEAD END . . . . . . . . . . . . Mike Hodoos
THERE IS A CROOKED MAN . . . Jack Wodhams
ELEMENTARY MISTAKE . . . . . . Poul Anderson
BURDEN OF PROOF . . . . . . . . . . Bob Shaw