

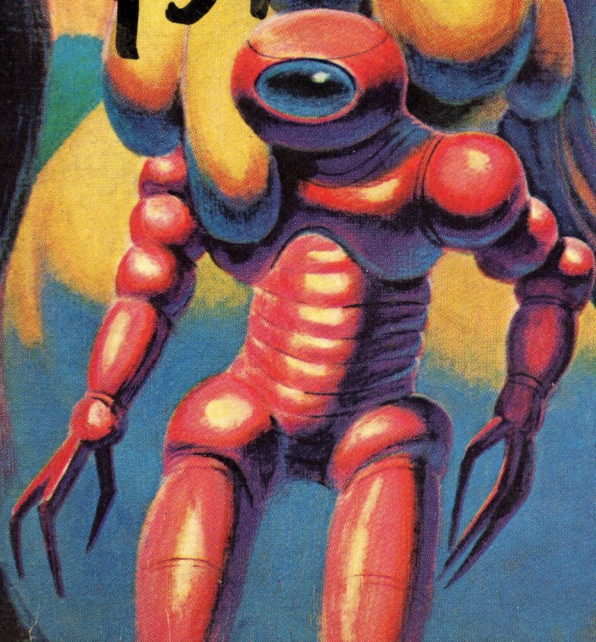
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The world that could not be

THE COILS OF TIME

A. Bertam Chandler

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· ONE PLANET VENUS TOO MANY! ·

Dr. Henshaw had created what he thought was a time travel machine and he had sent guinea pigs through it. But now he needed a human guinea pig to test it with.

Christopher Wilkinson thought the whole idea was absurd, until a book that had been sent through the machine came back with a thumb print on it, the fingerprint of Vanessa, his long lost sweetheart!

So Wilkinson agreed to the experiment. He stood in the white circle facing the machine as it began to gleam and spin, pulling him down through the tortuous coils of time. . . .

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THE COILS **OF TIME**

A. Bertram Chandler

ACE BOOKS, INC.

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For Susan, as ever.

INTO THE ALTERNATE UNIVERSE
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I

THERE WAS a scorching gale blowing, as usual, and the poisonous air was thick with the fine, abrasive dust. Christopher Wilkinson, struggling through the deep drifts in his borrowed Venus-suit, cursed at the dimness of his vision through the faceplate of his helmet.

Then he grinned sourly to himself; after all, the state of the helmet, as long as it did not leak, was of no real importance. Even had the armor glass been as clear as when the suit had left the hands of the maker, it would still have been impossible for him to see for more than a couple of feet through the swirling dust clouds. The fantastically expensive, radar-equipped, powered suits—space-ships in miniature, they had been called—were reserved for the top brass of Science City; lesser mortals and mere transients such as Wilkinson had to be content with gear that was little better than that used by Commodore Keel

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and his men on the occasion of the First Landing, almost a century in the past.

So Wilkinson struggled the relatively short distance between the Spaceport and the low huddle of domes that housed the Advanced Physics Laboratory, sweating profusely in spite of the suit's air-conditioning unit, keeping one hand in its armored glove firmly on the guide wire. He realised now that he should have waited for the promised dust-sled, and regretted his insistence that the exercise of the walk would do him good. This, he told himself firmly, would be the last time that he would let the space-manlike desire for healthy exertion on a planetary surface get the better of him.

The dust clouds thinned and he saw before him the first of the domes, its curving wall gleaming dully in the diffused yellow glare from the perpetual overcast. He stumbled towards it, gratefully watched the circular outer valve of the airlock swing open. Then he was in the chamber and the door was shut behind him, and he was hearing the whine of the pumps as they evacuated the noxious atmosphere, and the hissing of the antiseptic spray that played over every square millimeter of the surface of his suit.

Then, with the air pressure in the chamber restored, the inner door opened. Wilkinson stood passively while two white-smocked girls stripped his armor from him. He inhaled deeply and appreciatively. The atmosphere of the dome had an artificial quality, held the taint of hot oil and metal, of chemicals, of electrical discharges—but it was deliciously cool and satisfying after the stale air that he had been breathing.

He was a tall man, slender in his well-fitting uniform of black and gold that, in spite of the cramped confinement of the Venus-suit, was still neat and sharply creased. His thick, sandy hair, rumpled and uncontrollable as always, took the curse off his uniform's tailored appearance. Under

the heavy brows his pale eyes, grey rather than blue, looked about him curiously. A faint smile softened the hard lines of his face.

He said, "So this is the A. P. Store, Science City branch. . . . What are today's specials? A cheap line in contra-terrene matter, in giant, economy-sized cartons? And what are mesons selling at today?"

"That's not very funny, Mr. Wilkinson," said one of the girls sharply.

"I suppose not," he half apologized. "But I'm disappointed. Where are the super-cyclotrons? Where are the Mad Scientists?"

The other girl giggled as the first one said coldly, "Dr. Henshaw is waiting for you now." She added humorlessly, "This is only the vestibule. There is no apparatus here, of course."

"Of course," agreed Wilkinson.

He followed the tall, competent brunette through a doorway and then along a featureless passageway. At the far end of this there was a door that opened as they approached, and beyond the door could be seen a mess of equipment that looked more like something cooked up by a Hollywood special-effects man than by a working physicist.

Henshaw was a little man, ruddy, rotund, and almost bald. He fussily pushed an accumulation of books and papers from a chair to the already littered floor, cleared a space on a table with a sweep of his forearm, and produced bottle and glasses from a filing cabinet. "Wilkinson, isn't it?" he barked. "Must be, in that fancy dress. Welcome aboard, Admiral. Sit down, man, sit down." Then, to the girl, "Don't you dare touch those papers, Olga. I've my own filing system. I can always find anything I want, but I can't if *you* start tidying up. Damn it all, woman, I've told you enough times. And that's all—unless you want a drink."

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"No thank you, Dr. Henshaw," she told him severely. "I never drink in working hours."

"All the more for those that do," chuckled the scientist.

Wilkinson seated himself. Henshaw cleared a chair on the other side of the table of its debris, sat down facing the spaceman. He splashed amber liquid into the two glasses, neither of which was very clean. Wilkinson looked at his dubiously. "Go on, drink up," urged the other. "A drop of good Scotch won't kill you."

Wilkinson sipped. It was excellent liquor.

Henshaw gulped the contents of his own tumbler. He said abruptly, "I suppose you're wondering why I asked you to come and see me. This is the way of it, Wilkinson. Everybody in Science City has his own pet project, and nobody has much time to spare to help anybody else. So, when I heard that there was a ship's officer, who'd been landed sick from *Venus Queen*, staying at the Spaceport Hostel, and when I heard that this same officer had made a good recovery and was getting very bored while waiting for a ship. . . ." A grin flickered over his broad face. "I said to myself, 'Henshaw, here's your made-to-order guinea pig.'"

"Thank you," said Wilkinson drily. "But I'll make my position quite clear. I'm not taking part in any medical experiments. My one session with the Purple Rot has given me a healthy respect for your local viruses." He added, more to himself than to the scientist, "I should have stayed on the Earth-Mars run. Mars, outside the domes, is a dead world, but this hell-hole is a damn' sight deader and has the viruses to make it worse."

"Who said anything about medical experiments?" countered Henshaw. "I'm a physicist, not a physician. And I want a man of action, somebody who's used to danger, physical danger. Even if any of my esteemed colleagues were willing to volunteer, very few of them are qualified.

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And, as you may have noticed, there's any amount of useless popsies infesting this dump; but what I want you for is no job for a woman."

"Go on," said Wilkinson.

Henshaw absentmindedly refilled his own glass, and took a hearty gulp from it. He chuckled. "I am going on. As you should know, being a spaceman, Venus is the most valueless hunk of real estate in the Solar System. *But*—it's an ideal site for Science City. You must know what the *respectable* research workers—the ones with their laboratories on Earth and the Moon and the Space Stations—call us . . ."

"I do," said Wilkinson. "The Mad Scientists."

Henshaw chuckled again. "Yes. That's us. We're all of us engaged on lines of research that could be extremely dangerous if anything went wrong. But as long as we're here we're safe enough—from the viewpoint of Central Government, that is. If we blow ourselves up, that's all that we do blow up."

"There might be a ship at the Spaceport," said Wilkinson.

"What of it? You people are paid to take risks. Not that there's any *real* risk. The very worst that we could ever do would be to initiate some sort of chain reaction that would cause the sun to go nova. After all, we're only a stone's throw from Sol here."

"You could always move out to Pluto," suggested the spaceman.

"I suppose we could—but it's a long way out, and too bloody cold." He replenished his glass and this time, as an afterthought, did the same for Wilkinson.

Wilkinson sipped slowly and appreciatively, allowing his gaze to wander around the cluttered laboratory. There was, he thought, some justification for the "Mad Scientist" label. His attention was caught and held by the complex piece of apparatus that occupied the full length of one wall. There

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were brightly gleaming wheels; there was something that resembled a metallic Moebius Strip mounted on a shaft; there were oddly twisted antennae, and convolution upon convolution of glass tubing. It reminded him vaguely of a mobile that he had seen in the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, during his last vacation on Earth.

But this was not mobile.

"Yes," said Henshaw. "That's it."

"That's *what*?" demanded Wilkinson.

"*It!*" snapped the physicist. "I haven't a name for it yet, because the only possible name has been done to death by incompetent hacks writing pseudo-scientific fiction over the last two or three centuries. But it works. I've sent Rufus, the laboratory cat, through it, and got him back unharmed. And there were the white rats that I . . . er . . . borrowed from Titov in Biology. It wasn't that apparatus that killed them; it was Rufus. But I want to send something—sorry, *somebody*—who'll be able to tell me what he sees and experiences."

"Send somebody *where*?" demanded the spaceman.

"Not where," corrected Henshaw. "Not where—but *when*. Young man, you are looking at the first Time Machine ever to exist outside the pages of sensational fiction."

"Count me out," said Wilkinson firmly.

And the little voice at the back of his mind was whispering, *but what if this charlatan can bring back yesterday?*

Yesterday, and Vanessa Raymond, and the happy days with her that had flown by during each long stopover at the Marsala Spaceport on Mars, and the bright future that had stretched before them, the dream that had died, shockingly and tragically, when the liner *Martian Maid*, in which she had been traveling to Earth, had been utterly destroyed by a reactor explosion.

He had left the Martian Mail run when he had been

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told of the disaster, had applied for a transfer to the Venusian trade. He had run away from his memories.

But now the memories were back, and with them there was the first faint flicker of an impossible hope.

He said quietly, "I was a little hasty, Dr. Henshaw. I just might be interested."

II

"You know the principles of the gyroscope?" demanded Henshaw.

"I should," Wilkinson told him. "After all, I do hold a Master Astronaut's Certificate."

"Then what are they?"

"Rigidity in space. Precession."

"Very good. Now define precession."

"A freely mounted gyroscope," said Wilkinson, "will precess at right angles to an applied force, in the direction of rotation."

"So they do teach you something at the Woomera Space Academy," chuckled the scientist. "And now I'll show you how *my* gyroscopes precess."

He got unsteadily to his feet, and walked to the switchboard a little to one side of the main mass of apparatus. The spaceman watched him as he pressed buttons, turned knobs—watched him carefully and listened to the song of the spinning wheels, low-pitched at first and then rising higher and higher to an almost painful shrillness, to a thin, keen-ing near-inaudibility. And a lambent flame was flickering through the intricate convolutions of the glass tubing, and the gleaming rotors were spinning in a luminescent haze, were spinning and fading, spinning and precessing, tumbling down some formless infinity, fading and vanishing and yet never completely invisible. . . .

"Watch!" Henshaw was calling. "Watch!"

He had snatched a book from the desk that was below the control panel, had thrown it into the center of a circle marked in dirty paint on the plastic covered floor. He went back to the controls, and the metallic Moebius Strip turned slowly on its mount, turned until it seemed to be a mis-

shapen lens focusing the emanation from the spinning, precessing rotors on to the opened book. The leaves of it stirred and lifted, although there was no draft in the room. They stirred and lifted—and then the book was . . . gone.

Henshaw, still at his controls, was muttering to himself. The light in the transparent convolutions flickered and flared, flickered and died. The song of the gyroscopes faltered, the thin, high whine subsided to a dying grumble and the gleaming wheels, as they slowed, resumed their solidity.

And the book was back.

Wilkinson tried to keep his voice calm and matter of fact. He asked, almost incuriously, "Where did it go?"

"Not where. When!" scolded the physicist. He went on, "According to my calculations, according to the setting of the controls, that book should have been sent two hundred years into the past. But . . ." He walked slowly into the painted circle, picked up the volume, brought it to Wilkinson. "Look!" he said.

The spaceman looked, not knowing what it was that he was supposed to see. But the mud, still fresh and wet on the plastic binding, was obvious enough, and it seemed to him that he caught the smell of moist earth and rotting vegetation. There was the mud—and there, on the open page, was a dirty thumbprint, a small one, a child's. It could have been old—but Wilkinson knew, somehow, that it was fresh.

"Look!" Henshaw said again. "Two hundred years ago there were no men on Venus. Two hundred years ago the art and science of rocketry was in its first infancy and the inertial drive had only been dreamed of. And the mud . . . on this arid dustbowl of a planet?"

"You should send a camera," suggested Wilkinson.

"Do you think I haven't tried? Give me a film that's not hopelessly fogged by the temporal fields and I'll try again—for the fourteenth time. But you see, now, why I want a human guinea pig."

"Yes," said the spaceman. "I see."

He held the open book in his big hands. He stared at the thumbprint. *He had seen it before.* It was not so much the pattern of loops and whorls—after all, he was a space officer, not a criminologist. It was the little scar that ran diagonally across the print—the scar that Vanessa had told him had been there since she was a baby. Shakily, he put the book down on the table and then pulled his notecase from the inside pocket of his jacket. He took a photograph from the case, staring at the picture of the laughing, black-haired girl, the girl with the lustrous black hair and the golden skin and the eyes of so deep a blue as to seem violet.

He turned it over, remembering the day that Vanessa had given it to him, remembering how she had said that she wanted to sign it with something more personal than a mere written signature. Her thumbprint was there still, black and clear on the white plastic. He compared it with the one on the open page of the book. It was larger, but . . .

He demanded abruptly, "What do you make of this, Dr. Henshaw?"

Puzzled, the scientist grumbled, "I'm a physicist, not a policeman." But he found a magnifying lens on the cluttered table, and with it closely examined the two prints.

There was a long silence.

"Well?" asked Wilkinson sharply.

"I . . . I don't know. . . ." faltered Henshaw.

"And neither do I, but I'm going to find out." He got to his feet, gripping Henshaw's shoulders. "How soon? How soon can you send me through?"

"Not so fast, young man," expostulated the scientist. "This isn't one of your Dean-Kershaw Drive ships, where all you do is push a button and whiffle off to Pluto at half light speed."

Wilkinson laughed sardonically. "There's more to navigating a ship than pushing buttons." He let his hands fall

from the other's shoulders. "But I want to be your guinea pig, Doctor. You know that, I think—even though you don't know why."

"I can guess," murmured Henshaw, a note of sympathy in his voice. "I can guess." Then, with envy overriding the sympathy, "Why do you think that I ever started playing around with this temporal precession effect? Why do you think that I got the idea of tinkering with Time? But some people, like you, are lucky, and some aren't. . . ."

"Lucky?" whispered Wilkinson. "Yes, I did think that I was lucky—once. But that was before the *Martian Maid* disaster." There was a note almost of pleading in his voice. "But one's luck can change, can't it? Can't it?"

"Sit down!" ordered the scientist. He splashed whisky into the two glasses, and pushed one of them towards Wilkinson. He gestured with his free hand towards the book, the photograph. "There's something . . . odd here. This oddity has been apparent in all the experiments. The rats were sent back in sealed boxes, and there was mud on those boxes when they returned. Rufus was allowed more freedom. I got Titov to make him a little suit, with helmet and air supply. After all, if Venus is incapable of supporting our kind of life now, it must have been equally incapable of so doing a mere two centuries ago. Rufus returned in a spitting fury. He'd managed to tear his helmet off—it was only a light plastic—and his fur was smeared with mud, and it was obvious that he'd been in a fight with . . . something. . . ."

"Did you have the mud analysed?" asked Wilkinson.

"Of course. And I was accused of having perpetrated an elaborate but pointless hoax. The mud, they said, was rich both in dead organic matter and in living micro-organisms, some of which approximated quite closely to the mutated strains that Mendelbaum, in Biology, is playing with. Then there were the shreds of flesh and fur under Rufus's claws. Rat fur, I was told. Rat flesh. And as Rufus

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had got among those rats that I'd borrowed from Titov that, as far as Titov was concerned, was that."

"But," objected the spaceman. "Rats . . ."

"But," countered the physicist, "a girl's thumbprint. And, furthermore, a print identical, in everything but size, with that of a girl in this day and age. Rats, and a girl's thumbprint, and good, rich, organic mud on a planet that's never supported any life more complex than a virus. . . ."

Said Wilkinson, "It doesn't make sense."

"Of course it doesn't. And neither does this machine of mine make sense. Time travel is impossible, a mere fantasy. There are too many paradoxes. So . . ."

"So . . ." echoed Wilkinson. He looked at the complex array of gleaming rotors, silent now and motionless, looked from it to its maker. He said, "But there's something. There's the evidence. The mud—and the thumbprint."

"The mud," agreed Henshaw. "The mud, and the thumbprint, and Rufus's survival without protection in what *must* have been a breathable atmosphere, and those animals he fought, wherever and whenever it was. . . ."

The spaceman picked up the photograph, staring at the picture of the laughing girl. He said softly, "What have I got to lose? I've already lost everything. . . ."

"And you still want to be my guinea pig?" asked Henshaw.

"Of course. What do you think I've been telling you for the last half hour? You can send me now, if you like."

"Not so fast, young man. Not so fast. To send anything through as large as a human being I have to make adjustments, modifications. But I'll arrange to have your gear sent over from the Spaceport Hostel, and have you made an honorary member of our mess during your stay here."

"And when will you be ready for me?"

"Tomorrow, perhaps," snapped Henshaw. Then, his manner softening, "Tomorrow."

III

HENSHAW ORGANISED a dust sled and a driver to take Wilkinson back to the Spaceport Hostel. There he said his few farewells, signed for meals and accommodation up to the time of his departure and packed his gear. In a short time he was back in the pressurized cabin of the vehicle, trying to ignore the uneasy motion as the thing skimmed over the dunes like a small sea-going craft in a heavy swell. He was not sorry when he saw the main airlock of the Advanced Physics Laboratory ahead, the big door sliding open at the sled's approach.

In the vestibule beyond the airlock the tall, dark girl who had first met him was waiting for him. She wasted no time on courtesies or formalities, saying brusquely, "Follow me."

Wilkinson followed her, through long corridors, past a seemingly endless series of closed doors. At last they came to a large hall, the common room of the laboratory staff. At this time of the day (every establishment on Venus maintained Greenwich Mean Time) it was almost deserted, although at one table two bearded men were playing what was obviously a long, slow game of TriDi chess. Wilkinson looked around with interest. There were bookshelves and magazine racks, there were billiards and tennis tables and, in an alcove, the large screen of a big playmaster glimmered whitely. There were flowering plants growing from pots and tubs, and from plots set in the floor of the common room itself.

As he stood there, a serving robot of unusual design, functional rather than humanoid, glided towards him on noiseless wheels and asked, "Your order, sir?"

"Later!" snapped the girl, before the spaceman had time

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to reply. Then, to Wilkinson, "All the living quarters open on to this hall. We've put you in No. 14. It's next door to Dr. Henshaw."

She led the way to one of a row of doors set flush with the curved wall. It opened as she touched a button set to one side of it. She gestured to the man to enter. It was a simple suite—bed-sitting-room with adjoining shower cubicle—but it looked comfortable enough, about on a par with what Wilkinson was used to aboard ship.

"Dinner's at 1830 hours," said the girl. "You've time to freshen up if you want to."

Wilkinson thanked her, and she left him. After showering and dressing he went out into the common room. The two oldsters, still hunched over their interminable game, ignored him. A tall, thin man was pottering around a tank of gaudy fish built around the thick central pillar of the dome. He looked around as Wilkinson approached him, grinned whitely and remarked, "Ah, the guinea pig."

"I suppose you could call me that," Wilkinson admitted.

"As a biologist," the other said, "I'm something of an expert on guinea pigs. I hope that you're luckier than my white rats were."

"Dr. Titov?" queried the spaceman.

"In person. But let's take the weight off our feet."

The two men walked to one of the tables, and sat down. The serving robot glided up to them and asked in its flat, mechanical voice, "Your orders, gentlemen?"

"What are you having, Wilkinson?" asked the scientist. "I can recommend the Tio Pepe."

"I'd rather have something long and cold," Wilkinson said. "Lager beer, in a tall glass."

The machine clicked sharply and whirled softly. A hatch set in its bulbous belly slid open and a tray was extended on which stood two glasses, the tall one with the beer misty with condensation.

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"Clever," said Wilkinson. "Clever. You people do yourselves well here."

Titov snorted and said, "Wait until you've seen *our* common room, in the Biology building. Like a garden it is. It is a garden. None of this functional rubbish." He added parenthetically, "I just look in here now and again to keep an eye on their plants and tropical fish." He took his sherry from the tray. "And we have none of these monstrosities to serve the liquor. We have genuine Bunnies, recruited at great trouble and expense from the various Play Clubs back on Earth, imported regardless of cost. Of course, they're shown on the books as laboratory assistants. Which they are, I suppose. The trouble is that quite a few of them start getting interested in science and become *real* technicians. . . ."

"What sort of work do you do in Biology?" asked Wilkinson.

"Oh, anything and everything. My own project at the moment is breeding the assorted wogs brought back from the surface of Jupiter by the last probe, and finding out if any of 'em will attack alien—to them—organisms such as the Terran mammalia, up to and including Man."

"Rather pointless," said the spaceman. "We shall never make a manned landing on Jupiter, or, if we ever do, it will be in some enormously strong ship and nobody will be able to go outside."

"Don't be so sure," Titov told him. "Another project that we're working on is breeding new races of men and women, each of which will be adapted to a different planet. Mars will be easy, of course—the Adams and Eves will be of Andean or Tibetan stock. Jupiter's not so easy—there's both the poisonous atmosphere and the crushing gravity to consider."

"I don't like the idea," said Wilkinson. He grinned. "After all, if it works out it will be putting spacemen out of employment."

"There are always the stars," Titov said. "Sooner or later

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one of the bright boys in Physics will come up with an interstellar drive, and then you'll be pushing up and out to explore the worlds of distant systems. It may be closer than you think. After all, this thing of Henshaw's may be the answer to the problem."

"How?"

"Oh, I'm just a biologist, not a physicist or a spaceman. But just suppose you had a ship that went astern in Time while going ahead in Space. . . . Then the planets of Rigel Kentaurus would be only a few weeks distant."

"So you think that this thing of Henshaw's works?"

"I—I'm not sure. There's something odd about it. Oh, it makes things vanish, and it makes them reappear, but it may be teleportation rather than Time Travel. There was that mud, and Venus was never muddy."

"And there were the micro-organisms in the mud," said Wilkinson.

"So Henshaw told you, did he? Yes, there were the micro-organisms. Some of them were what you'd find in any sample of swampy soil picked up on Earth. And some could have been mutated varieties. And others—well, perhaps they were mutants too. After all, since we started making full use of atomic energy for industrial purposes back on Earth, the radio-activity of the Terran atmosphere has increased more than somewhat."

"Teleportation . . ." murmured Wilkinson slowly. He felt let down, disappointed. If all that Henshaw's apparatus had done had been to teleport the cat and the rats to, say, the Amazonian jungle and back again, then his wild hopes were no more than a wishful dream. There was that thumb-print; but now, in his mind's eye, he watched it being made by some wild, naked Indian child, some little savage who, by utterly fantastic but not impossible chance had suffered a slight, scar-leaving injury to the ball of the thumb. The pattern of the two prints had appeared to be similar—more

than similar, identical—but neither he nor Henshaw had been qualified to make a proper examination and comparison.

“Teleportation . . .” he whispered again. Then, in a louder voice, “But it can’t be.”

“And why not?” asked Titov.

“Think of the movements of Venus and Earth relative to each other, each planet in its orbit around the Sun, each rotating on its axis. Imagine a sort of focused ray or beam, along which the teleportation takes place. . . . Oh, it would be possible to keep this beam always lined up to focus on one spot, and one spot only, on the Earth’s surface—but it would require some very complicated machinery and a first class electronic brain.”

“Both of which,” observed the biologist drily, “friend Henshaw could cook up as an afternoon’s relaxation. But if he did, then he’d boast about it.” He sipped his sherry. “Odd. Very odd.”

“So it *could* be Time Travel,” pressed Wilkinson.

“It could be any damn thing. And I advise you, my friend, to be prepared for anything.”

“I shall be,” said Wilkinson, feeling again the beginnings of what he would not admit was an utterly illogical hope.

IV

As Titov and Wilkinson were finishing their drinks, Henshaw hustled through the common room on his way to his quarters. He paused by their table, saying rapidly, "Afraid you'll have to excuse me, young man. Too busy to look after you. You mind doing the honors, Titov?"

"It will be a pleasure," said the biologist to Henshaw's retreating back. He put his empty glass down on the tray extended by the patiently waiting robot. Wilkinson drained the last of his lager, following suit. The machine asked tonelessly, "Your orders, gentlemen?"

"Nothing further, thank you," Titov told it. Then, turning to the spaceman, "Come on. Let's get out of this mechanised boarding house. You can be an honorary member of *our* mess tonight. It's better than this dreary dump."

They got to their feet, and Wilkinson followed Titov into the maze of tunnels that connected the domes. Later, much later, he was glad of the services of a guide back to his own quarters. As Titov had told him, the biologists did themselves well. Rather too well, he thought ruefully as he carelessly pulled off his clothing and fell into his bed.

When morning came he felt surprisingly fit. He had slept deeply and dreamlessly in the strange bed, and when he awoke it was with a sense of urgency, or excited anticipation.

It was Henshaw's diffident cough that stirred him to full wakefulness. He was standing by Wilkinson's bed, and beside him was one of the gleaming robots. The machine, as soon as the spaceman's eyes were open, grated, "Tea. Coffee. Tomato juice. Orange juice. Apple . . ."

Wilkinson threw back the light bed covers. "Later," he snapped.

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"You might as well order," said the scientist glumly. "There's no hurry."

"What do you mean, there's no hurry? You promised . . ."

"Yes. I know I promised. And as far as I'm concerned, I've kept my promise. It's that damn Clavering who's let us down."

"Clavering?"

"Our Master Mechanic. So called." He addressed the robot. "All right. Coffee for me." Then, to Wilkinson, "What are you having?"

"Coffee, I suppose. Black." Wilkinson lay back on the bed. He did not try to keep the disappointment out of his voice. "And now, I suppose, you'll condescend to tell me what all this is about."

The automaton buzzed sharply and the tray, with its two steaming cups, was extruded from the hatch in its belly. Henshaw took them, and set them on the bedside table, while Wilkinson waited impatiently.

He said abruptly, "Of course, I had to obtain the Director's permission before I could employ a human guinea pig. He gave his permission, but *he* made the rules."

"As long as your Time Machine's in working order, what rules can there be?"

"You'd be surprised. But this is the one that concerns us right now. The Director insisted that you wear one of our V.I.P. suits. You know about them, of course?"

"Yes, spaceships on legs."

"Tanks on legs, we call them. They're so heavily armored that you could never move in one of them without a power unit."

"So?"

"So all the suits but one are out to various people engaged on lines of research that take them outside the domes. The one suit not in use has a faulty power unit. Clavering was supposed to be repairing it last night . . ."

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"And?"

"And he had a more important engagement. With a bottle of Scotch."

"This suit," said Wilkinson sharply. "It's just the power unit that's on the blink? What about air supply and conditioning?"

"As far as I know they're in order."

"Then there's no reason why we shouldn't have our trial run. There'll be no need for me to tramp around all over whatever cock-eyed world it is that you'll be sending me to. For my first visit I'll be quite content just to stand still and observe. After all, if those suits are as heavily armored as you say, I shall be safe enough."

"Yes . . ." murmured Henshaw dubiously. Then, with more assurance, "Yes." He jumped to his feet. "I'll see the Director now. And Clavering. You should have your answer in a few minutes."

It took more than a few minutes to obtain the consent of the Director. Wilkinson had to appear before him in person, had to listen patiently while that burly man, an executive rather than a scientist, stated his side of the case.

"Yes, Mr. Wilkinson, I know that you have no dependents, and I know that you have some personal interest in Dr. Henshaw's experiments, but we must consider your employers. A trained space officer represents a quite considerable investment in time and money made by the Interplanetary Transport Commission. We, in Science City, have always endeavored to remain on friendly terms with the Commission. After all, we are utterly dependent upon its services."

"And utterly dependent upon the services of the spacemen employed in the Commission's ships," remarked Wilkinson.

The Director allowed himself a brief chuckle. "Well put." He looked at Henshaw and Wilkinson across the wide, polished expanse of his desk top. "You want to go to

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wherever or whenever it is that Henshaw has been sending his guinea pigs. All right, you can go. But first . . .”

He pushed a closely typed sheet of paper across the desk to Wilkinson, who picked it up and read it. It was simple enough in content. It cleared Science City of all liability for any injury incurred by himself. Fair enough, he thought. He took the proffered stylus and scribbled his signature.

“And good luck to you,” said the Director. “You’ll need it.”

Clavering, a wizened gnome of a man, was already in Henshaw’s laboratory when the physicist and Wilkinson got there. He was fussing around with what looked, at first glance, like a huge, anthropomorphous robot. He turned as they entered, peering at them sourly from red-rimmed eyes. He snarled, “All right, Dr. Henshaw. She’s as ready as she ever will be at short notice. But I take no responsibility.”

“What about air supply and temperature control?” asked Henshaw sharply.

“They’ll do,” admitted the other grudgingly. “I’ve put in a small, temporary power unit to look after that side of it. But she’s not mobile, and won’t be until I get the proper unit back in.”

“Then it will do,” said Wilkinson quietly.

“It’s your neck, mister, not mine,” growled the machanic. “But I’m telling you that you’d not get me into one of these tin coffins unless I was able to take steps, and long ones, away from any danger.”

Wilkinson ignored him, inspecting the suit with interest. The back of it, through which he would enter it, gaped open. The enormous thickness of the skin was self-evident—the insulated padding and, outside that, the tough, overlapping metallic plates. Perhaps, thought Wilkinson, in Free Fall a man might just be able to move inside it, but on any

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planetary surface with an appreciable gravitational field he would be helpless.

He asked, "Where are the controls of this thing?"

"There aren't any," Clavering told him. "None that you can get your interfering paws on, that is. When she's working properly she adjusts to *you*, to all your movements. You bend a finger, and the corresponding finger of the glove also bends. You take a stride, and the electro-magnetic muscles in the legs take one as well. You kick a brick wall, and if you aren't wearing the suit you break a couple of toes. But as long as you're in the suit it's the wall that gets broken."

"Happy, Wilkinson?" asked Henshaw.

"I'd be happier if the thing were working properly." He fingered the armor. "But I think I'm safe in saying that anything carnivorous with designs on me would break a few teeth trying to get me out of this shell."

"This armor," said Clavering proudly, "is proof against fire from a twenty millimeter cannon." He asked Henshaw. "Where do you want her?"

"In the middle of that circle on the floor," said the physicist, pointing.

"You're the boss." The little man pushed the heavy suit, which was on a dolly, until it came to rest at the center of the painted circle. "What now?"

"Just help Mr. Wilkinson on with it. Or help him into it." Henshaw grinned briefly. "After all, all things are relative."

"Before we go too far," asked the spaceman, "what's the drill?"

"Getting cold feet?" enquired the scientist, but there was no sneer in his voice. "Can't say that I blame you."

"No. Not cold feet. Not quite. But it's part of my training to run around with a check list before leaving the ground."

"You have something there," admitted the other. "But in the case of a voyage through Space you know what to expect

and what has to be done about it. In the case of a voyage through Time—who knows what to expect?”

“Air supply?” Wilkinson asked Clavering.

“Don’t worry about it, mister. It comes on automatically, as soon as the suit is sealed. You’ve a good six hours’ breathing—more if you don’t exert yourself.”

“And for how long shall I be gone?” Wilkinson asked Henshaw.

“For this trial run, just ten minutes. The same as I gave Rufus and the rats. They had no armor and they were brought back unharmed.”

With the little mechanic standing by to assist, Wilkinson clambered into the suit. It was comfortable, the padding adjusting itself to every contour of his body. It was comfortable, but when Wilkinson heard the sharp click as the back snapped shut he felt the beginnings of claustrophobia. He had never felt happy when obliged, occasionally, to go outside his ship in a conventional spacesuit—but this was worse. In a conventional suit he had been able to move freely.

But the air supply was in order; he could feel the faint draft on his face, cool and refreshing. And he could, at least, move his head inside the helmet, the heavy glass strip visor giving him an arc of vision of 180°. He heard Henshaw’s voice, tinny in the helmet phones, “Are you all right, Wilkinson?”

He said that he was.

“Good. I’m sending you back now. Just for ten minutes, the same as I did Rufus and the rats.” He repeated what he had said before. “*They* had no armor, and they were brought back unharmed.”

They could move, thought Wilkinson, and then remembered that it was only the cat who had enjoyed the advantage of mobility. The rats had been in an airtight box.

From the corner of his eye he could just see the physicist

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at his complicated switchboard, and almost directly ahead of him was the glittering complexity of rotors and spindles, motionless now, and the gleaming column that was almost a Moebius Strip. And then, slowly at first, but gathering momentum, the fantastic contraption began to move, the wheels spinning and precessing, the Moebius Strip twisting upon itself. It began to move, and he could feel it pulling him, dragging him from the sane Universe and into and across unfathomable gulfs of Space and Time, and the rotors spun and precessed, tumbling down the dark dimensions, carrying him with them. . . .

He tried to look away, but could not. He tried to close his eyes, but his eyelids were immovable. He tried to cry out, but his mouth and tongue and throat were paralyzed.

At last, "Stop!" he managed to croak, and shut his eyes against the yellow glare.

The yellow glare?

He opened his eyes slowly and painfully, stared unbelievably at a confusion of sullen green and shrieking scarlet, at an intolerably brassy sky.

V

AT FIRST he thought that he had been transported to Earth, to one of the few remaining untamed areas of the mother planet. But this, he came to realize slowly, was no world that he had ever known. It was not Earth, and it was not Venus, and it certainly was not Mars. Fantastically lush was the vegetation; great fleshy fronds, huge blossoms that were explosions of scarlet and orange, green-and-purple-mottled ribbons and streamers that undulated lazily in the breeze.

But was there a breeze?

Wilkinson cursed the immobility of his armor, and then discovered that he could, at least, move his helmet—slowly and painfully, but enough to extend his field of vision. He bore down on the chin pad and the helmet tilted, the neck joints complaining. He was standing, he discovered, in what appeared to be an almost dry watercourse. There was a bed of stones, large and small, waterworn, all covered with an unpleasant grey slime that steamed in the heat. (He knew, somehow, that it was hot, even though the temperature control of the suit was functioning perfectly.)

Little things like crabs, hard to see because of their protective coloration, scurried over the pebbles and boulders, darting into the crevices. And there drifted into the space-man's field of view a larger creature, a thing with a long, spindly body, striped orange and black supported between flickering, gauzy wings. It hovered before his helmet, staring at him with its great, many-faceted eyes, and then, suddenly, it was gone.

With an effort Wilkinson turned his head, pressing on the right cheek pad, striving to follow the creature's line of flight. He was in time to see it dive in a blur of rapid

motion, to see it lift again with something clutched in its mandibles, a bundle of dirty brown fur that was bleeding, that was still struggling feebly. Before it was carried out of sight the man had time to see what it was.

It was a rat.

So this was Earth, then. (But Terran rats, he knew, had established themselves in the underground colonies on the Moon and on the Jovian satellities, in the domed cities of Mars and even in the Martian desert itself.) But this could be Earth. What if Henshaw's machine displaced its—its victims? . . . both in Time and Space? What if he, Wilkinson, had been teleported to the Earth of the Carboniferous Era? It all fitted in—the lush vegetation, the little scurrying crustacea, the thing like a huge dragonfly.

It all fitted in . . .

But the rat did not.

He became aware of a droning sound, a distant throbbing, loud enough even to be heard through the thick casing of his helmet, that seemed to come from somewhere overhead. He knew the beginnings of fear. What new monster was this? Something that could crack his armor like a nutshell with its jaws or mandibles, or something that would achieve the same effect by lifting him, carrying him aloft and then dropping him hundreds of feet to the stones beneath? But whatever it was, panic was useless. And whatever it was, he told himself unconvincingly, the sound that it was making was regular, mechanical . . .

But did flying machines belong in the Carboniferous Era?

Slowly, painfully, he tilted his helmet back on its neck joints, pressing back hard on the pad. At last he was able to stare directly into the yellow, featureless sky, into the glaring haze, the brassy overcast. The drumming noise was louder, louder, and still he could see nothing.

And then it swept into his field of view, only a black speck at first, but one that expanded rapidly as he watched.

Conveniently it circled, so that he never quite lost it. It circled, losing altitude, and he was able to make out details—the torpedo-shaped hull, the swept-back wings, the flicker of blue flame at the after end. He knew what it was then. He had seen machines like it, although only in training films during his astronautical education. In the early days of space travel the rocket had been the only possible means of locomotion from world to world, but shortly after the first Lunar landing it had been rendered obsolete by the inertial drive.

And did rocket ships belong in the Carboniferous Era?

It circled, losing altitude and speed, dropping lower and lower. From its belly its landing gear protruded. It circled more widely so as to pass behind the man immobile in his heavy armor. It passed out of his arc of vision and, struggle as he would, Wilkinson could not follow its flight. The stuttering roar of it faded, faded—and then, abruptly, began to swell. Wilkinson realised that the unknown pilot must be following the line of the watercourse. Perhaps it led to a landing field, or to a town or settlement.

The screaming roar was loud, and louder, and swelling to a deafening crescendo. The spaceman cringed inside his suit, and tried desperately to throw himself forward onto his face as the thing swept overhead. And then it was in sight again—squat, foreshortened, the flaring flame from its tail blindingly brilliant. It was dropping rapidly.

A hundred yards beyond him it touched and rebounded, touched again and slewed violently around as one wing tip fouled a boulder standing higher than its fellows. For a brief second its course was reversed and it was heading straight for Wilkinson, and then the damaged wing dipped, striking a coruscating shower of sparks from the stony river bed. That was the end of it. It turned over and over in a cloud of sparks and debris, and the screech and clatter of rending metal was loud even in the helmet.

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The spaceman stared in horror at the crumpled wreckage. Smoke was rising from it, and through the rents in the once sleek hull he could see a pulsing, ominous blue glow. There was a trickle—more than a trickle—of red fluid from the battered fuselage, and already the little crustaceans, too brainless to have really been frightened, were crawling around and over it. Already the first of the giant dragonflies were hovering over the growing puddle, were beginning to participate in the obscene feast. Already the rats—more intelligent and more cautious than the arthropods—were emerging from their hiding places.

Wilkinson retched miserably. He did not know what manner of beings had manned the wrecked rocket plane, but some of them might still, somehow, be living, and he was unable to go to their assistance, imprisoned as he was in his all but immobile armor. The perspiration poured down his skin as he tried to lift first one heavy leg of the suit, then the other. He achieved no more than a slight teetering motion.

But something was moving in the wreckage.

It was a man.

Slowly, painfully, he crawled from one of the larger rents in the plating, a scarecrow in bloody, smouldering rags that had once been a uniform. Slowly he staggered to his feet, then turned, thrusting an arm into the jaggedly edged hole from which he had emerged. He seemed to be tugging at something, and then he stooped so that he could use both hands, to lift as well as to pull. Something—clothing snagged on a sharp projection?—gave, and he fell backwards, lay sprawled on the stones with a body of a small girl clasped tightly in his arms. She moved, stirring feebly, then turned her head so that she was looking straight at Wilkinson.

He cried out, although he knew that she would not be able to hear him. He knew, with absolute certainty, who

she was. He had seen photographs of her—taken on Mars and not on this impossible planet. He had been shown, by Vanessa's mother, portraits made of her when she was a child.

She looked at him, and he saw her mouth moving. She must be calling to him for help, and he, in the imprisoning armor, was helpless. She looked at him, pleadingly—and then her features settled to a hardness shocking to see on the face of one so young. She turned away from him and freed herself from the man's arms, scrambling clumsily to her feet. She exploded into a fury of action, kicking and striking at the rats and the crustaceans which had gathered around the two survivors. They retreated sullenly. She bent over the man, struggling to pull him to his feet.

And then he was standing, swaying unsteadily. She grasped his arm and started to lead him over the slimy stones, away from the broken aircraft, away from the crumpled heap of metal, inside which the pulsing blue light was now much brighter. The man paused to look at Wilkinson, and his hand went to his belt, to the holster from which the butt of some sort of pistol protruded. Dazedly, Wilkinson thought, *I know you*. The face, battered and bloodstained as it was, was as familiar as that of the girl, more familiar—and yet impossible to place.

The girl gestured impatiently, tugging at the man's arm. With one last, long look at Wilkinson he followed her, and the pair moved out of the spaceman's field of vision.

He was alone now, alone and utterly immobilized, standing only yards from a bomb that would explode any second now. He did not know what sort of engines had powered the rocket plane, but that blue glare was ominous, and did more than hint at some reserve of raw energy that was on the point of being released. He knew that somehow, somewhere and somewhen, Vanessa was still living—but this knowledge would be meaningless if he were to be incinerated or blown to atoms within the next few seconds. *What was Henshaw*

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doing? Surely the ten minutes must have elapsed long since.

The rats were going, scurrying from the scene with a haste that was evidence of panic. And then the crablike things were gone, melting into the crevices. The dragonflies lifted slowly, drifting upwards towards the sky—and as they did so Wilkinson heard the dull, ominous roaring, a continuous thunder that was felt as much as heard, a heavy rumble that set the stout structure of his suit to quivering, that in the space of a few seconds became deafening.

But it did not come from the crashed rocket. It seemed to be coming from behind him.

Something struck him a violent blow on the back and he was overset, swept from his feet, carried helplessly down upon the twisted wreckage of the flying machine. Only the suit padding saved him from serious injury.

Before the transparency of his visor was hopelessly obscured he caught a fleeting glimpse of a surging torrent of mud.

VI

SUDDENLY THE violent motion ceased and he realized that he was once again standing upright. Slowly the mud drained from the visor of his helmet, leaving a dirty translucent film. He could see, dimly, vague outlines a few feet ahead of him, something that gleamed like burnished metal. The wreckage of the rocket plane? But this was no wreckage; this was a complexity of shining wheels and spindles, an intricate convolution of glass tubing.

He cried out as he felt himself falling backwards. Something checked his fall, and he was lowered gently to a polished plastic floor. He looked up in bewilderment and saw a giant, a mud-plastered giant in whose back was a great, gaping hole. He stared at it stupidly, realizing only after long seconds that this was the armor from which he had been released.

"Mr. Wilkinson!" somebody was asking urgently. "Mr. Wilkinson! Are you all right?"

He turned his head towards the sound of the voice, saw the anxious face of Olga. Beyond her was Henshaw, pale and more than a little frightened. Wilkinson tried to grin reassuringly. He said, "I survived."

"You survived what?" The scientist's expression of alarm was fading fast, replaced by an alert curiosity. "What did you survive? And where?"

"Dr. Henshaw," said the girl, her voice severe. "This man needs medical attention. Furthermore, I suggest that you take measures, at once, to have this suit thoroughly disinfected; it's coated with mud and, in all probability, crawling with micro-organisms. It will be advisable, too, if all three of us are given broad spectrum anti-biotic shots . . ."

"I do the suggesting around here, Olga," snapped the

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physicist, his customary bombast reasserting itself. "I handled the cat and the rats when we brought them back from wherever it is, and there was nothing in previous mud samples capable of harming us."

"How do you know that Mr. Wilkinson was sent to the same place?" demanded the girl. "The same place—or the same time?"

"There were rats there . . ." muttered Wilkinson. "There were rats there . . . and people. . . . *She* was there. . . ." He managed to stagger to his feet. "And I have to go back. I must go back. But I need weapons. And . . ."

The room was swirling dizzily about him. He clutched at the tall girl for support. He felt himself fall against the yielding solidity of her, felt her arms supporting him. He realized dimly that she was leading him to a chair. He collapsed into it, and that was the last he knew for all of twelve hours.

He awoke in his narrow bed in the quarters that had been assigned to him. At first he did not know where he was, and his eyes refused to focus. He sensed rather than saw the woman bending over him. He murmured softly, "Vanessa . . ."

She said, her voice crisp and efficient, "My name is Olga." She added in a barely audible whisper, "I'm sorry."

"That's all right," he said vaguely.

"Drink this," she told him.

He took the ice-cold tumbler of fruit juice that she put into his groping hand. It was refreshing, and the almost flavorless additive, whatever it was, cleared his head. He looked around, recognizing his surroundings. He smiled shakily at the tall brunette, and managed a grin for Henshaw and Titov. The other man in the room was a stranger to him.

"How do you feel?" asked the physicist.

He replied, "Not too bad." Then, "I'm ready to talk."

"There's no need to, Mr. Wilkinson," the stranger told him. "You've already done so." He went on, not without embarrassment, "It would have been a shame not to have taken advantage of your condition. It was conducive to total recall."

Wilkinson growled something about violation of privacy.

"You signed a waiver," Henshaw reminded him. "Remember? In any case, we weren't concerned with your murky past, only with what happened on the other world."

"Where is the other world?" demanded Wilkinson.

"I wish I knew. I thought at first, as you did, that my device had sent you back to the Carboniferous Era on Earth—but Titov assures me that this was not the case."

"The crustacea and the giant dragonflies fitted in, more or less," said the biologist. "But the vegetation, according to your description, was all wrong. And then there were the rats, not to mention human beings flitting around in rocket planes."

"I'll find out more for you when I go back," promised Wilkinson grimly.

"I've no doubt that he will," said the stranger. "I've no doubt that he will. Have you considered the possibility, Dr. Henshaw, that Mr. Wilkinson's experiences may have been subjective rather than objective? Your device may have done no more—and no less—than the hallucinogenic drugs."

"He didn't get that mud out of his subconscious," said Henshaw drily. "His suit was covered with it. By the way, Titov, what did you make of it?"

"It was similar to the samples brought back in your earlier experiments. Most of the same micro-organisms were present. As far as I can judge, there was nothing dangerous."

"And these microscopic life forms," asked Wilkinson, "are typical of the life forms of a world with an atmosphere rich in oxygen?"

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"Yes," admitted Titov.

"Good. I want to go back. After your . . . prying, all of you know why. But next time, Dr. Henshaw, I don't want to be cooped up in a steel casket, unable to move so much as a finger. I shall want freedom of movement, and ample time in which to execute my search." A thought struck him. "Yes—this business of Time. Are you sure that I was away for only ten minutes? It seemed much longer to me."

"It may have been," admitted the physicist. "It has already occurred to me that the time scales of this Universe and . . . the other place? . . . do not match."

"I think, Dr. Henshaw," said the stranger, "that it would be advisable to send a trained observer, a scientist, next time. It is obvious that vast new vistas are opening to us—possibly in my own field—and it seems a pity that our agent should be a man fanatically obsessed by his own private problems."

"You should know, Dr. Grimm," Henshaw told him, "that this is a very common condition. In any case, Mr. Wilkinson volunteered when the rest of you were still laughing at me. All right, so he has his reasons, perfectly valid ones, for volunteering. So what? As far as I'm concerned, my apparatus is at the disposal of Mr. Wilkinson until such time as he is successful. That's all."

"But, Dr. Henshaw . . ."

"I agree with Henshaw," said Titov.

"And I," declared Olga.

"It's *your* Rube Goldberg machine, I suppose," grumbled Grimm. "But I'm telling you, as a physician, that before Mr. Wilkinson undertakes any more wild goose chases he needs quiet and rest."

"He'll not be able to rest now," Olga said quietly, "until he's found what he's looking for."

"Thank you," said Wilkinson.

VII

WILKINSON FRETTEd at the delay occasioned by thorough preparation, but, as a senior ship's officer, he was obliged to admit that it was inevitable. Nothing would be gained—indeed, all might well be lost—if he returned to the weird world beyond Henshaw's dimension twisting apparatus unprepared.

There was so much that he had to take with him, even though most of it might well be unnecessary. There were weapons, and a supply of starch and protein concentrate and water purifying tablets, and a first aid kit, and writing materials. The list seemed almost endless, and even though the weight of everything was cut down to a minimum, the spaceman wondered if he would be able to stagger along under the load of his rucksack.

Titov did suggest that a scooter be sent back with him, but Wilkinson decided that the nature of the terrain, as he had seen it, militated against the use of any wheeled vehicle. Unfortunately it was impossible to transmit anything as large as a hover-car.

While his equipment was being assembled and while Henshaw was working on his machine, making further adjustments, he talked matters over with Titov.

"Of course," the biologist told him, "there isn't any *real* delay."

"Like hell there isn't," swore Wilkinson.

"No, there's not." Then, just to annoy the spaceman, "Of course, you have to remember that once you start tinkering with Time, all delays can be cancelled. The trouble is that the controls on Henshaw's gadget aren't fine enough. You might well return to the Other World to find that your girl is still only a babe in arms. . . ."

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"Surely Henshaw can do better than that."

"He might—if he had some concrete data to work with. But I'm afraid Wilkinson, that this second expedition of yours will be as much of a leap in the dark as the first one was."

"Then I'll leap again, and again, and again—until I strike the right Time."

Titov smiled sympathetically and apologetically. "I believe you would, Wilkinson. Yes—I believe you would. But I sincerely hope for your sake, and for hers, that it will not be necessary. After all, it would be very unsettling for her if her future husband kept on appearing and vanishing at all sorts of odd times during her early life until he was satisfied that he'd got the date right."

He puckered his lips and whistled softly. Wilkinson could not help grinning as he recognized the tune; it was from one of the old Twentieth Century comic operas, *Get Me To The Church On Time*.

"But all these speculations," went on Titov, "are no more than wild guesses. Not even Henshaw knows just when—or where—he is sending his guinea pigs. We might employ our time more profitably discussing the equipment you are taking. You've decided against a scooter. Why not wait until the mechanics have one of the powered suits ready for you?"

"Last time," said Wilkinson, "I had a basinful of those tailor-made tin coffins."

"The one you were in saved your life. And it had no power unit, so you had no real experience of operating in it."

"I know. But the main snag is that it's quite impossible for one to be opened from the inside. I shall spend quite a long time in the Other World, and I can't be sure that I shall be able to find anybody to let me out of the armor as and when necessary."

"A powered suit could be modified."

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"It would take too long."

"H'm. You're very impatient, but I'd be the same in your shoes. And one of the standard Venus suits will give you protection enough. What about weapons?"

"A Colt point two five automatic, with high velocity ammunition. Explosive bullets, of course."

"Why not a laser gun?"

"It would be better, *if* I could be sure of finding a power supply for recharging the cell."

"You're as likely to find that as you are to find a gunsmith's shop where you can buy ammunition."

"Agreed. But I'm taking a couple of hundred rounds with me, and a laser gun is good for only twenty shots before recharging."

"I see your point. And while we're on the subject of weapons, I think you'd better take a good knife."

"I've already thought of that. A knife is more than a weapon. It's a very useful tool."

"You seem to have thought of most things," admitted Titov. "But I wonder if you've thought of the most important thing of all?"

"What's that?"

"From what you've already told us, that Other World may have a different Time Scale from this one. All right, you're taking a watch with you, calendar watch, but how will you know that it's still keeping *this* time? If you're going to go traipsing all over the surface of that fantastic planet searching for your girl, how can you be sure of being back at the right place when Henshaw throws his machine into reverse, or whatever he does?"

"Dr. Henshaw is a clever man," said Wilkinson. "He has already thought of that complication." He fumbled in the side pocket of his uniform jacket, bringing out two bracelets of metal mesh. At the first glance they looked like watch straps. Wilkinson slipped one onto his right wrist. "See?" he

said. "A Moebius Strip. Don't ask me how or why it works, but Henshaw assures me that it does, or will, work. As long as I'm wearing the thing, I shall be pulled back to the Here and Now as soon as my time's up."

"And the other bracelet?"

"For Vanessa, of course. It would be rather pointless if I came back without her. I'd sooner stay there, wherever it is, than leave her and lose her again."

"You could do worse," admitted Titov. "Frankly, I hope most sincerely that the Director considers my application to be next on the list for teleportation. I've been going over your story in my mind, and that world just could be Earth in the Carboniferous Era. The rats and the rocket plane can be explained away. Somebody in our future—possibly working from the records of Henshaw's experiments—is Time Traveling."

"But if they, whoever *they* are, are from our future, why should they have reverted to a primitive type of aircraft, or spacecraft?"

"Perhaps the near-as-dammit Final War is going to happen after all, and *they* are representatives of a new technological culture."

"But the rats?"

"Quite simple. They used rats in their first experiment, and a pair escaped."

"You almost convince me . . ." said Wilkinson slowly. "You almost convince me. But your ingenious theory doesn't account for Vanessa."

"There are doubles . . ." said the biologist doubtfully.

"Yes. There are doubles. But I'd say that the odds against a double with an identical thumbprint, and with an almost identical scar running across the thumbprint, are astronomical."

"Neither you nor Henshaw is a criminologist."

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"No—but there is a criminologist on Venus. Dr. Naismith, from New Scotland Yard."

"Yes. I know. They chased him out here to carry out his experiments with the new hallucinogenic drugs. But his speciality is forensic medicine."

"And fingerprints are his hobby. He has examined both Henshaw's book and Vanessa's photograph, and he has assured me that the prints are identical."

"Curiouser and curiouser . . ." muttered Titov.

"And hopefuller and hopefuller," said Wilkinson firmly. He went on, his voice low, "You know, Titov, I've been cursing all this delay. But it would be a shame, now, to spoil everything by lack of preparation." Then, raising his voice, "But I'm ready."

VIII

YES, THOUGHT Wilkinson, I'm ready.

He was standing at the center of the circle painted on the floor of the laboratory, facing the assemblage of gleaming rotors and spindles, motionless now, but awaiting only the pressure of Henshaw's finger on the starting button. He was wearing a standard Venus-suit, a new one from the stores, thoroughly checked and tested. Beneath the light armor he had on shirt and slacks of cool yet tough olive-drab plastiweave, and the cuffs of his trousers were tucked into heavy boots. He was conscious of the weight of the tightly packed rucksack on his back, and conscious, too, of the slight drag on his hips of the belt that he was wearing outside the suit and from which hung the holstered pistol, the sheathed knife.

He heard the voice of Henshaw, faint yet clear through the helmet diaphragm, "Stand by!"

"Standing by," he replied.

He turned his head so that he could see the little physicist and Titov and Olga, who were standing beside him. He smiled at them, at the people who, in this short time, had become his friends, and ignored the others, the strangers, in the laboratory. Titov grinned back at him cheerfully, the girl raised her hand in a gesture of farewell.

"Now!" snapped Henshaw.

The apparatus stirred and murmured, the gleaming wheels began to revolve, picking up speed. Wilkinson felt an uncomfortable prickling of his left wrist, and tried with his gloved right hand to scratch it through the tough fabric of his suit sleeve. He desisted when he realized what was causing it. He knew that it must be the metal bracelet, the little Moebius

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strip fabricated from the same alloys as the big one that, rotating on its shaft, had turned to focus upon him whatever force it was that Henshaw had tapped, whatever weird radiations were being generated, that was concentrating the temporal precession field of the spinning, gleaming, ever-tumbling gyroscopes.

Wilkinson heard the thin, high, almost supersonic whine, but did not turn his head to look at the source of the disturbing sound. Instead, he fixed his regard on the faces of his friends, the faces that, he feared suddenly, he might never see again, the faces that flickered and faded, flickered and vanished, that were whirled away from him into some unfathomable limbo of lost years. . . .

But it was he who was being whirled away, falling free down the dark dimensions, no more than flotsam on the tide of time, a lost soul driven—where? when?—by the winds of it. He shut tight his eyes against the aching nothingness—and slowly opened them when he felt rough solidity under his doubly booted feet.

She was walking slowly, hesitantly, down the path to the dry river bed.

Save for the rough sandals on her feet she was naked, and her skin glowed warmly golden in the light from the yellow sky. She was not a child any longer. She was a woman, a beautiful woman.

And she was Vanessa.

He stared at her, not daring to believe that his search was ended, that his wild dreams were at last coming true. He stared at her, ignoring the crustaceans that crawled about his feet, the huge dragonfly that drifted slowly across his field of vision, the gaudy vegetation that was a somehow fitting background to the golden girl. (Later remembering the scene, he was to say that it reminded him of a painting

by the long-dead Rousseau—but at the time the great French primitive had no place in his thoughts.)

He stared at her as she approached him, slowly, hesitantly, picking her way among the stones. He stared at her, and marveled at the grace and the beauty of her. His head ached with the familiarity of her, the well remembered puckering of the eyebrows that in the other Vanessa—no, in Vanessa!—had always been indicative of puzzlement.

She opened her mouth to speak, and he felt the first stirrings of fear, of doubt. Would her voice be the same? Could her voice be the same?

She said—and, in spite of the faint, unidentifiable accent, it was Vanessa's voice—"Who are you? Why do you always come to this place?"

"Vanessa . . ." he said chokingly.

"Yes, that is my name." Her expression of puzzlement was more pronounced, and there was another expression, a mingling of hope and fear. "*But who are you?*"

He tried to answer, but could not. So he put up his hands to the concealing helmet, twisted and lifted it.

"No!" she cried. "No! It can't be!"

And then suddenly she was in his arms, sobbing, "Oh, Christopher, Christopher . . ." and he was holding her tightly, and trying to kiss away her tears. For long seconds neither of them was able to do more than to murmur inarticulately. Abruptly she pulled away from him, seemed to be listening for something. She caught his hand in hers, saying, "Hurry!"

There was no mistaking the note of urgency in her voice, and he followed her, stumbling over the stones that she avoided with practiced ease. Up the steep bank she climbed gracefully while Wilkinson, perspiring heavily in his suit, scrambled clumsily after her. When she was standing on the thick, mosslike growth at the top of the low cliff she halted. She extended one shapely arm and pointed.

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Wilkinson could hear the low, ominous rumbling now, and he could see, far down the ravine, the onrushing gray wave that was the forerunner of the mud torrent. He looked away from it to the rocky bottom where he had been standing, saw that all the rats had vanished and that the last of the little crustacea were scuttling for safety. He heard the girl say, "It would have been dreadful to have lost you again. . . ." He looked at her as a shadow of doubt flickered across her face. She asked, almost inaudibly, "But you are Christopher?" She repeated pleadingly, "You are Christopher, aren't you?"

"Yes," he said.

She sat down on a moss-covered boulder, and looked up at him, ignoring the drab, steaming torrent that was, by this time, surging along the watercourse. She said, "I've always known that there was something about this place. . . . Something . . . strange. Strange—but not hostile. Do you remember when the lifeboat crashed and you pulled me out of the wreckage? Do you remember that metal giant standing there? I had the oddest feeling that he wanted to help us, badly, but somehow couldn't. . . . And there have been all the other apparitions. The white rats, and the ginger cat, and that book that was snatched away from me before I had a chance to look at it . . . And now you." She caught his arm and pulled him down beside her. "But what did they do to you, Chris? I heard that you were dead, that they had killed you. But you must have escaped. How did you get back here?"

Wilkinson remembered the shockingly familiar face of the young man who had pulled the girl from the wrecked rocket plane. He knew now why that face had been so familiar. But it made sense. If Vanessa existed in this weird Universe, then so did he, Christopher Wilkinson. With a slight shudder he made the mental correction. *He had existed.* He wondered how best to initiate his enquiries—

and, looking at the beautiful girl beside him, wondered briefly if he should do so.

She went on, breathlessly, "This suit of yours . . . Did you escape in a spaceship? But I thought that *they* controlled every ship in the System. They own and control everything—but us. . . ." She was silent for a little, her face registering doubt and anxiety. "Tell me, Chris," she demanded sharply, "they don't own you, do they? Have they sent you back to spy, or to lead them to our headquarters? Tell me, Chris!" Her voice was hard, urgent. "Tell me!"

He said slowly and carefully, "No. They don't own me."

She told him simply, "I believe you. I know you too well not to know when you're lying. But you have to convince Hardcastle and Moira Simmons." She shuddered. "Hardcastle's as bad as they are, and so is Moira. You didn't see what they did to Dorothy Wallis. That was after you were captured. It was Dorothy who was the traitor, who was responsible for the ambush. Hardcastle and Moira should have killed her cleanly, but first they made her talk, and then they . . ."

"Vanessa," he said painfully, breaking the tense silence. "Vanessa . . ."

"Yes, Christopher?"

"Vanessa, I am not what I seem . . ."

She jumped to her feet. "Then get back to them!" she flared. "You deserve to die—but I couldn't bear to see you die the way that Dorothy Wallis did."

"But I'm not working for *them*. I don't even know who *they* are."

She said bitterly, "We know about their brainwashing. You'd better go, Christopher, before something triggers whatever post-hypnotic command has been planted in your mind."

"Damn it all!" he swore, "I don't know anything about this cock-eyed world. I don't belong here."

"Christopher! Are you mad?"

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"No. I'm not mad." He added, immediately regretting his cheap attempt at humor, "At least, I'm not running around like a refugee from a nudist colony."

"And how else would any sane person be dressed on this hothouse planet? Frankly, I've been wondering why you were keeping that absurd clothing of yours on." She stood there, looking down at him. She could not conceal the disappointment and worry in her voice. "You're Christopher—but you're not. They've done something to you." She went on, her face strained and desolate. "Believe me, Chris, I'd do anything to help you, to bring you back to me. But there are Hardcastle and Moira Simmons. They mustn't get you. They mustn't. So leave me, Chris. I want to keep you, but. . . ." She turned away from him in an attitude of utter dejection.

Wilkinson got to his feet, put out his right hand to grasp her smooth shoulder. He turned her gently, so that she was facing him. "Vanessa," he said to her gently, "let me explain. Please let me explain. And prepare yourself for a shock."

She demanded, not without bitterness, "To find you again—and then, almost at once, to lose you. . . . What other shocks can there be?"

He told her quietly, striving to instill conviction into his voice, "You are Vanessa, but not *my* Vanessa . . ." He corrected himself. "But you are. You always will be. What I mean is—you are not the Vanessa I used to know, the Vanessa who was lost in a shipwreck between Earth and Mars." He added parenthetically, "Earth and Mars are planets of the System from which I come." He saw that she was about to interrupt him, but went on hurriedly, "And I am not the Christopher Wilkinson whom you knew, whom you lost. But I *am* Christopher Wilkinson, and I love Vanessa Raymond, and I always shall."

She regarded him in silence, her face and her manner a

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vivid portrayal of puzzlement, but the doubt and the suspicion seemed to be vanishing. He waited for her to speak, but she said nothing.

So he asked, "Tell me, what world *is* this?"

"Venus, of course," she said.

IX

WILKINSON WAS shocked into silence.

Slowly he turned his head and looked all around him—at the river of steaming mud, at the lush, gaudy vegetation, at the hovering, darting flying creatures that were like oversized and improbably brilliant versions of Terran insects. Finally his regard returned to the girl.

He thought—but without emotion, without conviction—*she's mad*.

But there were no indications of insanity on her face, in her eyes, troubled though they were. She was naked, but she was one of those women who look impeccably groomed no matter what they are or are not wearing. And Wilkinson knew that clothing was not worn in many communities in Earth's Tropics and sub-Tropics. It could well be argued that the wearing of clothing in conditions of extreme heat and humidity was itself a symptom of insanity.

He asked himself, *am I sane?*

What was it that the psychologist had said when he recovered consciousness after his first experience with Henshaw's machine? Hadn't the man suggested that all that he had seen, all that he had experienced, had been dredged up somehow from his own memory, his own subconscious? But then both Henshaw and Titov had assured him that an actual physical journey had taken place; but to where? to when?

He asked, "*Is this Venus?*"

Vanessa's expression reflected her own doubt, her own worry. "Of course it is," she said. Then, "Christopher! What's wrong with you? You must have been brainwashed."

"I'm getting to the stage where I'm not sure of anything

anymore," he muttered. "But tell me, is the central body of this planetary system called the Sun? And are the planets called Mercury, Venus, Earth and Mars? And the Asteroids? And then Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto?"

She was looking at him intently, her brows creased. "Of course. What else would they be?"

He told her, speaking slowly and carefully, "Where I come from, or *when* I come from, we have the same planets as you. But our Venus isn't like this. It's an almost lifeless dust-ball of a planet, with a poisonous atmosphere. There's a small colony there, of Terran scientists. I agreed to act as a guinea pig for one of them. He was supposed to be sending me a few years into the past so I could do something to avert the disaster in which you were killed. . . ." He paused, then asked, "Tell me, Vanessa, what year is this?"

"Twenty-one ten," she replied.

"But it doesn't make sense," he muttered. "It was twenty-one oh nine—July 15, according to the Terran calendar—when I left Science City on Venus. *My* Venus." He paused again. "This date of yours, is it Terran Standard or some cock-eyed local time?"

"Terran Standard, of course."

"It doesn't make sense!" he almost shouted.

"But it must," she insisted, the feminine practicality strong in her voice. "It must. I lost you, Christopher, and now I've got you back. And you lost me, you say—and now you've found me again. There's a pattern of sorts, and I've no quarrel with it. Don't let's worry about it, darling. We'll get everything sorted out in time."

"In Time . . ." echoed Wilkinson.

She looked at him intently, worriedly. "But before I take you back to the camp we shall have to concoct some sort of story for Hardcastle and Moira Simmons. I believe what you told me—but will they?"

"They'll have to," he said.

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"But they won't. They're hard, suspicious. They must be, I suppose. I should be the same way, but . . ."

"This is my story," said Wilkinson stubbornly. "In *my* Universe I'm a spaceman. My ship was on the run between Earth and Venus. On Venus I picked up an unpleasant and dangerous virus infection and I was put ashore sick. After my recovery I was approached by a certain Dr. Henshaw, who wanted a guinea pig for his Time Travel experiments. I had my reasons for volunteering—as you know—so I volunteered. The first session with his Time Twister was a brief one—and I had to stand helplessly in the river bed to watch your rocket plane crash and to see you dragged from the wreckage by a man whom I almost recognized. All right, then—by myself. The second time, you found me.

"And then, after I've told my tale, your Mr. Hardcastle and Miss Simmons can tell me theirs. It had better be a good one. Damn it all—I still can't believe in this crazy world!"

"Then you'd better start right now, Wilkinson," interjected a strange voice.

Wilkinson spun around, saw that a tall, naked man had emerged from behind the trees. He was holding what looked like some sort of gun and, as he spoke, he raised the stock to his shoulder, taking aim.

The spaceman's hand fell to the butt of his pistol.

"Better not, Wilkinson," advised the other. "Better not. My bolt'll beat you to the draw. And you, Vanessa, get that belt off him. There's far too much lethal ironmongery dangling from it."

"But . . ." she began.

"Jump to it!" snapped the stranger.

"Better do as he says," murmured Wilkinson. He could see now what the odd-looking weapon was. It was an arbalest, a crossbow. After the first shot the bowman would have to reload; but, meanwhile, the bolt would have made a nasty hole in the target. At this range it could hardly miss.

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Another man stepped from the concealment of the trees, then two women. All of them were young and tough-looking, and all of them were armed as was the first one. One of the women would have been beautiful but for the burn scar that ran down the side of her face and puckered the skin of her right shoulder.

The first man said, "Wilkinson's back. So they didn't kill him, only brainwashed him."

"So I see," remarked the scarred woman. "Shall we do away with him now? It'll be kinder than letting Hardcastle and Moira try their own brainwashing techniques on him."

Wilkinson stood there helplessly, trying to think of something to say to the newcomers. He felt Vanessa's hands busy with the fastenings of his belt. And then he heard a warning cry from one of the two women and saw the first man's crossbow shift, heard the twang of the suddenly released string. Behind him Vanessa screamed and, disregarding the leveled weapons, he turned around and saw her nursing her right hand, from which blood was dripping. At her feet lay his pistol.

He acted instinctively, dropping to his knees, and heard the *whirr* as two of the bolts barely missed his head, and felt the jar of a glancing blow on his right shoulder. He dimly realized that the missile must have been deflected by his light armor—but all that mattered was that his right arm and hand were still in working order. He scooped up the pistol from the moss, juggling it for a brief, desperate second, and then its butt was fitting snugly into his palm and his index finger was on the trigger.

He said coldly as he turned to face the others, "Don't bother to reload. I can loose off four rounds, one for each of you, while you're still fumbling."

"But they're friends, Chris," Vanessa was saying. "But they're friends."

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"They didn't act in a very friendly manner. But what about you?"

"I'm all right. It's only a graze. Malcolm shot the pistol out of my hand."

"I should have shot *you*, Wilkinson," growled the big man.

Wilkinson sat there on the soft moss, looking at the two men and the two women. They looked at him. He wondered how long this impasse would last; already the gun was heavy in his right hand. Inside his suit he was soaked with sweat; the built-in air conditioner had, of course, ceased to function as soon as he removed his helmet.

"Stalemate," observed the scarred blonde, grinning not unpleasantly.

"Not quite," Wilkinson told her. "In a matter of seconds I can kill all of you."

"But you wouldn't, Chris!" cried Vanessa. Then, doubtfully, "You wouldn't?"

Wilkinson tried hard to make his voice sound vicious. "Wouldn't I?"

"Then—then you are from them after all. . . ."

"Damn it all, girl, I'm not from *them*—whoever *they* are when they're up and dressed. But I don't like seeing you shot at, and I don't like being shot at myself."

"Vanessa was going to shoot at us," said the blonde reasonably.

"I wasn't, Claire."

"Then what the hell were you doing with his pistol, Duckie?"

"This won't get you anywhere, Wilkinson," said the big man, Malcolm.

"Or you," said Wilkinson.

"There's something odd about this," said Malcolm.

"You're telling me," agreed Wilkinson.

"Can't we talk things over?" asked the blonde.

"That's what I've been wanting to do all along," Wilkinson told her, "if only you people would let me."

"You *are* Chris Wilkinson?" asked Malcolm.

"I am—but not the Chris Wilkinson you knew."

"This is getting crazier and crazier," said the blonde.

"Isn't it? Meanwhile, I'd like one of you to do something about Vanessa's hand."

He heard Vanessa's voice. "It's nothing serious, Chris. Really it's not." She moved to the fringe of his field of vision, and he saw that she had bound a papery leaf from one of the plants about the wound. Already it had stopped bleeding.

"Of course," said the blonde, "you don't know that gold-flower leaves possess excellent antiseptic and coagulant properties."

"I don't," he said. "Or I didn't. I suppose that I know now."

"It's a good act," said the blonde. "We were listening to the tail end of your intimate talk with Vanessa, before we came out from the trees. Just whom do you hope to fool?"

He said, "I'm not trying to fool anybody." Then, speaking to Vanessa, "Try to open my haversack without pushing me off balance. Maybe something in it will convince these friends of yours that I'm a stranger to this world."

He felt her gentle touch at his back, tried to ignore it as he held his weapon steady. Then she had moved again into his field of vision, and was holding up for inspection a small packet. "Cigarettes?" she was asking. "What are they?"

"Cigarettes?" echoed the blonde. "I've read about them. They were a dangerous vice that was stamped out towards the close of the Twentieth Century. It was proved that tobacco smoking was the cause of lung cancer."

"Yes," agreed Wilkinson. "But in *my* world, ways were found to remove the carcinogenic agents from tobacco. There are even tobacco plantations on Mars."

Malcolm said, "I'm almost convinced. After all, the

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stories we heard about *our* Chris Wilkinson's death were rather more than mere rumors. And Wallenstein actually saw the body before it was disposed of."

Said the blonde, "But they're clever, and this business of faking that archaic vice is all part and parcel of their cleverness."

"I'm tired of sitting here," complained Wilkinson. "I don't want to have to shoot you, no matter what your feelings are about me. I suggest that you take me to your Mr. Hardcastle so we can get things ironed out."

"But you're armed," said Malcolm.

"So he's armed," agreed Claire. Then to the other woman, a short, slightly built redhead, "You're fast on your feet, Suzie. Run on ahead and warn Hardcastle, so that he can have the laser projectors manned and ready."

"Do you agree, Wilkinson?" asked Malcolm.

"Yes. I agree." He turned to Vanessa. "Here. You're more or less neutral. Take the gun and give me those cigarettes."

He sat and smoked contentedly while the naked men and women, their weapons dangling unheeded from their hands, watched him with amazement.

X

AS HE CAME to the end of his cigarette Wilkinson was beginning to ponder the wisdom of his actions. But, he told himself, he had to trust somebody. He had to trust Vanessa; he had blandly assumed that she knew how to use a pistol, in spite of the fact that arbalests seemed to be the standard portable armament on this planet; and he had to trust these belligerent friends of hers. He could not take on a whole world single-handed.

He threw away the butt. "Well?" he asked.

"I hope, for your sake," said the woman Claire, "that the carcinogens have been removed from that tobacco. Not that it matters much."

"You seem to know plenty about it," he told her.

"I should. I'm a doctor—of sorts. I was just about to qualify when I fell foul of the Committee."

"I take it," asked Wilkinson, "that 'the Committee' is another way of saying '*them*'?"

"It is." The tall blonde glanced at Malcolm, who returned her look but said nothing. She spoke again to Wilkinson, "Come on—since you're so determined to die messily. Suzie should be at the camp by now." She added, "You can take off that tin suit of yours if you like. Or do you want a can opener?"

"I can manage," said Wilkinson. With a certain amount of contortion he was able to manipulate the fasteners. He stepped out of the armor, and in his plastiweave shirt and slacks he was still hot. After a second's hesitation he shed the shirt, but decided to retain his boots and trousers. The discarded garments he parceled up, securing them to the top of his knapsack. Without any assistance he managed

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to get it slung once more to his back. Then he saw his belt on the moss, where Vanessa had dropped it. The holster, of course, was now empty, but the knife was still in its sheath. He stooped to pick it up.

"Not so fast, Buster," admonished Claire. While she was talking she had approached Wilkinson and managed to get a toe under the broad strap of plastic webbing. Now, with a graceful movement of her shapely leg and slim foot, she kicked it into the air, catching it with her left hand. "Not so fast, Buster. You can come with us, but you come unarmed. And you, Duckie," she continued to Vanessa, "had better pass over that popgun to Malcolm before it goes off and hurts somebody."

"Shall I, Christopher?" asked the girl.

Wilkinson looked at her. She was holding the weapon in her uninjured left hand, but Vanessa had been ambidextrous. In all probability this Vanessa was ambidextrous. The way she was handling the pistol was evidence that she knew how to use it. He looked at the others, and they returned his stare openly. He decided that he had nothing further to fear—not from them, at any rate. The simple action of smoking a cigarette had been far more convincing than all his words could ever have been.

"Yes," he told her.

She gave the gun to Malcolm, who had buckled the belt about his waist. The big man glanced at it, moved the catch to *Safety* and then tucked it into the holster. "Let's go," ordered Claire.

They set off in rough formation—Claire in the lead, then Wilkinson and Vanessa, then Malcolm and the other man, a wiry little fellow who, so far, had not uttered a single word. The spaceman wondered how the blonde woman was navigating; there were surely no signs of a path over the thick moss. Yet she picked her way steadily and surely,

skirting closely some of the bushy clumps of fleshy vegetation, giving others a wide berth. After a while Wilkinson began to discern a definite pattern in her leadership—the trees, if such they could be called, that were avoided displayed a foliage of long, purple streamers, undulant ribbons that twitched and stirred even in a complete absence of wind. And then he noticed the debris strewn around the bulbous trunks—broken, gauzy wings, dessicated chitinous exoskeletons and even, now and again, little piles of whitening bones. The carnivorous trees were, after all, obvious enough hazards, but there must be many other dangers that were far from obvious.

Claire led the way rapidly and confidently—and then, suddenly, she stopped, standing in an attitude of rigid attention, every muscle of her superb body clearly defined beneath the tanned skin. Then, "Take cover!" she called.

The party ran for the shelter of a tall copse of huge ferns, of plants that looked like ferns if one ignored the huge, vivid scarlet and purple blossoms. Under the foliage and around the trunks and moss grew waist-high and Claire flung herself into the springy growth, falling full length. Infected by the panic although ignorant of its cause, Wilkinson pushed Vanessa before him, diving with her into the green shelter. He felt the ground quiver as the burly Malcolm thudded down beside him. He felt as much as heard a vibration of the air that deepened to a steady drumming.

He heard Claire whisper, "Who dropped that damn crossbow?"

Cautiously, he disengaged himself from Vanessa, turning over and around. He parted the fronds of moss, and could see, midway between the copse in which they were hiding and the next one, something that glittered metallically on the short growth, something relatively small that still was glaringly obvious.

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"They'll see it," went on Claire, "and they'll burn every clump of clover for a mile around."

"It was mine . . ." muttered the little man.

"Then go and get it, William. And if *they* spot you, lead them away from us."

"But . . . They're getting close."

"Not as close as they will be." Her voice was low and vicious. "If you don't do as I say, and if by some miracle they don't see it and start burning off, I promise you that I'll make a full report to Hardcastle and Moira. And you know what that means."

He replied, his voice thick with emotion, stating rather than asking, "You'll tell Suzie . . ."

"Yes." Claire was amazingly gentle. "Yes. I'll tell her. And now—go."

Wilkinson watched the little man running out across the short moss, watched him as he stooped to pick up the dropped weapon. And then, suddenly, the drumming thunder from the sky was deafening and something was sweeping overhead, a black arrow that trailed a shaft of vivid flame. William straightened up and started to run again—away from his hidden companions. The rocket turned in a wide arc and then came screaming back. Ahead of it there was a brief, almost luminous flicker in the air, and behind the running man there was a burst of white flame, a billowing of smoke and steam. Again the flicker, and again the fire and smoke—this time ahead of the runner.

William stopped then, and did something utterly futile, and yet something that Wilkinson would never forget. He drew himself to his full, insignificant height and raised the stock of his arbalest to his shoulder, calmly sighted on the downdriving rocket plane. Whether or not he had time to pull his trigger Wilkinson never knew—not that it could have made any difference to the end result. For the third and last time there was that flickering of the air, and the taut

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figure of the naked bowman flashed into intolerable brilliance.

When Wilkinson opened his eyes again, all that was there was a charred, black huddle in the center of a circle of bare, blackened earth, a sooty mound that was only vaguely human, that smoked greasily.

Claire broke the silence. "He was a good man," she said grimly. "He made his mistake, and that was the end of him, but he was a good man. . . ." She went on, "They will have thought that he was a solitary hunter. I hope."

The screaming roar of the rocket plane was now only a distant drumming—a drumming that faded to the merest vibration of the still air, and then was gone.

XI

THEY WAITED in their shelter until, at last, it seemed obvious that the rocket plane would not be returning. Wilkinson thought that they would be giving the dead man some kind of burial, and was shocked when, after he had mentioned this, Claire said bitterly, "What for? He's already been cremated. And if they think that he was just a solitary hunter, so much the better."

As before, the tall blonde led the way, at a pace that Wilkinson, at the least, found punishing. But he could still observe; he was still not too tired to take an intelligent interest in the country through which they were passing.

The way was uphill now, and the slope, gentle at first, was becoming steeper. Great, craggy boulders were pushing up through the green moss carpet and were, themselves, crowned with moss. They came to another river bed, but this one was not dry, neither was it the channel for a torrent of mud. The others knelt by the clear stream and splashed water over their faces and bodies, drinking from their cupped hands. The spaceman followed their example. The stream was surprisingly cool, and its water held a tart flavor, a slight acidity, that made it all the more refreshing. Then the party rested for a few minutes, and Wilkinson smoked another of his precious cigarettes. He thought, I'll have to go easy on these. He had assumed that this was one minor human vice that would be found anywhere and anywhere, but it seemed that he had been in error. Perhaps he would be able to find some local weed that would be a fair substitute—if he lived that long. Or if Henshaw didn't snatch him back to his own Space and Time before the need arose. He thought that he felt

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the bracelet on his wrist prickling, then decided that it was only imagination. Even so, it would be as well to have all in readiness.

He fumbled in his trouser pocket and brought out the twin to the little Moebius strip that he was wearing. He said to Vanessa, "I brought this for you, please put it on."

But it was Claire who took it from his hand, examining it curiously. She said at last, "I think it's safe. But . . ."

"It's safe," he assured her.

"I thought," she said slowly, "that it might be some sort of radio signaling device. But even the smallest vacuum tubes are relatively bulky."

Don't you have transistors? thought Wilkinson, but said nothing.

"Can I have it, Claire?" asked Vanessa softly.

"Give it to her," said Malcolm gruffly. "It's a pretty thing—and God knows that there's not much prettiness in our lives."

Claire tossed it in her long, capable hand. She remarked, "I suppose that I should boil and sterilize it. But if *they* have some sort of biological warfare in mind, this is an odd sort of vector . . ." She turned to Wilkinson. "In fact, Buster, everything about you is damned odd."

"I know," he said. "And when I get a chance to tell my story properly, you'll know why."

"All right." The blonde practically threw the bracelet at Vanessa. "You can have it. But, knowing Harcastle and Moira, I advise you to wear it as an anklet. The strap of your sandal will hide it."

Then, after Wilkinson had passed the metallic circle up over the girl's slender foot, settling it about her slim ankle, the party pressed on.

The dusk was falling as they reached the encampment, a blue, shadowy sea washing in from the west, flooding the

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no-longer-golden sky, slowly submerging the peaks of the low mountain range towards which they were climbing. As they trudged on through the gathering darkness, Wilkinson wondered where Claire was leading them; ahead there was a sheer cliff face, curtained with luxuriant vines, with no sign of any sort of path to the higher levels. The spaceman wondered if they would have to climb the natural scramble-net and doubted if he could make it. He had been too many years in Deep Space, and even though there were excellent gymnasiums aboard all the ships, only keep-fit fanatics made full use of them.

The tall blonde paused and whistled. It was like the song of a Terran bird, but it was too complicated. Then, as the party waited at the foot of the cliff, the vine curtain parted. Beyond it was a cave, or tunnel. There were lights there, dim, that seemed only to intensify the darkness. There was a menacing shape that Wilkinson assumed to be one of the laser projectors of which Claire had already spoken. It was big, clumsy—but this culture had not stumbled upon the transistor.

"Come in," ordered a man's voice.

When the last of them was in the cave, the curtain dropped. Somebody switched on brighter lights. Wilkinson stared at the men and women standing there. They were all of them naked, and all of them possessed the wofish quality so evident in Claire, and all of them were armed. But here were no arbalests. Here were automatic pistols not unlike his own, here were machine rifles—and every muzzle was pointed at him.

One of the men chuckled. "It's a good job Suzie warned us, Wilkinson, else we'd have taken you for a ghost."

"He may qualify for one yet," remarked Claire.

"Don't!" cried Vanessa.

"And so might we all," the tall blonde continued.

Somebody was scrambling from the rear of the cave. It

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was Suzie. "Will" she called. Then, "What have you done to Will?"

Claire put both her hands on the girl's shoulders. She said, with surprising gentleness, "He's dead, my dear. But he went out well, like the man that he was." She waited until the girl's sobbing was under control, then continued, "Come and see me in my hut. I'll give you something to make you sleep."

"I'm afraid that that will have to wait," said the gray-bearded man who had ordered them to enter. "You are all to come before the Council. At once."

Beyond the cave was a deep ravine, through which water flowed. Where it vanished into the ground there was a low hut, and from the hut came the whine of machinery. *Their power supply*, thought Wilkinson. There were other huts—sprawling, irregular, vine and moss-covered, all of them in darkness. And yet there was an air of wakefulness, of uneasiness.

They came to a large building standing aloof by the stream. They were pushed into an unlighted hallway, and the door was shut behind them. Another door opened and they stood there blinking, dazzled by the sudden brilliant light.

They were in a huge room, carpeted with living moss. At its far end was a platform, and on the platform was a table. Seated at it—four along one side, one at either end—were two men and four women. They stared at Wilkinson, neither friendly nor overtly hostile, but suspicious, and he stared back at them. The man and the three women along the side of the table were nonentities—useful organizers, no doubt, but lacking in real driving force. After his first glance Wilkinson ignored them. He looked at the man at the head of the table, the little man, almost a dwarf, with the thin, twisted face of the self-torturing introvert. He looked from him to the mountainous woman at the other end. With

that build she should have been the opposite to her male partner, psychologically as well as physically—but she was not. Yet she was different. Hardcastle was consumed by a bitter, internal flame but she was cold, cold. Of the two, thought Wilkinson, he would prefer Hardcastle. Not that he would be offered any choice in the matter.

"It's Wilkinson," said one of the Councillors.

"It's Wilkinson," agreed Hardcastle, his voice amazingly deep and resonant. "What do you say, Moira?"

"It could be Wilkinson," squeaked the fat woman. "It could be. On the other hand . . ." She glared at the spaceman from glacial blue eyes. "Strip."

After a second's hesitation, the spaceman complied. In spite of the fact that, until now, he had been the only clothed person in the room he felt absurdly embarrassed. He stooped to unfasten his boots, kicked them off. He stepped out of his trousers. Almost as an afterthought he loosened the fastenings of his knapsack, dropping it to the moss floor.

"He's pale," observed one of the Councilwomen.

"So would you be, if you'd spent a few months in a Committee jail," Moira Simmons told her. Then, "Turn around, Wilkinson. Slowly."

Burning with resentment, he pivoted on his bare feet. Sullenly he obeyed the sharp order, "Stop!"

"Where did you get that scar, Wilkinson?" demanded the hateful, squeaky voice.

"I'll try to explain . . ." he mumbled.

"No doubt you will try. But it's obviously an old laser burn. You're the nearest we have to a doctor, Claire. What do you make of it?"

"A burn," said the blonde, not without defiance. "But not necessarily made by a laser beam."

"How else? We all know that the Committee's inquisitors can be very unsubtle at times."

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Wilkinson turned to face his questioner, and briefly looked into Vanessa's eyes. He did not like what he saw there—the pain and the sick fear. He tried to grin reassuringly at her. And then, firmly, to Moira Simmons, "I can explain."

"You can try. We've all evening ahead of us. And if you're ever at a loss for words, we can help you find some, even if they're only 'Stop! Please stop!'"

Wilkinson tried to ignore the ghastly humor. He said quietly, "That scar on my left buttock is not a laser burn. It's an old scar. I had to go outside of my ship to make a hull inspection, and the insulation of my suit was faulty . . ."

"The last ship that you were ever in," said Moira Simmons flatly, "was *Venus Girl* when she tried to make her getaway from Port Hesperus when the Committee was taking over. You *might* have been injured when the ship was fired upon and destroyed by the Committee's cruisers—but you were not. You *might* have been injured when the lifeboat that you were piloting crashed in Mud Gully—but you were not. And then, when the rags of your pretty uniform were more indecent than honest nudity, you went naked like the rest of us—and nobody saw any scars on your pretty backside."

"But I don't belong on this world," he said desperately.

"He doesn't!" cried Vanessa. "I should know. Please believe him."

"He has some odd evidence to prove his point," said Claire quietly. "I suggest that you examine his gear, Moira."

"Not so fast, young woman." The obese monster turned again to the spaceman. "All right. So you don't belong to this world. Are you a spy who's dropped in from Earth or from Mars to see how things are going? Did somebody go to all the trouble to find an exact double of our late—or not so late—Chris Wilkinson?" Her voice was more of a snarl than a squeak. "What do you take us for?"

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"I come," he said, trying to keep his voice firm, "from another Universe, another Time."

"Henshaw," said one of the Councillors, a slight, scholarly looking man. "Henshaw."

"What are you babbling about?" demanded Moira Simmons rudely. "Pipe down, Duval, and let me get on with the business."

Hardcastle was on his feet, his face angry. "You pipe down, Moira. I knew Henshaw myself, and there were times when he almost convinced me when he discussed his theories. Pass up the prisoner's bag, Malcolm, and that belt you're wearing, and we'll see what he's brought with him."

"It might be as well," suggested Claire, "to soak that knapsack in a bucket of water first. If he is our Chris Wilkinson, and if he *has* been brainwashed, that bag could well be booby trapped."

Wilkinson, seeking comfort in trivial worries, hoped that the wrappings of his precious packets of cigarettes would be watertight.

XII

WHILE WILKINSON'S knapsack was soaking in the bucket of water there was a slight relaxation. It was Hardcastle who broke the silence by asking Duval, "What was that about Henshaw?"

"He was a physicist," replied the scholarly man. "He was as apolitical as anyone can be, yet he still contrived to fall foul of the Committee."

"So you had a Henshaw too," broke in Wilkinson. "It stands to reason . . ."

"Be quiet!" snapped Moira Simmons.

"Henshaw," continued Duval, "had some peculiar ideas about Time. He believed that Time Travel was possible, and at the time of his—his disappearance he was working on a device that, he said, would be capable of sending a person into the Past or the Future." A slight smile flickered over his thin features. "Of course, the idea made no appeal to our lords and masters. It would have been far too easy for one of us to make a brief excursion into the Past and to commit one or two murders just to nip the Committee in the bud, as it were . . ."

"And I," Wilkinson broke in, "let the Dr. Henshaw of my world send me into the past so that I could save my girl from being killed in a space disaster."

"I never gave you credit for much imagination, Chris Wilkinson," sneered the fat woman, "but I see, now, that I was wrong."

"Hear him out, Moira," protested Duval.

"Ay. I'll hear him out when we start him singing. We may not possess the fancy apparatus of the Committee's interrogation squads, but we make do very nicely with what we

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have. After all, once a man has talked he's not much further use to anybody and may as well die."

"Moiral" Harcastle's deep voice had a crack to it like the snap of a whip. "We interrogate when we have to, not, like the Committee, for the sheer love of it."

"Speak for yourself, Hardcastle," she replied sullenly.

The little man turned to the prisoner. "Well, Wilkinson, you can't say that you don't know the score. We can't afford to take risks. Whatever story you tell us, we must know whether or not it is true. Moira is a trained and qualified psychiatrist, so we should be able to get the truth from you without too much physical damage." He paused. "Of course, if you are an agent of the Committee the physical damage will be rather more extensive."

"But I *am* a Time Traveler!" protested Wilkinson. "When you examine the contents of my knapsack you will find that every article has its origin in a culture widely different from yours . . ."

"Such things can be faked," remarked the fat woman contemptuously.

"These weren't." Wilkinson turned to Duval. "Furthermore, I can describe Dr. Henshaw to you. Appearance, mannerisms . . ."

"Our friends of the Committee," said Moira Simmons slowly, "must have had ample time to observe Henshaw before they disposed of him. No doubt you have studied films and listened to recordings."

"Can't I convince you?" he implored.

"No. You cannot."

"But, Moira . . ." It was Vanessa, standing beside Wilkinson to face the Council. "I should know, if anybody does. This *is* Chris Wilkinson—but not the Chris Wilkinson who was captured. He's . . . changed."

Moira Simmons laughed. "So would anybody be changed after a few months of the Committee's brainwashing."

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"Yes, I know. But there's all the rest of it. The odd apparitions, always occurring just at the place where the lifeboat crashed. The cat, and the white rats, and the book, and the helpless armored giant . . ."

"We know," said Moira Simmons tolerantly. "We know. I don't doubt your word for a moment, my dear, but it is a pity that all these—visions? It is a pity that all these visions have been seen by yourself only, with no witnesses. In fact, I have been reminded often of those unlettered, semi-moronic peasant girls back on Earth who used to make a habit of seeing Virgins, Saints and whatever. I have always been intending, some time when I have less pressing affairs to occupy me, to subject you to a thorough psychological examination."

"But Chris saw the first apparition, the armored giant."

"Tell us what you remember of it, Wilkinson," ordered Moira Simmons amusedly.

"Plenty," he said. "I *was* the armored giant."

"You'll wish you had your armor when the real questioning starts."

"I could help you," said Wilkinson desperately, "if you would only let me."

"How?" asked Hardcastle.

"By setting up a supply route between this world and the Venus that I came from. Weapons . . ."

"What sort of weapons?" demanded the little man sharply.

"How would you like portable laser projectors—really portable ones that can be carried like a pistol? I saw the ones that you had guarding the entrance, and it was obvious to me that you people haven't taken the first step towards miniaturization. Or if you don't like it here we can have you all transferred to my own Universe."

"All transferred to a Committee concentration camp," sneered Moira Simmons.

Meanwhile, one of the men had opened Wilkinson's knap-

sack and was taking out the various items. He emptied the water from the bucket onto the absorbent moss of the floor, replacing it with the contents of the bag. This, together with Wilkinson's knife, pistol and clothing, he carried to the Council table.

Moira Simmons pawed through the articles like a scavenging bird, snorting.

"Thorough," she muttered. "Thorough. You have to give them credit for that. Mythical maker's names and trademarks. A recoil-operated pistol—which, I suppose, is just as efficient as a gas-operated one. A set of natty gent's clothing to be worn on a hothouse planet where nobody ever wears anything . . ." She shoved the pile of possessions away from her, along the table. "I propose that we don't waste any more time, and start the interrogation at once."

"You haven't looked properly," Claire was saying. "Those cigarettes, for example . . ."

"Is that what those things are? I thought they were some kind of candy."

"But we saw him smoking . . ."

"You'll see him smoking again once we get the hot irons to work."

"Not so fast, Moira." Hardcastle's voice held the authentic snap of authority. "Not so fast. I propose that we examine all these things at leisure. Wilkinson will keep in the lock-up until we're ready for him."

"As you please." The fat woman's voice was sullen. "As you please. But I say that we are wasting valuable time."

"I think that we just might not be. That automatic pistol and those cigarettes argue a quite fantastic degree of thoroughness—too fantastically thorough even for our enemies, with all their resources. But, if you insist, we can put the matter to the vote."

"I propose," said Duval, "that the prisoner be retained in custody until such time as a thorough examination of his

effects has been made." His eyes narrowed and he stared at Wilkinson. "Talking of effects, what about that bracelet affair that he's still wearing?"

"Just one of the bangles that seem to be in the fashion in the city these days. Just part of his pay from the Committee. Let him keep it. We can take it off him when he has no further use for it," said Moira Simmons contemptuously.

"I second Duval's proposal," said one of the woman Councillors. "Let's get the voting over."

So Wilkinson was not kept in suspense for long. All the Council members, with the exception of Moira Simmons, were in favor of Duval's motion. Then, before he had time to do more than flash a reassuring smile at Vanessa, he was hustled out into the warm darkness, dragged rather than led across the mossy ground, and flung into what appeared to be a cave in the cliff face, a cave to which a stout door had been added.

The door was slammed and locked, and then a single incandescent bulb, set high in the roof, came on. Wilkinson saw a pair of eyes regarding him through a grill set high in the door and heard a voice—it was Claire's—say, "Welcome to the Hotel Venusburg. If you want anything, just shout for room service. If you make enough noise there'll be a couple of guards to shut you up in a hurry." Then, in a softer tone, "Your story's as fantastic as all hell, Wilkinson, but I more than half believe it. I'll do what I can for you, and for Vanessa."

Then she was gone, but Wilkinson could hear the occasional shuffle and cough of the guards outside the door.

XIII

THE INSPECTION of the cave did not take long. It was no more than a bubble in the rock, the result, probably, of vulcanism. At the rear end of it there was a trickle of water down the stone wall, and not far from it was evidence that past prisoners had been obliged to relieve themselves there. Luckily the spongy moss that covered the cave floor was highly absorbent.

Wilkinson drank from his cupped hands; the water was clear and cool, and its slightly peaty flavor was more palatable than otherwise. He thought of the water purifying tablets that had been among the things in his haversack, but it was too late now to worry about possible micro-organisms. Quite possibly, or probably, it didn't much matter.

Wilkinson stretched himself out on the soft moss and tried to sleep, but his mind was active although his body was tired. He reviewed the sequence of events since he had come to this strange world. First, he had found Vanessa. But that, he knew, would be of little avail if he were to die under Moira Simmons' questioning. It was then that he started to sweat. He did not know what the woman's technique would be—but he knew that it would be more effective than pretty. He had read of torture in historical romances but, like all his generation, had been sure that such things no longer happened, ever, and that Mankind was now far too civilized. That may have been true of his own Universe, but all too obviously it was not true of this one. He wondered how he would comport himself when it came to the pinch. He was not a coward—if he had been he would have been weeded out long before he was allowed to set foot aboard a spaceship—but he knew little of physical

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pain, had come to rely upon anodynes to relieve the most trifling discomfort. With the treatment that had been available aboard his ship, the low temperature burn on his buttock had never been more than a slight inconvenience.

So—he was in prison.

So—he was in prison, awaiting torture and, probably, death by torture.

He tried not to think of all the things that could be, that would be done to him, and tried, instead, to consider ways and means of escape.

But how?

Claire might help.

Claire had been more than half-convinced by his story, and she, although not a Council member, enjoyed some standing in this community of . . . outlaws? Yes. Outlaws. But Claire, like the others, recognized the need for eternal vigilance. Better that an innocent man should die than the safety of the group be jeopardized. Claire, he thought bitterly, might help to the extent of making his last moments easier, less messy. That way it would not be so hard on Vanessa.

He tried to think of Vanessa as he had first seen her, naked and golden-glowing, walking down the rough path to the dry riverbed. But the image was replaced by one of himself, bound and naked, while the obscene psychiatrist turned torturer probed every nerve end with redhot metal.

He felt the bracelet on his wrist. (It was odd that it had not been taken from him when he was stripped; in his own world such a bangle could easily have been a lethal device of deadly potentialities. But, as he had observed, these people knew little of miniaturization.) He felt the bracelet, and wondered how Time was passing in his own Universe. It was possible, just barely possible, that Henshaw might snatch him back before the unpleasanties began. He hoped that Vanessa was still wearing hers. He thought, *After all, no*

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matter what happens to me I shall have accomplished something. She will be translated to a Universe where she can live with dignity and not as a hunted animal.

Even so, there must be a way out.

There must be a way out.

Unable to lie still for a second longer he got to his feet, began to pace up and down the limited space. He heard a man's voice from the grating, "What's the matter, Chris? Can't you sleep?"

"No," he snapped.

"Can't say that I blame you. If I had a session with that fat, vicious bitch coming to me, I'd have the jitters. But I've something that might help."

A key grated in the lock, and Wilkinson tensed himself for a spring to freedom. The voice warned, "Don't try it, Chris. There's two of us out here, and we're both armed. And we shan't shoot to kill either—just to cripple."

Wilkinson relaxed. He saw the door open inwards a scant two inches, and saw something small and flat thrown onto the moss floor. Curious, he picked it up. It was a flask made of white plastic with a screw top. "Happy juice helps," remarked the voice.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Still sticking to the story about being from another Universe, Chris? Mind you, there is something odd about that equipment of yours, and we were all sure that the Committee had executed you. Oh, well, I'll play it your way. Happy juice is what its name implies, and we make it from some of the mosses by brewing and distillation. Try it."

Wilkinson tried it. It was raw, and peat flavored, and could have been a very inferior Irish whisky. Wilkinson had been fond of Irish whisky, but he did not think that he could ever become fond of the so-called happy juice. Still—it helped. He took another sip, then another. When the flask

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was half empty he felt drowsy. He lay down again, and this time went almost at once asleep.

He awoke with a start.

He shook his head dazedly, trying to collect his senses. His eyelids seemed to be gummed together, and when at last he got his eyes open they were dazzled by the glare that struck through the grilled window in the door. But it was not the golden daylight; it was harsh, blue-white radiance that seemed to be striking down from above. And there was the noise of engines, and the rattle of automatic weapons, and a heavy explosion followed by shouts and screams.

Wilkinson staggered to his feet, and lurched to the door. The grill was at eye level and he could see through it. There was smoke, and there were flames, and there were naked figures in black silhouette against the conflagration looking like demons in an inferno of the ancient theologians. From above a vaned aircraft descended, fire spitting from the ports along its fuselage, fire that was answered by the machine pistols of the defenders. Abruptly the thing staggered in flight and then fell with a loud crash, and dissolved in an eye-searing burst of blue flame. But another helicopter drifted, with a throbbing roar, into view, and another, and another, and the probing bullets from the heavy machine guns and the flickering laser beams drove the groundlings to cover.

Somebody moved into his field of vision, obscuring it. Somebody was speaking through the grill, voice raised in competition with the general uproar. "Chris!"

"Yes. I'm here. What is it?"

"It's you they're after. We have to get you out of here."

"Wouldn't it be simpler just to shoot me, Claire?"

"Don't be so bloody silly. If *they* want you alive, then obviously you'll be of some use to us the same way. But the camp has had it. They must have known of its existence and location all along. We're abandoning, and making our

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way in small groups to our alternate hideaway. And you're coming with us."

He said bitterly, "After the way I've been treated here, I might be better off with *them*."

"Don't be a stupid fool. We can't hold them off much longer. The powerhouse has had it and we can't use our laser." The key grated in the lock. "Come on out."

Wilkinson stepped through the open door. Vanessa met him. She thrust into his hands a small bundle—his boots, his belt with the holstered pistol, the sheathed knife—and cried, "Hurry, Chris! Hurry!" And Claire caught his arm in a hard, painful grip and shouted, "Come on, you fool!"

Then, from one of the hovering aircraft, a beam of intense light stabbed out, bathing the little group—Vanessa, Claire, Malcolm and Wilkinson—in its hard radiance. From a sound projector boomed a giant's voice, "Stay where you are, Wilkinson! We have come to rescue you!"

"Like hell they have!" snarled the tall blonde.

She turned to face the aircraft, and her right hand, holding a heavy machine pistol, lifted. The weapon chattered violently and, with a crash of breaking glass, the light went out. In spite of the glare from the burning buildings and the searchlights of the other helicopters the darkness seemed intense. Vanessa caught Wilkinson's free hand, tugging at it violently. Malcolm gave him a shove from behind that sent him staggering forward. And then, pulled by the girl and pushed by the surly giant, he was stumbling over the soft moss, crying out in pain as he stubbed an unprotected toe on a projecting rock, but moving, slowly at first, then faster, in spite of himself caught up in the feeling of panicked flight, joining the exodus from the doomed encampment.

Behind him there was still the staccato rattle of automatic

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fire, and a tinny crash that told of another helicopter shot down, and a series of heavy explosions.

Ahead of him there was the pale form of Vanessa flitting through the opaque darkness, the will-o'-the-wisp that he had followed across vast gulfs of Space and Time—that he was, he realized, well content to follow still.

XIV

DAWN CAME slowly—a wan, gray luminescence creeping in from the east, gradually assuming a pale golden tinge. Around the little party slowly swirled the eddying mists, the touch of the air like damp, warm fingers on their naked skins. Nothing was visible beyond the little circle in which they trudged—spongy moss, an occasional upthrusting boulder, the looming shape of a tree-fern.

Claire halted them by the bank of a little, noisy rivulet.

She said, "I think we've come far enough for the time being. We'll rest and have a meal of sorts."

Wilkinson was glad to sit down. He had found it hard to maintain the same pace as the others and besides, they had all seemed to be familiar with the way, and he had been continually blundering into rocks and trees and bushes. Had they not allowed him a brief pause to put on his boots he would, by this time, have been crippled; as it was, his feet were bruised and aching.

He sprawled on the soft moss and looked at his companions. He realized that he must cut as fantastic a figure as they did. The four of them looked like a group of people out of the earliest dawn of Mankind—the nudity, the rough sandals on the feet of three of them, the tangled hair, the heavy, villainous stubble on Malcolm's craggy face. Wilkinson ran his fingers over his own smooth jawline; at least, thanks to the inhibitory technique practised in his own Universe, it would be at least six months before he would need depilation. Even so . . . He wondered what his ship-mates would think if they could see him now.

Yes, a group of primitive men and women—but hung around with modern equipment; the tough plastic belts,

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the machine pistols, and even the arbalests. He wondered briefly why his companions had bothered to bring the hand-powered weapons along, then felt a slight glow of pride as he worked out for himself their advantages. First of all, they were relatively silent. Secondly and most importantly, should they be used either in defence or for the killing of small game the bolts were recoverable. And pistol ammunition, most unfortunately, did not grow on trees. For his own weapon, for example, he possessed only what was in the magazine, a mere ten rounds.

Having refreshed herself from the stream, Claire opened the bag which she carried slung at her waist. From it she brought four flat cakes, passed one to each of the others, and kept one for herself. Wilkinson examined his curiously. He asked, "What is it?"

"Food," mumbled the tall blonde through a mouthful. "Go ahead. It won't kill you."

"It's a change to find something on this crazy world that's non-lethal," replied Wilkinson. He saw that Vanessa was looking at him with a hurt expression. "Present company excepted, of course."

Claire swallowed noisily. She said, "Either your story is true, Chris Wilkinson, or you're putting on a damn good act. But if you must know, these cakes are made from flour that we get by grinding down the seeds of the stinkweed blossoms. Baking gets rid of most of the smell, but not all. The flavor leaves much to be desired, but there's enough concentrated nourishment in one of these cakes for two days' tough marching. We always keep supplies on hand for emergencies such as this."

Wilkinson nibbled cautiously. The taste was, as he had been warned, vile, but there was plenty of clear, cool water in the stream to wash it away.

When the simple meal was finished he asked, "What now?"

"We press on to the alternative camp, hoping that it hasn't

been wiped out before we get there. There's a cache of weapons and ammunition, and a small hydro-electric power station . . ." Her face hardened. "But whoever betrayed the location of our old headquarters could have sold us out altogether. Somebody must have told the Committee about you, and where to find you. It was obvious during the raid that *they* were being careful with their machine guns and laser beams, and two or three good bombs could have wiped out everybody, including you, Chris."

"One good bomb," he said. "Just one good fission or fusion bomb."

"What are they?" she asked.

"Just a piece of military unpleasantry that we've grown out of—although there are a few stockpiled against emergencies. Didn't you have atomic weapons in *your* history?"

"No," she told him. "Some time, when we are less pressed, you must tell me about them."

"If *they* have heard about him," said Vanessa, her face frightened, "and if they know that he comes from another Universe, then they will want him alive. There is so much that he could tell them. Too much. The weapons that he has just mentioned. With such power at their disposal they could bring the rest of the Solar System to heel with ease."

"There is so much that he can tell *us*," said Claire.

The mists were thinning now; the sun, although it was merely a vague blur, a roughly circular area in the golden overcast, was well up in the sky. Wilkinson saw that they were on a hillside, although vision merely confirmed what his own aching leg muscles had told him long ago. They were on a hillside, and the scenery was of the kind that he had already begun to regard as familiar—the luxuriant moss, the gray-white boulders thrusting through it like dead bones, the scattered copses of tall, fern-like trees. Through the hot air drifted the gaudy dragonflies, living jewels of fantastic and beautiful intricacy. On the other side of the

stream an animal pushed its way through the mosses, lowering its head to the water to drink. Wilkinson stared at it. It was the size of a pony, and roughly resembled one, but it was heavily scaled.

Malcolm unfolded the cocking lever of his arbalest and his muscles stood out as he began to pull back the bowstring. "No," Claire told him. "We have enough food to last us to the new camp and, in any case, we daren't make a fire." She explained to Wilkinson, "Most of the vegetation will burn, but none of it burns without making smoke. And smoke is one of the things that the Committee's air patrols will be looking for."

"What is that thing?"

"Aphrohippus Farmeria," she said. "In other words, Venus Horse. Named after Captain Farmer, who was in command of the ship that made the first landing."

"We'd better be on our way," said Malcolm.

"Yes. Now, all of you, keep your eyes skinned and your ears flapping." She grinned. "Not that I need tell you, Vanessa and Malcolm, but the way that our friend was blundering around in the dark has quite convinced me that he is, as he claims, a stranger here. Anyhow, the air patrols will be out, so be ready to duck for cover at the first sign of aircraft." She rose to her feet, looking, with her hard, reckless face and the weapons that she carried, like a modern Diana. (But Vanessa, thought Wilkinson, in spite of her pistol and bow, looks like a Venus—not the suety Venus de Milo, but like the Rokeby Venus of Velasquez . . .) "Come on," ordered Claire. "The sooner we get to the new camp, the better."

She set off up the hillside at a swinging pace and the others followed her—first Wilkinson and Vanessa, walking side by side, and then, bringing up the rear, Malcolm.

Through the long, hot morning they pressed on. Wilkin-

son was tired and thirsty and beginning to suffer from heat exhaustion, but he drove himself to keep up with his companions, determined not to delay them. At first he was able to take an interest in the creatures that crossed their path, in the copses of flamboyant trees they skirted, but soon all his attention was given to the effort of putting one foot in front of the other. He stood stupidly when Malcolm barked a sharp command, watched dimly as the giant loosed a cross-bow bolt at something slithering through the tall mosses, something that screamed and reared, revealing a head that was all jaws and teeth and three great, bulbous eyes, from the center one of which protruded the vaned tail of the missile. He realized that Claire was saying in a cool voice, "Aphroserpens Horrendus. Carnivorous." He sat down to rest while Malcolm, having waited for the reptile's dying struggles to subside, drew his knife and cautiously extracted the bolt from the thing's eye. He was grateful for Vanessa's assistance when he got to his feet again.

Shortly after noon they came to another stream and, walking along its bank, rested hard by the concealment of a clump of the tree-ferns. Here they drank, although they did not need to eat again, and Wilkinson removed his boots and bathed his abused feet in the cool water. Claire, watching him amusedly, said, "You're in shocking condition, young man."

He replied, "I'm an astronaut."

She said, "If you spend most of your life in Free Fall you would be flabby, I suppose. But I have to admit that you're not as flabby as the average spaceman."

"Our ships maintain a constant acceleration," he told her.

"Then you must have fantastically efficient fuels."

"We grew out of rockets years ago. We have the Inertial Drive."

She said, "I don't know what that is, but it's obvious that it must never be allowed to fall into *their* hands." She

looked at Malcolm. "If things go wrong, if *they* catch us, you know what to do."

"Claire!" Vanessa's voice was all entreaty. "You couldn't. You wouldn't."

"I could, and I would, my dear. You know as well as I do that *they* would make him talk, and that by the time *they* had finished with him he'd welcome death. They'll drain him, suck him dry, and then toss him onto the dung-hill. Would you want that?"

"No, but . . ."

"Would *you* want it, Christopher?"

He replied, "I find it hard to muster any enthusiasm on the subject of my impending demise, but if it has to come it might as well be painless."

"It won't be if *they* get their paws on you."

He said, "I've only your word for it. And you must admit that if it hadn't been for *them*, your own Moira Simmons would, by this time, have been using her own technique for extracting information."

She told him, "I only hope, for your sake, that you never find out what *they* can and will do." Then, roughly, "Put your boots on and start marching."

XV

THROUGH THE LONG, hot afternoon they trudged, uphill all the way.

Wilkinson derived a certain wry pleasure from the fact that the others were toiling now, that Claire, an inflamed area of skin showing under the heel strap of her left sandal, was beginning to limp. All of them were pleased rather than frightened when the advent of a high-flying rocket plane obliged them to take cover in a clump of giant ferns. But the rest was only a brief one, and on they trudged.

Ahead of them was the mountain range, its peaks shimmering in the heat, some of them gleamingly snow-clad. Underfoot the moss grew only in sparse patches, and there were long stretches of a lichenous growth that was dry and brittle and most unpleasant to walk upon, and on either hand the gray, dessicated bones of the planet poked through the thin skin of unfertile soil. The great dragonflies were gone, and in their stead buzzed and harassed swarms of midgelike flying things that clouded the vision, that flew into open, gasping mouths, that drowned themselves in the streams of perspiration pouring down naked skins.

On they trudged, and on, seemingly oblivious to all but their discomforts, but suddenly Claire halted.

"There!" she muttered, pointing. "The Steeple Rock, in line with Donegan's Peak . . ."

"Not far . . ." whispered Malcolm.

"Not far . . ." echoed Vanessa, and then, with a note of hope in her voice, "I hope that Moira Simmons didn't make it."

"Vanessa!" Malcolm's utterance was both reprimand and warning.

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"Let her say it," whispered Claire. "She's only giving words to what we all think. Hardcastle may be brutal, when he has to be, but he's just. But Moira . . ."

"There is a pass there?" asked Wilkinson. He could see the aptly named Steeple Rock, and, above and beyond it, the almost unnaturally sharp cone that must be Donegan's Peak.

"If you can call it a pass. It's no more than a steep track up the cliff face and through a fissure. It's not obvious until you're right on top of it—and that's its main beauty." She paused for breath, and then set off again, a hint of the old liveness returning to her stride.

On they trudged, and on.

Ahead of them now the Steeple Rock loomed tall, obscuring the distant Donegan's Peak. To the right of it was a narrow fissure in the sheer cliff face, the merest crack. Wilkinson kept his gaze fixed upon it. It was something to steer for, something to attract and to hold his attention, something to take his mind from the misery of burning feet and aching muscles. Almost subconsciously he put out his hand to support Vanessa as she stumbled, felt the sweet pressure as she caught his hand between her upper arm and her side. The little act of aid, lovingly accepted, suddenly made everything worthwhile. He knew, in a moment of absolute certainty, that things were going to come right.

On they trudged, and on, and Steeple Rock was a great pillar of stone, rearing almost to the zenith, dwarfing the smaller boulders, although they were at least as big as houses. But it was from the smaller boulders that death and danger came.

Behind Wilkinson, Malcolm cried out sharply.

Wilkinson turned, and saw that the giant had fallen, was sprawled supine. There was a black hole in his chest, still smoking slightly, a cauterized wound that could not bleed. There was a horrid smell of charred meat in the still air.

"Down!" Claire was shouting. "Down!"—but still Wilkinson stood there, staring stupidly at the dead man, until a tug on his ankle brought him tumbling to the scant cover of the piled and scattered, water-rounded stones. One of the smooth rocks exploded with a sharp crack and a razor-edged fragment nicked Wilkinson's shoulder. Another one burst, and in the microsecond before it did so Wilkinson saw the almost invisible flicker of a laser beam.

"They've an aircraft hidden among the boulders," gasped Claire. "It must be a 'copter. They could never land a rocket here."

Wilkinson tried to make a comfortable bed for himself among the rocks, but it was impossible. He was acutely conscious of his protruding buttocks. He managed somehow to get his pistol out of its holster, cocked it and wished that he could see a target.

"Whoever sold us out," muttered the tall blonde viciously, "made a thorough job of it . . ."

Again the barely audible hiss and crackle, again the explosion of a rock.

"Why don't they take off and get above us?" asked Wilkinson. "We shouldn't stand a chance then."

"Because," Claire told him tiredly, "we managed, even with our limited resources, to develop very effective incendiary and armor-piercing ammunition for our machine pistols. At least two of their damned flying windmills were shot down when they raided headquarters." She added, "And if they did get on top of us to fry us with their beams, you'd fry too. And they don't want to fry you. Yet."

"Vanessa," whispered Wilkinson, "try to wriggle over until you have me between you and the big, almost spherical rock . . ."

"Very noble, Chris," sneered Claire, "but I don't suppose that you've noticed that there are two helicopters—one

behind the sphere and the block, and the other behind the twin cones."

"Even so, if we stay in a huddle and if they're scared of hitting me . . ."

"Even so," she returned, "I like to keep my gun hand free. I want to be able to give an injection, a lead injection, at a second's notice."

Wilkinson heard the stones rattle as she squirmed over them. He managed, without unduly exposing himself, to turn to watch her, and saw that she, like himself, had drawn her pistol. She called, "Chris, when I give the word you distract their attention by firing at the gap between the sphere and the block, and you, Vanessa, loose off a few rounds in the general direction of the twin cones." She added, "There's always the chance that a ricochet may do some damage."

"And the certainty," said Wilkinson, "that we shall be wasting ammunition."

"Not wasting it," she told him grimly.

Wilkinson rolled over on to his side. He found that he could just bring his weapon to bear on the target indicated, but realized that his angle of fire must, inevitably, be too high even to inconvenience those in the hidden flying machine. But he was a stranger in this world, just as he was a stranger to warfare. And Claire was not. He hoped that she knew what she was doing.

"Now!" she called.

Wilkinson squeezed his trigger, heard the sharp report, felt the gun buck in his hand, lifting it. He brought the pistol to bear and fired again, and again. Then he heard the rapid rattle of Claire's gas-operated automatic, and out of the corner of his eye saw that she had risen to her knees, and was shooting carefully and with deliberation. Suddenly the fissure between sphere and block glared blindingly blue and Claire dropped to her face. From the other helicopter, the

one concealed behind the twin cones, lashed a beam that splintered the topmost stones of the pile behind which she had fallen.

"Claire!" Vanessa was calling.

"I'm all right. Now, listen, you two. The laser projector that was giving us the most trouble is destroyed. We have cover from the other one as long as we keep our backsides down. Just follow me."

Rapidly, she crawled over the rounded stones. Almost as speedily Vanessa followed. Slowly and painfully, bruising knees and elbows, Wilkinson brought up the rear. He could see that just short of the entrance to the pass there was a patch of smooth ground, and wondered how they would get across it. They would have to get to their feet and run, he thought, and his muscles began to tense in anticipation of the effort.

Claire had halted in the last of the cover, and Vanessa had squirmed up beside her. Recklessly now, Wilkinson scrambled to join them. He heard the throbbing roar of engines as both helicopters readied themselves for the take-off, and wished, too late, that he had thought to pick up the dead man's pistol with its full magazine of specialized ammunition. There were seven rounds left in his own weapon, but he doubted their effectiveness against even a lightly armored machine.

"When I say 'run', *run!*" called Claire.

She jumped to her feet, with the girl beside her, and Wilkinson, although he was not yet clear of the piled and scattered stones, followed suit. "Run!" she shouted.

And then there was a burst of fire from the boulders heaped around the base of Steeple Rock, and she crumpled, blood gushing from her lifeless body. Vanessa was standing over her, her own machine pistol hammering viciously at the men who were leaping from cover to cover, closing in,

until Wilkinson caught her shoulder and pushed her roughly, yelling, "Make for the path, and get the hell out of here!"

"But . . ."

"Do as I say! It's me they want, and they want me alive. I'll be able to hold them off until you're clear!"

"Chris! I must stay with you."

"You will not." He snapped off a couple of rounds at two of the figures, naked except for metallic kilts, that were closing in on them, and felt a savage glee as he saw them fall. "Run, girl! *And keep that anklet on, whatever happens!* We'll be together soon, I promise!" And he thought, surely it will not be long now before Henshaw drags us back.

Firing as though he were back on the pistol range that he had found the most interesting part of his Naval Reserve Officer's training, regarding the Committee's troopers as mere targets, he got three more with the five rounds remaining in his magazine, then stooped to scoop up Claire's pistol. As he did so, he saw that Vanessa had almost made the cover afforded by the fissure in the cliff face. The dead woman's weapon was unfamiliar in his hand, and his first few shots were wild. But, he thought, I shall get the hang of it in a couple of seconds. I may even be able to shoot my way to the crack in the cliff—and there one man could hold off an army.

He loosed off another burst, and felt a grim satisfaction as he saw it take effect.

And then, from above, dropped a net of fine steel mesh, and the hovering helicopter descended gently, landing a foot from his ensnared and ineffectually struggling body. He managed to shoot off what was left in the magazine, but every bullet went wild.

XVI

THEY CLOSED in on him, the burly men with the sullen faces. With rough fingers they pulled the net from him, not caring how much they hurt him in the process. They kicked the empty pistol from his hand and flung him onto his face, and one of them pulled his arms behind his back and snapped a pair of handcuffs about his wrists, remarking as he did so, "That's a pretty bracelet he's got on. I may as well have something for my trouble."

Ordered one of the others—his kilt was of a golden mesh, not silver, and he wore a golden circlet on each of his upper arms—"Leave it there, Kurt. Our orders are to bring him in as is, *in every detail*."

"All right. You're the boss. But can't we rough him up a little?"

"No," was the answer, but it was delivered in regretful tones.

They jerked Wilkinson to his feet, pushing him towards the door of the helicopter's cabin. He resisted, more on principle than in the hope of accomplishing anything useful. He had time to see that the other aircraft had landed—there was a hole in the sleek metal skin of its fuselage, looking as though it had been made by a huge blow-torch wielded by a clumsy giant—and that the bodies of the dead, Malcolm and Claire among them, were being loaded into it. He hung back as long as possible, bracing his feet against the stones, until he was sure that they had not got Vanessa. Then he allowed himself to be prodded up the short flight of steps that were extruded from the doorway, and fell onto the seat towards which he was shoved. Facing him sat two of the police, each with a drawn pistol in his

hand. They glared at him with hostility and handled their weapons suggestively. Their officer, who was last into the aircraft, frowned heavily at them and said, "I don't want any trouble. He's to be delivered intact."

"But he and those two bitches did for half a dozen good men, besides shooting up the projector in the other ship. In any case, boss, what's the damn rush? What about our own wounded? Don't they deserve any consideration?"

The officer was beginning to get annoyed. "Pipe down, damn you. Mr. Haldane's 'copter is taking the casualties. All we have to do is to get back to Venusburg in a hurry."

"Then why couldn't they have put a rocket plane on the job instead of this whirly-bird?"

"Because there's no damn place for one to land," called a fresh voice from the forward end of the cabin. Then, "Keep the passengers quiet, will you, Bill? I can't hear myself think for all the racket going on back there."

There was the roar of motors and Wilkinson could feel the cabin deck vibrating under his feet. He turned his head so that he could look through the nearest port, but he could see nothing but featureless sky. And then the distant mountain range drifted into view, and he realized that the flying machine had lifted and was turning in the air. He said to the officer, trying to keep his voice casual, "How long will the trip take?"

"Shut up, you!" growled one of the guards, and slapped him across the mouth with his open hand.

"Let him speak," ordered the man whom Wilkinson had addressed. He got to his feet, staggering slightly as the helicopter swayed in flight, motioned to one of his men to vacate his seat. He sat down alongside the remaining guard, facing Wilkinson. He stared at the prisoner with interest. He asked, at last, "What's so darn important about you, fellow? This operation has cost three 'copters, and about twenty casualties. If it had been necessary to wipe out that camp

of yours—although I can't see why—it could have been accomplished without the loss of a single man or machine . . .”

Wilkinson stared back at his interrogator. The man was cast in the same mould as his underlings, but there was more than brutality evident in the heavy features. There was intelligence, there was imagination. He replied cagily, “I don't know. We were just minding our own business, and you people descended upon us with horse, foot and artillery.”

“Don't be funny. Our orders were to get you, and to get you alive. And you've been killed once, and that makes it odder still. The first time it was considered rather too dangerous to have a professional spaceman among the rebels.” The officer's brows knitted in puzzlement. “Yes, you were killed all right. You were taken apart, literally, and your body thrown into the incinerator.” He paused. “Could you be twins? Half a pair of twins, that is.”

“No,” Wilkinson told him. “I am not half a pair of twins.”

“But you are Christopher Wilkinson?”

“Yes.”

The officer seemed to be in a conversational mood. “You know, there was quite a commotion in our headquarters when word came through from your camp that you'd turned up again.”

“So Claire was right. There was a traitor.”

“Oh, no. You are the traitor. But no matter.” He paused. “You know, I'm beginning to work things out for myself . . .” He paused again, considering deeply. Abruptly he came to a decision. “Kelly!” he snapped to the guard sitting beside him, “take the prisoner into the after cabin. I intend to conduct a preliminary interrogation during the flight.”

“Rubber hose or brass knucks?” grinned the man.

“Neither. The prisoner has to be delivered in good condition.”

“Mind you don't kill him with kindness, Cap.”

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Two men pulled Wilkinson to his feet, and conducted him to a door at the rear of the main cabin. He took the opportunity to look through the ports, but he could see little of any interest. Outside and below were low hills, and the endless moss-covered plains, and the occasional clumps of trees and tree-like vegetation. Overhead was the saffron sky.

And then he was in the smaller compartment, a mere cubby hole. He was pushed down onto a padded settee at one side of it, and the police officer seated himself on the opposite bench. The men retired, leering suggestively, shutting the door after them.

"Drink?" asked the officer.

"I could do with one. But I'm handcuffed, and my hands are behind my back."

"I know. I could ask you for your word that you'll not try anything, and then unlock the cuffs, but I'm not altogether a fool. So you'll just have to be bottle fed." The officer stooped cautiously to open a locker under his settee. "And keep your feet to yourself, Wilkinson. If you try anything, my men may forget the orders about delivering you intact. After all, you could have been injured resisting arrest."

"I'll not try anything," promised Wilkinson.

The officer produced a plastic flask, similar to the one that had been given Wilkinson in the camp's cell. He unscrewed the stopper, and held the bottle to the prisoner's lips. Wilkinson sipped with appreciation. It was like the other liquor that he had sampled, but smoother. Much smoother. He felt a twinge of resentment when the other withdrew the flask.

The officer took a drink himself, then sat there looking at Wilkinson. "As I said," he remarked at last, "I'm beginning to work things out for myself. You're important. It didn't matter who got killed—on your side or ours—but *you* had to be brought in alive. And if you had got yourself bumped

off, it would have been just too bad for whoever was responsible. And at the finish, that would have been me." He paused. "If we hadn't had to be so damned careful with you, that little bitch with you would never have gotten away. And we could have had some fun with her.

"Anyhow, this is the way of it. You're dead. I know that. But you aren't dead. But how? How? If there's some means by which a dead man can be—reassembled, I want to be in on it. As you damn well know, police work has its occupational hazards, and those of us on our side of the fence are just as liable to wind up defunct as you on yours. And it would be sort of nice to know that if one got bumped off in the line of duty it needn't be—permanent."

"Yes," agreed Wilkinson. "It would be."

"So . . ."

"So?"

"Listen, Wilkinson, I can make things easier for you."

Like hell you can, thought Wilkinson.

"You can give me a clue, something to work on . . ."

Get yourself a degree in Advanced Physics first, and I just might, thought Wilkinson. And even then the clue would be no use to you, for what *you* want.

"I could make you talk, you know, even with the limited equipment I have in this 'copter."

"I've no doubt that you could. But one of your men, or more than one, could spill the beans to your top brass—and then where would you be?"

The officer grinned ruefully. "You've got something there. I've seen too many people taken apart in a friendly manner to want to join their company. Another drink?"

"Thank you."

Again Wilkinson sipped from the proffered flask. He thought, I hope this stuff doesn't loosen my tongue too much. But even if I do blurt out the truth it will never be believed.

He said, "We could swap information."

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"What do you mean?" was the suspicious demand.

"I'll be frank with you. The—er—process has an amnesiac effect. As you well know, I'm alive. But I've forgotten practically everything about . . . everything. I know that we're on Venus, and I know that there's one bunch of people living the life of hunted outlaws, and another bunch of people doing the hunting—and that's all."

"You mean that you've never heard of the Committee?"

"I've heard of it. I must have known what it was, and what its aims are, but I don't know now."

"The Committee rules Venus," said the police officer. "The Committee realizes that the only stable society is one in which discipline is strictly enforced. The Committee will continue to maintain a civilized culture on this world long after the decadent democracies of Earth and Mars and the Jovian Satellites have collapsed into barbarism."

"And the outlaws?"

"Fools and incompetents who cannot and will not accept discipline." He took a swig from the flask. "Now it's your turn."

"I haven't finished yet. What about your technology?"

"What do you mean?"

"Astronautics, for example. As you know, I'm a spaceman. Or I used to be a spaceman. I'd like to brush up in my own field."

"I'm not a spaceman. I don't know anything about rocketry. All I know is that exhaust gases get blown out in one direction and the ship goes in the other."

"What are your industries?"

"I am a policeman, damn you. All that I know about industries is that every so often we get called in to put down a riot among the workers. But you're just wasting my time and yours. The Big Boys are going to make you talk, and you'll get very dead in the process, and then if this revivification process of yours works a second time you'll start again with a clean slate. What is the process?"

"It's rather complicated," admitted Wilkinson, suggestively licking his lips.

"All right. You can have some more." He applied the flask to Wilkinson's mouth. "How complicated?"

"Extremely so. You want a room full of apparatus for a start . . ."

"What apparatus?"

"As far as I can remember it, it's a complicated set-up of gyroscopes. They precess . . ."

The officer's hand was hard and heavy as it slashed across Wilkinson's cheek. "Don't fairy tale me, you rat! Gyroscopes to reassemble and revive a dead man! I suppose that you're not flesh and blood at all, but just a complicated robot, all circuits and gears!" His stiff finger prodded painfully into the prisoner's midriff. "That didn't feel like metal to me. Or this!"

"Don't forget," gasped Wilkinson, "that I'm supposed to be delivered intact!"

"I'm not forgetting—but I can work on the bruises you already had when we picked you up. I'll teach you to drink my liquor and then try to make a fool of me!" He grinned sadistically. "And don't forget, you scum, that what I'm doing is nothing compared to what *they* will do."

"And don't forget," lied Wilkinson desperately, "that I'm no longer a normal man. Until I've built up my strength again I'm weak. Too much pain, and you'll have a corpse on your hands. And what then?"

Surprisingly, the police officer grinned as he desisted. "All right, you bastard. You win, for the time being. I don't know if you're speaking the truth or not, but I'm taking no risks. But if your story is true, then you'll be sorry you told me. *They* can be very, very careful, when they want to be." He offered the flask again. "Have another drink?" Then, in a wheedling voice, "Are you sure you won't tell me?"

"I have told you," replied Wilkinson.

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A voice, the pilot's, came from a speaker set in the deck-head. "Prepare for landing. Prepare for landing."

"Thanks for the warning, Mick," muttered the policeman. He pulled a little box out from a pouch at his belt, and extracted two tablets. One he swallowed himself, the other he popped into Wilkinson's mouth with one hand, holding his nose with the other. The prisoner gulped involuntarily and the pill went down. "So you'll be handed over in good condition, *and* sober," explained the officer. "So we're both of us sober."

There was a slight shock as the landing gear kissed the ground.

XVII

THE DOOR of the after cabin was flung open and another man—heavy-set, brutal, with more gold about his person than Wilkinson's captor—stood there, glowering. "What's going on here, Captain?"

"Nothing, Major. Nothing at all. I thought it advisable to keep him away from the men. There were casualties."

"So I've heard." The thick lips curled contemptuously. "Wasn't it you who said that the rebels would run like rabbits?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Go ahead. Make your excuses."

"Nobody told us about their new ammunition."

"You know now. It will be a lesson to you not to take things too much for granted." Then, to Wilkinson, "All right, you. Outside."

Wilkinson got to his feet a little unsteadily. He walked through the door, the Major ahead of him, the Captain bringing up the rear. When he was descending the steps he tripped and fell heavily and painfully. The men just stood there looking at him. Finally, in spite of the handicap of his manacled hands, he managed to struggle to his feet.

Some sort of discussion as to his disposition was in progress so he was able to look around him. The aircraft had landed in what appeared to be a military or semi-military airport. As well as the machine in which he had come, other helicopters stood around on the concrete, some as large as the transport craft, some smaller. There was an air of briskness, in spite of the enervating heat, of bustle—but it was not a cheerful briskness. Naked men were working around the aircraft, refueling, engaged in maintenance. Naked men

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and women were pushing trolleys loaded with supplies and equipment. Only the swaggering guards were clothed, and they were dressed only in the short metallic kilts.

Beyond the low buildings that surrounded the airfield Wilkinson could see the tall structures of the city, towering rectangular blocks and cylinders, all of a dull uniform black, all without any redeeming grace of line. From masts on the taller structures floated flags, but flags without the gaiety that is usually associated with displays of bunting. The lazily stirring standards were as lusterless as soot, and each carried, in dull red upon the black ground, the letters 'CV'.

"That will do, Captain," snapped the Major. "You can make your report and your excuses to GHQ. I will take charge of the prisoner."

A ground car approached the little group—a low, four-wheeled vehicle, black-painted, with a glassed-in driver's cab and a paneled compartment at the rear. It turned, then backed towards them. The doors of the enclosed section opened and two men jumped out, grabbed Wilkinson and literally threw him into the interior. In spite of the rough treatment he noticed that their kilts were made of the golden metal-mesh. He lay there on the hard floor watching dazedly as they, accompanied by the Major, clambered in. The doors slammed shut. His new captors disposed themselves on benches. The engine started and the truck bumped into motion.

The Major—a looming, menacing form in the gloom—spoke abruptly. "You know, Wilkinson, I can make things easier for you."

Wilkinson, squirming uncomfortably, managed to get the weight off his manacled arms. He made no answer. After his experience in the helicopter he knew what to expect.

"The three of us here," went on the Major, "would like to know just how a dead man can come back." He chuckled. "It could be a handy thing to know."

"This," muttered Wilkinson tiredly, "is where I came in."

"So you told Captain Magruder, did you?" The Major chuckled again. "That's no worry. We can easily have him disposed of before he's in a position to make use of his knowledge."

"It's a long story," said Wilkinson.

"And we have a long ride ahead of us. I've already told the driver what route he is to take to avoid traffic jams." He chuckled again.

"You wouldn't believe it," said Wilkinson tiredly.

"Try me and see. I'm willing to believe *anything* as long as it's to my advantage." He went on, more to himself than to his companions, "That's why they let Dr. Voronsky get away, or course, in spite of his treasonable utterances. They thought that he'd work better away from our discipline—but they must have been surprised when he got results so fast. What was it that he was always saying? Give me a single cell, and I shall re-create the organism from which it was taken. . . I suppose that now we shall have to pull the good doctor in from the camp in which he's taken refuge, but I doubt if anybody below the rank of General will have a chance to talk to him. So you'll have to do."

"I don't know any Dr. Voronsky," stated Wilkinson.

"A distressing case of amnesia, eh? Perhaps a minor operation might cure it. Carl, have you your knife handy? The one you used on that fat blonde saboteur when she wouldn't talk. But you'll have to be subtle this time, Carl. This will be just a little *aide memoire*, not a cure for overweight. . . ."

"I tell you, I don't know any Dr. Voronsky."

"Switch the light on, will you, Hugo. . . . Ah, that's better. Now let us consider which of these little cuts and scratches can be enlarged. Don't be so impatient, Carl. We must show *finesse*."

"The fat blonde was far more fun," grumbled the thin, dark officer with the face of an evil monkey.

"Yes, Carl. But that was in the line of duty. This is—how shall I put it? This is extra-curricular. We are working for ourselves, and not for our lords and masters of the Committee."

"And it gives me pleasure," said Wilkinson bitterly, wincing under the Major's probing fingers, "to imagine what the Committee will do to you."

"But we have friends," said his tormentor, "who are high in the hierarchy of the interrogation chamber. All right—you will sing. But never a note that would throw any doubt upon the integrity of myself and my two colleagues will be heard by Committee ears. But I'll be generous. I'll give you another chance. How did you return from the dead?"

"I didn't."

"So we are dealing with a ghost—a mere, insubstantial phantom. Or are you composed of ectoplasm? Tell me, can ectoplasm feel? Can it bleed?" Then, aside, "This, Carl, promises to be an interesting experiment. . . ."

Wilkinson noticed that the van was stopped. It must have been caught in one of the traffic jams that the Major had spoken of. He filled his lungs preparatory to yelling for help, and then, as he realized the hopelessness of his situation, let them deflate. These were no gangsters into whose hands he had fallen; these were police officers. Besides, the walls of the truck were almost certainly soundproofed.

"This is fortunate," remarked the Major. "You will need a steady hand, Carl. And you, Hugo, hold his feet, will you? I don't know where he got those fancy boots, but they could deliver a nasty kick."

The grossly obese Hugo—but there must have been more muscle than fat—flung himself on Wilkinson's lower legs. Carl, a viciously happy smile distorting his simian face, juggled his gleaming knife. And then the van rocked as

something rammed it broadside—rocked and almost turned over. Carl staggered and fell—and screamed. From under his supine, twitching body spread a crimson, glistening flood. He had used his knife for the last time. Hugo looked stupidly towards his superior who, his face scarlet with rage, was yelling, "I'll have that blasted driver flayed alive!"

The rear of the van flared into sudden incandescence and fell away with a crash, the guttering edges of the panels dulling to red heat. There was a wave of scorching air, tainted with the acridity of burning paint and metal. Framed in the opening were men, armed men, clad in what Wilkinson had come to recognize as police uniforms. There was a shocking hammering of automatic weapons against a background of shouting and screaming—and then the bodies of Hugo and the Major were lifted from Wilkinson, flung contemptuously aside, and Wilkinson was dragged into the open. He had a fleeting glimpse of towering black buildings against a yellow sky, of rank after rank of stalled road traffic, and then he was thrown into another vehicle, another of the sinister black vans, that at once, with its siren shrilling, forced its way into a side street and rocked along at increasing speed.

XVIII

WILKINSON STARED up helplessly at his new captors. They stared back at him. He thought, *these look more . . . human than the others.* . . . He asked, his voice dull, "Who are you?"

"You'll find out soon enough, Wilkinson," replied their leader, a tall, slender man who, to judge by the weight of gold ornamentation, must be at least a full Colonel. He looked worried. "You *are* Wilkinson, aren't you?"

"Yes. But *you* should know."

"I agree. We've paid enough for information over the last few decades, but not all of it was accurate. However, this time it was worth taking a gamble. Whether it comes off or not it'll mean the breaking off of diplomatic relations and the shutting down of the Embassy."

"And about time!" declared another of the men. "Boy, am I sick and tired of this stinking—and I *mean* stinking, in every conceivable way—hothouse of a planet!"

A voice came from a speaker set in the roof of the van. "All clear, sir. Nary a witness."

"O.K., Joe. Change over." He returned his attention to Wilkinson. "It may comfort you to know, young man, that at the touch of a switch this vehicle lost its distressing similitude to a paddy wagon and is now revealed in its true colors—to wit, maroon, and embossed on each of its sides an arrowed golden circle. And now we'd better change ourselves."

The men stripped off their kilts, reversed them, and put them back on. They were maroon now, and emblazoned in gold with the symbol of the planet Mars. The pseudo-Colonel unclipped the badges of rank from his upper arms, throwing them contemptuously into a corner. One of

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the others produced a key and unlocked Wilkinson's cuffs. Before he had time gratefully to stretch his released arms, a maroon kilt was buckled about his waist.

Wilkinson desperately tried to gain more information. "Just what is happening?" he demanded.

"You're very slow on the uptake, young man—but then, if the stories that were sold to us are true, you'll be a stranger here yourself. Anyhow, I'll try to put you in the picture. We're proceeding, quietly and respectably now, to the spaceport. *Martian Maid* is there, her tubes warmed up ready for blast-off, and the rest of the Embassy staff is already on board. It's supposed to be a farewell party to the Skipper—he's retiring at the end of this trip." He laughed. "He has no option. There'll be no traffic now between Mars and Venus for quite a while."

"Aren't you risking a war?" asked Wilkinson.

"And you're supposed to be a spaceman! Have you never considered the insoluble problems of logistics that would arise in the unlikely event of a war between two planets?"

"Frankly, no." Wilkinson thought hard and desperately. He had been rescued by the Martians (but why? but why?)—but would Henshaw's mechanism for snatching him back to his own Universe operate in the event of his being taken from this planet? He said, slowly and carefully, "I appreciate what you've done for me. But I have to stay on this world. There's a girl . . ."

"Sorry, chum," broke in one of the younger men roughly, "but you'll have to come with us. If it's a girl you want, there're plenty on Mars, and with some fire to them. Better than these cows."

"But why am I so important? What do you want from me?"

"Knowledge," said the pseudo-Colonel. "Knowledge that will be of inestimable value to the Federation."

"Dr. Voronsky's secret, I suppose?" muttered Wilkinson sardonically.

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"Dr. Voronsky? Who's he?" The men exchanged dubious glances. "If you'd said 'Dr. Henshaw's secret' it would have made sense. According to our sources of information, your re-appearance ties up with the experiments that Dr. Henshaw was carrying out before he fell foul of the blasted Security Police. We managed to get hold of him before too much damage was done, and smuggled him off the planet, but he can recall little of his experimental work. We hoped that you might be able to help him regain his memory."

"So Henshaw's on your world."

"Of course."

Wilkinson felt better. There was hope once again. The Henshaw on Mars would be able to work out some way to send him back to the Henshaw on his, Wilkinson's, Venus, and surely by the time that this was accomplished he would find Vanessa waiting for him there. And if not—then he could be returned to *this* Venus, to the same time as before, but better prepared. . . . There were all sorts of paradoxes involved, but Henshaw would be able to sort them out.

The van stopped with a jerk.

"The spaceport gates . . ." muttered one of the men. "Do you think they'll search? They must know by this time that Wilkinson has been hi-jacked."

"They'll not blame us," said the man who had worn the Colonel's uniform, his voice confident. "We have always fostered the impression that the last thing in the whole wide world that we want to do is to alienate their stinking autocracy. They'll let us through."

The van moved forward again.

XIX

THE VAN stopped, the rear doors opened and, without haste, the men got out. Wilkinson tried hard to copy their assumed nonchalance, but at the sight of the spaceship he could only stand and stare. From his point of view she was an anachronism, but a splendid one. A great spire of gleaming metal, supported by vanes like graceful buttresses, she towered into the gathering dusk. She was clad in a beauty and a dignity altogether lacking from the utilitarian spheres with which Wilkinson was familiar—but they were spacecraft pure and simple, and had not been designed in accordance with the laws of aerodynamics. Their shape had not been dictated by the necessity of getting upstairs in a hurry.

"Come on!" said one of the men, laying a rough hand on Wilkinson's shoulder. "Don't stand there gawking; you've seen ships before. If you don't get a move on we shall miss the party."

But it's my party, thought Wilkinson, with wry amusement. It's my party, and I'll not miss it.

"Come on," said the man again.

"All right," Wilkinson told him.

The group closed in about him; in a body they walked up the long ramp to the after airlock. The door was open, the light inside the chamber gleaming warm and inviting.

There was an officer on duty there, straightening to attention at their approach. He wore crimson coveralls and a peaked cap with a badge that was a silver rocket surrounded by the Martian symbol in gold. He saluted smartly. He said, "They are waiting for you in the Captain's quarters, gentlemen."

The man who had masqueraded as a Colonel stopped abruptly, peering at the face that was shadowed by the cap peak. "I can't quite place you," he muttered.

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"This is my first trip to Venus, sir. I was on the Jovian run before I was transferred here."

"Your first trip—and your last!" laughed the pseudo-Colonel.

"Yes, sir. Do you wish me to operate the elevator for you?"

"No thanks. We can manage. We're probably more familiar with the old *Maid* than you are."

"That could well be, sir."

The party passed from the airlock into the body of the ship. Wilkinson could not keep himself from gawking. That affair, like the breech of a huge cannon, must be one of the firing chambers. He wondered what it would be like to ride the flame and the thunder and not, as he had done all his working life, a grumbling, querulously whining engine that lifted itself by its bootstraps. He thought, *If I should be marooned in this Universe I could do worse than to become a spaceman again. I could learn how to handle one of these things. I could make a start as soon as we get away and things settle down. . . .* Then he reproached himself for his disloyalty. There was Vanessa. He had to find her again, even if he had to search through an infinitude of alternative Time Tracks.

"Come on!" growled the man who had exhibited his impatience outside the ship.

They were standing before what looked like a huge pillar. It must be the axial shaft, thought Wilkinson, running the length of the ship. The tall man, the leader, had pressed a button and a door had quietly opened. Inside it was a brightly illumined elevator cage. It was large enough to accommodate Wilkinson and his four companions without crowding. At the touch of another button the doors, inner and outer, slid shut and the cage rose smoothly.

Wilkinson tried to identify the various levels as they passed through them. There was one with the noise of machinery; that would be the auxiliary engine room. The

one above that would probably be hydroponics—the ship's farm and air purifying plant. And the next one . . . Store-rooms, possibly. But did these people go in for tissue culture and yeast vats? And what about cargo spaces? Wouldn't the center of gravity be kept as low as possible? In Space it wouldn't matter, but on the surface of a planet a lofty structure such as this would have to be kept stable.

And there would be passenger accommodation, and officers' accommodation and, at the very stem of the ship, the control room. But he would have ample time to explore during the Free Fall voyage to Mars. Free Fall—that was another thing. He was not used to it; he was accustomed to continuous acceleration.

The cage stopped.

The doors slid open.

The tall man said, "This is it, fellows. We'll report to old Copper Whiskers and in a few seconds we shall be on our merry way."

They stepped out into a narrow alleyway that curved sharply around the axial shaft. They must be very close to the pointed stem of the ship. Almost directly opposite to the elevator door was another one, set practically flush with the plating. Over it, in polished letters, was the word "CAPTAIN." The tall man pressed a bell push set to one side of the door. It slid open, revealing a plainly furnished day-room-cum-office. Facing the door was a desk. Behind the desk sat a man in the maroon and gold uniform, the color of which clashed badly with the ginger beard that framed his face. But the blood that still dribbled from the neat round hole in his forehead was a good enough match.

Then the room was alive with men in the silver kilts of the police.

The Martians had disposed of their incriminating pistols on the way from the scene of the ambush to the spaceport, and were unarmed save for the ornamental dirks they carried

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at their belts. But they fought, somehow they fought, and the police were hampered in the use of their automatic weapon by the fear of hitting each other.

In the brief respite so gained the tall man grabbed Wilkinson's arm, pulled him back into the elevator and sent the cage climbing to one last level. They emerged into the control room. The spaceman stood staring at the banked instruments, at the pilot lights glowing white and red and green and amber.

"Take her up!" shouted the tall man. "You're a spaceman, and she's warmed up, ready to go. Shut airtight doors and blast-off, and once we're up and out we may be able to do something about these bastards!"

Wilkinson looked long and sadly at the enigmatic controls, the controls that he had dreamed, briefly, of one day using.

He said, "I . . . I can't. . . ."

And then a hatch in the deck opened, and from it half emerged a police officer who, taking leisurely aim, almost tore the tall man in two with his stream of bullets.

XX

WILKINSON WAS bruised and bleeding after his hopeless fight in the control room of the ship, and he was shivering in the chill of the air-conditioned building to which he had been brought. The two police officers, almost as naked as he was, did not seem to be worried by the relative cold—but they were not tired, they were not hungry, they had not been subjected to extreme physical abuse.

Wilkinson sat on the hard plastic bench waiting. But for what? He looked at the policemen, and they stared back, arrogantly, contemptuously. He looked at a piece of apparatus in a corner, an affair of reels of tape and glass tubes. He decided that it was some kind of a recorder. He looked at the featureless walls. He looked at the ceiling. He looked again at the policemen. He swallowed his pride—what was left of it. He asked, "What now?"

"You'll soon find out," replied the one in the golden kilt. The other one laughed. It was not a reassuring laugh.

The men came to perfunctory attention as a woman entered the room. She was as Wilkinson had last seen her—tall, slim, dark, attired in a white laboratory smock. He cried out, "Olga!"

The fine eyebrows arched in surprise. "You know my name?"

"Of course. Did Henshaw send you to get me out of here?"

Her face hardened. "Henshaw is a traitor."

He winked at her, hoping that the police officers would not notice. She would have to be careful, although, by the sleek appearance of her, she was making out better in this crazy world than he was. Much better.

She turned to the man in the gold kilt. "Lieutenant, I think I'll have a few words with the prisoner before the

real interrogation starts. Manacle him to the bench, will you? And start the recorder before you go."

"Our orders, Miss, were to maintain a close guard on him."

"And *my* orders," she snapped, "are that top secret information is not to be divulged to unauthorized personnel." She added nastily, "If you wish, I can take the matter up with Colonel Craven."

The Lieutenant flushed. "That will not be necessary, Miss." He gestured to the other man, who unhooked another pair of cuffs from his belt and, working with practised economy of motion, and a deliberate brutality, shackled the prisoner's right ankle to a leg of the bench. When he had done this he walked over to the recorder, and depressed a switch. The reels began to turn; the vacuum tubes glowed into life.

Radiating resentment the policemen left the room.

Olga sat down on a chair facing Wilkinson. She looked at him curiously, as though he were some odd specimen. She said at last, "So you're the man who died under interrogation, whose body—what was left of it—was thrown into the incinerator, and who turned up alive and kicking, a few months later, nattily attired in a lightweight spacesuit, hung around with all manner of equipment that couldn't have originated on this world, or, come to that, any of the other worlds of the System. . . ."

Wilkinson felt the beginnings of doubt.

The woman's name was Olga—she had admitted it—and her appearance was that of Olga, but her manner was not. There was an alien hardness, a ruthlessness. But . . .

He said desperately, "You must have been sent by Henshaw."

She smiled coldly. "Henshaw defected. Henshaw is on Mars. Your friends from the Red Planet managed to smuggle him out of the prison, and off Venus. I don't think that his mind is working too well, and I am sure that his memory isn't what it was. But the Martians hoped that with you to jog

his memory, he might be able to reconstruct the apparatus with which he was working at the time of his arrest." She smiled coldly. "I'm trying to reconstruct it myself." She got to her feet, and began to pace slowly up and down. "If you are what we have reason to think you are, you may be able to help us. Where you come from, there must have been another Dr. Henshaw. You must have some idea of his theories, his *modus operandi*." Her manner softened, but it was a patently spurious softness. "If you decide to help me, I can have things made easier for you."

"I've heard that before," growled Wilkinson.

"Have you? Then this is not your first . . . jump?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"But you must. Otherwise you would not be here—on a world in which you're officially dead and cremated. Perhaps if I refresh your memory a little? Henshaw you know, obviously. And your Henshaw has—or had?—a woman called Olga Kubischev working for him. Right?"

"Right. And when I compare the two Olgas I'm convinced that environment, at times, plays a greater part in the formation of character than heredity."

"Just what did you mean by that nasty crack, Wilkinson?" A thin smile seeped over her mouth. "Oh, I see. *Your* Olga let you sleep with her. Well, if you co-operate I may be able to get the real interrogation canceled, and then we shall see what we shall see."

"A woman can be womanly without entering into a relationship."

"We're discussing advanced physics, Wilkinson, not sexual *mores*. But I've made an offer. In return for your knowledge I'm willing to be . . . amenable? Yes. Amenable."

"You must know more about it than I do."

"As far as theory is concerned, yes. Time is a spiral, and worlds and people recur and recur, from the Beginning (if there was one) to the End (if there will be one). But it's not

necessarily an exact recurrence. History need not follow the same course on every arm of the spiral. Physical laws may be different. The formation of planets may not occur in exactly the same way . . .”

“The Venus from which I was sent here,” said Wilkinson, becoming interested in spite of himself, “was nothing like this world.”

“So you admit having made the jump from one arm of the spiral to another?”

“I’ve been trying to convince people of that ever since I came here,” said Wilkinson bitterly. “But I was a fool to expect credulity. How many instances are there of men and women, obviously castaways from some utterly alien culture, who have appeared suddenly and mysteriously, and who, when they have told their stories, have been branded as madmen or charlatans?”

“Quite a few,” said Olga. “Quite a few. Henshaw did a great deal of research on the subject before he started to try to work out ways and means of doing it himself. His idea, of course, was that it would be a means of escape. He did not see eye to eye with the Committee who, to be frank, looked at it as the road to fresh worlds to conquer. We still look at it that way, of course.”

“You would,” said Wilkinson.

“Watch your tongue, boy. I’m being frank with you, and I do not expect insolence in return. I’m willing to *buy* your knowledge. If the body beautiful doesn’t appeal to you, then we can offer you high rank, with all its prerequisites, in our expanding trans-temporal empire. Or if you’re so struck on that little popsy you were knocking around with in the rebels’ camp, we can have her brought in, quite intact.”

“No,” said Wilkinson.

“Stubborn bastard, aren’t you?” She sat down again. “You must have seen your Dr. Henshaw’s apparatus, and your presence here is proof that it worked. Even a layman’s

description would be of value to me. I have the theory; all that I have to do is to clothe the theory in glass and metal. For example, what metals were used? What alloys?"

And the mention of alloys reminded Wilkinson of the bracelet on his wrist, the Moebius Strip of metal mesh that, miraculously, had stayed in place through all his vicissitudes. He thought, *it can't be long now*. He told himself *I have to fight a delaying action. Once I'm dragged into their torture chamber I'm finished. As long as I stay out of it, there's a chance.*

He said slowly and carefully, "I'll be frank with you, Olga. I don't want to help you people, and if the Venus from which I came were any use to you, I wouldn't. But it's an arid ball of rock and dust and poisonous vapors, and not worth adding to anybody's empire."

"Then what were you doing there?"

"It's used as a research station, for experiments that are too dangerous to carry out on Earth or any of the colonized planets and moons. And with the resources they have, it'd take ten armies twice as well equipped as yours to conquer it." He shrugged. "But there are other Venuses. An infinitude of them. Some may be suitable for your purposes, some may be so well defended that you'll bite off more than you can chew and throw your own stinking world open to invasion. So I've decided to tell you all I know. But . . ."

"But what?"

"My terms are cash, not credit."

"What do you mean?"

"Need I spell it out to you?"

Olga laughed scornfully. "Talk sense. How can we make you Governor General of Venus XIV before I've made the apparatus that will get us there? And if it's your popsy that you're pining for, we can't deliver her to you on a silver tray, garnished with parsley, in five seconds flat. Now I'll be frank with you. I was told that I could have first go at you;

after all, the information we're after is for *me*. But if I don't get anything worthwhile within a reasonable time limit, then you're handed over to the professional extractors of information."

"And if I *do* talk to you, I'm still handed over."

"Of course not!" she snapped, too readily.

"Well," he said, "before I sell the secrets I'd still like something on account. A deposit, as it were. . . ."

"Indeed?" Again the fine eyebrows arched.

"Yes."

"Such as?"

"You made the offer, Olga. You know."

Surprisingly, she blushed, then laughed to hide her embarrassment. She got up, walked to the wall and pressed a button. The two policemen entered.

"Take the cuffs off him," she ordered, "and release him to my custody, in my apartment."

The man in the silver kilt leered at his superior but did as he was ordered. Then Wilkinson, a heavy hand on his shoulder and the muzzle of a pistol digging into his back, was marched out of the room and along a corridor, and through a door that Olga opened. She turned to the guards and said coldly, "You can wait outside." When one of the men sniggered there was bloody murder in her eyes.

She came into the bathroom where, in the warm, scented water, he was soaking away the soreness from his skin and muscles. She had taken off her smock and was wearing a diaphanous robe that hid nothing. Beneath it her skin was richly brown, her nipples startlingly pink in contrast. She said, "I'm ready to make the down payment. But I have to be able to tell my superiors that I am receiving value for money without much further delay."

He thought, *if you were a little enthusiastic it would make things better. Or worse?*

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He stood up in the tub, stretched out his hand for the soft towel that she handed him. She stared at his wrist. "What is that? Don't you take it off even when you're having a bath? *Don't you dare to take it off?*"

"Just a bangle," he said.

"It's more than just a bangle. It's a Moebius Strip. And Henshaw's apparatus, the one that he destroyed before the police arrested him, had parts like it. Give it to me!"

"No," he said flatly.

"Yes," she said sharply. "That's all part of it. That's part of the device that brought you here. I must have it."

He said, conscious that he was speaking the truth and equally conscious that he would not be believed, "It played no part in bringing me here."

"You're lying."

She turned away from him in a swirl of transparent drapery, darting into the bedroom. He followed her, and was in time to see her snatch something from an opened drawer of her dressing table. It was a gun, a miniature machine pistol, almost a toy but deadly enough. He was on her then, grappling for her right wrist. Her left hand clawed for his eyes and he jerked his head back barely in time. Straining body to body they fell to the bed, but still she retained her hold on the pistol, still she strove to bring the vicious little thing to bear. He had each of her wrists imprisoned in his hands, but her legs were free, and she brought a knee up with all the force of which she was capable. Wilkinson almost screamed with the pain but hung on, desperately. Somehow he managed to straddle her, to catch and to hold her thrashing limbs between his knees. His grip on her right wrist tightened, until it seemed that he could hear the creaking of fragile bones. Suddenly her hand relaxed, and the pistol fell with a tiny thud.

And Wilkinson relaxed too—and screamed as she bit him savagely on the face. He lifted his arms to push her away,

then realized that both her hands were about his wrist and that she was wrenching at the bracelet. She had it, and she jumped away from him, running for the door. Wilkinson rolled off the bed, landing on his feet.

The door opened.

The policemen stood there with drawn pistols.

"Is he playing rough, Miss Kubischev?" asked one of them with mock sympathy.

"It doesn't matter," she said triumphantly, holding aloft the gleaming circlet of twisted metal. "I've got what I want."

"That's just as well," said a familiar female voice. "I'm tired of waiting, and I've come to get what I want."

She stood there in the corridor, a short drab robe hanging open to reveal her unlovely nudity, a veritable toad of a woman. She said, in an oily voice, "Of course, dear, I'm sorry to interrupt you—but, to judge by Wilkinson's face, the love play was getting a little out of hand. Or are you a disciple of Mr. Masoch, Mr. Wilkinson? If you are, there's a real treat in store for you." She turned to the four uniformed men who were standing behind her. "All right, boys. You know where to take him."

But the guards made no move. They were staring at the thing in Olga's hand, listening to the singing of it, a thin, high note like that produced by rubbing the rim of a fragile crystal goblet. It had begun to glow, dimly at first, then brighter and brighter, with a golden radiance that should have looked warm but was cold, cold, gelid beyond all imagining.

With a frightened cry Olga threw it from her.

It sailed towards the opposite wall—then vanished, seeming to diminish, seeming to fall, twisting and turning, through unfathomable gulfs of Space and Time.

"Well," remarked Moira Simmons matter-of-factly, "I guess that's that. You'll have some explaining to do, Wilkinson. And so will you, Kubischev. Take them both away."

XXI

STRAPPED TO the table, held almost immobile by his bonds, Wilkinson waited helplessly for whatever was to happen next. With the disappearance of the metallic circlet, the Moebius Strip, he had lost all hope, apart from the hope that Vanessa had escaped from this world of tyranny and terror. But if she had, and if she had told the full story to Henshaw and his colleagues (as she must have done) what chance was there for Wilkinson's rescue? It might be accomplished by a full regiment, with air support, but not by a handful of scientists, no matter how well armed.

He was able to turn his head, and he could see Moira Simmons, sitting at her slovenly ease by a low table upon which stood a tall bottle, bedewed with condensation, and a glass. The woman saw him looking at her and she giggled squeakily. "Don't you wish that you could have a drink, Wilkinson? But you're not getting one. This is all part of the softening up process. This is just rubbing it in that here you have no rights, no dignity—nothing at all, in fact, but the capacity of feeling pain."

She scowled. "That stupid Kubischev bitch! What does she know about the proper technique for extracting information? The only way is to smack a human being down until he can't be smacked down any further, and then to show him a little kindness so that he fawns on you like a whipped dog—and then to smack him down again." She gulped noisily from the glass, then went on.

"I suppose you wonder what I'm doing here, Wilkinson. Well, it will do no harm if you know. It might do some good, as it will help to make you realize the sort of people that you, with your limited intelligence, are up against. We have known

for a long time that an underground movement in the cities can be dangerous; but if we allow malcontents to escape, to camp out in the wilderness, they can be kept under observation, especially if every such encampment also houses at least one agent of the Committee. Too, even with the primitive equipment they have at their disposal, now and again they come up with something useful—such as, for example, the incendiary and armor piercing bullets that they made from the standard machine pistol ammunition as supplied to the police.” She giggled again. “I passed word of that to our military big-brains, but they didn’t believe me.

“Then, of course, I knew all about the peculiar apparitions that your darling Vanessa was always seeing. I did think at first that the girl was mentally unbalanced; but as I observed her I was obliged to admit that she was not. And I heard, of course, about Henshaw’s theories and experiments, and I knew of cases of people who have vanished, inexplicably, without trace, and other cases of strange people, telling fantastic stories to account for themselves, who have appeared from literally nowhere, and there seemed to be some connection. And then *you* turned up.”

“But,” said Wilkinson, “you were wanting to have me dealt with at once. It was only the Council vote that saved me.”

She snorted contemptuously. “The Council voted the way that I wanted them to. If they had voted my way, I could easily have found ways to defer the—er—questioning for a day or so, so that the police raid would pick you up intact. Not that you’re going to stay intact much longer.

“Yes, have a good look around. Those instruments on the end of long, flexible shafts are dentist’s drills. Don’t you know what they are? Well, I’ll tell you. Back in the good old days of the Twentieth Century people used to have trouble with their teeth. Believe it or not, they used to decay.

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So if you had a decaying tooth you went to a specialist who was called a dentist, and he'd either extract the tooth, or he'd drill out the carious material from the cavity and fill it with metal or porcelain. As a matter of fact it was various police forces who first realized that the dentist's drill is quite an effective instrument for tongue loosening. The dentist, you see, was always careful not to drill right down to the nerve—but it's only when you do drill down to the nerve that you get results. . . .

"Those irons and the brazier—they're for show only. As a matter of fact I use them only when I want to get quick results with the infliction of hardly any damage. They're very effective with women, and with some men. Believe it or not, I had a policeman in here last week, and he started to sing while the irons were still heating up. Not that it did him much good. He had to be punished for taking bribes from an illegal gaming house owner.

"Yes, that's a rack in that corner. It's all right for punishment—its crippling effects are so permanent—but there are better means of persuasion. And the famous Iron Maiden, of course. But she, poor dear, is only a museum piece. But I'd like to use her one day, just for the hell of it. Dearie me, my drink's getting warm." She gulped again, noisily.

"Talking is thirsty work, isn't it? But not as thirsty as you'll find it," she went on. "The main item on the agenda is to find out what you know. The technique of travel across the Time Spiral, of course, and as much as you can tell us about the technology of your own Universe. Your spaceships, for example. I believe that you have something far superior to rockets, so much so that it might be possible for us to launch an assault against Earth or Mars.

"Swing the table a little more, Ilse," she said to somebody just outside Wilkinson's field of vision. "What do you think of my skins, Wilkinson? That golden one was taken from the discarded mistress of Committeeman von Bulow. The

trouble was that he insisted that she be executed—and painlessly, too!—before I removed it. And then his wife wouldn't let him put it up on the wall of his study, so he gave it back to me. But it's quite decorative, don't you think?

"A little more, Ilse. Thank you, dear.

"And that, Wilkinson, is my own humble contribution to the art of interrogation. I call it The Frame. You'll be spread-eagled in it, held immobile by what are, in effect, the guy wires. And, as the frame can be swiveled and tilted to any desired angle, every millimeter of your body will be at my disposal. As you see, this is the very latest model—complete with drip tray.

"In some ways it's rather a pity that I have to be so thorough. I'd rather have liked to have added your own hide to my collection. There are a few other collectors on Venus, but I'd be the only one with the skin of a man from another Universe. But those stupid cops—to say nothing of the Kubischev trollop—marked you up rather badly, and I shall be marking you up some more."

She poured the last of the bottle into her glass, and threw the liquor down her throat.

"And what if I talked now?" croaked Wilkinson. Since he would talk anyhow, what difference would it make? And if he talked of his own volition he could at least exercise a certain censorship.

"You can if you like. But I know your kind. You'll tell me lies, and half-truths, and omit anything and everything of real importance. So let's not waste any time. Ilse! Gretta!"

He would at least put up a fight, Wilkinson thought. He might even be able to reach the obscene female and get his hands around her fat throat. But he felt a sharp prick in his arm and turned around in time to see a sullen blonde giantess withdrawing a hypodermic needle.

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"A mere temporary paralysis," smirked Moira Simmons. "But not, repeat not, an anaesthetic."

Wilkinson hung in the frame, feeling like a fly trapped in the web of some huge, malevolent spider. The cunningly devised system of wires supported his weight so that, as yet, he felt no real pain, only extreme discomfort. But the real pain would start soon enough, and he hoped that he would not disgrace himself—and knew that he would.

Moira Simmons padded around her contraption, her face intent, preoccupied, cleaning her fingernails with a surgeon's scalpel. Her two women stood by, expressionless, awaiting her orders. Their muscular arms looked abnormally long. They could have been two hairless female gorillas. *Get on with it!* Wilkinson wanted to say, but his mouth and throat were dry, and he could only croak wordlessly. Moira Simmons looked up at him enquiringly, then resumed her restless padding.

"Ilse! The subject wants to say something. Perhaps you had better moisten his mouth."

One of the women nodded and fetched a glass of water. She was tall, and was able to hold it to his mouth without stretching. The fluid was warm and unpleasantly brackish, but Wilkinson swallowed it gratefully.

"Well, Wilkinson?"

"Nothing," he replied sullenly.

"Changed your mind, have you? It doesn't matter."

She stood looking at him. There was something in her manner of the butcher—a butcher who enjoys his job. Fascinated, Wilkinson watched the tip of her tongue playing over her thick lips.

She spoke again. "He's not too badly marked, Ilse. We shall just have to be careful not to mark him any more. In some ways it is a pity. Torture, for any purpose, is so much more effective when the victim can see what is being done

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to him, when he can think, *I'll never use that again.* However," she added briskly, "one can't have one's cake and eat it. Unfortunately."

Ilse—until now Wilkinson had assumed that she was dumb—spoke. "The other skins are *much* better."

"Yes, dear. I quite agree. But you cannot appreciate the viewpoint of the true collector. *This* hide will be the only one of its kind in this Universe. There will be others, no doubt, when *we* have learned how to jump from arm to spiral arm of Time, but until then . . .

"Gretta, you have a steady hand on the controls. Give him one dol."

Gretta walked to a control console set against the wall. The machine, whatever it was, was already on; pilot lights were glowing in the panel. She depressed a switch, slowly turned a knob. And there was something flowing into Wilkinson's body along the wires that imprisoned and supported him; possibly a current of electricity, probably something more subtle. All at once every contusion that had been inflicted upon him started to ache anew, every cut and abrasion to smart.

"Two dols."

The pain was not yet intolerable, but it was bad.

"Three."

The pain could still be endured.

"Off!"

Wilkinson realized that his body was bathed in sweat, and that his teeth were gritting painfully together.

"Well, do you like it?"

"What sort of answer do you expect?"

"You should appreciate what I'm doing to you, Wilkinson. Not everybody gets this treatment. Guaranteed not to mark or wound, and all as a result of one of my discoveries. Did you know that what I call organic electricity differs from current generated mechanically? Well, it does. The

organic electron seems itself to possess some of the properties of organic life, and it has an affinity for the nerve trunks and endings. But you are supposed to be talking, not me." She smiled at him with ghastly sweetness. "Incidentally, the controls are calibrated to one hundred dols."

The next time no halt was called. Three dols . . . four . . . ten . . . and then jump to thirty. Wilkinson knew that he was screaming. He was drowning in a lake of fire, and he had swallowed the flames, and they were eating inwards through his skin and outward from his vitals. He couldn't stand it. And from some hard core of his mind came a determined voice, *I will not stand it*. From the depths of his memory bubbled recollections of those men and women who, from time to time, faced by some intolerable situation, have lost consciousness or, even, released their hold on life altogether.

And then the pain was gone and he was falling, falling, down the dark dimensions, into the blackness that has no end. And he thought, with grim satisfaction, *the bitch overdid it. She killed me.*

XXII

HE RECOVERED consciousness slowly, realizing that he was sprawled on a hard, cold plastic floor. He thought, *so I have to go through it again, and again.* He put his hands around his throat and started to squeeze. This was one way that he could cheat Moira Simmons if he had the willpower to carry it through.

And then somebody had fallen onto him and was wrenching his wrists, was trying to lever up his suicidal fingers. Through dimming eyes he saw that it was Olga. He thought viciously, *I'll do for you first. You robbed me of my chance to escape!* But she evaded him as he scrambled clumsily to his feet, screaming, "Dr. Henshaw! Vanessa!"

He opened his eyes properly and saw that he was back in the familiar, untidy laboratory, in the center of the roughly painted circle, with Henshaw's machine—silent now and motionless—looming over him. And there were people running through the doorway—Henshaw, and Titov, and Vanessa. She was the first to reach him.

He realized dimly what must have happened. He had not belonged in the other Universe, and had been driven from it by Moira Simmons. He held Vanessa tightly and hoped desperately that she would never be so driven.

"How did you get back?" Henshaw was demanding. "How did you do it? How did you do it, Wilkinson?"

The real answer came to him in a moment of sudden clarity as he fell asleep in Vanessa's arms.

"I was pulled back," he whispered.