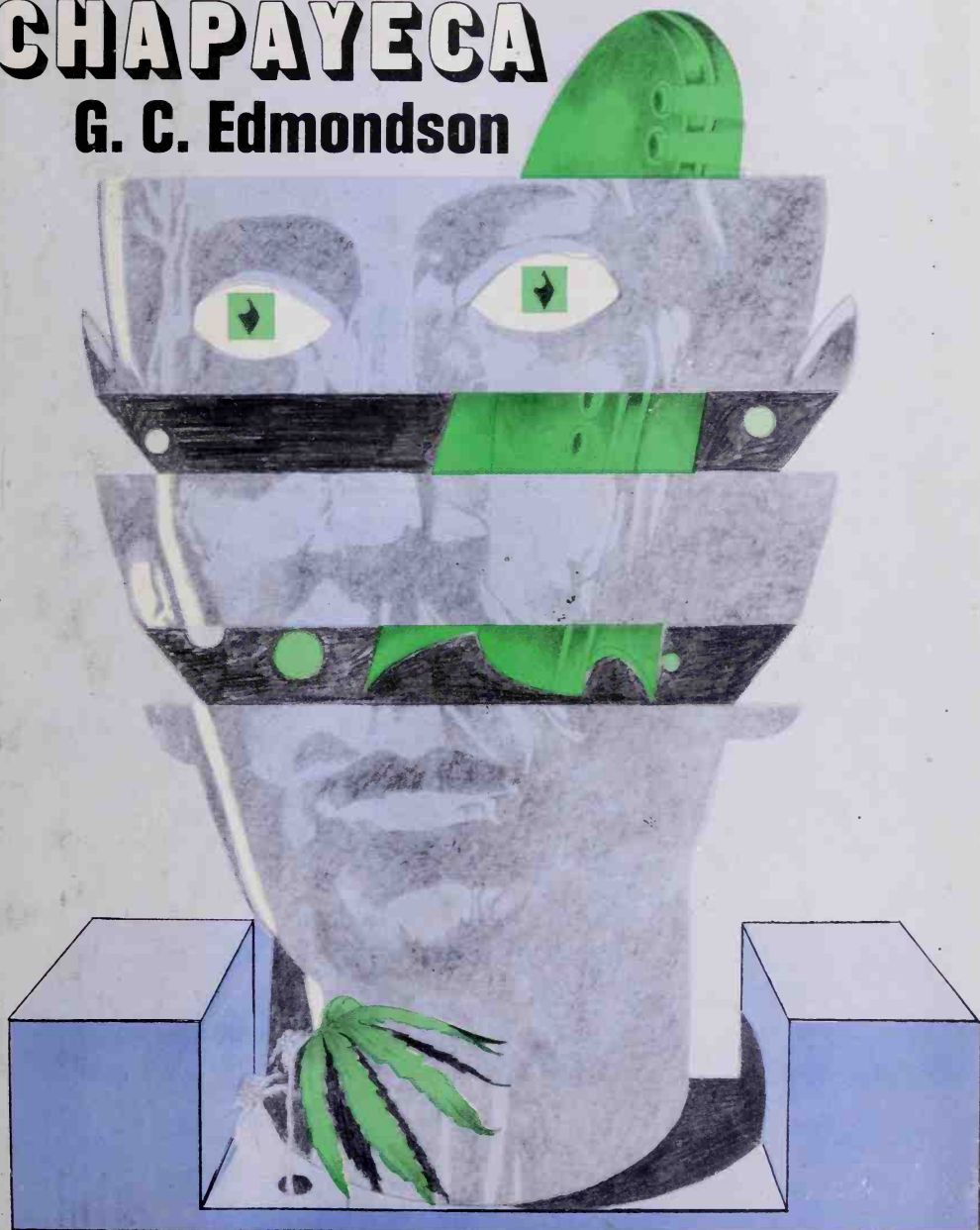


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CHAPAYECA

G. C. Edmondson



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G. C. EDMONDSON

1971

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CHAPAYECA

CHAPATZEC

ONE:

Taber stripped and sat on the table, wondering if the air conditioning was going to give him another cold. But the doctor was unusually prompt. "Well, Nash, my boy! Turn your head and cough.

"Hmmm. Not bad, considering it's only been a year."

"About my eyes," Taber began. "Those floaters—"

"They'll reabsorb."

"The blood clots did but I've got other things floating around."

"What color?"

"Blue."

"Iris!" the doctor said triumphantly. "Gets old and stiff. You knocked off a few flakes."

"So what am I gonna do every time a bird flies by?"

"Duck," the doctor said cheerfully. "Someday one might be for real. Now cross your knees."

After peeks in his ears, nose, and throat Taber endured a probing finger and donned his trousers. The nurse took his blood pressure and made furtive signals.

"Blood sugar's better," the doctor said with his irritating cheerfulness. "Just take your insulin."

"About the pain," Taber began.

"A broken back doesn't heal overnight."

Taber wanted to say it was a rather long night.

Standing at the bus stop he wondered if the cheerful doctor had ever spent twenty-four consecutive hours in pain. He boarded the bus with only a slight awkwardness. He looked so normal. On warm days he didn't even limp. If he'd lost an arm or leg perhaps people wouldn't . . . *I might still be married.*

The girl in the consulate was young and attractive. She greeted him warmly in Spanish. *Am I supposed to know her?* Maybe . . . She stepped back from the counter to reveal huge, dropsical legs. He began filling out the application.

The girl studied the form. "Nash Taber?"

He produced a birth certificate and discharge papers.

There was a hint of malice in her smile. "I confused you with someone named Ignacio Tavares."

"I being those both person," Taber said deliberately mangling genders and verb endings.

"*Momentito*," she said nervously, and disappeared. An elderly man came out smiling. "*¡Nachol! ¿Otra vez con tus indios?*"

Taber gave a wan smile. "Time I did something."

The consul signed and stamped papers. "*La exportación del auto* arranges itself at the port of entry."

"No car this time."

"You no longer drive?"

Taber shook his head.

"Comprendo perfectamente. In any event, a happy voyage." They shook hands and Taber left, thinking the well-meaning consul did not understand at all. Outside a raw wind made the pain worse. He caught a bus back to the campus.

Afternoons the pain was always bad. Trying not to tremble, he got out of the bus. The breeze was stronger. It would be a bad night. Halfway across the quadrangle he saw a dumpy woman on the wrong side of fifty. *Turn the other way,* he willed. *I'm sorry and so are you but we just embarrass one another.* He noted her flushed face, make-up askew. There'd been some talk. Now he was seeing the grants committee chairman's wife drunk in public. "You," she said. "Seven people dead and you alive. Why?"

Taber braced himself while a twinge shot up his leg. After a moment the pain was bearable. "Possibly," he gritted, "because I was on my own side when your little acid head came flying across the divider. And who told you I was alive?" He clenched his teeth and stalked away, wishing he could control these outbursts.

Hissing with pain, he reached his room and washed down three pills with a tumblerful of gin. Before lowering himself on the narrow plywood platform bed he set the alarm. Bracing against the twitching and jerking, he stared straight up. "Beelzy, if you only existed you'd know I'm ready to wheel and deal," he said.

Taber's philosophy had gone full circle and finally found more comfort in cursing the Supreme Indifference which could just as easily have engineered a practical body. "Egomaniac with the morals of a used car salesman!" he snarled.

Gradually the pain subsided. There was a scratching on the door. "Christ on a crutch!" His landlady was a goodhearted soul in an overblown body but he didn't feel up to her complaints tonight. He turned out the lights, then realized the ill-fitting door gave him away. Resignedly, he opened it. A tall man

pushed in. "*Úhbua, bamséka*," he said, and hurriedly closed the door. Taber turned the light on.

"Lico!" He studied the Indian in astonishment. Lico's crisp Negroid hair was shorn in an unbecoming Dutch bowl. He was barefoot and dressed in much-laundered denims. What startled Taber most was his harried look. He had never seen the giant less than calm.

Lico satisfied himself that the door was locked, then sat in the only chair. Taber hovered uncertainly. "¿Hast hunger?" he finally asked.

Lico hesitated, then urgency overcame good manners. "It makes two days that I do not eat."

Taber found the flour. The Indian poured coffee and sat again. After a sip he relaxed. "Strange laws you have."

Taber sighed and punched the dough. How long before someone traced the fugitive? The jailer was a decent and humane man, used to the ways of drunken Indians, but he had his job. Now Lico would get another couple of weeks on the garbage truck.

"You murder presidents just like the Mexicans and yet you get so upset about *little* things."

Taber divided the dough into golfball-sized lumps. He was rolling one paper thin with a piece of broomstick when the outer door opened. Footsteps clumped unnecessarily loud.

Lico vanished into the bathroom. Taber opened the door and stood, wiping flour from his hands. Frank Hernández was in full uniform for once. They greeted each other with sad smiles. The jailer saw the extra cup and glanced at the bathroom door. Taber busied himself rolling another tortilla.

"I hope I don't find him here," the jailer said in loud Spanish. "Duty would force me to take him in and this time it won't be two weeks on a garbage truck."

"What makes you think he's here?"

"My boy," the jailer said, "I've known you ten years. I might go so far as to say I've liked you. More importantly, many

Indians like you. You've done little things for them. To the credit of humanity and the glory of God, some races can feel gratitude without discomfort."

Taber studied the elderly man in some puzzlement.

"You stuck your neck out for these people when you'd've been just as comfortable remaining silent."

Thinking guiltily of the nice little career he'd carved out recording Yaqui folkways, Taber shrugged.

"But this time it's federal heat."

"My God!" Taber gasped. "What'd he do?"

"Nothing. That FBI asshole come nosing around my jail wanting to know how come my Indians weren't citizens or immigrated or somesuch thing."

"Aren't they?"

Hernández looked at him pityingly. "You know what happened during the revolution. Of course they're here illegally. So's half the town. I wonder how legally some asshole with a name like Kramerhaus got his grandparents in. Anyhow, he rounded up half my jail. Near the border a bus blew a tire. When the dust settled a few were missing and now there's federal warrants out. Goddam that asshole!"

The old man wiped tears of anger and opened the door. "Got to cover six more houses yet. If they don't get shot first they'll do two years minimum and then get deported. And the two years minimum"—he shot a sharp glance at Taber—"goes for anyone caught aiding and abetting. Good night, Nacho." He closed the door.

"*Kábe amatóca*," Taber called to the bathroom.

"There is too somebody here." Lico came through the door.

"What are you going to do?" Taber asked.

The Indian smiled. "First, I will eat." He ate hugely until he got to the beans which always come last. "What'd you do to them?" he sputtered.

"Soda."

"¿Bicarbonato—por qué?"

Taber didn't like them either but soda removed the explosive factor. When his bowel distended with gas the pain was unbearable. The pills were wearing off and he squirmed, bracing against the electric shock in his foot. Federal warrant or not, Taber could not let an old friend down. But was there a way to turn this to his advantage? "What will you do?" he repeated.

Lico belched. "It's time to walk in good streets."

Good streets. A few hundred miles south across the border the eight towns had once been isolated into a life as alien as another planet's. The highway had changed that. Now soldiers were garrisoned there. Did the Indian understand the power of a federal warrant? "You will have no peace in the eight pueblos," Taber said.

The Indian smiled.

Taber searched for a metaphor. "The man who almost freed Sonora from the *yorim*—how was Not-drink-water caught?"

Lico sobered.

"And how was Our Lord taken?"

The Indian was silent.

"You think somebody won't sell you for a reward?" Taber waited, trying not to show anxiety.

The Indian sighed. "Maybe I won't go to the *wohnaiki pweplum*," he murmured.

Taber's voice was casual. "Some *yor*i town?"

"I don't like Mexicans enough to live with them."

Taber poured coffee and waited.

"There is another *pweplum*," the Indian finally said.

Taber caught his breath. For years he'd followed the rumor of a town somewhere in the Sierra—holdouts from the last peace and amnesty. "Will you take me?"

Lico hesitated.

"If I help you I won't be able to come back." Privately Taber was horrified that something might go wrong and make this true.

"I'd take you but . . ." Lico was embarrassed. "I don't know how welcome I'll be. And to come with a stranger . . ."

There was a sound. The doorknob began turning. Lico moved noiselessly. Taber was hiding the dishes when the door burst open. "In the name of—" the wild-eyed young man shrilled before Lico's ham-sized fist moved. A .38 clattered. Taber stared while the Indian gathered it up. He waited but no one else came in. Lico closed the door. "I know this *cabrón*," he said.

Taber released a long-held breath. Fine, he thought. Assaulting an FBI man. Then abruptly he recovered. *What have I done?* Lico was stripping blankets from the bed. "Hurry," the Indian said.

"I'm too crippled. You go. I can take care of this if you'll leave me the gun."

Lico hesitated. "You'll kill him?"

"No! Hurry now." Taber opened the door cautiously. When he returned from the pay phone Lico was gone.

Frank Hernández did not come but a young cop slapped the intruder awake. "You'll sign a complaint?" he asked.

Wondering somewhere in the back of his mind if all feds were as careless of due process, Taber nodded. The cop grinned and prodded his prisoner down the hall. Taber realized he was trembling.

TWO:

The Regional Director was older and wise enough to apologize. Taber had been tempted to "make a federal case of it" but he didn't want to be trapped into admitting old Frank Hernández had been there first. He accepted the apology. But despite apologies and assurances of good will Taber suspected the latter emotion was alien to the turkey-necked young man's nature. He had fully expected an angry red face to be waiting each time the bus had stopped on its way south.

A chill wind blew through the cañons of this border town.

Taber was tired and the pain was building. He was squatting to lift his bags when a voice said, "*¿Ignacio Tavares?*"

Taber straightened too quickly. Lightning seared from waist to heels. The short dark man had his hand in his pocket. He scooped up Taber's luggage with the other. They walked past bars where *mariachis* in skin-tight pants gossiped with whores. They reached the *comandancia de policía* but the short man did not turn in. Did he have anything in his pocket? It made no difference. Taber could neither fight nor run.

They passed burros posing with vegetable patience before ancient cameras. Abruptly the stranger gestured Taber through a narrow opening under a *cuartos de renta* sign. He knocked at a door. "*¿Quién?*" a voice rumbled.

"*Chicho.*"

The door opened. It was Lico. Taber felt dizzy. He staggered across the dirt floor to a cot.

He was in the back of a truck which jerked through endless gear-scraping shifts. Finally it settled down to a stolid forty-five. The big dipper wavered and swerved in the square of sky to the rear. Taber wondered.

As a young man he'd gotten by on brilliance, never learning the outs of infighting. But he was no longer young. At thirty-nine he should have been easing into administration but here he was on another goddam field trip. And he'd better turn up something earth-shaking for there wouldn't be any next time.

Taber's university was no more publish-or-perish than most but he really hadn't done much lately. Was this last grant disguised charity? Or was it a wild goose chase while promotions were being handed out?

He woke abruptly. Men were poking at the cargo. A flash-light shone in his face. "And who are you?" the inspector asked.

"*Soy turista norteamericano.*"

"Knock off the bullshit!" The customs man was swinging his

boot back when Taber pointed a finger from under the blanket. Customs decided not to risk it. "Wise guys," he growled. "Always I get wise guys!"

Hours later the truck skewed off the highway again and bumped through the cattails and carrizos of delta land. Any place this hot could only be Río Yaqui. Finally the truck stopped.

Lico and Chicho were greeting several men. Sudden silence as the Indians glimpsed his pale, *yorí* skin. The silence stretched. A toothless old man squinted and finally grinned. "*¡Don Ignacio!* You remembered us."

"*Liós emchianabu,*" Taber greeted. He followed them to a backless bench under the military society's *ramada* and sweat through elaborate formal greetings. "How long will you stay?" the old man was asking.

"Until the time of waters," Taber guessed. Why so many questions? Couldn't they realize he didn't speak Yaqui that well?

Gradually Taber realized the elders wanted to know if he'd been serious about learning their ways. But he was tired and the Yaqui glottals, its shifts from double to single vowels were confusing him.

Lico and his compadre excused themselves. Taber saw them carrying his gear to a house by the truck. The elders were apparently satisfied for the inquisition ended. He strolled to the edge of the *plaza* and again felt the physical pressure of the sun.

Back under the *ramada* men sat in earnest conversation. One glanced at him and quickly looked away. Taber studied the opposite side of the *plaza mayor* where Mexican soldiers lounged under an almost identical *ramada*. One glanced up, saw Taber, and mustered energy to hurry inside. Taber wondered if visitors were still so rare.

Back at the Yaqui *ramada* an elderly man with a bullwhip around his waist was marching a group of men across the plaza toward a temporary *ramada* thrown up to the right of the brick

church. Under the *ramada* they opened their bundles and lay down for it was forbidden to put on masks in any other position.

A man came from the opposite direction, scouting and peering exaggeratedly. He wore a cotton blanket folded and pinned like a coat. As he came closer Taber saw the *chapayeca* mask: long-eared, short horns, and a long sharp nose. He passed closer and Taber saw the rawhide thong from his neck up into the mask. At its end would be a wooden cross in the man's mouth, reminding him to be silent and pray forgiveness for the sacrilege he would commit. The masks were evocative of subconscious horrors and this one was especially weird.

Taber was surrounded. Children stood silently regarding his outlandish *yorí* color. *Thank god they don't beg.* A clown approached; rattles about his legs and bells dangling from a belt. Coarse white hair protruded from his mask. He offered Taber a ritual glass of water and a handrolled cigarette. Taber accepted and immediately the *pascola* began a story. The children listened fascinated.

The sun went down. People hurried. This was Lent, biggest event in the Yaqui calendar and already he'd missed a week of it. But Taber didn't think he'd missed much. He'd covered all the trivial details of dress and ceremonial masks to feed the manuscript-devouring monster they called a University Press. He was strolling past the *chapayeca* barracks when someone called, "*¡Don Ignacio!*"

He couldn't remember the young man. *Probably a boy the last time I was here.* *Chapayecas* and *fariseos* lounged about the coffeepot, masks turned to the side. As they continued their discussions of months-old news Taber felt himself slipping into their timeless dream world. But what was he going to do? This trip had to produce results.

Holdouts? East of here, he supposed. Any other way was too well explored. High in the mountains somewhere, a valley. Ground for corn and squash. Pasture for cows and horses. There had to be water.

He glanced up from his coffee straight into a mask. The wearer's nose extended surrealistically past the mask's left ear as he sat in profile. The man was thirty—or twenty. Taber was never sure with Indians. Something different about this man. Finally he realized this was the only dancer who hadn't smiled a greeting when he sat. The mask was different too. Its chilling effect made Taber wonder what archetype—*Did something like that frighten me when I was a child?* It was the same mask he'd seen crossing the *plaza mayor*.

The face, the horns, the long-pointed nose were some boy-stealing spirit the Jesuits had long ago transmogrified into the Christian demonology. There was nothing basically different about this mask. Yet it made Taber uncomfortable even without the angry face behind it which still pretended he was not there.

A sudden silence fell. Taber saw polished boots over khaki riding breeches. He looked up at a shirt with the triple bars of a *capitán primero*. The face under the army *kepí* was Mexican and wore a square military mustache. The face made a show of slightly exaggerated surprise. "But this *chapayeca* is not Indian!"

The Indians did not seem worried but from the corner of his eye Taber saw the man in the special mask. The cords in his neck were standing out. Taber tried to stand too quickly. After a moment when the pain stopped he struggled to his feet. "Nash Taber *a sus órdenes*," he said.

The captain absently accepted coffee. "Nech Teiver . . ." He chewed the name and suddenly his face cleared. "Notch Tahber! You wrote the— A true pleasure to know you, sir," the captain insisted. "When I was being posted to Río Yaqui your book was most helpful." The captain made vague sitting motions and magically two chairs with backs appeared.

"—most productive land in Sonora," the captain was saying. "Truly an enchanting place."

His accent was Mexico City—which is a damsite cooler. "You really enjoy the weather here?" Taber asked.

The captain gave him a sharp glance, laughed and was off again. "—long and difficult relationship between our peoples."

Taber assumed he meant the Yaquis, and not the Americans.

"—cruelty and lack of faith on both sides."

From the corner of his eye Taber watched the noncommittal Indians. The man with the odd mask was scratching a diagram on the ground for the man with whom he talked.

"—highly desirable to quiet unrest in the district."

Somewhere in these long-winded pleasantries the captain was saying something. He was affable, but suspicious. Taber guessed he should have dropped in at the *cuartel* and paid his respects.

"—forget the unhappy past and work together toward our common destiny."

Behind this bland speechifying the captain's green eyes did not change. *Suspicion? He knows who I am. FBI?* It wouldn't take much Sherlocking to know where Taber was going. *Not suspicion.* That captain *wants* something.

Abruptly the captain was on his feet, shaking hands. "If you're free tomorrow morning, drop around to the *cuartel* for coffee." He half saluted and strode off. Polished boots twinkled away in reflected firelight. Taber wondered if tomorrow was an invitation or a summons. The straight-backed chair was comfortable but somehow it associated him with the *yorí* captain. He rose painfully. Men around the fire made room. Too much room.

"Do I have to go there?" No answer. *Damn the captain!* Moments ago they'd been friendly. He sat, trying to salvage something. Finally he made his good nights.

He lay twitching and jerking most of the night. Gassy foods were bad. The thing he never talked about was sometimes worse. The accident had cross-connected something in his spine to make each orgasm so painful that he had gradually turned celibate, growing meaner with each month of abstinence. He lay rigid, resisting the need to empty his bladder while the growing light picked out the thatched roof. A woman appeared

and made the customary Yaqui genuflection, a slight bow of the head and lifting of the right foot before the "mother" cross, and began stirring embers on a mud-coated platform of carrizo canes. She boiled coffee and a teenage girl began making tortillas.

Lico and his *compadre* came yawning from the house and urinated. Coming back they spied Taber. Narciso's square face was hurt. "Why didn't you come in? We had a bed prepared."

"The ground is all right. I have to sleep on something hard." He began the slow, painful process of standing. They caught his arms and put Taber on his feet.

Wacas poponi is boiled brisket that has been shredded, dried, fried crisp, and given substance with an egg scrambled in at the last minute. The girl furnished yard-wide tortillas. Taber nibbled the fiery *güeritos* which the others devoured by the handful. Finally, sipping coffee with brown sugar, he leaned back. Before he could suppress it a tremendous roaring belch punctuated his satisfaction. Moon-faced wife and daughter beamed. Narciso and Lico lit cigarettes.

"Lico," Taber began, "what shall we do?"

The Indian smiled expansively. "Are we not walking in the good streets?"

"You want to leave so soon?" Chicho asked. "You're not happy in Río Yaqui?"

"Yes, but for years I have heard of a place—"

Lico was frowning. *Damn it, blown it again!*

Into the cool early quiet came the faint hum of a motor racing and bucking down the delta's rutted paths. Minutes passed before a dusty jeep skidded to a stop in front of the Mexican *cuartel*. An officer bounded from it. Taber caught a worried glance from Lico and his *compadre*.

The jeep roared again in a dust-spraying turn. Before Taber could collect his wits a soldier stood at the gate. "Captain wants the American," he said in nasal southern Spanish.

Lico and Narciso tensed. As Taber climbed painfully to his

feet they remembered he could neither fight nor run. "I'll be back," he said, and hoped it was the truth.

The jeep was difficult. Taber chinned himself from the roof support. The soldier gunned the motor impatiently. "Stop that!" Taber snapped and he reacted automatically to the voice of authority. "Now drive very slowly," Taber said when he was settled. While they crept across the plaza he tried to guess what the FBI had done to complicate his life.

The adobe building had the austere army functionalism but made concession to Yaqui climate by stopping all walls a half meter short of the roof. It was hot already in the office where the captain and an older man with major's stars sat talking. The captain remained seated behind his desk when Taber entered. "Good morning. You slept well?"

"I'm still breathing," Taber conceded.

An orderly brought boiling water and *café instantáneo*. The captain nodded toward the major. "My friend and boss," he said. Taber and the major shook hands. Each gave his own name with ritual phrases of undying loyalty and servitude.

The major looked thoughtfully at Taber. "Americans," he finally said, "are noted for their directness."

"It saves time," Taber said.

"Yes, time. What do you do with all that time you save?"

"We count each second and when they add up to two weeks we take a vacation."

The major frowned. "Very well, I shall be most un-Mexican. You are under suspicion. Coffee?"

"Thank you. I just finished breakfast. What charge?"

"I suppose Social Dissolution would do."

"Very handy law. Covers anything you don't happen to like."

"In this case it covers unrest in Río Yaqui."

"Big deal! There's been unrest in Río Yaqui since 800 A.D. We lesser breeds have been involved since 1533."

"Ah yes," the major said. "Once Cortez had stabilized the

situation in Mexico the *conquistadores* looked northwest for new worlds. What happened then?"

Why was the major testing him? "Near this river an Indian drew a line, kissed the sacred ground, and invited the Castilians to retire. Guzmán fired his cannon. Later he wondered if he'd been impetuous."

The major listened impassively.

"Seventy years later Martínez de Hurdaide had a crack at it with forty muskets, and four thousand Tehuecos. He came home with nine muskets, twenty men, and five wounds. But the Yaquis had gotten a scare too. How could *they* acquire gunpowder and steel? In 1617 Yaquis appeared in Mexico City.

"You may send priests,' they said, 'but no soldiers.'

"Jesuits brought the cross. They brought iron, horses, cattle. And they helped the Yaquis keep Spanish soldiers out. One hundred and fifty years later a pope outlawed the Jesuits. For two centuries the Yaquis have had no formal contact with the Church. Not surprisingly, some interesting heresies have crept into their ritual.

"Yaqui, incidentally, means *people*. My race and yours are lumped together. *Yorim*—not-quite-human. Considering the systematic genocide over thirty years of the Díaz regime I cannot dispute their ideas on relative humanity—especially since much of the land grabbing was done by people with fine old Mexican names like Richardson and Johnson."

The major hmphed. "You prefer poverty and savage ignorance to our admittedly imperfect civilization?"

"They're not savages," Taber said. "After a hundred-fifty years of Jesuits this culture is basically the Church Militant of sixteenth-century Spain. *They* are the true Christians. It's *you* who are degenerate and heretical."

"An interesting religion," the major said, "which has obscenities scribbled on its church walls."

Taber gave a sour smile. "Mexican soldiers put them there. They're left so their children can learn to love you."

"Preparing for holy war?"

"They do not glorify war. They only defend the sacred land. There is an analogous situation in the Middle East where an especially stiff-necked people has fought and intrigued for two millennia over a small piece of Palestine." Taber realized he was pacing up and down as he had in younger days when teaching had seemed important. "Forgive my pedantry," he said. "The captain has read my books and already knows where I stand."

"*Perfectamente*," the captain said. "You have a similar problem with the Seminoles but nobody takes it seriously. Here though, a nation with infinitely fewer resources finds, totally within its borders, another nation which has defeated it repeatedly."

What did all this have to do with bopping an FBI man?

"Do you think our present policy unjust?"

"No more than any country's Indian policy," Taber said. "The Yaquis want *all* their land back but they probably know any government that tried to return it wouldn't last a week. And I'm sure most of them believe they'll get water someday from the dams you're building. You Mexicans have achieved as good a balance between humanity and Realpolitik as anyone could expect."

"Then why do you work against us?"

"I?" Taber was stunned. "What have I done?"

The major smiled thinly. "I believe you really are Nash Taber. What else are you? For whom do you work?"

"The university."

"And the university?"

Suddenly Taber understood. "Oh, for Christ's sake!" he exploded. "If I were CIA I'd damn sure have more money and better equipment."

"There is unrest. Suddenly you turn up."

"My God," Taber said. "You think we'd back a thousand Indians and lose the one friend we have left in Latin America?"

The major spread his hands. "After the CIA's Caribbean adventures we don't know what to expect."

Taber sat heavily and wished he hadn't. "This is insane. Every man in this valley over forty has fought Mexicans. To go adventuring is one thing. It's quite another to fight in your own corn field, across the ashes of your own house and the bodies of your children. The Yaquis would kill me if I suggested such a thing."

"Have you suggested it?" the major asked.

"I'm not Ché Guevara. I'm an anthropologist. Check and see if I ever advocated the violent overthrow of anything."

There was a moment's silence. Finally the major said, "If we are not at cross purposes, will you co-operate?"

"What do you want?"

"Peace and prosperity. Someone stirs up trouble. If you learn who, will you tell us?"

"Sure, if you'll leave me alone. I had my foot in the door last night until you came along. Now after this long alone with you they may never trust me again."

"Agreed," the major said. "We must find some way to communicate."

"Meanwhile," the captain added, "please not to leave Río Yaqui."

Taber shook his head in disbelief. "I have my own snooping to do. That's all an anthropologist does. You want me to spy for you too. And I must do all this without moving. Why not just deport me so I can save bus fare home?"

"I'd rather know exactly where you are."

Taber found himself blinking in the *plaza mayor*. He cocked his hat against the sun and tramped glumly back to the house. "What happened?" Lico asked.

"He thinks we're down here to start a revolution." Saying this, Taber suddenly realized it wasn't true. The captain and the major had not mentioned his companions. Lico and Narciso smoked while the jeep made another dust-spraying turn and tore off back toward the highway.

"Aren't there any telephones here?" Taber asked.

Narciso grinned. "Wire keeps disappearing."

The silence grew unnatural. Finally Taber realized they were too polite to pump him. He took a breath and repeated all he remembered. When he finished they sat, still thoughtfully smoking. "By the way," he added offhandedly, "is there a grain of truth in the captain's suspicions?"

"Yes," Narciso said.

THREE:

Even Lico was surprised. Taber waited.

"I am *kia pweplum*, just a private citizen. I don't know what but something—yes. I feel it."

The sun climbed and they moved to remain in the shade of the *guamúchil* tree. Across the patio the teenage girl was still making tortillas. It seemed to Taber that she and her mother were preparing a great deal of food.

"These Mexicans," Lico asked, "did not ask about me?"

"Not a word."

Lico and his *compadre* looked at each other and Taber men-

tally kicked himself. Why hadn't he said the captain was hot on the Indian's trail too? Then he remembered. The captain had forbidden Taber to leave Río Yaqui.

Lico and his *compadre* began discussing mules. The conversation became so esoteric Taber lost the thread completely. Finally he realized they were deliberately confusing him so they could discuss some private matter. "Going to take a walk," he said, and their relief was evident.

Though he looked wistfully into the *ramada* beside the church nobody invited him in. He hurried past the Mexican *cuartel*, then slowed as he neared the other *ramada* where old men sat stolidly in the shade. Taber limped in and lowered himself delicately onto a bench. He sat, sorting through his limited vocabulary to compose an oration.

"Yesterday my brothers welcomed me. Now their hearts are cold. The *yorí sontám* think I bring trouble. They say they wish peace. I wish peace. There is no peace for me in Río Yaqui. The *yorí sontáo* asks me who talks of war. He says I must not leave Río Yaqui. If I cannot live here then I must die here."

A minute passed. Taber grasped the *ramada's* corner post and pulled himself erect. The elders could very well take his words at face value and kill him.

Narciso's children were scrubbing bugs from the windshield. Suddenly Taber realized the truck was still loaded. He found a chair under the *guamúchil* tree. Lico came from the house with a jug of *bacanora*. Taber stared across the plaza. Heat gave an illusion of motion to the elders who still sat under the *ramada*. A bugle tootled in the Mexican *cuartel*. Overhead a vulture circled. Heat passed through the *guamúchil*, driving Taber down like a tent stake. "A drink?" Lico asked.

Taber considered his shattered plans. He took the jug.

"Have another," Lico said.

Taber glanced toward the motionless elders. "Why not?"

Lico was asking something about mules. Finally he understood. "No," Taber said. "My riding days are over."

"Have another."

Lico was not drinking. "Head start," the Indian explained.

Whenever Taber took booze without codeine or opiates his thinking was not impaired—for a while. Incuriously, he saw sweat run down his trouser legs to form twin puddles.

Narciso embraced his wife and children in unstoic farewell. The truck lurched down a cane-shrouded path.

Sudden commotion in the Mexican *cuartel*.

"Have another."

As the pain faded his mind worked with increasing clarity. Captain thinks I'm on that truck. Can't search it without provoking an incident. Hmmm. Customs *garita* one hundred kilometers south. They can search but what keeps me from jumping off before we get there? Taber grinned as a jeep tore out of the *cuartel*.

"Have another."

Taber could feel *bacanora* splashing his face and chest but he couldn't hit his mouth. Narciso's wife was washing his feet! "*Sontáom!*" she hissed. "*Bamséka!*"

Taber looked up. Mexicans with rifles at port arms were trotting toward him. He tried to stand and felt himself sliding, spinning.

Without even opening his eyes Taber knew he had a headache. His face lay in a puddle of vomit. Suddenly he knew the pain in his midsection was not just from retching. Something was wrong. His shirt front was tattered. He heard the loose-lipped Bronx cheer horses sometimes make. From somewhere—it felt like between his ears—came the soul-shattering, diesel locomotive bray of a mule. When he could think again Taber felt his chest. The front of his body was raw. His hands—my God, they're black! So were his feet. Not dirt black; stained to a deep mahogany. The mule brayed again. "Where am I?" he croaked.

Lico studied Taber's half-dried scabs. "Gringos do everything

different," he said. "I never see a man with saddle sores in front."

"What happened to my hands?"

"Roads full of soldiers last night. They don't care if my brother's hands and feet hang out that blanket. They're looking for a white man and white men never get drunk."

"You've been listening to the wrong missionaries."

Lico lifted him. Painful separations of clothing and scab. Body one concerted ache so total he scarcely noticed the electric twitches from legs to spine. He stood swaying while Lico caught the mules. Hair stiff with vomit. His clothes . . . Lico lifted him onto a mule.

Taber grasped the high pommel with both hands. They started up a narrow wash straight into the sun and he learned he could be still more miserable. He could not stand in the stirrups forever. Gradually his pants contacted the saddle. He gripped horn with one hand and cantle with the other, closed his eyes and gave full rein to his death wish.

Lico was talking. "Very cute, that *yori* captain. Wants to know all about you, yet not once does he ask how you got to Río Yaqui."

Taber struggled up out of pain. "You planned this! Why get me drunk? You could have told me."

"Could you ride head down and quiet through *yori* patrols?"

They topped a ridge and the pain was worse as the mules single-footed down the slope. "How far are we?"

Lico shrugged. "Maybe forty kilometers."

The mules' ears turned. Lico was suddenly alert. "Keep your hat on and don't look," he said.

The airplane came out of the sun and banked around them with one wing nearly touching the ground. The mules spooked and sent rockets of pain up his spine. It was turning for another pass at them when Taber heard shots. The Cessna flipped into wild evasive maneuvers and headed away. Lico turned at right angles to their former course.

"Do we have friends up ahead?"

The Indian grinned. "Maybe somebody does not want strangers looking in his corn field."

Taber wondered if the plane had been looking for pot, poppy, or him. Now he was a fugitive from Mexican law. They'd be even more careless of due process than that FBI asshole. And the Indians? He was on the run. Maybe they'd help him. But how could he ever get off the hook with the Mexicans?

Finally Lico turned and they began climbing again. Greasewood and *pitahaya* gave way to runty *álamos* and *alisos*. They climbed another hour and the mules began trotting. Taber's palms were raw from supporting his weight.

A tiny scum-covered pool appeared. Mules jostled to drink. The cañon was narrowing. Finally water trickled down a cliff. This time the mules drank daintily, taking care not to roil it. Lico spread a blanket and helped him down.

At first he thought it was the pain which woke him but Lico was on his elbow watching a plane cross the cañon a kilometer below them. Taber moved and a startled frog chunked into the water. "Did he see us?"

Lico shook his head. "Up and down like a man plowing. Two, three more furrows and he'll be here." But the plane did not return. Taber tried to remember how much gas a Cessna held.

Lico helped him on the mule. The hangover was gone but he was weak, with the delicate, fluttery feel that at any moment he might shatter and flow off the mule's rump like a shimmering cascade of untempered glass. He retreated into a universe away from the mules' painful progress up washes, down alluvial fans, gradually up into mountains which now sported an occasional pine or *madroño*.

Soon the mules were unwilling to stumble through the dark. Lico hobbled them and in a moment was snoring. Taber wanted to shake him but was afraid if he once moved every nerve would

unravel and twist up in the opposite direction. How did he get into situations like this? Taber knew.

All his life he had drifted. Into a profession because the scholarship was there. Into marriage because she was there. He could never survive another trip. If he lived he'd better bring out some material—and not just another inch of crap for the *anthropology* shelf. But how would he get past the garrison at Río Yaqui?

Somehow Taber lived through the next day. "Can't we slow down?" he finally asked.

"Maybe. If that flying cockroach doesn't come again."

Taber rummaged through his pockets. His pillbox held three of the yellow painkillers. Hurriedly, he searched his other pocket. Twenty-one blue and white capsules. He counted them again. "Lico, the bundle at Narciso's house. My blankets, my clothes, my insulin—you didn't bring it?"

"Was it important?"

"In twenty-one days it'll be very important."

Halfway up a talus slope Lico's mule started a slide. Taber's danced about avoiding rocks and gravel. Pain shot up his spine. He clung blindly to the animal's mane. When it stood quivering and blowing on solid ground Taber swallowed his last three painkillers.

"Your bundle," Lico said. "Somebody will bring it."

"We're not wandering then. We have a destination where people can find us?"

Lico nodded.

So it was true. There was a holdout village!

Two days passed. The airplane had not returned but they still traveled with an eye toward the nearest cover. The road debouched into a broad meadow and Lico seemed especially nervous. They began climbing again and under the trees he relaxed and began singing interminable verses about playing harps and making eyes at girls. The cañon narrowed, nearly shutting out the sun. Would Lico ever finish that silly song?

The cañon came to a dead end. How did Lico intend to get out of here?

In the small flat ahead was the shallow circular pit of an *arrastra* with a hollowed pivot stone and the remains of the path where mules had once dragged a heavy stone to crush ore. Taber studied the cañon. That was a tailings dump. The shaft entrance would be at its head.

Lico spread their gear beside the *arrastra*. They undressed and picked their clothes over for ticks. Taber sat naked in the sun while Lico poked through his scalp, picking lice and popping them with his thumbnails. Then he did the same for the Indian. Behind the tailings dump was a tiny, unbelievably cold waterfall. Taber bathed as quickly as his shattered body could move.

Rice, coffee, and sugar were long gone. There remained some stale tortillas and a small bag of *pinole* but the parched corn meal had so much sugar Taber was afraid of it. He hadn't counted his pills lately. He had eaten so little he probably didn't need insulin. Suddenly he was ravenous. "If we eat tonight, what about tomorrow?"

"One way or another," Lico said, "I'm not worried about tomorrow." He glanced up. At the top of the tailings dump stood an Indian with a rifle. Taber gasped. The mules were grazing a hundred yards away behind another Indian. Abruptly he understood why Lico had been shouting that silly song. "Are they Yaquis?"

"I guess."

"Well, we gain nothing waiting. *Liós emchianabu!*" he shouted and started up the tailings dump. Taber had not taken ten steps before he was in trouble. How high were they? If trees grew there must be air to breathe. He stopped and drew breath, stepped out again, and fell flat on his face!

Faint shimmer. Somebody spooning soup in him. Two men in needle-nosed masks looking down. Their eyes were headlights

careening around a corner to fix mothlike on his own car. Squeal of tires, prolonged grinding crunch. One headlight still pointing crazily into the sky. Uniformed men burning metal from around him.

Mexican army uniforms.

"*Disolución social* is any word or deed which places the government in an unfavorable light, promotes dissension, or foments rebellion."

The uniform was a customs official's. "American tourist my ass! What're you hiding in that truck?"

"Mah ass and ah'll do what ah want with it." She was blond, attractive, and drunk.

"—committee has reviewed your request for a grant and frankly, we feel this vein is just about worked out. However, in view of your past performance—"

"Past performance means he'll head straight for your place so you can play little tin god. But by God you yokels can't just skim over a federal statute!"

"Skimming back and forth. Looking for me or is he looking for pot and poppy?"

"—insulin? How many days for the long ride?"

"Hermes Trismegistus, how this square-wheeled abortion bounces!"

"Lico, for the Saviour's sake, stop with the soup!"

"Three *chapayecas*. Do Jung's archetypes include a needle-nosed boy stealer?"

"Officer, it's bad enough hanging here. Do you have to spray sparks all over me?"

"Foreign agitators abusing our hospitality."

"Jes' a li'l ol' Southern hospitality, honey. If'n you ain't gonna use it somebody else maht as well."

"—can well appreciate your desire to get away for a while but can we justify using the university's money?"

"Called me an asshole right to my face—me, a federal officer!"

"Air speed 110 times 15 gallons divided by 4 days on a mule."

"Can I take a shit without falling off this truck?"

"If I don't eat I don't need insulin."

"Lico, I just *had* some soup."

"Lose a pound a day for 160 days—"

Four *chapayecas*. Why so blue? Needle-nose . . . Never an anteater within five thousand miles of here.

"Go ahead and burn. I can't feel anything."

"—regret to inform you that collision insurance does not cover hospitalization. If we may be of any further service—"

"Nineteen years in the service of my country and I've never seen a situation like this."

"Suspicion of having blue eyes and brown hair."

"Can't see why it makes you no nevermine, honey. You jes' go play with your dirty ole Indians. Ah'll fahnd somethin' to do."

"—but since you no longer drive, the money for a new car would be superfluous anyhow."

"—walking back and forth across that border just as if we didn't have any immigration laws!"

"—too busy flying that thing to tell one mule from another and poppies grown in a corn field are invisible from—"

"—deport those wise-ass Indians back where they come from."

"By my life, death, and defecation, will this truck never stop?"

"—alcohol does not upset the metabolism. The danger is that when drunk one forgets to take his insulin."

"By the mother cross and the father drum, Lico, don't you ever tire of pouring soup into me?"

"A dozen *chapayecas*? Mother of Pearl, what a stink!"

"All-powerful Creator of Tonsils and the Vermiform Appendix, give me ten minutes with a broken slide rule and I'll design a better warning system than pain!"

"Well, you just can't expect 'em to hold the road at that speed."

"—nation within a nation is a luxury which small nations cannot afford."

"North it's liquor, marihuana, or opium. Since you're heading

south this truck has concealed somewhere either .22 ammo, American Levis, or women's underwear."

"—since its discovery in 1922, starvation has no longer been the only way to prolong a diabetic's life."

"Lico, take that *chapayeca's* nose and use it to squirt that soup up your—"

"Anywhere, honey, any time. But not down there and not with you."

"Unfortunately the grants committee has only so much money and there are other, possibly more deserving—"

"—suspicion of speaking Spanish too well."

"You must remember it's a trying time for her too."

"What's she trying today?"

"Lico, I've had enough of that goddam soup!"

Taber sat up abruptly. There was no one in sight. Lice were taking Dracula-sized draughts from him. He scratched his face and found beard. The darkness was total. The next time he opened his eyes he saw fire and heard the thin airy tinkle of a harp. Outside boys with skirts over their Levis tramped monotonously three steps forward, about face, three steps and about face, dancing endless penance for having slept while the Romans arrested their führer. Boy-stealing *chapayecas* skulked in needle-nose masks, making menacing gestures but foiled by the skirts.

These *chapayecas* all wore blue. On the far side one had gone all out with a glistening coverall of electric blue plastic. His mask reminded Taber of that weirdly disturbing one he'd seen down in Río Yaqui.

Taber scratched. Inch-long beard! He scrabbled frantically through his pockets. Fourteen capsules. Not enough insulin and you die. Too much and you die quicker. Taber knew the lab techniques for analyzing blood sugar but he had neither needles, test tubes, nor reagents. But there was another test as old as the pyramids.

He edged back out of sight. Urine puddled at his feet. A fly buzzed. Soon hundreds were drowning in their greed for the

sugar his insulin starved body was rejecting. Taber gulped a pill. How many years had he aged his arteries?

Indians nodded as he wandered. Fires were smoking around the tailings dump. Was he beyond the Cessna's range? A *pascola* offered a hand-rolled cigarette. Taber didn't smoke but he thought it politic to try. It didn't taste like tobacco. More like the alfalfa he'd experimented with as a kid. He took another drag. There was a glowing halo around everything. Taber laughed uproariously at the *pascola's* hoary joke. He was really laughing because the clown had given him a joint of pot. What the hell? He finished it. Walking was painful but he no longer cared.

Things disconnected. He was eating *wakawáki* from a brown-ware bowl with a large iron spoon. The slightly rusty taste seemed the most interestingly unusual thing Taber had ever experienced. The clowns' friendliness made him wonder if he had imagined past slights. Fire under the stew pot blazed fascinatingly. Funny how he'd never noticed flames, the way they curled along, weaving upward like souls seeking salvation, only to fall back at the last moment without escaping the wheel of karma.

"You're feeling better?" a *pascola* asked.

"Much better. Very nice here. Does it snow?"

"Not often. It rains a lot."

Rain. What have they done with the rain? "Moisture evaporates from the sea," he began, "and is carried in the form of clouds to the foot of the mountains where the abrupt rise and lowering of temperature—" To hell with meteorology. He wasn't here to teach. He was here to ask questions. Blow it all if he asked the wrong one. But with the few days he had left he might as well. "Why do *chapayecas* all wear blue here?" He waited for the clown's face to turn blank but the *pascola* only smiled.

"You understand," he said, "they're not real *chapayecas*."

"To be perfectly honest," Taber said, "I don't."

"They are only men pretending to be *chapayecas*."

Taber nodded. "This much I understand but—"

"Well," the Indian continued, "if you've never seen a real *chapayeca* . . ." There was a pregnant pause.

"Forgive me," Taber said. "I do not speak your language well." What he wanted to say was that white men speak in simple declarative sentences which Indians find abrupt and discourteous. "I must admit," he finally said, "that I have never seen a real *chapayeca*. What is a *chapayeca*? A demon who steals boys yes, but—for example, does it bring forth living young or lay eggs?"

"I don't know," the clown said. "You might ask."

"Where would I find one?"

"Over by the next fire."

This conversation kept slipping out of control. Taber took a deep breath. *This's the last time I smoke this stuff*. "Really, I don't speak Yaqui well. I'm not sure that I—"

"Over there. The big one with the blue skin."

Yaquis were fond of jokes but damned if Taber could see the point. He put down his bowl and walked over to the next fire where *chapayecas* relaxed with masks turned to one side, except for the one in electric blue plastic. The man was eating a bowl of *wakawáki* through his mask. Taber felt his hackles rising. No man could maneuver a spoon in and out of a mask *that* neatly.

For the first time Taber understood the mind paralyzing total fear which medieval man experienced at the thought of witchcraft. Sweat spurted as he struggled to control his breathing. Blast and damn marihuana anyhow. "Pull yourself together," he muttered. Abruptly the spasm of fear passed. What was he afraid of? *Chapayecas* sat around calmly eating. None of the Indians seemed frightened.

What was the strange *chapayeca*? Taber was not a zoologist but he knew with absolute certainty that the *chapayeca* had no relationship to any phylum of terrestrial fauna. Several Earth animals walked on two legs and used the other two to grasp things. But none had an electric blue, hairless, and ap-

parently poreless skin, a vaguely human face, with a nose like a proboscis monkey that got caught in a wringer, and larger than human ears which turned toward whoever happened to be speaking.

This being had not evolved on earth. Taber looked away and took deep breaths. He looked at his hands and suddenly the greasy whorls of his fingertips were fascinating as they had never been. He looked back at the *chapyeca*. The needle-nosed demon fluttered rapidly in and out of focus while Taber rubbed his eyes. He's for real, Taber finally decided.

Taber had read enough science fiction to know this ought to be some kind of a historic moment, perhaps a watershed in human history. Here he was, the first civilized man, about to meet an extraterrestrial. The occasion called for a phrase worthy of quote in history books but Taber could not think of one. Did the *chapyeca* speak English or Spanish? He seemed to be understanding Yaqui well enough. No use trying another language and falling flat on his face, Taber decided.

The young clown was watching. Taber had been standing for an awkward length of time. He could think of nothing to say. Finally he said, "May God be very helpful to thee, Father." It was the common Yaqui greeting.

The *chapyeca* looked up and Taber realized with a shock that the pupils of his eyes were square. Both eyes looked forward, giving him stereoscopic vision. Taber tried to remember what square eyes meant. Vertical slitted eyes meant leaping predators. Was a square eye dangerous? The only animal he could remember with square eyes was a penguin. Taber tried to still his hackles with the knowledge that penguins seldom ate humans.

"*Liós emchiókwe,*" the *chapyeca* said—may God help thee also.

There was an awkward pause while Taber tried to bring the stranger back into focus. The *chapyeca* kept retreating to the very limits of vision then zooming in until Taber flinched from the imminent collision. Finally the demon sat still, his entire

body puffing and shrinking like a toad in orgasm. Taber searched for something brilliant to say.

"I'm a stranger here myself," he finally got out. "Have you been here long?"

The *chapayeca* finished spooning stew into his rather small mouth. "About a year," he finally said. His voice seemed human but its epicene quality made Taber wonder. Was this a he, a she, or an it?

Páaros, the young clown, gave Taber a wicked glance. "My friend," he said, "was wondering if you lay eggs."

There was another deliberate pause before the *chapayeca* answered, "No."

Taber could not detect whether the demon was offended or amused. "How do you reproduce?" he finally asked.

Another pause and finally, "As you do."

"Are you male or female?"

A pause. "Male. And you?"

"Also," Taber said. Was the *chapayeca* putting him on? Somehow Taber didn't think so. Perhaps the thought had not occurred to the alien before. Curious, Taber thought, that a person on a strange planet should be so incurious. A sudden thought came to Taber. Was this *chapayeca* a person or a thing? "Is your species dominant on your world?" he finally asked.

The concept was not easy to express in Yaqui and Taber was not surprised when the *chapayeca's* silence continued. "Are there other kinds of beings on your world?" Taber amended.

A pause. "Yes."

"Of these different animals, does any own you or take care of you?"

The *chapayeca* was silent for quite a time. "Sometimes when we are not yet grown another animal cares for us. It walks on four legs."

Dogs, by God!

"But when you are big you care for the other animal?"

The *chapayeca* wiggled his nose and nodded. From the way

he nodded Taber suspected the gesture had been learned from the Indians.

Perhaps disappointed at not provoking something, Páaros walked back to his own fire and joined the rest of the clowns. The other *chapayecas* made room so Taber could sit beside the alien. Taber squatted and was about to make himself comfortable when he suddenly stood up again. "No time," he muttered. "No time to screw around talking to a hallucination. And you're not even a plausible hallucination." He stood, ignoring the pain which shot through him at the sudden movement. "And I hope somebody kicks my ass if I ever smoke another one of these things!" He stumped off into the tunnel and, after some stumbling and fumbling, finally rolled up in his blanket.

FOUR:

Lico and Taber were walking down by the spring the next time they saw the *chapayeca*. "Would you please pass the word not to give me any more 'guanita'?" Taber asked. "It's no good for a painkiller and my grasp on reality is tenuous as it is."

"You mean him?" Lico asked, nodding at the man in the shiny blue coveralls.

"That I do," Taber said. "Where'd he get that blue plastic anyway? Doesn't he ever take it off?"

They came nearer the stranger. "*Liós emchiókwé.*"

"*Liós emchiañabúe,*" the *chapayeca* answered, and stood,

patient as a mule while Taber tried to think of something else to say. For some reason the man in the demon mask robbed him of his composure. Taber studied the mask closely. By the gods, the man's eyes *did* have square pupils!

"You really aren't human, are you?"

"No."

Again Taber's hackles rose. Irrational, he told himself. So he's not human. What the hell was he, a mutation? Impossible. Even mutations bore resemblance to their parent stock and Taber knew perfectly well nothing on Earth could have spawned this sport. Either he's a demon or he's from another planet. Taber found the latter explanation less discomforting. But was he a menace? The Indians weren't afraid. The *chapyeca's* whole being radiated a bucolic placidity which by comparison left Carnation cows discontented.

But there was no getting around the fact that this man—demon—thing, was not from Earth. "What are you doing here?" Taber asked.

"Getting a drink of water."

"That's not exactly what I meant." An idea bored into Taber's consciousness. "Are you by any chance up to the same thing I am? Are you an anthropologist too?"

"What's an anthropologist?"

Taber had often wondered. After fifteen years he sometimes suspected the word meant anyone not at peace with his own race, his own culture, his own family. What was it that induced a man to make a career of living with people different from his own? Was it the same morbid curiosity that turned nuts into psychiatrists? But he had to come up with an answer. "A person who tries to learn how different kinds of people live and think." The answer brought no reaction from the *chapyeca*. "Are you here to learn about us?" Taber finally asked.

"I don't know."

"Do you know where you came from?"

"Yes."

"Is it a secret—something you cannot tell me?"

"No."

"Well?"

There was a long silence. The blue-skinned *chapayeca* was neither impatient nor secretive. More and more his acceptance of any situation reminded Taber of a mule.

"Where did you come from?" Taber finally asked.

"Home."

Taber swallowed his impatience. "Where is that?" he finally asked.

"I don't know."

"You don't know where you came from?" Taber was frankly unbelieving. "How do you expect to get back?"

"I don't know."

"Were you conditioned to forget certain things before you undertook this voyage?" Taber probed.

Silence again.

"Do you remember anything special happening before you left home for here?"

"I got fresh blood."

Taber was inclined to wish he hadn't asked that question.

Like the other Indians, Lico accepted the *chapayeca*. He seemed vaguely embarrassed at Taber's persistent questioning. After a moment he excused himself.

"Are you on your way somewhere?" Taber asked.

"No."

"Does it annoy you if I ask questions?"

"No."

"Would you like to sit down?"

"Yes."

They sat and Taber tried to sort out his questions. Obviously the alien wasn't volunteering any information.

"Did it take long to learn this language?" Taber asked.

"No."

"Do you speak other Earth languages?"

"I don't know."

"¿Habla español?"

"Sí, algo."

"Do you speak English?"

"Yes."

"Fala portuguez?"

"Sim."

"Können Sie Deutsch?"

"Ja."

Taber dredged up phrases from a half dozen other languages without stumping the *chapayeca*.

"How about reading?" he finally asked.

"I don't know."

Taber made a halfhearted gesture toward his pocket but he already knew there was no notebook there. Finally he smoothed the mud around the edge of the spring and scratched BATNAA-TAKA. "What's that in English?"

"In the beginning," the *chapayeca* said.

Taber was silent for a long, thoughtful moment. Then he smoothed the mud again and wrote: /K ur rdG m mD.

"No," the *chapayeca* said, "I cannot read your mind."

"You're the first person to figure out my private shorthand."

The *chapayeca* rubbed a purple-green scar beneath his right ear. Taber had assumed it was a vestigial gill slit until he noticed there was none on the other side of the alien's face. "It's in here," the alien said.

"Something which translates?"

"Yes."

"Someone put it in there just for this trip?"

"I don't know."

Taber sighed. "If one language is as good as another," he finally said, "let's use English or Spanish. My Yaqui's not very good."

"All right."

Taber studied the *chapayeca*. At first he had assumed the

electric blue plastic was clothing but there were no lines where it terminated. He could see no pores but the *chapayeca* had a decidedly nonhuman odor. Not disagreeable but—different. The alien had to be wearing clothing unless he had no sexual equipment. "Is it?" Taber asked.

"Is what?"

Either the *chapayeca* wasn't falling into Taber's trap or he really couldn't read minds.

"Clothing," Taber explained. "Or is that your skin?"

The *chapayeca* worked a finger around his neck and a crack appeared. When he removed his hand the garment again blended imperceptibly with his poreless blue skin.

"May I touch you?" Taber asked.

"Yes."

Taber put out his hand. Startled, he tried again. It was like trying to move under water. A yard away Taber could move normally but as he neared the *chapayeca's* body the air attained substance. Finally, moving his hand very slowly, he managed to feel smooth dry skin. It felt feverish. The alien's body temperature must be higher.

"Why is it hard for me to touch you?" But before the *chapayeca* could answer Taber had guessed. "Would you let me throw something at you?"

"Yes."

"Will it backfire and harm me?"

"No."

Taber retreated a few paces. It would cost him a week's pain to really zing it in so he merely tossed. The stone curved in an unnatural, foreshortened arc like a straight line seen through telephoto lens. Taber pondered the implications. He had a sudden conviction that anything from bullet to bazooka shell would come to the same gentle stop an inch short of the *chapayeca's* smooth blue skin.

"The thing under my ear," the *chapayeca* explained.

With that sort of equipment Taber guessed he'd be calm too.

He'd been piddling about, trying to find a few hungry holdouts so he could publish instead of perishing. And right here in front of him was— Handle it properly and Taber would never hurt for money again!

Money! It could not ease pain. It couldn't renew a marriage. But it could get him away—someplace where he didn't have to stumble over the broken pieces. Maybe he could even do something for the people here in Xbampo.

"Do you know what money is?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Is it used on your planet?"

"Yes."

"Are you rich?"

"No."

"Would you like to be?"

"Yes."

"Something tells me this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

The *chapayeca* wrinkled his needle nose. Taber wondered if the gesture was meant to be a smile.

The constant trickle of water masked outside sounds so that Taber had little more than a second's warning before the rumbling roar engulfed them. "Quick," he shouted. "Hide under the tree!"

The *chapayeca* was across the path with one bound and under the *madroño* with another. Taber scurried his best and was nearly in the tree's shadow when an airplane burst over the cañon rim. He didn't recognize the model but it was larger and faster than a Cessna, not really suited for ground searches, but probably it had a longer range. The plane passed over the opposite cañon rim and was gone as suddenly as it had appeared. They waited under the *madroño* until Taber guessed it was not coming back.

"What is it?" the *chapayeca* asked.

"An airplane," Taber said, and gave him an odd look. "You've never seen one?"

"No."

And the alien had been here a year.

Taber felt a sudden churning of his digestive tract. What was he going to tell the Indians? Minutes passed and he guessed the plane would not be returning. How many people had been in sight up on the tailings dump? "Better get back up there and see," he said.

"See what?"

Moved quickly enough, Taber thought. Three possible conclusions: 1. He wasn't really frightened. 2. He has more presence of mind than I do. Or 3. He really *can't* read my mind.

"Let's go see what people have to say," Taber said.

When they reached the top of the tailings dump there was no one in sight. The tunnel entrance was jammed with men and women. With the *chapayeca* on his heels Taber crowded in and promptly bumped someone. "Licol" he called.

"Over here."

More bumps and fumbblings as people made room and passed him on. By the time he reached his friend, Taber's eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness. From the men in costume he guessed a dance had been in progress. "Did he see us?"

"Unless he was blind," Lico said.

"Lico, we've got to talk with the old men—the *kobanaó* and all his staff."

The Indian soberly agreed.

"You too," Taber said to the *chapayeca*. "You'd better hear it."

Within minutes Taber stood before a group of seated men in a small gallery off the main tunnel. Four of them, as near as he could tell by the single candle, were old. Two were middle-aged, and the last was younger than Taber. Taber discovered himself reacting instinctively against the young man's air of barely controlled violence.

Lico was nervous. Taber looked at the *chapayeca* and

wished he could bore through the mulelike placidity to know what the alien was really thinking. He faced the glowering elders and sifted through his stock of honorifics for proper speech-making phrases. After a moment he gave up and merely said what was on his mind. Beat them to the punch, he thought. If they ever got him on the defensive Taber knew he had none.

"This is the first airplane to pass over," he began. "An airplane means trouble. Lico and I came here and trouble followed us."

The elders made no comment.

Taber took a breath and continued. "Think this and you may be right. But I think something else. I think of all the others who travel between here and Río Yaqui. The *yori* captain down there may be a cuckold. He may be lower than a *virsha*'s son, but he is not stupid.

"That captain senses unrest. He does not know the cause but he intends to learn. For a time he thought I might be the cause. But soon he will remember there was unrest in Río Yaqui before I got there. Possibly he will note that there is still unrest after I am gone.

"You must do what you think best for your people and your village. You plan to kill us because we brought the airplane. Do it and the airplane will come again. Soldiers will ask why we do not come down from the mountains. If I were *kobanaó* I'd think long and hard before I drew the soldiers to my village.

"And while thinking," Taber continued, "I'd realize that *yori* captain is not blind. In Río Yaqui I noticed a strange *chapayeca* mask. Others saw it. Do they all keep secrets or was it a *yori* who sold Man-who-does-not-drink-water?"

Taber didn't like to rub their noses in it but he felt it necessary to remind these men that a Mexican had been sheltering their onetime leader the day he was betrayed by a woman of his own people.

He squinted into the candle, trying to read the faces opposite him. The older men were noncommittal but the young man's lowering face grew darker. Where had he seen that face before?

The man hated Taber and people don't usually feel that strongly about strangers. He thought a moment, wondering what to say next.

"I am going to sleep now," Taber finally said. "If I am alive tomorrow morning we shall talk again." He turned and stalked out quickly before anyone could stop him. Lico and the *chapyeca* did not follow.

Taber rolled up in his blankets and wondered if his studied arrogance would carry the day. The young man on the *kobanaó's* staff hated him for reasons unknown. But Taber had diverted the older men's reasoning down a new path. Give them time to discuss it and become really worried. Then just when they had everything threshed out, toss another blockbuster. But what could be say next?

Taber wished he could sleep. Had he taken his insulin? Yes. He was hurting no worse than usual. What was he going to suggest when it came time to talk to the *kobanaó* again?

Taber still didn't know what the hell was going on in Río Yaqui. He had discovered an alien but the Yaquis weren't making a big deal out of it. The Mexicans didn't know of his existence or it'd be in every paper and on every channel. The captain knew something was wrong. So did Taber. But what? These Indians were minding their own business. He sighed and cursed a few times as his body unwound with its customary twitches and jerks.

He was almost asleep when he began to suspect where he had first seen the man who disliked him—and where the young man had seen him: sitting in a chair talking with the *yorí* captain. Taber was willing to swear the young man had been sitting with his back to the captain, pretending he wasn't there. Taber had shoved all his guilt off on someone who'd blown the gaff in Río Yaqui with a strange *chapyeca* mask. Now he remembered who had been wearing it.

Taber still had not slept when they came. Two men silently led him back to the gallery. Lico and the *chapyeca* were there.

Taber wondered if they had been there since he left. How long had it been—two, three hours? Irrelevantly, Taber caught himself wondering about the *chapayeca's* feet. How had he managed that leap across the path of the *madroño*? Were those feet or were they shoes? Taber watched a moment and detected a slight wrinkle as the alien changed position. If they were shoes they were skintight.

The five-toed feet had no nails but were within the realm of human possibilities, with a heel bone which protruded no more than a Bantu's, and an arch no higher than Nijinsky's. The leg from knee to ankle seemed a bit long. The *chapayeca* could probably outrun a human. But could he outlast him on the human's own ground? Too many factors: relative gravity, metabolism, oxygen. Was the *chapayeca* breathing oxygen? Taber studied him a moment and noted a slightly longer than human interval in the rise and fall of the alien's chest. He ate human food. Was he oxidizing or did his metabolism revolve around nitrogen? No. That didn't make chemical sense.

The *kobanaó* spoke and Taber felt a fleeting sympathy for him. The old man was holding the silver headed cane which meant this was an official pronouncement. After a moment Taber gave up. Whenever a man became a government official he lapsed into unintelligibility, no matter what the language. Finally the old man was silent.

"Do you wish a well thought out, honest answer?" Taber asked.

Apparently they did.

"Then you'll have to use simpler words or try some other language," Taber said.

"You seem to know who brought the airplane," the young man accused.

Oh! Now Taber knew why the language was so involved. He tried to think of some way to offer suggestions without shredding their already tattered dignity. For the moment he was on top but he wouldn't stay there long unless he did some fast

talking. And then he'd have to do some fast getting out. How much insulin did he have left? The thought of insulin forced two bits of information together with an almost audible click.

"You sir," he addressed the glowering young man. "You left Río Yaqui after I did. Did you bring my bundle from Narciso's house?"

There was a moment's silence before the young man reluctantly nodded.

And now Taber knew why the young man hated him. Not distrust because he'd sat with the *yori* captain. Simple elementary psychology.

"Many factors enter into our problem," Taber said. Cute, he thought, the deep dark way I make it *our* problem. "Some things in my bundle can have a great bearing. I must see if they are still there." *Help him to save face.* "The Mexicans may have searched the house first," he added.

The elders glanced at each other and the young man left the gallery. Taber stood through the tense silence. The gallery was barely high enough to stand upright and the smoke from the slightly rancid tallow was beginning to collect. Taber tried to ignore it, along with the elders' uninhibited attitude toward the consequences of bean eating. Finally the young man returned.

Taber opened the bundle and pawed through it. *The son of a bitch! I gave him his chance.* He straightened and faced the council.

"No matter what others may say, I know you are not simple savages," he began. "You speak Spanish as well as I do. Most of you read. Probably you speak English. You have traveled and worked in the big cities. You know about doctors and pills.

"Simple people think a doctor gives a pill and it cures whatever is wrong. I do not insult you with such an idea. You are men of the world. You know there are many sicknesses and each has its own kind of pill." Taber hesitated a moment to see how this new idea was going over.

"Those of you who've had dealings with *yori* doctors know the

medicine which saves a sick man can kill a man who is well. Is there someone here in the village who has—" He searched for Yaqui words and finally translated the Latin literally: "Someone who pisses honey?" From their mystified looks Taber guessed the elders had never heard of diabetes mellitus.

"If a well man took my medicine he would get drunk. Just before passing out he would become very thirsty and ravenous for something sweet. He would wake again only by a special favor of his saints." Taber looked at the young man who glared back for a moment, then looked away. The elders shifted uncomfortably.

"This medicine means my life," Taber said. "It means death for anyone else." He described the insulin and painkiller pills. "Perhaps it fell out of the bundle," Taber said. "Perhaps it can be found if everyone looks carefully. And while you're looking," he added, "keep your eyes open for a thousand rounds of .22 ammo which I was bringing as a gift for you gentlemen. If you don't mind, I shall now rest for a while." He smiled an evil smile at the young man, bowed to the elders, and exited with the knowledge that he now had one more enemy. Taber wondered what he could have done without that young man's unwitting cooperation.

Condition Red had apparently ended when he found his bed in the main tunnel. He lay down alone and succumbed to a fit of the shakes. What now?

Taber had no real confidence in his skill as a problem solver. He had always drifted through life and waited for problems to solve themselves or go away. But this village wasn't going to go away. Nor would that young man go away. If the elders punished him he would avenge himself against Taber. If he got off, shame would drive him into an even more unreasoning hatred of the man who'd shamed him.

And the *chapyeca*? How did he get here? A ship? Taber wondered what a space ship would look like. Life and Look had pretty well established that there was no life in the solar

system. That left only some other star. From somewhere Taber remembered Alpha Centauri, the nearest, was some four light-years away. A ship that could travel that distance would bear no more resemblance to Earth's rockets than Apollo to a wheelbarrow.

What was the alien doing here? Stranded? Taber thought of nineteenth-century whalers who blithely jumped ship to live with cannibals until another less overbearing captain should happen along. The *chapyeca* seemed willing to answer any question he could be made to understand but unless Taber perfected his technique it could take months to learn anything.

"¿Nacho?" It was Lico. The giant bedded down beside him.

"I know I shouldn't have but what else could I do?" Taber asked.

The Indian sighed. "I don't know," he finally said. "People will watch out for you here but someday you gotta watch your own back."

"Speaking of that someday," Taber said, "if that bastard doesn't come up with my pills . . ."

"He found them and the ammo damn quick. Here's your pills. I brought your other things too."

Taber sat up and fumbled while Lico lit a candle stub. The pills had been opened and several were missing from each bottle. Taber uncharitably hoped somebody was cursing and straining around the colossal constipation which came with an overdose of painkiller. Loutish fingers had broken something trying to open the Minox so there would be no pictures.

"How did the *kobanaó* ever get such a thoroughgoing son of a bitch on his staff?" Taber asked.

"He didn't. Tetá put himself on. Nobody likes it but they're afraid of him."

"He must have friends," Taber decided.

Lico nodded. "Let's not talk any more," he said.

Taber glanced around the gallery, suddenly aware that he could see nothing beyond the feeble bubble of illumination

which Lico's candle provided. "Right you are," he said. Lico blew out the candle and they tried to sleep.

Next morning they breakfasted on *carnitas* and beans with the usual yardwide tortillas. The bits of roasted pork were less gamy than Taber had expected. Wild pig, in fact, had less fishy after-taste than the bacon he'd been getting in the city. He wished for eggs but he had not heard a cock crow since arriving at Xbampo.

There was the peculiarly sharp and penetrating sound of a Yaqui drum. Taber and Lico left their breakfast and went out into the tailings dump. Some distance from the "mother" cross a new post had been set up. Across its top was another, notched and lashed like the bar of a T. Taber looked anxiously at Lico and knew he had guessed its function.

The drum tatted again and two of the middle-aged men on the *kobanaó's* staff came, leading a third between them.

Taber wanted to go away. He'd given the man his chance to back out gracefully. The stiff-necked fool had not taken it. Now his arms were being bound to the cross-arm. Taber looked to see if anyone was bringing firewood, then realized this was not a capital offense like witchcraft.

The drum tatted again and the white haired *kobanaó* appeared with his badge of authority wrapped round his waist. Without further ceremony he unwrapped it and began.

From the corner of his eye Taber saw impassive faces, here and there a faintly satisfied look. Other faces, mostly young, were not satisfied. Obviously, they didn't feel strong enough to rescue their leader. Or had their leader let them down with his petty thievery? How had they planned on covering up the theft? Sweat popped and Taber felt sudden weakness as he knew how they'd planned on covering up. Now he knew why Lico had been so nervous the last day or two on the trail.

FIVE:

The young man took his whipping in silence, bracing himself against the ground. His back was well bloodied now. Calf muscles trembled and his knees began to buckle. Taber was no stranger to pain. He knew exactly what the young man was experiencing. He edged around behind a rock and quietly lost his breakfast.

When his eyes stopped watering Taber turned back toward the *plaza mayor* and faced the sardonic smile of Páaros, the clown who had introduced him to the *chapayeca*. "Hangover?" the young *pascola* asked.

Taber shook his head. "Still not feeling very well," he explained.

"Some things around here make me sick too," Páaros said.

Taber felt a twinge of apprehension then shrugged. What the hell, how could he become more involved than he was now? "Which side are you on?" he asked.

"Like the *yori* captain down in the delta, I want peace and prosperity for Río Yaqui."

"I didn't see you around when he said that."

"He says it every chance he gets."

"And you don't believe him?"

"Of course I believe him. The only question is, peace and prosperity for whom?"

"Don't the Mexicans treat you fairly?"

"Once *all* Río Yaqui belonged to us, not just half."

Taber sighed. "Once Hollywood belonged to the Mexicans. Once Israel belonged to the Canaanites. Once my house belonged to me."

"It isn't fair."

"You're damn right it isn't!" Taber snarled, thinking of his house. "But politics has been defined as the Art of the Possible."

"What does that mean?"

"It means things could be worse."

"Like what?"

"Why ask me? Ask your father and mother. They'll remember what it was like to be on the run through these mountains, every man's hand against them, outrunning cavalry only to be surprised by string and paper airplanes that shot real bullets. If you young guys are so keen on fighting I know a country could use a few of you. But before you drag your folks into it, remember they already had their share."

"You talk just like the old men here."

"Every old man was young once. It wouldn't hurt you to hear how it feels to pick your wife and children's bodies from the ashes of your home. Of course though, you can win this way."

There's ten thousand of you and only forty million Mexicans. Your air force can handle it easy."

"We've got something better than an air force," the young clown said smugly.

"Sure," Taber sneered. "The Will To Win. You've been reading the wrong books. If the gringos were as scared of Vietnam as they were of the Japanese you'd see how long it took to turn the whole country into a gulf.

"You guys up here cease being a minor nuisance; just put one good scare into the Mexicans and see how long it takes to exterminate you. If I live through it I'll see that the UN passes a resolution of condemnation. It'll look nice on your wife's tombstone."

"We have the will to win too," Páaros said, "but I was talking about something better than an air force—something the Mexicans don't have. Something not even the gringos have."

"I'll bet," Taber said. And as he said it he was suddenly willing to bet he was wrong.

Ten minutes later Taber had cornered the *chapayeca* down by the spring. "Have you been selling arms to these Indians?" he demanded.

"No."

"Have you been selling anything?"

"No."

"Have you been giving them away?"

"It is not in my nature to make gifts without some hope of return."

"Then what have you done that makes these young studs think they can take the whole Mexican army?"

"I don't know."

"Balls!" Taber growled.

"Yes."

"Yes what? Oh. Do you know what emotions are?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any?"

"Yes."

"Don't you become annoyed when I question you?"

"No."

"How do you feel now?"

"All right."

Taber sighed. What kind of a mind did this *chapayeca* have? "By the way," he said, "do you have a name?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

The *chapayeca* spoke a paragraph of hissing tonalities only slightly longer than the legal description of a lot in Florida.

"That's all of it?" Taber asked.

"Yes."

"Somehow it seems not too well adapted for Earth mentalities. I think I'll call you Chap. Do you know what that means?"

"Yes."

"Have you any objections?"

"No."

Taber pondered Chap's bland neutrality and it occurred to him that mules and very young children have something in common. "What is your average life span in Earth years?" he asked.

The *chapayeca* was silent. When Taber had finally decided he wasn't going to answer the alien said, "I don't know."

"How old are you?"

"I don't know."

Taber ran both hands through his thinning hair. "Are you young, middle aged, or old? Are you a child?"

The *chapayeca* thought a moment. "My skin is still blue," he said. "I guess I'm not old."

"Are you young?"

"My skin is blue."

Which, Taber guessed, settled that. "Do the young of your species act impulsively, in ways calculated to shock their elders?"

"Yes."

"May we safely assume you're past that stage?"

"Is anyone?"

Taber gave up.

"You must have come here in a ship of some sort," he finally resumed. "Where is it?"

"Safely hidden."

"Will it still run?"

"No."

"What's wrong with it?"

"I don't know."

"Have these Indians ever seen it?"

"I don't know."

"Could they find it now?"

"No."

"Did you do anything spectacular while landing—fiery trails in the sky or somesuch?"

"The ship is invisible."

"But it's on the ground—not orbiting somewhere?"

"Yes."

"Near here?"

"Yes."

"How long after you landed did these Indians find you?"

"Three days."

"Were they looking for you?"

"I think they were hunting deer. It was this time a year ago and at first they thought I was a man in that costume they wear."

"Don't you find it an odd coincidence that you resemble a mythical demon on this planet?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Maybe we came before."

"Did you steal boys that time?"

"I don't know."

"Well," Taber sighed, "you're stealing them this time. Do you

know what'll happen to most of the young men who start a shindy with the Mexicans?"

"They'll die."

"Do you care?"

"Death is irreversible. Life offers more alternatives."

"Have you warned them?"

"Yes."

Something whirred overhead. At first Taber thought it was a bullet, then realized he'd actually seen it flying. A stone, he decided, but it must be from a sling or catapult. Before he could become alarmed another was heading straight for him, coming from the trees somewhere behind the *chapayeca*.

Without looking Chap put out an arm. The stone suddenly slowed and dropped gently into his outstretched hand. He handed it to Taber. Taber studied the smooth stone and remembered what Lico had said about watching his back. "You do that like it happened all the time," he said.

"It does," the alien said.

Lights went on in Taber's head. "Those young fire-eaters think they can put you out in front and Mexican bullets won't hit them!" He hesitated a moment. "Will it work?"

"No."

"Can you expand the radius of action so that damping effect could protect more people?"

"No. You're at the edge of it now; far enough to get hit but close enough to spoil aim." Taber was about a yard from the alien. Hackles rose as he realized a stone slung at him from the opposite direction would be slowed very slightly. "Would you mind walking behind me?" he asked. "I think we'd better get back up to the *plaza mayor* where there're more people." The *chapayeca* obediently fell in behind Taber as he picked his painful way up the steps to the top of the tailings dump.

"Someone threw a stone at me," Taber told the assembled elders. "I realize you can't be personally responsible for everyone's

conduct but it's to your interest that I stay alive. I know now what the *yorí* captain is nervous about because I know what your young men are planning. I trust you gentlemen are old and wise enough to know how hopeless it would be." From their agonized looks Taber guessed several elders had not reached this conclusion without much soul searching. "You have dealt fairly with me so I wish to be honest with you. The *chapyeca* seems a decent enough fellow but he draws out the evil in your young men. There will be no peace until he leaves this village and this country for good. I too must leave so the *yorí* captain will know the evil is gone and that I have taken it with me. I shall wait outside now while you discuss this."

Lico was unhappy when Taber left the council chamber. "We just got here," he protested.

"You can come back. Can you guide us to the border without that *yorí* captain getting wise?"

Lico thought a moment. "Not easy," he finally said. "Have to circle around lots of places."

"How long would it take?"

"Two, three weeks. Depends on you."

Taber shuddered at the prospect of three weeks on muleback. Before he could ask more questions the *kobanao's* messenger called him back.

"It is best that you go away," the old man said. "We will do what we can to see that you are not molested on the way home."

"And the *chapyeca*?" Taber asked.

"He was here for a year before the airplane came. He has done nothing. He can stay."

Walk out on this without even a picture! "The demon must go too," Taber protested. "I know he has done nothing but your young men would use him in war against the *yorim*. You have stopped Teta—maybe. But as long as the *chapyeca* is here tempting your young men there will be no peace.

"There is another, greater danger," Taber continued. "You are

of the People. You see ghosts, demons, magic people all the time. It is nothing to you. But the *yorim* have no ghosts or demons."

The old men were frankly unbelieving.

"It's true," Taber insisted. "I've traveled much—maybe even farther than you venerable gentlemen. And yet, in my whole life this is the first demon I've seen.

"This is a nice place here. You walk in good streets without *yorim* to bother you—present company excepted. But the *yor*i captain knows of this place. Of course, he didn't know exactly where until that airplane came. But if it became known that here could be found a real demon . . ." Taber let the words hang. He cleared his throat and fumbled to give them time to digest this news.

"Not only would Mexicans come," he continued, "this village would be overrun with scientists from every country on Earth. You'd have an invasion of gringos. On their heels would be the Russians." Taber hesitated and drew breath. "And don't be surprised," he added, "if some day soon these hills are overrun with thousands of armed Chinese, all looking for the *chapayeca* demon!"

There was a collective gasp from the council and Taber knew he'd made his point. The Yaquis shared with Mexicans a common loathing of anything Chinese. An armed Chinaman was not a danger; he was a sacrilege.

The *kobanaó* shook his white head confusedly. "But the *chapayeca*," he complained, "we can't just turn him out to starve."

"He wouldn't starve as long as he stayed with me," Taber said.

"You—you'd take him with you?"

"Of course," Taber said.

"He eats a lot," the *kobanaó* warned.

"By the Mother Cross," Taber swore, "as long as I have life and money the *chapayeca* will not starve."

"Maybe he won't want to go," the *kobanaó* said.

"Why not ask him?"

The *kobanaó* and his staff were so bent out of shape no one could think of an answer. Unsporting of him, Taber knew, to do them out of the pleasure of endlessly discussing a problem, but he was in a hurry. Irrelevantly, he remembered the epitaph in a Kipling story about "here lies a fool who tried to hustle the East." Were East Indians any more dilatory than Amerinds, he wondered.

Finally, after some halfhearted attempts at discussion the *chipayeca* was summoned. The *kobanaó* took a firm grip on his silver headed cane and straightened himself. "Do you wish to go away with don Ignacio?" he asked.

Without a moment's hesitation the *chipayeca* said, "No."

"Are you out of your skull?" Taber wailed. Did this alien really have a brain? How did he think? Frantically, Taber sifted through his German which was limited mainly to snatches of popular songs. "*Willst Du reich werden?*" he finally managed.

The idea of getting rich bridged a synapse somewhere in the alien's mind. "Ja," he said.

"*Denn Du musst mit mir kommen.*"

The elders were glaring at Taber but he suspected they'd rather die than admit they didn't understand what was going on. Probably they thought he was speaking some weird kind of English. Which, of course, he was.

The *chipayeca* faced the *kobanaó* again. "I did not understand the question," he said. "I will go with don Ignacio. He promises to make me rich."

Why did I bother with another language? Taber wondered.

Though they were plainly unhappy, the elders did not refuse the alien's request. Taber hunted up Lico who was sunning himself at the tunnel entrance and they began planning.

There was no great abundance of food in the village but by next morning they had rounded up staples for three weeks, providing nobody tired of *pinole*, rice, and beans plus the half pound of intensely hot *pico de pájaro* chili which Lico found in-

dispensable. Taber was unhappy about the beans for he expected enough pain on muleback without provoking the nerve spasms which came whenever his lower bowel was distended with gas. But meat was in short supply and there was none dried.

Their two mules were fattened and rested but none could be found for the *chapayeca*. Finally Lico, with Taber's money, swung the loan of a horse which Lico was to drop off somewhere else along the way back.

All was in order for an early start. Taber mounted his mule without help. Feeling rather proud of this, he waited while Lico gave the *chapayeca* a crash course in riding. Ground school finished, the alien approached from the left, gathered up the reins, and raised his leg.

The horse shied. The alien made a surprisingly nimble recovery and tried again. The horse shied again. Lico held its head and soothed the horse while the alien tried again. Seconds later Lico rolled out of the way, barely escaping the rearing horse's hoofs. After a few well-chosen remarks the Indian mounted his mule and caught the horse. A half hour and several tries later it was obvious that there would never exist a rapport between *chapayeca* and horse. "Must be his smell," Taber guessed.

Lico regarded the *chapayeca* with some awe and Taber knew the alien's strangeness was impressing itself on the Indian for the first time. He wondered if dogs would howl at the demon's approach. Resignedly, Lico ground-tied the horse upwind and began introducing the *chapayeca* to his mule.

The mule was also a xenophobe.

An hour later they headed back out of the cañon, the *chapayeca* walking in front, followed by Lico riding the skittish horse and leading a very nervous mule. Taber followed far enough behind so his mount could not catch the full force of the alien's scent. Still, the mule kept looking back up at Taber, showing an extraordinary whiteness of eye.

They reached the cañon mouth and the wind shifted to their rear. Lico reversed the order of march, putting the *chapayeca*

behind so the animals would be constantly reminded of his scent. But when they tried at noon the horse and mules still refused to carry the blueskinned alien. "How're your feet holding out?" Taber asked.

"All right," Chap said.

"Are you tired?"

"No."

"Will your shoes wear out?"

"What shoes?"

Taber sighed and tried not to think. They rode on through the afternoon heat and Taber daydreamed in and out of his private thoughts, rousing at times to curse the pain which lurked to remind him that he no longer had any business traveling in this fashion. His mule still refused to settle down, insisted on turning its head to look back. It wasn't until late afternoon that Taber realized the mule was looking back even when the *chapayeca's* scent came from an entirely different direction.

He slapped his mule into a trot and caught up with Lico. "We're being followed," he said.

"I know. Don't bunch up."

"Why?"

"If he could count on getting all of us . . ."

Conscious of a prickling between his shoulder blades, Taber held his mule until Lico was several hundred yards ahead. The *chapayeca* caught up and passed without breaking step. "We're being followed," Taber said.

"I know."

"You know who?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"His heart."

"What?"

"It beats with a slight irregularity when he is excited. It sounded the same way when he was being whipped."

"You can hear his heartbeat when we can't even see him?"

"Can't you?"

"Not really," Taber said. He suddenly remembered the alien was invulnerable so there was no point in keeping his distance. "What else do you know about him?"

"He's hiding. I think he doesn't want us to see him."

"I shouldn't be surprised," Taber said. "Is he armed?"

"No."

Taber was just beginning to let some of the tension out of his spine when the alien added, "He has a rifle, of course."

Taber wondered what the *chipayeca* considered real armament.

All that afternoon they traveled up a valley which gradually narrowed as it rose to the level of the surrounding hills. The ground was poor, with barely enough soil to hold the rocks together. Trees were stunted and few. Taber gave silent thanks for the open country which forced their pursuer to keep his distance. What would he do when they were in timber again? Taber worried at various schemes to protect himself when they had to make camp. Shadows were lengthening and the mules needed frequent prodding to keep up their unhurried amble. Taber wondered if they'd made fifteen miles.

They passed through a thicket of *carrizos* where underground water encouraged the canes' growth. Taber thought uneasily of ambush but Lico was out of the other side before he and the *chipayeca* entered. On due reflection Taber guessed Lico was right. Their pursuer had lost enough face back in the village. He wouldn't risk assassinating only one of them and leaving the others to tell tales. While the mule lunged through the thicket Taber realized it was time for his daily insulin. Poking through his pocket for the lipstick container, he found his jackknife. Thoughtfully, he withdrew it and cut off a section of the hollow bamboo-like *carrizo*.

When the mule burst from the other side of the thicket Taber's arms were free again. He swallowed his insulin and began

trimming the cane until he had a flutelike tube a half inch thick and some eight inches long.

Darkness came and, though the horse was willing to stumble on, the mules refused. They had emerged from the valley and were now on a vast mesa which offered no concealment. "Might as well camp," Lico shouted.

While the Indian was parceling out their slender rations Taber poked through the provisions until he found what he was looking for. He spread out his saddle skirt and poured out a half fistful of powder, then used a twig to mix it with the fluffy ashes of their fire.

"Going to play *wokhimari*?" Lico asked.

"No," Taber said. He had seen the old no-holds-barred game of Yaqui football with one player to a side. Fortunes and occasionally wives had been lost over his ability to get the ball over a goal contrary to the wishes of opposing sorcerers chanting and blowing their best magic at him.

Lico gave him a thoughtful look and studied the darkness. Now that their cooking fire had gone out it was possible to see a hundred yards or so under the stars which illuminated this moonless night with the cold voluptuousness of high altitude. "Better not sleep close together," the Indian said.

"Bullets won't hurt Chap here," Taber said.

"I'd heard it but I didn't believe it," Lico said. "In that case he'd better stay with you."

Taber was about to protest when Lico continued: "I can move quicker than you. Also, I don't know if he really has anything against me."

"What does that mean?"

"Means if he thought he could sneak in here and kill you without me seeing it—" Lico frowned. "But if he knows he can't kill the *chapayeca* . . ."

"Chap, what has Teta tried to do with you in the past?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all? Has he ever talked to you?"

"Yes."

"What'd he ask?"

"He asked if more of my kind were coming."

Taber felt a momentary prickle of sweat as he realized that he had never asked this question. "What'd you tell him?"

"I said I don't know."

"It figures," Taber said. "Do you know the difference between the truth and a lie?"

"Yes."

Taber thought a moment, trying to sort out several things. Finally he said, "To hell with it. Maybe I can get some sleep."

Lico shouldered his blankets and strolled a hundred yards off toward the horse and mules who stood in mournful companionship, occasionally cropping a mouthful of sparse grass. Taber unrolled his own blankets and lay down. The *chapayeca* squatted beside Taber and turned his needle-nosed face toward the stars.

"Which one is yours?" Taber asked.

"I don't know."

"Doesn't it worry you to be lost this far from home?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

Taber looked into the darkness to see if Lico was safely away. Moving his lips, subvocalizing in less than a whisper, he said, "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," the *chapayeca* said.

"Can you hear the man who's following us?"

"Yes."

"Is he near?"

"No."

"Where is he?" Taber insisted.

"Washing at the last waterhole."

Taber calculated. At least two miles down in the valley, he guessed. "Washing his hair?" he suddenly guessed.

"It sounds like it."

"That's a ritual purification," Taber explained. "Afterward he'll come to kill me. Do you care?"

"You asked me if I wish to become rich."

"That's my boy," Taber grinned. "Now listen to my heart and my breathing."

"They're so loud I can hardly hear Teta's."

"Good," Taber said. "Now let's get back to truth and lies. I'm going to let you in on a secret. When a human tries to lie his breathing is faster. His heart also beats faster. It is something we cannot control. Do you know that I speak truth when I say I mean you no harm, that I will act so that we may both soon be rich?"

"Yes."

"You know I speak truth then. Now tell me, how can I know if you are being honest with me?"

"You can't."

SIX:

"I can't?"

"I could tell you that I always speak truth but there would be no more way for you to prove it than there is for me to know if you can control your heart and respiration."

Taber sighed. At least the alien wasn't quite so stupid as he seemed. "Where is the man who follows us now?"

"Just coming over the cañon rim. He's listening for us. You people don't hear very well, do you?"

"Some of us hear better than others," Taber evaded. Suddenly he realized it was the first question the alien had ever asked.

"You don't trust me and I don't trust you," he said. "Do you trust the man who comes to kill me?"

"No."

"Will you help me?"

"If I do and you lose he will be angry."

"He can't hurt you. Why are you afraid?"

"I must have food."

Taber decided he had no answer for that one. "Is Lico awake?" he finally asked.

"He is trying but his breathing becomes heavy and regular."

Poor Lico, Taber thought. One invalid on the way up and now he's saddled with two hopeless bunglers.

"Where's our wandering boy right now?"

"About halfway. Soon he will hear me answering you."

"You will not help me?"

"I cannot," the alien said.

"In that case, find me a rock before you go."

"I cannot."

"Why?"

"I cannot see in this light."

"How do you get around?"

"Echoes."

"I see," Taber said. "Well, you'd better run along now."

Silently the alien withdrew. Taber swallowed a couple of pain pills. If he calculated right they'd let him move a trifle more freely without slowing him down any worse than he was already. He felt around in the darkness and found a smooth rock which fitted his hand. He caught the skirt of his saddle and dragged it up on his chest so the horn projected over his throat, nearly touching his chin. He felt in his pocket to make sure the *carrizo* cane was ready. He found a sweaty handkerchief and laid it across his eyes like a blindfold, then changed his mind and held it ready in one hand.

Snakes, lizards, kangaroo rats slithered through the sparse grass. Taber forced himself to breathe deeply, trying to imitate

the rhythm of a man asleep. Somewhere a coyote howled. Minutes passed, one eternity at a time. He thought he could hear someone out there, creeping toward him, then realized it was only an insect of some sort, making elephantine noises as it crashed through the undergrowth.

He rolled his head slowly until he was looking back toward the valley. He could almost see in the starlight now. The longer he looked the more he realized he *could* see. The ground was perfectly flat and there was no one there.

Feeling suddenly chilly, Taber suppressed a fit of trembling. Damn it, of course there was no one there! No Indian would be stupid enough to come from where he was expected. Very slowly, Taber began rolling his head. The coyote howled again and this time received an answer. After a minute Taber was looking in the opposite direction.

Again, nothing. Then he noticed a faint darker spot quite close. Clump of grass? Then it moved! Taber's even breathing faltered for a second, then he regained control. He gripped the smooth stone and held the *carrizo* like a cigar between his teeth. At this angle it wouldn't be visible, he hoped. Everything depended on the other man thinking he was asleep. He wondered if he dared snore. Too obvious. All he needed now was for his leg to start its involuntary twitching. Thank Thoth he'd remembered the painkillers. Thanks to his nearly empty stomach they'd worked in time.

The clump of grass halved the distance. Less than twenty feet now. Taber braced himself, forced his breathing into the same calm rhythm, wondered if his assailant would continue creeping. Or would he break cover and rush the last few feet?

Suddenly fingers were touching Taber. Momentary consternation as they encountered the saddle over his chest. Quiet exploration until his throat was accurately mapped. Taber saw the knife silhouetted in starlight as the man moved into position. He drew a breath and puffed, expelling the hollow *carrizo*'s mixture

of ashes and ground red pepper into the knifer's face, exactly as sorcerers used to spell against opposing ballplayers.

The knife buried itself in the pommel of Taber's high-horned saddle. Then the chili started burning. Taber marveled at self-control which kept the other man from crying out. Clawing at his eyes, the Indian turned and ran blindly. He had not gone a dozen steps before he stumbled and fell.

Forgetting the pain it would cost him, Taber scrambled to his feet. Before he could reach him the man was on his feet, running again. But his blind flight had changed direction. Now he ran straight for Taber. Taber put his foot out. When the other man went headlong he clobbered him with the rock.

The man fibrillated like a freshly stuck bull. Taber whipped the belt from his pants and lashed the man's hands behind him. While he was looking for something to tie the feet Lico came running. "Don't kill him," Taber said.

In a moment Lico had the young man trussed like a rolled roast and Taber had his belt back. They got a fire going and by its light Taber peeled back the would-be murderer's eyelids. Both pupils showed the same dilation, barely visible under the bloodshot capillaries. It would be hours, possibly days before the man's vision returned to normal. His breathing changed. He squirmed and Lico kicked him into alertness.

Taber surveyed his enemy. A lump was growing on the back of the young man's head. His eyes streamed from the ashes and red pepper. After a moment his bleary vision focused on Taber. "Kill me or I kill you," he said.

Taber felt a massive attack of the shakes coming on. He sat, facing the trussed-up Teta and tried inconspicuously to twist his body into the shapes experience had taught him for less pain and twitching. "If I wanted to be nasty," he finally said, "I'd fix you up just like me. You'd never be much of a threat to anyone again. Death—" Taber spat, dramatizing unnecessarily for he already had Teta's full attention. "Killing's easy," Taber said. "I'm trying to find a way to keep you alive."

"Kill him like he was going to kill you," Lico said. "Only slowly."

"There is a dark side of my nature which lingers lovingly over that thought," Taber said, "but we must be practical. I do not wish a blood feud with his family."

"Why do they have to know?" Lico asked. "Don't bury him. By dawn he'll be coyote dung."

"Such an action would put us on the same plane as this assassin."

Lico was impatient with moralistic pettifogging. Inwardly, Taber was even more impatient. He knew why he didn't want to kill Teta. Teta was his enemy, had tried to kill him by stealth, had found reasons to hate Taber without bothering to know him. Racial discrimination, Taber thought with an unamused grin. Turned loose, Teta would probably try to kill him again but if Teta was to die Taber would have to kill him. And when you got right down to it, Taber knew he couldn't do it.

"You have sinned greatly against me," Taber said, "I have done naught to thee. I am neither young nor able. The demon did not help me. And yet I bested thee."

"Is that true about the demon?" Teta asked.

"Ask him."

Teta turned to the *chapyeca* who sat placidly at the edge of the firelight.

"It is not my quarrel," Chap said.

Teta seemed suddenly to shrink. "You are a sorcerer!" he hissed.

"I am not a sorcerer. If anyone helped it was Itom Ai, Our Mother. If you doubt me I'll kiss any cross you wish. Has it not occurred to me that when you fight me you also fight Our Mother? Perhaps you are the sorcerer who should be taken back to the village and burned."

Teta seemed beaten. "Are *you* a warlock?" Taber asked.

"No," Teta mumbled.

"Then why do you seek to harm a man who has done you no wrong?"

"I don't know."

Taber drew a breath. "Will you swear by your mother's honor"
—Lico was making frantic negative motions but Taber pressed on
—"never to harm me again in word or deed?"

Teta's eyes gleamed in the firelight. "On my mother's honor I swear it," he said.

With a mental sigh Taber cut the young man's bonds. Teta stood uncertainly, swayed for a moment, then scampered blindly off into the darkness.

"Are you crazy or just stupid?" Lico asked.

Taber slapped his forehead. "I forgot to get his rifle, didn't I?"

"That isn't all," Lico groaned. "You made him swear on his mother's honor."

"It's the most binding oath I know."

"Not if your mother was whipped from the village for harlotry. Why do you think he's mad all the time?"

"Sweet jizzing Jesus," Taber muttered. After a moment he turned to the *chapayeca*. But the alien was gone. "Did he run off to go with Teta?"

Lico shrugged.

"Great," Taber muttered. All this trouble to get the alien this far so he could get a few pictures and salvage his reputation as a discoverer of strange beings and now he'd lost him. But at that moment the blue-skinned demon came bounding back into the firelight. "Here," he said. The *chapayeca* was holding Teta's rifle.

Taber released a breath. "I take it you're on our side now?" he said.

"Yes."

"Does Teta know how well you hear?" Taber finally asked.

"He never asked."

"Did anyone else ever discuss it?"

"No."

"Did you ever do anything to make it apparent that you hear better than some humans?"

"No."

Taber relaxed. "Can you hear him now?"

"Whenever you stop talking."

"What's he doing?"

"Going back toward his horse."

Taber looked at Lico. "Ever get an eyeful of chili?"

Lico nodded.

"How long before you could see?"

"Not long. Three, four hours maybe."

Taber pondered. Probably Teta had had enough violence for one night. It might take a day or two to screw up his rage for another attempt. He'd wait until they were relaxed and felt more secure. "To hell with it," Taber said. "Spread out and get some rest." The painkillers were really taking hold now. Taber slept.

They hit the trail at daybreak and rode along the spine of a ridge all morning. Toward midafternoon the ridge played out and they passed through rolling country, lush with fresh grass and twisted oaks. Finally the hungry animals ignored the bit so Lico hobbled them. While the horse and mules grazed they lay beneath an oak and studied clouds in an untroubled sky.

"Beautiful country," Taber said.

"Enjoy it," Lico said. "Plenty desert coming."

"That bastard still on our trail?" Taber asked.

The *chapayeca* wrinkled his nose in the gesture Taber had learned meant "yes."

"How far?"

"Just out of sight."

Which would be a mile, Taber guessed. As long as he stayed that far away . . . He looked worriedly at the animals who seemed determined to founder themselves on the green grass.

"Let them eat," Lico said. "There won't be much graze for the next few days."

Later that afternoon they took turns holding Lico's mule while the *chapayeca* came gradually nearer. It was turning dark before he could pet the animal. When he finally could

mount the mule still flinched and threatened to buck. "Just sit there a while," Lico said. "Maybe tomorrow he'll let you ride."

Meanwhile, Taber surveyed his blanket roll. Thirty feet overhead the oak sent out a limb. He studied it and tossed a rope several times. Finally he got it over the limb. When finished he had a fifty-pound boulder dangling just over where his chest would be. Satisfied, he hauled it up to one side where it would be partially hidden in the oak's tiny leaves. Then he ran the tripping line down to his bed. Chances were Teta would be considerably more cautious the second time around but Taber could think of nothing better. When he was satisfied he began gathering acorns.

"Why bother?" Lico asked. "We haven't got time to wash the bitter out."

"Bitter?" Chap asked. He tried an acorn and soon was gorging himself with the gall-tasting nuts. It was the first time Taber had seen the alien eat with any enthusiasm. What was he going to do with this alien? Taber wondered. Somehow he'd have to get his pictures and a monograph before the government moved in.

Taber had bitter memories of the McCarthy era when all professors had been suspect. He thought nostalgically of the days when the academic life had been a refuge—when the physicists had been harmless crackpots. Now . . .

Taber suspected once the government learned of the *chapyeca's* existence he would immediately become top secret. Not improbably, Taber would be restricted right out of his own discovery. What could he do to prevent it?"

Probably nothing. Better learn what he could while there was still time. What did he really know about the alien? He could make a couple of guesses.

"Chap," he began, "you hear better than I but you can't see as well. Does these mean your atmosphere's thinner and your sunlight brighter than Earth's? Come to think of it, I'll bet you

have some kind of light in the sky all the time, don't you? Two or three satellites?"

"I don't know," Chap said. "Yes, I do. Moons. Lots of moons. Always two or three. Bigger."

"What kind of a house do you live in?"

"I live in the mine."

"I mean at home on your own planet."

"I don't know. Do people live in houses?"

"Sometimes," Taber said. "From the looks of that sky we're going to wish we were in one before morning."

Lico summoned them to a tasteless gruel of parched corn. The *chapyeca* was full of acorns and didn't eat. Taber swallowed listlessly and watched the steadily clouding sky. His blankets were under a branch but the oak wasn't going to offer much protection.

"How long did it take you to get here?" Taber asked.

"The same time it took you," the *chapyeca* answered.

Taber sighed. "I mean from your own star to Earth."

"I don't know."

"Was it long?"

"Not very."

"A day?"

"More."

"A year?"

"Less, I think."

"Do you turn yourself off or sleep or something while traveling in space?"

"Sometimes."

Taber abruptly remembered that he had never seen the alien asleep. "Did you sleep last night?" he asked.

"No."

"Have you slept at all since you've been on Earth?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I don't know. Maybe a week ago."

"For how long?"

"A day and a night, they say."

"When will you sleep again?"

Chap was silent for a moment. "Maybe tonight," he finally said.

Not for twenty-four hours, Taber hoped.

A drop of rain fell.

By the time the shower ended it was dark. Taber rolled up in his soggy blankets and tried not to shiver.

By dawn he was too cold to shiver. So cold, in fact, that he didn't even hurt. Cold often worked that way so he had gotten the habit of sleeping as chilly as possible. Within minutes after sunup he was up scrounging bits of dry wood. Rather proudly, he woke Lico and handed him a cup of coffee. The *chapayeca's* clothing kept him comfortable anywhere but he also accepted black coffee. Likes bitter things, Taber decided.

Silently thankful that he hadn't had to use it, Taber tripped the deadfall over his bed and salvaged the ropes. Though skittish, the mule finally deigned to carry the *chapayeca* so they made slightly better time.

All morning they crossed the mesa: gradually thinning grass and ever more stunted oaks. The country was open and almost desert when the *chapayeca* said, "Here comes another one."

"Another what?"

"That noisy thing that carries men, like a stiff winged bird."

Taber and Lico looked at each other. There wasn't the slightest chance of concealment. They were still looking despairingly at each other when Taber saw the plane pinpointed by the *chapayeca's* needle nose. "Give Chap your hat," Taber told Lico. Silently the Indian complied. "Pull it down over your face like me," Taber told the alien. "And when the plane comes near don't look up."

The *chapayeca's* mule felt the tension and added it to his own. Soon he heard the airplane and began lightfooting around. Taber

wanted to help but his own mule was still skittish around the alien. Lico was having trouble with his half-broken horse.

The plane spotted them and altered course. They strung out in single file and rode, heads down, trying to look like the locals. A moment later the plane buzzed them. Lico's horse bucked. Lico took time to shake a fist at the pilot before controlling his horse. Amused, the pilot swung around for a second pass. Taber's mule was giving him all he could do. He was thawed out now and each movement sent blinding pain up his spine. The plane banked to circle them and the *chapayeca's* mule exploded.

Head, tail, hoofs moved in opposing directions as the beast went up, sunfished, lit stiff-legged, and finally arched its back to catapult the alien fifteen feet in the air. The hat went flying but Taber knew it made no difference. The blue-skinned demon spun in a tight ball. At the last moment he straightened to land on his feet, bounce straight into the air, and back astraddle the mule. The airplane made several circles before flying away. "You may's well give Lico back his hat," Taber said. Damn it, he'd known the alien was nimble. Why hadn't he been prepared for something like this?

"How far are we from a landing strip?" Taber asked.

Lico frowned. "A ranch two days west of here but I think that plane's from Río Yaqui."

"How many days' ride would that be straight from here?"

"You can't go straight."

"I know," Taber said, "but if we could ride straight over the mountains like that plane does, how long would it take?"

Lico was thoughtful. "Four days," he finally guessed.

"An hour to go, an hour to refuel, and spread the news . . . Where can we hide within three hours?"

"East of here the ground gets rougher. Small pines here and there but no place to hide."

Taber turned his mule and kicked it into a reluctant trot. Shimmering coruscations shot up his spinal column with each bounce.

"What's the use?" Lico asked.

"If I can get a long stick of wood and do something to that airplane," Taber muttered.

"You crazy?" Lico asked. "They'll have guns. Besides, they wouldn't land that close."

Taber slowed his mule. What had gotten into him? Willing to scrag a pilot and some soldiers who were merely doing their jobs, yet he hadn't been able to do in his would-be assassin. Maybe the real difference was that he knew Teta. The pilot and soldiers were strangers—mere meaningless abstractions. "Well, anyhow," he said, "let's head for the timber. Maybe something will turn up."

An hour later there were a few scrub pines but the terrain was hopeless for concealment. Still, the occasional tree made them slightly harder to spot. If they could just hide the mules . . . "Let's build a house," Taber said suddenly.

Lico looked at him as if he had finally gone round the bend.

"Really," Taber insisted. "We have an ax. Knock over one of these little pines for a roof tree, throw a few branches over it, and we and the mules could all hide inside until dark."

"Might work," Lico conceded. "But what about tomorrow?"

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. How many nights to reach the border?"

"Three, maybe four."

"Any cover farther up?"

Lico frowned. "You know, we *can* make it," he finally said. He dismounted and lopped off a wrist thick pine with one blow of the ax.

"Bring all the brush and branches you can find," Taber told the *chipayeca*. While Lico and the alien were foraging Taber lay the pole out on the ground. Stripped clean, it was twenty feet long with both ends beveled sharp from single slashes. He decided to tie branches along it while it was on the ground. Later the three of them could lift and prop it high enough for the horse and mules to crowd under. He glanced up and saw

Chap and Lico a quarter mile away, lashing a bundle of brush to drag it in. Then he heard something else.

Abruptly, Taber remembered Teta. How close had he been following? The country was open but since the airplane they hadn't been covering their rear very well. *Should have asked Chap.* His mule was pointing ears back the way they'd come. A horse stepped from behind a pair of tiny pines. Teta sat on it. He had a short bow and a long arrow of *carrizo*.

Taber froze. His companions were too far away. Teta could shoot him a dozen times before they could help. Why hadn't he killed Teta when he'd had the chance? That moment's weakness was going to cost him his life.

The Indian's horse reared and broke into a gallop. Taber crouched, still gripping the ridgepole. Horse and rider were within fifty feet before Taber realized he was not going to shoot the arrow. Teta was going to ride him down. Taber remembered the feeling of helplessness when he had once seen an automobile bearing down on him. Unthinking, he raised the pole.

The sharpened ridgepole caught Teta just below the ribs. The horse shied and left its rider in midair. Slowly, momentum carried Teta up over Taber's head like some clowning pole vaulter. He dropped the bow. It clattered beside Taber. In the sudden silence afterward Taber heard the Indian say "Uff, uff, ooh," as he slid down the pole like a sloppily skewered piece of shish kebab, leaving fresh gobbets of viscera to dangle from each jagged snag where once a branch had been. Various liquids spattered Taber and he thought annoyedly that there was no place to wash.

Teta finally reached the ground. The pole fell over with a clatter and levered him onto his side. He huffed twice and reached for Taber. He was still twitching when Lico and Chap arrived.

Taber was mildly surprised at his lack of reaction. He felt annoyance at being spattered with foul fluids. Maybe later he

would feel remorse. Soon he was wondering if he had planned it the way it happened.

Abruptly, Taber came to his senses. "We've got to get away from here quickly," he said. "Leave the rifle so we won't have anything to connect us with this."

"But the plane?"

"Even if we got away they'd find him. We've enough hanging over us already."

Lico nodded soberly. "Tonight the coyotes will bury him. Let's move."

They headed east toward the tall timber. As Taber bounced with the mule's hard-legged trot he realized he hadn't been hurting since he'd killed Teta. Slowly the adrenalin wore away and the pain returned. Gritting his teeth, he considered the consequences if they were captured. Eventually he reached the only valid conclusion. "Lico," he said, "you and Chap can get away. I can't. When the plane comes you and Chap run in different directions. I'll run too, but slower."

"They'll kill you," Lico protested.

"I don't think so," Taber said. "I haven't really done anything, providing they don't connect me with that body back there."

Lico looked anxiously at the sky but as yet no vultures called attention to Teta's poor judgment. They were five miles away and the hard ground left no prints which could be seen from the air.

"If they catch me they'll have no reason to backtrack," Taber said.

"You're all bloody."

"So I killed a deer."

"But we can't just leave you," Lico insisted.

"You'll have to. As long as you two are loose I don't think my life is in danger. I know too much that they don't know."

The mules slowed to a walk. The ground was rougher now, studded with piano-sized boulders. A few more miles and they'd be where no plane could land. How badly were they

wanted? There were always things like paratroops and with a plane spotting overhead they couldn't last long. Maybe that pilot had just been flying a routine search for pot and poppy fields. Taber snorted. If it had been routine it certainly wasn't after he'd seen the *chapayeca* do that inhumanly impossible bounce and recovery. Would the *yori* captain tie it in with the unrest in Río Yaqui? Not yet perhaps. But soon his mind would start sifting. Taber remembered how Chap's needle nose had stood out in a Mickey Mouse profile as he landed astraddle the suddenly trembling mule.

"Different," the *chapayeca* said.

"What's different?"

"Airplane. Sounds different."

Great, Taber thought. Now they're sending troop carriers. Oh well, at least they couldn't land. And come to think of it, he couldn't visualize the Mexican army dumping paratroops where they couldn't be picked up again. Maybe there was a chance. He was still searching for a plan when he heard the distant *plup-plup* of a helicopter.

"Get moving!" Taber shouted. "I'll go the other way." He spurred his mule, clenching teeth against the pain and achieved a slow gallop for a hundred yards before the mule settled down to its normal lope. He looked back. Lico was gone but the *chapayeca* was right behind him. "I told you to go with Lico!" Taber shrieked.

"Lico will not make me rich."

Taber's mule came to a stop and let its head droop. So did Taber.

"Bullets can't hurt you," he finally said tiredly. "Beat it and maybe you and Lico can help me break out of wherever they take me."

The *chapayeca* made a visible effort to think. "You may be right," he said after a moment. But by then the chopper was swinging around to land.

"Don't try it now," Taber said. "You may be bulletproof but I'm not."

The chopper settled in a whirlwind of dust. Their mules strove mightily to panic but the *chapayeca* had been thrown once and apparently learned enough never to be thrown again. He held Taber's mule by the bridle until the dust settled. Finally they got the animals turned so they could not see the lazily spinning rotor.

The man beside the pilot wore an officer's *kepi*. He climbed down from the bubble and Taber saw it was the *yori* captain.

"Fancy meeting you here," Taber said.

SEVEN:

The captain was not smiling. I told you not to leave Río Yaqui," he said.

"You should have told the Indians not to kidnap me," Taber answered. To his surprise the captain was unprepared for this. Obviously, it had never occurred to him any more than it had to Taber a moment before he'd said it.

"Anyhow, you're back now," the captain said. "Let's go."
"What about the mules?"

"Turn them loose. Mules always know the way home."

Silently Taber and the *chapayeca* complied. They were climb-

ing into the chopper when the captain asked, "Where's the third man?"

"Took off when he heard you coming. Good thing you found us," Taber elaborated. "He took all the food and water."

The captain gave Taber a fishy look but didn't make an issue of it. "Who's this?" he finally asked.

"This is Máachil," Taber hastened. It was the first name that came to his head. He wondered if the captain knew it meant scorpion.

"Why the mask?"

"*Una manda*," Taber said. The captain would be familiar with the way Christians bribe their God with bargains to grow a beard or wear some outlandish garb in return for an answered prayer.

The captain started to say something but it was drowned out as the pilot twisted the throttle and began fiddling with the cycloidal pitch.

Dust flew and the chopper trembled but it did not lift. The pilot glanced worriedly at the altimeter. Taber saw the small needle resting on three. Which worked out to somewhere between nine and ten thousand feet. Taber saw the pilot's lips moving but could not hear him. Slowly, he increased throttle. The engine responded sluggishly and finally the chopper lifted, spilling drunkenly westward down the gradual slope.

Taber glanced nervously at the rocks below. The chopper's skids seemed barely to be clearing them.

"Can't you fly higher?" the captain shouted.

"Wide open," the pilot shouted back. "I don't know what's wrong. Should handle a couple more people at this altitude." He fiddled nervously with controls, trying for more lift.

The *chapayeca* sat peering stolidly down at the ground below. Probably assumed this was the way they were supposed to fly, Taber guessed. But then, what the hell, Taber wouldn't worry either if he had a shield which would bring him to a gentle stop before hitting anything hard. At least Chap was looking

away and not giving the captain a good look at that face. How long before the captain realized this wasn't a masked Indian? Not very, Taber guessed.

"Can you hear me?" he subvocalized.

The *chapayeca* leaned back toward Taber and wrinkled his nose in the gesture that meant yes. The engine faltered momentarily and there were anxious seconds before it settled down again.

"Don't look at the other men," Taber muttered. "Let them think you're a man in a mask."

The *chapayeca* nodded imperceptibly. The pilot cursed over the roar of the struggling engine. "That ridge ahead," he shouted. "If I dump enough fuel to make it we won't get home."

Interesting possibilities crossed Taber's mind. They had been traveling in a straight line. If he could disable it somehow it wouldn't take Lico long to find them. Of course, he didn't know how he and the *chapayeca* would give the captain the slip, especially since the captain and the pilot both wore pistols and could probably outrun Taber. But the ground offered more possibilities than up here.

Covertly, he studied valves and levers. Dump fuel? The valves for switching tanks were all out of his reach. And if the engine quit they'd be the first thing the pilot would reach for. How does one sabotage a helicopter? Could he jam the rotor gears? Vaguely he remembered something called the Jesus nut. When it failed a chopper came down *very* quickly. Better still, he decided, how does one sabotage a helicopter without killing the passengers?

The engine was roaring and clattering away right behind him but it was thoroughly covered. Need a half hour and some tools for that. No chance of pulling a wire loose. Forget it.

The *chapayeca* craned his neck to study the mountain range ahead. Abruptly the motor caught its breath and they gained a hundred feet of altitude.

Suddenly Taber knew what was happening. The *chapayeca's*

personal shield protected him from projectiles, yet anything which moved slowly could pass through it. Probably the shield was made to inhibit movement and could not distinguish between a bullet and a spinning shaft. Whenever the *chapayeca* came near an engine invisible brakes were applied. Taber waited until a clear space appeared below them. "Lean back just a little toward the rotor shaft," he mumbled.

The pilot exploded into a frenzy of defecations on the mother of whoever last worked on that engine. Gently, the chopper settled back onto the ground. "Back just a little more," Taber mumbled.

The engine gave an odd, ducklike quack and died. The helicopter rocked a couple of times and settled into immobility. "What sulphurous obscenity occurs with that unnatural mother of an engine?" the captain inquired.

"You might ask the cuckold son of a bag of feces who last worked on it," the pilot replied. "Now, everybody out of the way."

"Can't you use the radio?" the captain asked.

"Never get over that ridge," the pilot replied. "Besides, what good would it do? This is the only chopper in 500 kilometers."

The captain got out. Taber and the *chapayeca* followed him. The captain glared at them and vented his fury on small stones which his polished boots lofted to respectable distances. In ten minutes the pilot had the engine opened up. Taber studied the sky. The sun was low. In another hour or two it should be dark. Then what?

The pilot finished his checks and tried to start the engine.

"Over close to it quick," Taber mumbled. He and the *chapayeca* made as if to board the chopper.

"Not yet," the pilot growled. "Let me see if it's going to work first!"

They retreated and stood at some distance from the *yori* captain who still kicked pebbles. The engine caught and ran rag-

gedly for a moment, then settled down. The pilot lifted off, circled gracefully, and landed again.

"What'd you do to it?" the captain asked.

The pilot shrugged. "Who knows?" he said. "Let's go."

"Sit in back where I was," Taber mumbled.

Silently the *chapayeca* complied. He had not yet sat when the engine backfired, shook the chopper with a wrenching shudder, and again died.

The pilot performed a bodily function on twenty-four fingers selected from twelve apostles. He made promiscuous assumptions about the parentage of anyone remotely connected with helicopter manufacture. He was still making allegations of wholesale cuckoldry when the sun went down an hour later.

Taber coughed, spat, and cleared his throat. By now he was becoming expert in forming words without actually saying them. "Can you hear Lico?" he asked.

"No," Chap said.

The captain glared at the alien with increasing suspicion.

"Don't talk," Taber muttered. "Wait until he's not looking and then answer me with a nod. Can you hear anybody close by?"

While the captain was kicking another pebble the alien shook his head.

"We've got to get away from these people," Taber continued. "Otherside I'll never become rich. And if I don't, you don't." He hoped this logic would appeal to the alien's unpredictable mentality.

They had covered perhaps twenty miles before the chopper had been forced down. And how many miles had Lico made? "How far away would you be able to hear Lico?" Taber asked, then realized he'd have to rephrase the question. "Could you hear Lico if he were where this whirligig picked us up?"

The *chapayeca* wagged a finger in the Latin gesture for no. "Halfway?"

A shrug.

"And no other human moves within that ten-mile radius?"

The *chapyeca's* gesture was decisive.

Taber frowned. A chill wind was springing up. He began scrounging about for bits of greasewood and *pitahaya*. The *chapyeca* caught his intention and soon they had a small fire going in the lee of the chopper. After a while the captain tired of kicking pebbles and joined them. They huddled morosely, watching the pilot who now had the carburetor apart and was studying it with a flashlight. The pilot's rage had dwindled into a joblike despair as he checked part after part and found nothing wrong.

Taber guessed they must be near the line which divided Sonora from Chihuahua. At least a week's mulebacking from here to Río Yaqui and perhaps half that distance to the village which Taber still mentally labeled Xbampo. Should he head back for the village? Not after the hard sell he'd given about taking the alien away. Besides, Teta had friends. When he didn't return they'd reach certain conclusions and Taber would be answering to charges of sorcery.

The fire burned low and he went searching for more wood. The captain apparently knew the country for he didn't appear concerned about anyone escaping. "You go look the other way," Taber told the *chapyeca*. Under his breath he added, it's dark now and these men can't see much better than you can. We could be twenty miles away from here by daylight. Only I don't know where to go.

"Make some noise over there; break a stick of wood so the captain will know you're near." Taber heard wood snap and a moment later he made some noise of his own to keep the captain happy.

Chap wasn't stupid. His mind worked in distinctly non-human ways and an anthropologist didn't have to remind himself more than twenty times a day that different people held different values. The *chapyeca* had admitted to wanting to get rich. Taber had purposely avoided learning exactly what constituted riches in the alien's eyes for fear that it might be so far out he could not even visualize, much less fulfill the alien's wishes.

The alien was so damn *passive*. Just like I've been as long as Lico was around to take care of me, Taber decided. If the alien had a shield that would stop bullets he probably had several other happy household hints. All Taber needed was his active cooperation. How could he acquire a lever?

"What does the government on your planet do if a man becomes rich too easily at the expense of others? No, don't let the captain know you can hear me. But am I right in assuming that the government finds ways to deprive people of their liberty if their get-rich-quick schemes bypass too many official claws? If so, make a noise."

Loud snap of wood fracturing.

"These men are the government here," Taber subvocalized. "If they learn you are not human we shall both lose our liberty—possibly forever. And without freedom you must know we shall never get rich."

Taber brought an armload of wood back to the fire and dropped it with a clatter. The captain was peering into the bubble where the pilot was about to start the engine.

"Bring your wood in quick," Taber mumbled. "Get as close to the engine as you can."

Immediately the alien was there, peering over their shoulders. The starter ground slowly. It didn't take a mechanic to know the engine would never start. "If I believed in such things I'd say we're under a curse," the pilot said. "That battery was perfect a moment ago." Tiredly, he began tracing out cables and switches.

"Why would I lose my freedom?" the *chapyeca* whispered.

"You're different. That alone is enough to make people fear you. Once they learn you cannot be harmed by bullets they will fear you more. You'll end up in a cage. If you prove that you mean no harm to anyone you'll still end up in a cage, only with people torturing you. They call it scientific research. Now go get some wood before the captain gets suspicious again."

Once more they braved the thin ten thousand-foot wind. After

a moment Taber thought of the clincher. "Maybe they can't hurt you in the cage," he murmured. "But no Earth law says they have to feed a demon." He was silent for a while, gathering wood in the wan starlight. Thank the gods it was still too chilly for snakes to be out.

"Do you understand now that we must escape?" he finally added.

Snap.

"Are you with me?"

Crackle.

And now the one with the hook in it, Taber thought. "Have you any idea how we can get away and not be caught again? Remember, that chopper will run like new without you nearby."

Pop.

"You're sure?" In his excitement Taber almost shouted the words.

Crack crack. It sounded as if the *chapayeca* was uprooting a mesquite.

"Good," Taber said. "You can find me in the dark. Now, very quietly, circle around and join me."

Seconds later Chap came bounding through the air like a blue kangaroo.

"Where do we go?" Taber asked.

"The men from the village found me not far from here."

"So?"

"I was near my ship when they found me."

"It's disabled," Taber groaned.

"Also invisible."

Taber surveyed the alien longly in the starlight. "I hope you're not kidding," he said.

A half hour later they were topping the ridge. Taber looked back and could barely see the small fire. He wondered what the pilot would have to say tomorrow when the chopper decided to run. At that moment the engine started. Moments later

the chopper lifted, scattering embers of the fire, and came *plup-plupping* up the hill toward them. After a moment landing lights came on and the pilot began a square search pattern.

The alien gripped Taber's arm, helping him along somewhat faster than he would have liked to walk. From occasional glimpses of Orion's belt he guessed they were heading south in the general direction of Xbampo. "I hope you know where you're going," he puffed.

"I know."

"What'll we do when we get there?"

The *chapayeca* stopped dead in his tracks. "Don't you know?" he asked.

The chopper was swinging in a right-angled turn which would bring it within a hundred yards. "Don't stop now," Taber said. "I'll think of something." But as they jogged on into the night he knew he hadn't the slightest idea what he was going to do.

"How far is it?" he gasped.

"Not far."

There was a click and hum clearly audible over the chopper's noise. A moment later the *yorí* captain's voice: "Tahbair, where will you go? Don't you know your FBI also wants you?" The captain's voice was pleading.

How could he signal the captain through all that racket if he wanted to? Taber wondered how much more fuel the pilot would waste before he decided to pack up. As if in answer the helicopter suddenly lifted and made a beeline for Río Yaqui. It passed directly overhead but by then Taber guessed they were no longer looking.

Was it true about the FBI? The captain hadn't known of Taber and Lico's troubles. That parting shot was too much for coincidence. What did that red-faced, perpetually angry young man have against Taber? Abruptly, Taber remembered Teta. Lately he'd been catching a lot of hell from angry young men.

Was the FBI man's mother also a whore? If so, what connection did she have with Taber?

Taber had never been much of a womanizer. Thoughtfully, he reflected on the wife, the dozen or so casual copulations which comprised his sex life back in the days when he had thought about such things. It didn't seem a promising field for research.

As the *chabayeca* hurried on through the night Taber reached two conclusions: He was growing increasingly short of breath, and it had been many hours since he had eaten. "How much farther?" he insisted.

"Not much."

"Are we halfway there?"

"From where?"

"From where we started walking," Taber snapped.

"Yes."

"Then let's slow down. There's no danger now, not until daylight anyhow."

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

"There is danger."

"What?"

The *chabayeca* stopped short. Slowly he rotated his head. Finally needle nose and ears pointed at right angles to their line of travel. "Eleven, maybe twelve," Chap said. "On horses. If we hurry they'll pass behind us. Stay here and we'll meet."

They'll cut our track, Taber thought. If they were Yaquis the trail would be as obvious as the white line down a highway. But why would Yaquis be rushing around after dark? "Can you hear voices?" Taber asked.

"Yes."

"What language?"

"The same the men in that whirling machine spoke."

"Mexican soldiers! That FBI asshole must've convinced somebody I'm stealing atomic secrets."

"Hurry," the *chapayeca* insisted.

Dimly Taber realized it was the first time the alien had initiated any action. Up to now he'd let things happen. "Do you know what it means to get tired?" Taber asked.

"Yes."

"Well, I am. I can't make it much farther. Are they spread out searching or are they riding in single file?"

"One after the other," Chap replied.

Which meant they were not searching. Mexican soldiers were no great shakes at tracking and these, apparently knew better than to waste time after dark. But what were they up to, out here at the end of nowhere at this hour? "Can you hear what they're talking about?"

Chap aimed his long ears again and began a toneless repetition in Spanish: "So good it is. Pity it must all burn."

"Can't we snag a couple of kilos just for ourselves?"

"Sure. The sarge's ok. Just don't overdo it."

Taber grinned. They weren't coming for him at all. They were on their way to burn somebody's marihuana crop. Then Taber realized it could be pretty sticky. Nothing would convince these soldiers that he and the *chapayeca* were not look-outs for the pot farmers. "Will they miss us?" he asked.

"If we hurry," the *chapayeca* said. They began jogging again and Taber realized he was now hearing hoofbeats, the creak of leather and jingle of bridles with his own ears.

"Easy," he told the alien. "Humans aren't that deaf."

The column passed within a hundred feet. By the time Taber could no longer hear them he had caught his breath enough to realize how hungry he was. They went on more slowly now and he sensed that the *chapayeca* was not so certain of his direction. Finally he stopped completely and rotated his needle nose through the compass points. "What're you doing?" Taber asked.

"Listening."

"For what?"

"For a—" The *chapayeca* was silent for a moment. "A bubble,

I guess you'd call it. A place where the night sounds are not quite right. I doubt if you could hear it."

"I can't hear anything," Taber admitted.

"Neither can I as long as you talk."

Taber was silent. A moment later the alien started walking. Taber followed. Abruptly, the alien disappeared, leaving Taber alone in the desert night, without water, food, or mule.

Taber stood a moment, trying to decide what to do. He couldn't go back to Río Yaqui. Have to straighten out a few details before the States were safe. Somewhere east of here in the Sierra Madre he'd probably run into Tarahumaras, the renowned hunters who ran down deer because they couldn't afford bullets. How long would it take him to get in trouble with them?"

"Going to stand there all night?" Chap asked.

"Where are you?"

"In the ship. Come in."

Taber stepped hesitantly forward, holding his hands in front of him. With no sensation at all, he was suddenly inside.

After a moment his irises stopped down and he could see in the glaring blue-white light. Taber felt a vague disappointment. What had he expected? He didn't really know but somehow the immense interstellar distances had led him to expect a ship of corresponding size. He was standing at the bottom of a funnel—or was it a cone? There was barely room to stand. Somewhere above the *chapayeca* perched. The top of the cone was open to the stars. After a moment Taber realized it couldn't be. He was looking through a transparent roof or at a screen of some sort. Here inside the ship he was protected from the wind but it was no warmer than outside. "Can you turn on a heater or something?" he asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"There isn't any."

"How can you survive out where it's really cold?"

"My suit."

Taber slapped his forehead. No wonder the alien had been curious about people living in houses. Man's three necessities had always been food, clothing, and shelter. With the alien's clothing one necessity no longer existed. Who would live cooped up in a house if he could be perfectly comfortable in any weather?

What would a no-wall civilization offer in the way of social mores? Like any anthropologist, Taber immediately thought of Margaret Mead's work on the sexual habits of Samoans who relied on darkness and a knowledge of who slept where. Then he realized that an open air society with two or three luminaries always in the sky would not even have the possibilities for planned and unplanned confusion which lent variety to Samoan life. Unless the aliens reproduced by budding there would be buildings, caves, some sort of artificial darkness. What would darkness do to an alien's mental set? "I'll bet you've been feeling horny every night since you've hit Earth," he said.

"No."

Another beautiful theory dashed on an inconvenient fact.

"Do people live in houses where you come from?" Taber asked.

"Not houses. Sometimes a roof without walls like the Yaqui *ramadas*.

"Why?"

The alien shrugged. "Some people like old ways."

So they respect tradition.

"Is there anything to eat in here?" Taber asked.

"Starfood."

"What's that?"

"Only eat it in space. Not very good."

"Unless it fights back, I'll eat it."

The alien tossed down a translucent hexagonal block. It reminded Taber of baby soap. "Do I open it or anything?"

"Just eat."

Taber bit gingerly. It was crunchy, a little short on salt, and tasted vaguely of protein. Could've been lamb or venison. A

faint fishy aftertaste suggested turtle. Taber devoured the block. "Why do you say it's not good?" Taber asked. Then he remembered Chap's gluttony over bitter acorns. "Why do you provision a ship with bad-tasting food?" he amended.

"They say too much *jahel* makes thirst."

"*Jahel*. Would that be a bitter seasoning?"

"Yes, but I think they don't do it to save water."

"Why then?"

"In space nothing to do. Except eat."

Taber was reminded of the diet which began, "Eat all you want of everything you don't like." Though he hadn't thought of the translucent block as containing much moisture he realized he was no longer thirsty. Possibly the truth lay somewhere between the official version and Chap's.

He reached in his pocket for insulin and knew a moment's panic. When he calmed down Taber knew he had pills for ten days. The rest was in his bundle. And his bundle was tied to the latigos on his saddle.

Damn the *gori* captain! But Taber realized it wasn't exactly the captain's fault. He could've taken his blankets and clothing if he'd remembered. If he had, it would be in the helicopter now on the way to Río Yaqui. Would Lico recover the mules?

Fuming, Taber inventoried his other pockets. He had a dozen pain pills and a half roll of Testape, the teletype colored strip which turned green whenever he was passing sugar. "Is there a toilet in here?" he asked.

"No."

"No? How the hell do you—? Never mind." Taber turned and stepped out into the black desert night behind him. He shivered in the chill wind and tried to urinate on a piece of tape. Minutes later he realized he wasn't going to. Disgustedly, he put the strip of torn off tape in his pocket again and stepped inside. "I suppose there aren't any beds in here either," he grouched.

"No."

"You do sleep, I presume?"

"No gravity in space. Sleep anywhere."

"How about on the ground?"

"On the ground."

"What?"

"On the ground. Why stay inside the ship when we're on the ground?"

Taber reminded himself of the alien's protective field and his temperature-regulating clothing. He felt his scientific objectivity going to hell as he realized that this maze of hand holds and monkey bars offered no place to sleep, nor any means of alleviating the cold which was beginning to seep through him. He said an unscientific word and went out to gather firewood.

He stumbled about until his eyes habituated to the darkness, then gathered as much greasewood and *pitahaya* as he could wrench loose in the immediate vicinity. When he had an armload Taber realized he had no idea in which direction the invisible starship lay.

"Chap!" he yelled.

The alien appeared immediately. "Not so loud!" he hissed. "Soldiers near. Come inside."

Cursing under his breath, Taber pushed through the entrance and resigned himself to a night without heat. How long until daylight? Then he noticed the powder blue tennis ball the alien was offering. "What is it?"

The *chapyeca* shook the ball. It began unrolling and in a moment Taber realized the micron-thick film must be a suit like the alien was wearing. "It goes next to your skin," Chap said.

Teeth chattering, Taber stripped. He was afraid of rupturing the weightless blue film but it proved tough and after a moment it shrank to his body. He felt naked but soon realized he was no longer cold. "Will this stop bullets?" he asked.

"No. It keeps you warm or cool, depending on the weather."

"How long before it wears out?"

"I don't know."

"How long have you been wearing the one you have on?"

"Since the last one burned out."

"When was that?"

"About halfway here. I passed through the outer envelope of a star. I don't know your name for it."

Offhand, Taber guessed it would be good for several seasons in Sonora.

"Will you sleep tonight?" he asked.

"No."

"Good. Then I will. Let me know if those soldiers get too close." Taber stepped outside into the darkness. He made a pillow of his filthy shirt and trousers and woke several hours later with the sun in his face.

He was on a tiny knoll. Rocks and vegetation forced game trails around this particular area so there was little likelihood of the starship's accidental discovery. Taber looked around for some slight shimmer or distortion which would indicate its presence. There was none.

Leaving his clothing for a base point, he began spiraling outward. The spiral was a hundred feet across before Taber realized he was not going to find the ship this way. He hadn't been more than a step or two away from the entrance. Was Chap lying about the ship being disabled? Thoughtfully, Taber returned to his pillow. He strode straight out from it for five paces, returned, and stepped out along another radius. On the fourth try he stepped through the entrance.

The *chapayeca* was reading a book. If Taber judged his expressions correctly, the alien was not happy. "I must have walked right through the ship," Taber said.

"You will if you don't hit the entrance."

"It's not just invisible then; it's in some other dimension, isn't it?"

"I don't know. I guess out of phase would be closer."

"What're you reading?"

"I don't know."

Resignedly, Taber grasped hand holds and lifted himself up the funnel. There was a more or less clear passageway from the bottom of the vortex up through its vertical axis. Overhead the wider areas were broken into a labyrinth of bars like a kid's jungle gym. Nowhere could Taber see anything that resembled machinery.

The alien hung by hooks in what Taber had always thought were belt loops. He looked around but could find no more hooks. "Swing near to a bar and hold still for a moment," Chap said.

Taber did. A hook emerged from the monkey bar's unbroken surface and engaged his waist. He stretched his opposite side toward another bar and the same thing happend. "Now how do I get loose?" he asked.

"Just pull."

"Won't it break?"

"Not unless you want it to."

Taber considered the underlying mechanical principles of such a device. It was almost as improbable as TV. He let his weight slowly onto the hooks and began to appreciate the thin blue suit which could hang him thus without compressing his scrotum into jellied agony.

"Do you have many books aboard?" he asked.

"Just this one."

Shades of Marshall McLuhan, Taber thought, a post-literate society. "You don't read very well, do you?"

"No."

"When did you learn?"

"I don't know."

EIGHT:

Taber passed a hand over his forehead. "We could get rich a lot quicker if you'd tell me about yourself, your people, and where you come from without me having to pull it out of you one tooth at a time."

"But I don't know."

"What do you remember?"

"Not very much."

"Did you have some kind of accident on the way here? Did something go wrong? It must have. Your ship won't run. Do you know why?"

"No."

Taber shook his head. Have to try a new tack, he decided. "Do people marry where you come from?"

"In which way?"

"Like the Yaquis—or like my own people, one male to one female—at least, one at a time."

"I think so."

"Are you married?"

"No."

"Are you old enough to marry?"

"I guess so."

"Are you too old?"

"I don't think so."

"Why have you never married?"

"Nobody ever asked me."

Taber caught a hint of emotion in the *chapayeca's* monotonous voice. "Why not?" he probed.

"I don't know."

"Are you ugly?"

"No."

"Are you of low social status?"

The alien thought a moment. "I don't think so," he said. "Everyone treats me with respect."

"Yet you consider yourself poor. Is that why you're not married?"

"Many poor people marry."

"I've noticed that," Taber said.

"Were you?"

"Was I what?"

"Poor when you married."

"How did you know I'd been married?" Taber asked.

"You carry a sadness within you. It is different from the anger of young men who have still to lose some part of their being."

"For a man who's never been married you know a great deal about it." What kind of marriage customs did the *chapayeca's*

society have? Taber wondered if he and the alien were talking about the same things at all.

"Is this where you intended to come or were you forced down on Earth?"

"I don't know."

Taber sighed. "Let me see that book you're reading."

"It's not in Earth language."

"I know. Just looking at it ought to tell me something about your people."

Chap handed him the book. It was like an Earth book or rather, like a tablet for the sheets were stuck together across one of the narrow edges with some kind of binder which stretched so they could fold under. Chap had been holding it with the spine at the bottom.

Taber felt the book. Faintly roughened surface of the leaves. Call it paper, though it refused to wrinkle or crease. The faint lavender background was covered with symbols and drawings. Odd drawings, evocative, though Taber had never seen anything like them. He thumbed through the book. Craftsmanship and quality were earthly, to say the least. Taber had expected something better, at least a reversing hologram which would show him the back of the same view when he rotated the drawing. To Taber the book seemed handwritten, hand drawn, its slightly misaligned pages even bound by hand. "Looks hand-made," he said.

"How else would one make a book?"

"Oh ho!" Taber said. "Don't you make things with machines?"

"Yes, of course."

"So why don't you make books with machines?"

"A machine does not have interesting thoughts."

"I didn't mean for a machine to *write* it." Briefly, Taber tried to explain the mechanics of publishing—where the author left off and the machine took over. For background he described the first publishing houses in Rome where slaves sat taking dictation to produce an edition of fifty scrolls.

"Sounds great," the *chapyeca* said.

"Printing presses are fascinating. I'll show you one some day."

"No, I mean the slaves. Who could use more than fifty copies?"

Taber shrugged, then landed on the bit of information he'd turned up. "You have slaves?"

"No."

"So?"

"I think there are people who would copy books."

"For money?"

The alien hesitated. "I don't think so," he said. "Young people . . ." He dwindled off.

Taber waited but the *chapyeca* did not resume. Frustrated, he thumbed the book. The drawings reminded him of something . . . He smote his forehead and stared around the ship. *If I could take one book, what would I take? Bible? Like hell I would! Survival manual?* Taber gazed abstractedly at the maze of monkey bars inside the ship, then back at the crude sketches. "This book," he said. "It's a repair manual."

"I'd hoped so," Chap said. "Can you read it?"

"No," Taber admitted, "but I can damn sure try. How do you fly this thing?"

"It won't work."

"Show me how you'd make it go if it did."

Chap caught a monkey bar with one hand and lifted himself. Hooks disengaged from his waist and he swung up toward the open-appearing top of the ship. Taber followed, thanking his private daimon that he still had strength in his arms. Come to think of it, he hadn't hurt much today. Maybe hanging this way took the strain off his back. Probably just the blue suit keeping him warm, he guessed.

Chap swung himself into a maze of bars and arranged himself between them, swinging into a position which Taber considered doubtful. "Doesn't that slice you thin when the ship accelerates?" he asked. "Or is this ship protected from acceleration?"

"My shield," Chap said, and pointed to the scar under his ear.

"Hmmm . . ."

Near the alien's left hand a stumpy phallic object protruded from the maze of bars. The *chapyeca* grasped it and bent it. Taber felt the ship sway on its narrow bottom. The alien wrung the handle as though trying to break it off.

Taber hung on as best he could while the ship flopped over and spun like a dying top. Through the roof screen he saw crazily tilting landscapes. At one point he thought he saw a helicopter parked near men on horses. "Knock it off" Taber shouted. "I can't hang on forever."

The alien brought the control back to vertical and the ship stood upright again. He pulled the handle up. Nothing happened. "See," Chap said. "Won't go up."

Taber checked himself for bruises. "Warn me before you try something like that again," he growled. "I haven't got a shield."

Taber grumped about for a few minutes, wondering what to try next. Even with a Minox they'd accuse him of faking pictures. What chance had he without a camera? He remembered the soldiers. "Did this ship make any noise or turn visible or any such thing when you rolled it?"

"Never visible. Maybe some noise."

"Let me try that control."

Taber had expected some resistance on this point but the alien silently moved out of the way. Would Taber have let a stranger who didn't know how to drive play with his car? Gingerly, he grasped the handle, then remembered to hook up to the framework.

Very slowly, he tilted the handle. The ship tilted at the same rate. When he could see the ground he began skewing the handle. Slowly the ship followed through. Taber was hanging upside down when he saw the chopper and horse soldiers a half kilometer down the slope. They were not looking in his direction. Slowly, Taber straightened the handle and felt his equilibrium return.

"Is this the only control?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Isn't there a door—some way to close and lock it?"

"No."

"How do you keep air in when you're in space?"

"I don't know. It just stays."

Taber groaned.

"What?"

"I said it took me two years just to learn what all the knobs on my typewriter were for."

Doggedly, Taber began trying to find some relationship between the hand-lettered diagrams and the ship. Once he recognized the artist's conventions some diagrams became self-explanatory. But he could not find one which referred to the control handle.

Taber had repaired enough machinery to have a more or less instinctive grasp of what was proper and what was not. But he was also enough of an anthropologist to realize exactly what he was up against. What would a master mechanic of a century ago make of machines which were welded together in unlikely spots and which absolutely refused to unscrew for adjustment and repair?

Taber knew he would never understand the principles behind this ship's drive any more than the average woman knows what makes her car run. But if the malfunction were something simple—the space age equivalent of a loose screw . . . The only trouble was, how does a knots and cordage man learn to think nuts and bolts?

"When something breaks down do you repair it or do you throw it away?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Think, damn it! Has anyone ever patched a rip in that blue suit you're wearing?"

"They don't wear out."

"You burned one out. What'd you do with it?"

"Threw it away."

"How?"

"Out the door."

"Is that how you—" Didn't make sense, Taber decided. Starfood explained the lack of kitchen facilities. The alien might not care for it but it stuck to the ribs quite nicely. Taber was still neither hungry nor thirsty.

"If you were home would you have this ship fixed or would you get another?"

"I don't know. Never had a ship before."

"Aha, so they aren't all that plentiful!" Was Chap a new driver who didn't realize cars need gas? Couldn't be that. Part of the ship still had power.

The clue was in that repair manual. This ship was not a one-of-a-kind affair. It took a well-developed technology to build a starship. But the repair manual for that starship was very much one of a kind. It reminded Taber of the artsy-craftsy things children did in the primary grades. Why?

Gently he tilted the control again. The chopper was gone but the horsemen were still there, a hundred yards away—following Taber's footprints straight to the starship's unprotected door. "They're coming in!" Taber panicked and invoked several lesser Babylonian deities.

The *chapayeca* roused. "Turn the ship until the door's on the ground," he said.

After several agitated tries Taber halted the rolling ship in the right position. Barely in time, he guessed, for at that instant the ground under the doorway spouted a thin stratum of dust. When it cleared Taber saw hoofprints. The rider's head must have passed through Taber. He loosed a long-held breath. The *chapayeca* was not even remotely agitated.

What kind of a technological society doesn't have books? Reluctantly, Taber retreated to his first guess. He stared at the alien. *You're a telepath, damn you. Why don't you admit you can read my mind?* But the alien showed no sign of perceiving Taber's thought. If all knowledge were pooled and readily

available there would be no need for books. Nor would anyone ever have to study. It would be a hive mentality, Taber guessed, unbelievable in its total abilities. But the intelligence of any individual might be very small.

Was this the answer to Chap's placid stupidity and his occasional flashes of brilliance? Taber was wandering in unknown territory and had to use what guideposts were available. Assume telepathy existed. If it was radiant energy it must obey the inverse square law and lose power at a distance. How far was the alien from home? Far enough to be out of contact?

"Do you have radios or telephones?" Taber asked.

"What?"

Taber described Earth's communications network.

"No."

"Nothing like that?" Taber asked. "No movies, no TV?"

"What for?"

What indeed?

Tentatively, Taber began sketching his theories to the alien, watching for some sign of recognition or agreement. "Am I right?" he finally asked.

"I don't know."

"Am I wrong?"

"I don't know."

Dejectedly, Taber went back to studying the manual. Was it a repair manual? "You're sure you're not married and this's your kid's coloring book?" he asked. "No, don't tell me. You don't know."

"I do know," Chap said. "If I were married I'd remember."

Taber thought briefly of the wretched mess his own marriage had turned into. "Yes, I guess you would," he agreed.

There just weren't enough common points of reference for Taber to build up any theory. What did he really know about the alien? "Are you right- or left-handed?" he asked.

"What?"

Taber explained about the brain's division and the dominance of one half over the other."

"I guess not."

Taber hmmd. Ambidexterity would explain the alien's extraordinary agility. Of course, agility might merely come from the absolute knowledge that no fall could ever hurt. Taber reached for his pen and suddenly slapped his forehead. What was happening to his mind? He tilted the ship upright, unhooked himself, and climbed down to the entrance. He was just stepping through the doorway when he saw his shirt and pants. The *yor*i captain was facing him and emptying the pockets two short steps away.

"Turn the ship over quick!" Taber shrieked. He wedged himself into the monkey bars and held on.

Minutes passed before he could think calmly. If the ship had turned the way he thought it had the captain was now somewhere inside it, perhaps occupying the same space as Taber. Now the captain knew Taber had been here, that he was on foot, and couldn't be too far away.

After a time Taber realized just how puzzled the captain must be. By now he probably knew Taber was a diabetic, unavoidably linked to an insulin supply. Yet here were Taber's clothes and his medicines. Probably the captain was waiting for the *zopilotes* to start circling overhead, waiting with full confidence that he would find Taber's body where the scavengers zeroed in.

This area was going to be busy for the next few days. How perfect was the ship's camouflage? If the *yor*i captain ever got the slightest hint . . .

"We've got to get out of here," Taber began. "I was about to ask if you know what a screw is."

"Yes."

"You do? Are things sometimes put together with screws on your planet—like the cap on my pen?"

"Yes."

Well now, Taber thought. "Can you show me some screws in this ship?"

The *chapyeca* grasped the nearest monkey bar, twisted it a quarter turn in the wrong direction, and handed it to Taber.

"That's impossible," Taber exclaimed. "That bar was fastened at both ends. Even with opposite threads the pieces it's fastened to would have to move."

The *chapyeca* handed him the bar. Taber studied the almost microscopic threads on both ends. Broken threads, like those which permit an old-fashioned diving suit to mate the helmet with only a quarter turn. But Taber could not visualize how the piece went in and out. What the hell, he finally thought, if a horse can pass through the ship why can't one monkey bar swallow another? "Does the whole ship come apart this way?"

The alien handed him another piece.

"Don't!" Taber hastened. "Unless you can remember how to put it back together."

He hooked up and hung, thinking. "When did you first know the ship wouldn't work?" he finally asked.

"When I landed here."

"How did it act?"

"I was coming straight in like always and when I flipped over to land I couldn't slow it down."

"Like always. Then you've flown a lot?"

"No." The *chapyeca* frowned. "Oh, I see. *Like always* is the way it's done—not personal experience."

"So how do you slow down?"

"I flipped over and raised the handle UP but it wouldn't go."

"The handle or the ship?"

"Neither."

Too easy. It can't be that simple. Taber pulled himself up to the control position and grasped the handle. The monkey bar was no different from the others. The handle grew from it as naturally as a limb from a tree. He hooked up and flexed it, trying to keep his eye on the handle while he cartwheeled in

Earth's gravity. Abruptly, he remembered the captain. He studied the screen during one revolution and saw no sign of life save a small smoke a mile away.

The handle flexed but no joints or articulation were visible. Nor was it soft anywhere. "What'd happen if I pushed down?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"I mean if it worked—what'd happen?"

"Go down."

"Into the Earth?"

"Yes."

"Would it hurt the ship?"

"No."

"Will this ship go backward as fast as forward?"

"I guess so."

Taber forced the ship onto its side again and saw it was getting dark outside. This time, when the ship was horizontal he did not relax his pressure on the handle. Pushing harder, he learned it would move farther though it took most of his strength. Forcing the handle, he saw the ground tilt up until the large end of the ship was down end for end from its normal position. "What'll happen if I push down now?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"If it works, I mean. Will the ship back *up* away from the ground?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

Gently, Taber tried it. The lever didn't move. Remembering the strength it had taken to turn the ship over, Taber tried harder. Straining, he saw the ground retreat a foot. He relaxed and the ship settled with a jolt which he felt in every vertebra.

"That handle's easy for you to push down, isn't it?"

"Yes."

For the first time Taber realized how much stronger than human the alien must be. Not that it made any difference. Taber

was getting used to everyone being stronger than he was. "What kept you from backing all the way home?" he asked.

"Couldn't see where I'm going."

"You couldn't even rig up an outside mirror or something?"

"What's a mirror?"

Automatically, Taber began explaining, then stopped. "You're sure you've never seen anything like that before?" There must have been a mirror somewhere in Xbampo. Did telepaths see themselves only through others' eyes?

"Can you take the handle apart like you did that other thing?"

"I don't know." The *chapyeca* began fiddling with it and the ship wobbled alarmingly.

"Hold it!" Taber said. "There's got to be a master disconnect somewhere."

"You mean something that makes the whole ship dead?"

Taber nodded.

"Here." The alien twisted the monkey bar which held the control handle. There was that momentary blurring like a jump cut as Taber's eyes saw something which his conditioning had taught him not to believe. Then the bar, complete with handle was loose from the ship. Simultaneously, the glaring blue-white light went out.

After a moment Taber's eyes adjusted to the outside light which filtered in through roof and doorway. He studied the ends of the bar but could not see how the threads worked. He looked for connectors and saw none. Probably there, Taber guessed, but they would be as invisible to him as gearless power transmission to a pre-electricity man. He squinted at the control handle. "Too damn dark in here," he said. "We ought to've tried this in the daytime."

"I don't think so," Chap said.

"Why?"

"Ship's visible now."

Taber handed the bar back to the alien. "Put it back quick!" he said.

Seconds later Taber was blinking in the blue-white glare again. He rotated the ship for a look outside but their momentary appearance had apparently gone unnoticed in the dusk. Taber glared at the control handle. The alien consistently unscrewed things in the wrong direction. Taber twisted experimentally. The handle turned but the ship did not. There was an unhappy, crunchy feel as Taber continued turning. Suddenly the handle came off. He felt movement—the sinking sensation of a rapidly rising elevator. Overhead he saw a rapidly growing crescent moon. It looked like he might just miss it.

After the first panic Taber accepted the situation with admirable resignation. He puffed and blew at the handful of parts which poured from the handle. A small amount of white grit separated from them. Taber didn't know if it was dirt or worn-out parts. After several tries he had the handle reassembled in proper order. At least, he had it back together without anything left over. Gingerly he tried it and felt the assembly move without the former gritty feeling.

Moon and Earth were two equally sized hemispheres when he finally turned the ship a half hour after lift-off. He wondered how he was going to get back without spending weeks hunting the right spot. Once convinced the control was now working properly, he solved the problem the easy way. He relinquished the control to Chap and said, "Let's go back."

It wasn't until after he had done this that Taber realized that now with the ship working perhaps the alien would have no reason nor intention to return. But Chap aimed for the brighter of the two half golf balls and soon Taber saw the mainland of Sonora rushing up at him. As the Gulf disappeared over the horizon he reminded the alien, "Come in slow; I break easy." It wasn't until they were on the ground that Taber knew why that uprushing landscape had seemed so familiar. It looked just like a page of old newspaper coming into focus on a microfilm reader.

Once on the ground again, Taber experimented euphorically.

The ship was so simple even an idiot—well, Chap handled it, didn't he? It was a bright moonlit night and Taber's eyes worked better than the *chapayeca's* so he took the control. He had not gone a dozen miles before he knew he was lost. "Can you take us back to the village?" he asked.

Chap took over and jumped high enough to outline Sonora's dark land mass with the moonlit waters of the Gulf. Then he dropped rapidly, flipped at the last moment, and landed in a small cañon. "Better leave the ship here," he explained.

"Where are we?"

Chap pointed. Taber unhooked and let himself down to the ship's entrance. Silently, they climbed out of the cañon. When they reached the top Taber saw cooking fires on the tailings dump below them.

Lico was there. He had recovered the mules and Taber's possessions. He recovered his good nature on seeing Taber. "Do they know about Teta?" Taber asked.

"He attacked and you defended yourself. You're a bigger man here now."

"We stopped to see if you're all right," Taber said. "After the way I warned them about having us in the village I don't think it'd be smart for us to hang around."

"You're right," Lico said. "I'll get my stuff."

"No, wait. You've been a good and faithful friend. Now I have to do something by myself. If it works, maybe someday you can come back to the states again when you get tired of 'walking in good streets.'"

Lico gave him a searching look but said nothing. They embraced formally, then Taber and the *chapayeca* trotted up over the ridge.

NINE:

Back inside the ship Taber inventoried his pills. He swallowed an insulin capsule and realized it had been forty hours since he had eaten or excreted. Suddenly he understood the lack of plumbing in the starship. "Only eat it in space," the *chapyeca* had said.

"Chap, how long before I'm hungry again for more starfood?"

"I don't know."

Of course you don't, Taber realized. "How long does a piece of it last *you*?"

The alien thought a moment. "I ate before I left home," he said. "Half a year ago I started eating Earth foods."

"And as long as you eat starfood you neither drink nor eliminate?"

"Yes," Chap said.

"How long can people live this way?"

"I don't know. Forever, I guess."

Taber knew from long and bitter experience that the pain was worse when his lower digestive tract was distended with waste matter or gas. This last day or two he'd felt almost human. Coincidence or starfood? Taber went back to another problem. "Chap, does this ship run out of fuel?"

"I don't know."

"Have you ever seen fuel of any kind being put in a ship?"

"No."

"People travel all around the universe, come home; what do they do with their ship?"

"Turn it off."

"No special work? Nobody takes it into the shop for refitting or service?"

"No."

"Have you ever been anywhere else on Earth but right here around this village?"

"No."

"I'm going to broaden your horizons. Hang on." Taber lifted the ship. It was too dark to tell land from water. It took him a minute to find Polaris in the profusion of stars at this altitude, then he headed north. Seconds later a luminous patch appeared. Taber dropped toward it.

A moment later he remembered, "Say, this ship isn't heavy, is it?"

"What?"

"Does it support its own weight when I land or will it smash a roof?"

"It won't do that."

After some careful last-minute maneuvering Taber stopped the ship. "Welcome to my humble abode," he said, and turned on the lights in his apartment.

Chap stepped out of the ship and stood incuriously in the middle of the tiny room. The door was still locked from outside. Taber wandered about running his finger through dust atop tables and shelves. Either the FBI didn't want him very badly or they knew he wasn't here. He rummaged through cupboards and found coffee and a can of soup. Both were on the table before he realized that neither he nor the alien really wanted to eat.

"Starfood," the alien explained.

"Oh well . . . Want to take a bath?"

"What's that?"

Taber explained, meanwhile hurriedly analyzing. The alien did have an odd smell. Not offensive—just slightly different. How long since Taber had had a bath? Must've been before he'd had to leave Xbampo and kill Teta. How many days? As he began peeling off the skintight blue suit Taber discovered his body was clean.

Thoughtfully, he showered, shaved off his scraggly beard, and got back into the suit. He found clean trousers and a long-sleeved shirt which covered everything but a strip of blue around his neck. It'd pass as a weird undershirt, he decided. Suddenly Taber grinned. If he could find a way to market those suits on Earth it'd be only a matter of days before the plumbers would contact the soap and deodorant people and form a cabal to assassinate him.

His bed felt strange. Taber was mildly amazed when he woke next morning to the realization that he had slept a whole night without pills. He stretched, breathed deeply, and faced the day without need of coffee. When had he felt this good? Not for three years, he knew.

"Chap," he said, "we can save ourselves a lot of future trouble

if we do something right now. That *yorí* captain is still worrying about unrest in Río Yaqui. Let's put his mind at ease."

"All right."

Taber suspected the *chapayeca* would have answered the same if he'd proposed to cut God's throat with a rolling pin. He gave the apartment a quick sweepout and they entered the ship through the door to Taber's closet. Taber reflected on his own hit-and-miss navigation and said, "Take her back over the village."

Sudden brutal acceleration took them a hundred miles up in half that many seconds. They hovered an instant while Chap got his bearings by some instinct known only to demons. By the time they were heading south on a long downward glide Taber could breathe again. He was hurting in every joint and trembling with the knowledge that he probably would have died if that micron-thick suit hadn't held him together. "Slow, damn it," he finally managed. "I break easy."

"What?"

"The acceleration. I'm not built like you. Or maybe it's just because I don't have one of those things under your ear."

"Oh," the alien said, and fingered his scar. "Am I going too fast now?"

"It's not a question of speed," Taber tried to explain. Ruefully, he reflected on the number of things people didn't have to concern themselves with when they were bullet and acceleration proof. Good thing I'm not any stronger, he thought, or I'd've killed myself the first time I piloted this ship. The *chapayeca*, who could pull the handle farther, nearly had.

"There," the alien said.

"What?"

"Village right below." He flipped the ship and Taber saw a fingerprint of mountains and cañons.

"If you can't see as well as I can, how do you know it's there?" Taber asked.

"I've been there."

"You wouldn't by any chance know where the *cuartel* in Río Yaqui is?"

"No."

"I guessed so." Taber took the controls and headed west toward the Gulf, dropping slowly until he could recognize roads, houses, and other appurtenances of civilization which multiplied as they neared the coast. Finally he recognized the broad valley of the Yaqui and followed it down to the delta. "You're sure we're invisible?" he insisted.

"Yes."

"I wonder if we show up on radar."

"What's that?"

Taber explained. The Americans had a satellite tracking station near Guaymas. If it was catching a pip of their erratic wanderings several countries would have aircraft in this region before long. But all was quiet when he arrived over the dense, steaming canebrakes of the delta. Slowly, he maneuvered over the *plaza mayor*. Men were dancing down there. Isn't even Easter yet, Taber thought. How far had he come in three weeks!

He skimmed over Narciso's house, across the *plaza mayor*, and came to rest above the Mexican *cuartel*. Now if he could just remember where the captain's office had been . . . Last night he'd gone through the roof of his house without a qualm. But that had been after dark. Involuntarily bracing himself, Taber pushed the inverted ship down through the low building's roof. There was an instant's blackness, then his eyes were adjusting to the dim interior light. Leisurely, he floated about the *cuartel*. Men were picking their noses, doing the thousand other things people do when they think nobody's looking.

The captain sat alone at his desk. Carefully, Taber flipped the ship and brought it to rest. He unhooked and climbed down the monkey bars to peek through the doorway. No good. Someone might blunder in. He signaled to the alien who diddled controls until the ship's doorway was coincident with a wall.

Hoping no one would deliberately walk into a wall, Taber stepped out.

Seconds passed before the captain looked up from his papers. "You're supposed to knock," he growled, then he recognized Taber.

The captain boggled a moment, then drew breath to summon the corporal of the guard. Silently, Taber put his finger to his lips and gave what he hoped was a conspiratorial look. The captain glowered but remained silent. "Well?" he asked.

"There is no unrest in Río Yaqui," Taber said.

"How do you know?"

Taber tried on a silent film version of a leer. "There are things a person like you in an official position prefers not to know," he said.

"So?"

"You were right," Taber said. "There was trouble brewing. The trouble focused on one particular person."

"And?"

"That person will never trouble anyone again."

"How did you get away?"

"I didn't get," Taber said. "I was taken. These Indians . . . As you probably know, there are factions. The faction you and I favor is now in power."

"Be that as it may," the captain said, "that village must be destroyed."

"What village?" Taber asked. He knew damn well what village.

"They're training an army up in the mountains."

"Oh no!" Taber protested.

"You know better?"

"Of course I know better. I was there when your damned airplane flew over. Look, they're not training any army. All those poor bastards want is to be left alone."

The captain was silent for a moment. "I'd like to believe you," he finally said, "but it's out of my hands now."

"What's going to happen?"

"We'll bomb them out."

"You can't," Taber said. "You can bother them, maybe catch a few in the open. But if you drop a bomb on that village you'll undo everything I've accomplished. You want a full-scale war in Río Yaqui?"

The captain hesitated, then squared his shoulders. "Too late," he said. "The orders are cut. They're probably in the air already."

"I've got to stop them!" Taber exclaimed.

"I still have an order for your arrest," the captain said. "You're not stopping anybody."

"Want to bet?" Taber blazed.

"Corporal of the guard!" the captain bawled.

Taber took a step backward and disappeared into the wall of the captain's cubicle. "Back to the village," he said to Chap. "And take it easy on the lift-off."

A minute later they hovered in clear blue sky over Xbampo. Taber could just make out the tailings dump where tiny spirals of smoke suggested the dancing and feasting. He searched the sky. If planes were coming he couldn't see them. "You hear any?" he asked the *chapayeca*.

"No."

Taber thought about warning the villagers to stay inside the mine then decided against it. There'd be plenty of time and if the planes didn't come, why stir up the people below?

"Do you know what trade is?" he asked.

"Yes."

"People get rich exchanging goods for money on your planet?"

"Yes."

"Do people exchange goods from one planet to another?" Taber asked.

"Why?"

"To make money, what else?"

The alien thought a moment. "I don't think so," he said. It was Taber's turn to ask why.

"Every planet has things. Why haul them so far?"

"Are things exactly the same on every planet you know?"

"Yes."

They would be, Taber decided, if the aliens were telepaths. As alike as two anthills or two beehives. "Don't you people like new things—something different?"

"I don't know."

"Take these blue suits," Taber said. "If you could deliver me a shipload of them I could get you quite a bit of Earth money or Earth goods for them."

"What kind of Earth goods?"

Taber shrugged. "What would you like?"

"I don't know until I see it."

"You sound like an editor," Taber muttered. He thought a moment. When shipping costs were high . . . Earth's first long-distance trade routes had carried spices. "Something new and different to eat?" he asked.

The alien evinced no interest.

"Fancy clothing? By the way, do both sexes dress alike where you come from?"

"Yes."

There goes the high fashion market. "Do you practice warfare?"

"No."

Naturally not, Taber guessed. It'd be impossible for telepaths to plot skulduggery against one another. But how about other races? "Are you the only *people* in the universe?" Taber asked. He used the Yaqui word which carries semantic implications of the red man's burden in a world of degenerates who do not even know proper ritual.

"I don't know," Chap said, then wrinkled his needle nose in the gesture Taber had come to recognize. "I remember other kinds of people. Like you but hair all over. I don't think they fight."

A subject race?

"Did you see other kinds of people on the way here?"
"Didn't stop."

Taber scratched his head. "Sounds like you deliberately headed for Earth. You weren't just forced down on the way somewhere else, were you?"

"I don't know." The *chapayeca* squirmed with the effort of thinking. "The book," he began unsurely, then trailed off.

"Yes, the book, damn it. If I could only read it!"

This couldn't be a routine flight, Taber knew. That book was handwritten—a one-of-a-kind thing. Somebody had done his best to prepare the *chapayeca* for a special danger. Why give a book to someone who couldn't read?

"Airplanes," the *chapayeca* said.

"Where?"

The alien headed the ship south and seconds later Taber could see them. He stared in disbelief at three ancient lumbering B-25s then realized their slow maneuverability was ideal for this sort of mission where no ground fire or air cover awaited. They ground along, throbbing and shaking like overloaded washing machines.

While Chap matched speed Taber wondered whether to work on the lead plane first. He decided against it. If the following pilots saw something the *yori* captain would put it together with Taber's disappearance and know he hadn't been hallucinating.

Taber hooked up to monkey bars inside the ship's doorway, leaving himself slack to get an arm and leg outside. Yelling and waving, he got the alien to jockey the invisible space ship until he could get a foot onto the lumbering bomber's elevators. The plane nosed down abruptly. As it dropped away from Taber's foot the pilot overcorrected and had to nose down again to avoid a stall. By the time Taber had repeated this maneuver several times the plane was much nearer the ground than the pilot cared to be with a live bombload. The other two pilots were waving frantically and yelling into microphones.

The starship eased into position and again Taber put his weight on the bomber's elevators. The pilot lost another five hundred feet. He looked despairingly at the mountains ahead and reached a decision. Bomb bay doors opened and a stick of anti-personnels thinned out the cactus below, scaring crows into raucous disapproval. Taber was already at work on the second plane.

Harassing the last plane, Taber barely escaped mashing his leg when the alien overshot and brought them inside the fuselage. Peeking cautiously out the doorway Taber saw a mike in an unoccupied gunner's turret. "Hold 'er steady a minute," he called to Chap. "This is God speaking," he said into the intercom. "Drop those bombs on my people and I'll do something *you* won't like." He barely pulled back inside before the plane banked in a tight turn back home with bombs undropped.

Taber wondered if he should warn the people below and decided not to. If he kept popping in and out unexplainedly before long someone would entertain suspicions of sorcery. Besides, the Indians below didn't need somebody else to tell them what airplanes meant. The older ones had been bombed before.

"Home, James," Taber said, and wondered what he was going to do when he got there. Once Uncle got wind of an alien . . . How did one disguise a *chapayeca*? Nothing could make that nose look human. Earth clothing and a hat would cover most of the alien's body and only someone very curious would notice the square-pupiled eyes. But a needle-nosed blue face? How does one hide things?

In plain sight, Taber guessed, the old Purloined Letter gambit. Could he hide a demon that way? Taber decided he was going to have to. "Not home," he said. "Can you take us back where Teta died?"

"Yes."

Coyotes had worked the young Indian over pretty thoroughly. Vultures were at him now. Holding his breath, Taber inspected

the area. He could find nothing to connect him with the crime except the ridgepole of their proposed house. Taber studied its dark-smeared length. He'd have to warn Lico to get rid of the ax on the odd chance that someone might want to match up its nicks with slashed branches here. Then he thought of a simpler way.

"Help me gather up these branches, Chap. At least we can give the poor devil a cremation."

"Better hurry," the alien said.

"Why?"

"Horses. Men talking Spanish."

Soldiers. "How far?"

"Half hour."

Taber wavered. Vultures would guide the patrol to Teta's stinking remains. Starting a fire would only bring them here a few minutes sooner and might destroy what little evidence remained. He set to work. When the pyre was blazing he turned to enter the ship and— A shadowy gray outline like a spinning top stood where the ship ought to be. While he watched it turned more solid.

Taber tore headlong through the doorway. "We're visible!" he yelled. "What the hell's going on?"

The *chapyeca* wrinkled his needle nose and twisted the monkey bar back into place. "Nothing," he said. "Wanted you to find the doorway quick. They're close."

Taber hooked up and lifted. A moment later the soldiers arrived. Taber couldn't tell if it was the same squad. He watched while they dismounted and waited for the fire to burn out. From the smell they'd know meat was burning and guess what kind. But the soldiers were unprepared. By the time they had found sticks to poke the pyre apart it was nearly burnt out.

"His horse," Taber said. "It probably headed for the nearest waterhole." Belatedly, Taber realized he had not removed the unfortunate beast's bit. It was hard enough for a horse to survive in this country without handicaps. It occurred then to Taber

that Lico might have caught the horse and brought him back to Xbampo along with their own animals. "Can you hear a stray horse anywhere?"

"Have to get away from those soldiers," the *chapayeca* said. He hooked himself as Taber had done and hung his head out the doorway. Taber went a mile out from the troopers and began circling. He was halfway around the column of smoke when the alien pulled his head in and pointed.

Soon Taber saw a bright roan gelding whose skin was just beginning to hang a bit loose. The animal stood until Taber got within smelling distance then gave a frightened whistle and ran. Finally Chap ran the hungry animal down and held it long enough for Taber to remove bridle and saddle. "I must be getting to smell like you," Taber said.

"Starfood," Chap answered.

Taber slapped the quivering horse on the rump. It scrambled to its feet and galloped a hundred yards then turned to gaze accusingly at Taber.

Taber untied blankets from the saddle's latigos. There in the young Indian's meager belongings he found the odd mask he'd first seen in Río Yaqui. "See if you can put it on," he said. Silently the alien complied.

"Is it comfortable?" Taber asked.

"It's all right."

"You may have to wear it a long time."

"Now?"

"Not yet," Taber said. "When we get home."

The *chapayeca* lined up the ship's door with the rear wall of Taber's closet much quicker than Taber could have done it. And now that he understood Taber's fragility the alien was not indulging in those herniating accelerations.

Taber washed his hands and face and changed into clean clothes. The micron-thick blue suit took care of everything else. He consulted his stomach and was neither hungry nor thirsty. What was starfood doing to his metabolism? As long as he

couldn't urinate there was no easy way to tell about his diabetes. Have to see the croaker one of these days and get a blood sugar analysis. But for the time being . . . Taber felt good. He couldn't remember feeling this painfree, this alive.

He breathed deeply and stretched out on his bed. The alien squatted and leaned back against the wall. Taber glanced at the clock. Noon exactly. Covered a bit of ground in only four hours, he decided. Then he got back to the real problem.

"Chap," he began, "you must have some kind of government where you come from."

"Yes."

"Does your government ever sacrifice the rights of some individual for the good of the community as a whole?"

"Yes."

"How does that individual feel about it?"

"I don't know."

"There are so many things you don't know. Why is your memory gone? Did someone sacrifice your rights?"

"I don't know."

"I wonder if you're a criminal being punished by exile, loss of memory, or somesuch?"

"I don't know."

It would be an odd sort of punishment, Taber guessed, if the victim couldn't know he was being punished or why. It seemed almost like life.

"Do you know the difference between philoxenia and xenophobia?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Which are you?"

"I don't know. Neither, I guess."

"Well, we Earthlings have a little of both. As an anthropologist I suppose I'm more of a philoxene, a lover of the strange and novel. But this strange and novel can very easily frighten us into xenophobia.

"The Yaquis accepted you," Taber continued. "You fit into

their life scheme very conveniently and nothing was dislodged. I'm afraid you won't fit into civilization quite so easily."

"What does that mean?"

"Once the government learns you exist the bejesus is going to be scared out of a lot of people who think their job is defense. My human rights and your non-human rights are going to be violated flagrantly and publicly. We'll end up in a cage that'll make the Dionne quintuplets circus look like the ultimate in laissez-faire."

"So what do we do?" Chap asked.

"We remain as inconspicuous as possible. That *yorl* captain is probably quietly worrying about his sanity. He won't say anything. Nor will those pilots. But if too many odd things happen they'll compare notes. We can't hide out indefinitely so you're going to have to pass for human. It's a simple matter of not attracting attention. We humans have good eyes but we seldom bother to use them."

TEN:

"All right," the alien said.

"You started to say something once about the book," Taber probed.

"Yes." The alien passed a hand over his forehead and squinted his tiny square-pupiled eyes into invisibility. "It was for when . . . It was important. They told me. But I can't remember."

"You can read Earth languages, thanks to that gadget under your ear. Funny you can't read your own."

"I can," the alien said. "I read the words but I can't understand. I don't think Earth languages have words."

"Read it to me in your own language."

The alien stepped into the closet and returned with the book. He gripped it with the spine toward the bottom and began riffling pages. Taber waited. Nothing happened. "Aren't you going to read?" he finally asked.

"I just did."

"Aloud, I meant."

"That's the trouble. There aren't any words."

Taber sighed. If telepaths didn't use words their script would obviously not be phonetic. It would have to be ideographic, like Chinese where symbols stood for ideas and concepts rather than for the sounds which made up the words. How could a non-telepath ever learn such a language?

Taber took the book. "Granted," he said. "Many of these symbols are beyond me. Still, there must be some you can explain. Words like *and*, *but* . . ." He opened a page at random and pointed to what looked like a shorter word. "What's that one?"

The alien screwed his face in concentration. "It's like one thing fitting inside something else," he finally said.

Taber switched to Spanish. "*¿Caber?*" he asked.

The alien hesitated.

"*¿Cabiendo? ¿Quepa? ¿Cupo?*"

"*¡Cupo!*" the *chapayeca* exclaimed.

"Noun or verb?"

"What's that?"

Taber explained.

"Noun, I guess."

Taber found a soft pencil and over the ideograph he carefully lettered *CAPACITY*, *Volume?* *Displacement?* Before he had finished the final word the first one was disappearing.

Self-cleaning, Taber guessed, and found an unused notebook of Earthly manufacture.

Five hours later Taber had a hodgepodge of random words but not enough to gain the slightest hint of the book's subject

matter. Repair manual, he had guessed, but he still had no proof. Have to sneak into the university and Xerox a half dozen copies so he could scribble wherever he wanted.

Suddenly Taber shook his head. Here he'd been worrying about how to make money and he had a ship which could enter any vault! Then, just as quickly, he dropped the idea. Unexplained robberies would attract attention. And if closed-circuit TV was not already working inside the vaults it soon would be. Much as he would have enjoyed getting his own back from a couple of insurance companies, Taber decided he would have to stay honest—except for little things like borrowing the university Xerox after office hours. Surely *that* wouldn't be on TV.

He was prying another ideograph out of the *chapayeca's* mind when someone knocked. The alien was heading for the ship via the closet door when Taber, speaking Yaqui, said, "No. We've got to face the world sooner or later. Put on the mask." While the alien was putting it on Taber opened the door.

It was Frank Hernández, the old jailer who'd come to warn him when Lico escaped. "You're back, I see," Frank said to the alien.

Taber stared nonplused for a moment, then understood. "No, don Pancho," he said, "this isn't Lico Bacaségua."

"Sure he isn't," the old cop said. "No hide off my ass who he is. I'm retired."

Taber gaped. "Kind of sudden, isn't it?" he finally managed.

"Damn sudden."

"Was it voluntary?"

"Sort of. I was told to put in for retirement or face a charge of procuring."

"You a pimp?" Taber exploded. "Bull!"

"They got me dead to rights," the old man said.

"I don't believe it!" Taber had been in and out of the police station often enough trying to help his Indian friends. He had always known old Frank as a decent and kindly man.

"Why the mask?" Frank asked.

"Una manda," Taber explained. Frank was Mexican and needed no more explanation of a religious vow.

"OK by me," he said. "But look out for that FBI asshole."

"Is he still around?"

"Very much so," Frank said in his soft, hispanic English. "Why do you think I'm retired?"

"That bastard!" Taber breathed. "What'd he do?"

"It was on the graveyard watch," Frank began. "The new kid picked up this pair of drunks outside a bar just closed. They were whoopin' and hollerin' till somebody four blocks away phoned in. The guy was a loud-mouth Texan. He'd picked up Gracie. You know her?"

Taber nodded. Gracie was an aging whore whose metabolism required a loud flamboyant gesture against the Establishment about once a month.

"They were still raisin' hell when the kid got them to my jail. In a minute they'd've had my boys all woke up. People can't understand a garbage truck's hard work. I can't have a bunch of strangers raisin' hell, pukin' all over my jail.

"I got 'em quieted down a little. Took 'em in the shower and they cleaned up. Seems the loud-mouth had given Gracie the dough for an all-night party and she was tryin' to weasel out.

"Well," Frank continued, "to cut it short, I asked Gracie if she wanted to go to his motel with this guy or if they wanted to spend the night in the tank."

"What's wrong with that—?" Taber began, then suddenly he understood. Procuring. "It was a setup."

"Right," Frank said. "And that's why I came around to warn you. That dismal dipshit's out to get you too. You better get *him* out of town." He gestured at the alien, then squinted. "Say something," he said.

"What?" Chap asked.

"Anything. *Se rie de cicatrices quien nunca tuvo una herida.*"

"He jests at scars who never felt a wound," the alien quoted.

Taber wondered what kind of machine could bring Shakespeare back home without the usual translator's bumbles.

Frank was silent for a moment, staring at the alien. "You're not Lico Bacaségua," he finally said.

"I told you that," Taber said. "This's a friend of mine from Río Yaqui."

Frank sighed. "Well, make damn sure he's got a valid passport, or that asshole will find some way to rack both of you."

"I'll be careful," Taber promised.

Frank grinned, punched him on the shoulder, and was letting himself out when Taber asked, "Say Frank, who is that guy? You have any idea why he has such a hard on for me?"

Frank stopped in the doorway. "It is kind of funny, isn't it?" he said. "I'll find out."

After he was gone Taber sat in silence. Finally he turned to the alien who still squatted with his customary acquiescence. "It's dark outside," he said. "Late too. Most people are home in bed. You sleepy?"

"No."

"Neither'm I," Taber said. "Want to go for a walk?"

"It might help," the alien said.

Taber found some faded Levis and a shirt which would not look too out of place on a masked Indian. He handed them to the alien. "We'll walk down by the tracks in the Indian part of town where we won't attract attention," he said.

They were scarcely out the door when the alien said, "Lots of them."

"What?"

"Airplanes. These run on the ground. Got four wheels."

"They're called cars. Stay by me or you'll get run over. Wouldn't hurt you," Taber supposed, "but it'd scare hell out of the driver and get us more attention than we need."

A car came up the street behind them. The *chapayeca* cringed visibly as it passed.

"It won't hurt you," Taber explained, "unless you step off this." He indicated the sidewalk.

"Your heart tells me you are lying."

Taber thought a moment. "You're right," he said. "Since one of them nearly killed me, I've never felt the same about them."

"It was one of these—cars?—that left you with constant pain?"

Taber nodded.

They reached the boulevard and after one glance Chap seemed to understand traffic lights. The WALK signal went on and he grasped Taber's arm and hurried him across at an undignified trot. "Quit worrying," Taber protested. "There's time.

"You break easy," the alien said.

"Suddenly you're awfully solicitous."

"Teta is dead. Now you are my only—" Chap hesitated, searching for a word.

"Friend?" Taber suggested.

"No."

"Protector?"

"Something like that."

"Owner?" Taber hazarded.

The alien was silent for a moment. "Not exactly," he finally said.

"Captor?" Taber tried.

"It's no use," the *chapayeca* said. "There is no word."

No one had paid the slightest attention to them as they walked across the brightly lit boulevard. There were enough Indians in this university town so that a *chapayeca* mask was not much of a novelty. Down by the tracks Indians politely made way for the man in the *chapayeca* mask. Occasionally someone would say, "*Liós emchiókwe, don Nacho.*" Taber returned the greetings and they strolled on.

"Big one coming," Chap said.

An instant later Taber heard a distant whistle. "Hurry," he said. "Down by the track and you'll see something."

By the time they reached the track Taber could see the

diesel's wobbling headlight. The alien became increasingly nervous as the train approached.

"Stand still," Taber said. "It can't get off the track."

"Again I think you lie."

"Well, yes," Taber conceded. "Accidents do happen but not very often."

"You shouldn't stand so close," Chap protested.

"We're a short-lived species," Taber explained. "And we'd never accomplish anything if we didn't take a few risks."

"It's dangerous," Chap said.

"Not for you," Taber said.

"But you have no protection," Chap protested. "You live like this all the time?"

Taber's reply was drowned out as the train roared past. The alien was in a positive frenzy of alarm, dancing about trying to stay between Taber and the train.

"Come on," Taber finally shouted, "let's go home."

The alien walked behind him until the train disappeared, then switched to the outer edge of the sidewalk, escorting Taber like a very fragile old lady.

Back in the apartment the alien seemed perplexed. Taber made small talk but he didn't answer. Finally the *chapayeca* went through the closet into the ship. He returned a moment later and handed Taber a packet. "Open it," he said. "It has to be you so it imprints properly."

Taber studied the seamless cartouche. "How?"

"Twist."

Taber did. There was a slight pop like a party favor and the outer cartouche disappeared. In his hand was a smaller one, about the size of one of his insulin capsules. From both ends extended tufts of fine wire like caterpillar fur. It moved. "It's alive!" Taber exclaimed, and dropped it on the table.

"Of course it is."

"What is it?"

The *chapayeca* pointed at the fresh scar under his ear.

"A shield?"

"Keep you from getting run over," the alien said.

And make me bulletproof, knifeproof, accelerationproof, and an instant linguist, Taber thought. "There's got to be a catch," he said. "If that translator works it'd have to be connected somehow with my nervous system—probably through an auditory nerve. How do you know my nerves are in the same place as yours?"

"Your ears are in the same place."

"Yes but . . ." Taber gave up. In the first place, it would require a neurosurgeon and a hospital. How many other complications? He tried to explain.

"Can go anywhere," Chap insisted. "Under the ear is just a handy spot where it won't rub on things or get bumped."

"But the nerve connections—"

"It makes its own."

"How do you know it won't hurt me?"

"All other races use it."

"All?"

"Hairy ones like you."

"Your people don't."

"How do you know?" Chap asked, then fingered the raw scar under his ear. "You're right," he said. "I wonder why."

"Maybe they don't need it."

The *chapyeca* frowned and twitched his ears.

"Don't do that," Taber said.

"What?"

"Don't wiggle your ears or people will know they're real."

"All right."

"Will this parasite let me read thoughts?"

"Symbiont," the alien corrected. "No, it won't. At least, I can't."

"But there's fairly strong evidence that most of your people can. Is it a hearing aid for the afflicted?"

"Could be," Chap said. "I hadn't thought of it that way."

Taber underwent a severe attack of the flaps. As a young

man he had read enough science fiction to remember the symbiont in Clement's *Needle*. He also remembered a few dozen more gruesome possessions. Was Chap a mindless host to one of these ciliated capsules? If so, they weren't hellbent on taking over Earth. "Is this the first time you've offered one of these things to anyone?" Taber asked.

"Only one spare," the alien said.

"What'll you do when yours goes out?"

"I don't know."

"What makes them go out?"

"They're pretty strong. Maybe if you went into a really hot star . . ."

"How long will they last?"

"Longer than you."

"How long will that be?"

"With the suit and eating starfood . . . Hard to say under this kind of star. Maybe three times what you'd live without it."

"Those young warriors down in Xbampo must've pestered you for something like this."

"Yes."

"How come you didn't give it to Teta?"

"He wished only to use me."

"What do you think I want to do?" Taber asked.

"You offer something in return. Remember, I listen to your heart too."

Taber rushed embarrassedly into the bathroom and wiped sudden moisture from his eyes.

"Why did you do that?" Chap asked.

"I don't know," Taber said. "I guess it was something about your being so far from home and offering me half your chances of getting back."

"Then you'll take it?" Chap gestured at the wriggling capsule.

"Yes," Taber said. "I hope it quiets down once it's inside my head."

"It's only looking for something to hook onto."

"I don't have much in the way of anesthetics," Taber said. "Let me load up on pain pills." There were four in his pocket. He tried to swallow them and couldn't. He drew a glass of water and tried again. After several tries and an incredible effort of will Taber managed to swallow the yellow tablets.

"Starfood," the alien explained. "It doesn't like anything else interfering."

"Do you suppose the pills will work?"

"No."

"Then why did you let me waste them?"

"Would you have believed me?"

"No," Taber admitted. A half hour later he knew the pills were not going to stifle his contact with reality. In a way he was happy they hadn't. It had been years since he'd felt fully free from the aftereffects of sedation. It was such a glorious feeling just to be alive and not to hurt.

The alien came from the bathroom with a new razor blade.

"How did you know about those?" Taber asked.

"Saw you shave and throw one away."

"How deep will you cut?"

"Just under the skin."

"Slice away," Taber said. For three years he had lived constantly with more pain than that.

The *chapyeca* ran fingers over his face, feeling the hollow behind Taber's jawbone.

"Don't hit an artery," Taber said, and felt a slight sting as the blade laid open a flap of skin. Going to hurt in a minute, he thought. The alien poked around. He was sticking a Band-Aid over the cut when Taber felt suddenly woozy.

"It's connecting," the alien said. "You'll feel funny for a day or two and then we'll know if—" There was a loud pounding on the door.

They looked at each other. Taber saw the *chapyeca* through the familiar tunnel vision of narcosis. Were the pills finally

working or was that fuzzy thing fiddling with his nervous system? The door splintered open.

It was the FBI man, red-faced and angry as Taber had remembered him. "Got you this time," he said. Taber tried to ask "What for?" but he felt himself sliding down the rapidly narrowing tunnel of his vision.

Taber woke in a strange bed. He drowsed and it wasn't until later that he noticed bars on the window. Incuriously, he rolled his head and saw an oddly uniformed cop sitting beside the bed. It might have been another hour before he roused enough to study the cop's badge. U. S. Marshal. Now what federal law had he broken, Taber wondered, apart from aiding a fugitive and smuggling in an alien?

Suddenly he was awake. What had happened to the *chapa-yeca*? Guiltily, he remembered warning the alien not to attract attention. Did the alien realize a disappearing act would not attract half the attention which would come when some jailer removed that mask and saw the face underneath? "What'm I doing here?" he asked.

"You're under arrest."

"What for?"

"Suspicion."

"Of what?"

"You name it," the marshal said.

"I wish I could," Taber said. "I've always minded my own business. Suddenly everybody else is minding it for me."

"I just work here," the marshal said.

Taber decided he was going to get nothing from the marshal. The next time he woke a nurse was shaking him. "Come on now," she said. "There's nothing wrong with you."

"I know," Taber said.

"You've had two whole days to sleep. Now it's time to eat something."

"Not hungry," Taber said.

"You'll take it one way or the other," she threatened.

"When I'm damned good and ready," Taber snarled. "Now bugger off!" The nurse's mouth snapped shut and she swept out of the room.

"You knock off that kind of talk," the guard threatened.

It was a new guard. This one had a face—Taber thought of the Spanish phrase, *cara de pocos amigos*. This marshal's face looked as if he might have very few friends. Taber got a sudden idea. "I don't like your face and I don't like your conversation. If you don't like me, shoot me."

"Don't worry. Once we get your Indian buddy!" The marshal stopped in sudden consternation.

Taber grinned. "I won't tell anybody who told me," he said.

"Won't do any good," the marshal said glumly. "Place's bugged."

Taber heard footsteps. They lasted unusually long, becoming louder and louder. Finally the door opened and another marshal entered. "Put your clothes on," he said. Silently, Taber dressed. This hospital was turning into the noisiest place. Scrapes, squeaks, grunts, and wheezes—and beneath it all a steady booming of kettledrums. There were two beats, one slightly faster than the other. Suddenly Taber understood. It *was* a hearing aid. He was listening to the marshals' heartbeats! If his hearing was always going to be this good Taber guessed it was a mixed blessing. How much would it cost to soundproof his apartment?

He finished dressing and the marshal led him out the door, down the hall into what Taber guessed was an interrogation room. The marshal walked out and left him alone. The room was brightly lit and paneled in mirrors. One way glass, Taber guessed. How long would they leave him here to soften up?

He tried to assess his position. Chap had gotten away. How spectacular had his getaway been? Were carpenters tearing Taber's closet apart now looking for trap doors and secret passages? Unless they were in close contact with Río Yaqui the angry-faced young FBI man and his cohorts would probably

convince themselves that in the confusion they'd seen wrong—that the Indian had gone out the bathroom window instead of into the obviously impossible closet. Taber hoped they were solid unimaginative types with a fine regard for logic and legalities.

What did they know about him? Nothing really. They might suspect a great many things. When would they come to interrogate him? Absently, he glanced at his wrist. Peeping out from his shirt cuff was a bit of blue. He had been unconscious in a hospital and they hadn't undressed him? Either they thought it was his skin or . . . Probably they had tried to get the suit off and couldn't. How many doubledomes would be waiting to pinch and probe?

Underneath, Taber was conscious of the hospital routine: murmured conversations, comings and goings in the hallways. His hearing must now be as good as the *chipayeca's*. "Chap," he murmured, "are you near? Can you hear me?"

ELEVEN:

The door opened. In walked the young FBI man and two older men. They sat at one side of a table and motioned Taber to the other. "Well, Mr. Taber," the young man said, "you led us quite a chase."

"It was my understanding the last time I saw you that you were no longer going to interfere in my private, lawful business," Taber said.

"Smuggling aliens into this country is not a legitimate business."

After a nanosecond's hesitation Taber knew he referred to

aliens in the legal sense rather than in Taber's. "Nor do I engage in it," he said.

"Do you deny there was another man in your apartment?"

"That's illegal?"

"He was an alien."

"Did you check his passport?" Taber asked.

"He had none."

"Like a rug," Taber said.

"What?"

"You lie."

One of the older men interrupted. "You may as well know this involves a matter of national security."

"What this involves," Taber said acidly, "is a fishing expedition. As a matter of public record I am an anthropologist. Twice my home and privacy have been invaded. Perhaps I shall collect damages from persons responsible for hampering my work, frightening away subjects being interviewed. Those men's confidence in me is totally destroyed. A year's work down the drain!"

"Enough, Mr. Taber," the older man said. "Would you care to tell us why your skin is blue?"

"I got caught in the rain with some new Levis."

The older men smiled unwillingly. The young man's turkey-gobbler face turned darker. "Perhaps, Mr. Taber, you'd care to explain these." He tossed several small objects on the table.

They looked like bent pins. Taber held one to the light and squinted. It was a hypodermic needle, blunted and bent as if someone had been trying to mainline a block of granite. "Search me," he said incuriously.

"These were all used on you."

"Show them in court," Taber said, "and I just might get a jury to use them on you."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Taber," the older man said. "This matter is much too urgent and too delicate to waste time in the courts." Slowly, he drew a revolver from a shoulder holster and aimed

it at Taber. Taber saw his finger whiten on the trigger. The explosion would have been deafening in the closed room, even without Taber's augmented hearing. He saw the flash and the tiny tendril of smoke. The bullet clattered at his feet.

Taber picked it up. The bullet was not blunted. He felt its heat. Ears ringing, he tossed it back across the table. "Eat it," he said.

"What are you?" the man asked.

"A thoroughly angry man," Taber said. "You'll find out just how angry if you ever pull a cheap trick like that again. Now eat it!" He leaned forward. The man with the gun turned white. Hastily, he popped the hot bullet into his mouth. Taber heard it sizzle. "Swallow," he said.

The man swallowed and took on an expression of such excruciating agony that Taber wondered if he'd copied it from a cheap crucifix.

"Now," Taber said, "when are you going to stop interfering with the rounds of my lawful-appointed business?"

"We aren't. Mr. Taber, you are an educated man. Surely you realize the mark of Cain is upon you."

"Have I killed someone?"

"Not yet."

Inwardly Taber relaxed. "As I recall the Cain legend," he said, "the mark was to prevent others from killing him."

"You seem in need of no such protection. But suppose we turn you loose. How long before someone tries a larger weapon?"

Taber shrugged.

"Somehow you have discovered the secret of Achilles. Do you think the world will not search out your heel? Make no mistake, Mr. Taber. Either you cooperate or the world will stake you out under larger and larger destroyers. Can you withstand an H-bomb?"

"Probably," Taber said. "Can you withstand my retaliation?"

"Where would you live?"

"Where would *you* live? I can always go to another planet."

Belatedly, Taber realized he had given something away. From suddenly accelerated heartbeats he knew they had caught it too. He waited for them to pounce but his questioners were oddly silent.

"Would you like some coffee?" one finally asked.

"No."

"Anything?"

"No, thank you."

"The nurses tell us you have taken nothing for the last seventy-two hours."

"I'll tell you when I'm hungry," Taber said.

"You do that," they said and walked out, leaving Taber alone in the room. A moment later a marshal came and led him to an elevator. They went up several floors and Taber was put in a cell. After a while he realized it was padded.

"Chap," he subvocalized, "are you there? Can you hear me?" There was no answer. A padded cell was a pretty good insulator. Taber could barely hear the routine sounds out in the corridor. Did his captors know this or was it just coincidence? Again he was sleepy. He stretched out on the padded floor. If only he'd had time to try out the thing under his ear . . .

Chances were this cell was wired for sound and vision. It wouldn't do to try something and fail. The only things he knew for sure were that he could stop bullets and that he could hear better than formerly. He'd picked up the hot bullet and felt its warmth but it hadn't burnt him. That man had known the bullet wouldn't hurt Taber. How much experimenting had they done while he was unconscious?

They probably knew more than Taber knew about himself. But did *they* know that? Perhaps he could tear this cell door off its hinges and walk off through a hail of bullets. But if he couldn't? Better keep them guessing. Then he remembered one other detail. The shield and the blue suit would give him, conservatively, another hundred years under this kind of a star. Now what did *that* mean? If he could feel as painfree as he had for

the last few days, Taber wouldn't mind living that long. Might give him time to finish his definitive work on the Yaquis. On that happy note he dozed off.

He woke suddenly and lay a moment wondering what had wakened him. Then he heard a voice speaking Yaqui. He turned face down, away from possible cameras, and muttered, "Chap?"

"Yes."

"Where are you?"

"Talking into a small passage which brings air to your hole."

"What kept you so long?"

"They kept moving you. You are in a different light now."

Light? Taber remembered what his home town had looked like from the air. "Do you know the name of this city?" he asked.

"I cannot listen without exposing my head outside the ship. Let me try some other passages."

"Air conditioning ducts," Taber corrected.

The padded cell had no clock. It could have been ten minutes or an hour before he heard the alien's subvocalization again. "Some say the capital. Others say Deesee, and some call this place Washington."

"I can work it out from that," Taber said. "Are you all right."

"Yes. And you?"

"Better than I've felt for years," Taber said.

"Do you wish me to remain inconspicuous?"

Taber thought a moment. He began trying to remember and describe the closed circuit TV camera he'd seen in a surplus electronics catalog. "Can you see anything like that, or any unexplained wires leading into this cell?"

"Many wires," the *chapyeca* said.

"Don't fiddle with the lights or the organic matter will really hit the fan," Taber hastened.

A moment later Chap subvocalized, "One camera."

"Where?"

"Inside light."

"In the ceiling fixture?"

"Yes."

"Can you rip out the coax without exposing yourself?"

"Yes."

"Good," Taber said. "Now, when I signal you pull it out, then bring the ship in here and we'll leave."

"All right."

Taber grinned and pointed his finger. That'll give them something to figure out, he guessed, and shouted, "*BANG!*"

Flashes, sputters, smells of electrical disaster. He must've got the wrong wire, Taber guessed as the lights went out.

Immediately the cell door burst open. The angry young FBI man rushed in. Men with drawn guns stood in the doorway. "Don't you ever knock?" Taber asked. Where the hell was Chap? Then he saw the alien's head pop out of the ship for a subliminal instant. It was practically coincidental with the cell doorway. Taber stepped toward it.

"Stay away from me!" the turkey-faced young man's voice was an octave too high.

"Be happy to," Taber said, "if you'd only reciprocate." Halfway into the ship he suddenly stopped. Now was the time to find out why this young asshole persisted in blighting Taber's life. He caught the agent's arm and jerked. "Hi ho, Shapiro!" he yelled.

"What?" Chap asked.

"Up and away," Taber laughed.

The young agent was blinded by the blue-white glare of the ship's internal lighting. "You'll notice," Taber said after a moment, "that I didn't take your gun. If you're sufficiently imaginative you'll put it away."

Hastily the FBI man shouldered his pistol. He slumped to his knees and Taber thought he was fainting until he realized Chap was up to his old acceleration tricks. "Don't squash him," Taber yelled. "I want to ask some questions first."

The young man talked freely and at length—about what a

thoroughgoing bastard Taber was; how he had mistreated that dear, sweet woman, how she had suffered . . .

Taber studied his own emotions during this tirade. Stupid of him not to have guessed. She'd made life hell while they were married. She'd cleaned him in the settlement. And now she'd set this young man up for a ruined career just to get another shot at Taber.

When Taber married her she had been one of those lovely creatures whose beauty had kept her from ever having to be nice to other people. She was still beautiful, and nowadays even less nice. Taber hadn't realized he no longer loved her until one day he'd caught himself feeling sorry for her.

Now he felt sorry for this young asshole. He guessed he'd never get old Frank's earthy tag out of his mind. But by the time the red-faced young man was finally run down Taber no longer felt sorry for him. He was remembering Frank and Lico. How many other defenseless ones had this young clot bulldozed with borrowed authority?

"You're a trained investigator," Taber said. "Did it never occur to you to check that poor suffering woman's story? It's a matter of public record. The way she's passed from hand to hand for the last couple of years you'd better thank Venus she didn't give you something off a toilet seat."

But the young man worked himself into a new rage to reinforce his determination not to believe a word of what he already subconsciously knew. So intense was his effort that he forgot his surroundings.

Regretfully, Taber felt his own anger rising. "Is there nothing I can do to get you to just bugger off and let me live in peace?" he asked.

After the turkey-necked young man had sputtered, wheezed, and repeated himself for half a minute Taber realized Teta had done it with more dignity when he had said, "Kill me or I kill you."

Acceleration suddenly stopped. Taber caught the young man's

legs. As he floated upward he abruptly realized he was not on the ground. "Where?" he began, then Chap flipped the ship so Earth was overhead. They were traveling west, somewhere over the plains states and not very high. Below Taber could see roads, wheat fields, and an occasional auto.

"Shut up," Taber told the young man who was now making governmental-agent noises. In the silence he surveyed the wreckage of his plans. All he'd wanted was data for another paper. But this young asshole had forced him to leave town unprepared. From then on it seemed to Taber that he had never had time to catch his breath or digest what was happening.

The Mexicans were looking for him. It'd be years, possibly never, before he could safely enter that country. Now his own country was no longer a refuge. As an anthropologist he was finished. People with talent and friends could survive things like this. Taber suspected he no longer had either.

Discovering the alien had seemed like a new chance—a chance to make enough money to thumb his nose, not at anthropology, but at the grants committee which made the pursuit of it so difficult.

Two months later when this story ends and another quite different one begins, Taber reflected that this was the turning point. Up to this moment things could have been different. But his next move made the conclusion inevitable. Viewing the wreckage of his well-planned life, Taber decided just once to do something on impulse. He grabbed the FBI man by the arm. "Pick me up if I'm not spread too thin," he yelled, and jumped out.

Taber didn't know what the thing behind his ear would do. Immediately outside the ship he learned it would not keep air in his lungs at this altitude.

Moments later his laboring lungs brought back consciousness. Fifty feet below and to one side the FBI man was making swimming motions. Taber twisted his body in the thin air and found a way to drift beyond the other man's questing hands.

The wind in his ears seemed less than the buffetings he'd taken on a motorcycle as a young man. "Come back!" the FBI man shouted. His voice came thinly, as if he were already in another world.

"Why?" Taber asked.

"So we can be together."

"Won't you ever leave me alone? Bugger off now. I don't want you splashing blood all over me." Taber unzipped his jacket and spread it to sail magnificently away. Behind him the FBI man was screaming.

Suddenly the ground was close. Taber felt himself slowing. The FBI man stopped in mid-scream. It was not a painful deceleration. That thing under his ear must have a way of matching masses and velocities for he had begun slowing a good hundred feet off the ground. He twisted to land standing some distance from the small flattened patch of winter wheat. No use going to look. He didn't feel like gloating.

Now that Taber was alone he realized he hadn't really expected to die. Amazing how quickly he was adjusting to the idea of invulnerability. Now if he could just get the rest of the world to stop sniping at him . . .

"Over here," a voice said. Taber turned and saw the *chapeyeca's* disembodied head sticking out of the invisible ship.

"Hey there!" another voice shouted. Taber turned and saw a man running. Hastily, he got into the ship and they lifted.

"Where?" Chap asked.

Taber sunk his head in his hands. Where indeed? If it ever came to court he could establish a dozen alibis and make juries laugh at the FBI's cock and bull stories about a superman. But Taber knew it would never come to court.

He was rested now and hadn't felt a day's pain since first putting on the blue suit. Or was it since he had eaten starfood? What he needed mostly, Taber decided, was time to think. It was still only a few days after Easter. Could they hole up in some snowed-in hunting lodge? Then Taber remembered the

thing behind his ear. He could be comfortable anywhere now. "Can you find the way back to my apartment?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, from there, head west about 400 miles to the coast, then about 800 miles north until you see a snowcapped mountain."

"Easier to go straight," the alien said.

"If I had your sense of direction it would be," Taber admitted.

Minutes later they were relaxing on a sunny snowbank atop Mount Shasta. Remembering the local stories of mysterious lights and other goings on, Taber wondered if other aliens had oriented themselves by this landmark. But mainly, he wondered what he was going to do.

He found it surprisingly easy not to think about the patch of flattened wheat in Kansas. Remembering the troubles the young turkey-faced man had caused him, Taber regretted only that the fall could not have been prolonged a few more minutes.

Reluctantly, he began accommodating to the idea that he could no longer live on Earth. Try as he might, he would never long be able to conceal his invulnerability. A fall, a car in a crosswalk, a slip of knife or saw. Someone would notice and he'd have to move on quickly. And how many times could a man in powder blue underwear move? Was his picture already plastered across every newspaper and post-office wall in the world?

"Chap," he asked, "could I live on your planet?"

"I don't know. I'm living on yours."

"You're making more sense lately," Taber said. "Are you remembering more or is it just that you trust me more?"

"I don't know."

"Your people are telepaths. I'm sure of it. And you're not. Why?"

"I don't know."

"Are you handicapped—a telepathic deaf-mute?" Taber remembered the book. "Let me see that repair manual again."

Flipping through the manual for the hundredth time, he real-

ized he wasn't trying to decipher its symbols. *Under this kind of star*, Chap had said.

"There's something wrong with the sun, isn't there?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Is it going to nova or do something spectacular?"

"No."

"Well?"

The alien was silent for a moment. "Wrong color," he finally said. "Should be blue-white like the lights in the ship."

"What difference does it make?"

"Burns dirty."

"At the risk of repeating myself," Taber began.

"You do not live long."

"And you?"

"The same, I suppose."

Faint glimmering in Taber's mind. If Sol was a poison star which shortened the life of anyone bathed in its radiation that would explain why it was so infrequently visited by those of other happier stellar climes.

But Earth had been visited at least once in its past. Not too remotely either. Yaquis had only lived in the delta since A.D. 800. When had they started making *chapayeca* masks?

"I think," Taber began slowly, "you are a deaf-mute. You survive away from your race's pooled intelligence. Might also explain why you were sent here: do a dirty job, do it quick, get out."

"What job?"

"If the original expedition didn't report back . . ."

"What original expedition?"

"Those *chapayeca* masks didn't just happen. Maybe back home people don't realize how short life is here on Earth. Perhaps they just think the original expedition got confused—turned stupid that far away from the pooled intelligence, and couldn't remember how to get home. That'd explain sending a

non-telepath like you. It'd also explain that damn book. Why else would a race of telepaths write a book?"

"It's possible," the *chapyeca* said. "But I—Young people," he finally muttered, and trailed off.

"You have no trouble finding your way around here on Earth," Taber said. "Can you find your way home as easily?"

"I don't know," the alien said.

"Well, let's try."

"I thought we were going to become rich first."

Taber caught his breath. He'd forgotten that completely. "We can't now," he finally said. "You saw how they hunted me down. But if we could come back here with a cargo of something valuable—and maybe some official representative of your home government, then they'd think twice about mistreating us."

"How would we pay for the cargo?"

Taber sat in glum silence.

"You think about it," the *chapyeca* said. "I haven't slept for a week. Don't wake me until daylight tomorrow." He burrowed a comfortable bed in the snow and closed his eyes.

Taber sat staring into the setting sun, then into darkness. It was a merry-go-round. The biggest opportunity since man had invented tools and he had no way to exploit it.

If he got to the *chapyeca's* planet would he really want to return to Earth? Damn little here to hold him. More importantly, should he return? Western civilization had destroyed races and cultures wholesale. What would a galactic culture do to Western civilization? Perhaps it would be best just to con the alien into taking him home. If they were used to other races Taber wouldn't end up in a zoo. Life would be interesting. No females, of course. But the pursuit of knowledge brought its own quiet rewards.

At the thought of females Taber felt a momentary flash of rut. How long since he'd really desired a woman? Since before the accident, he guessed. Why this sudden urge? The blue suit and the shield? He stretched luxuriously on the hard-crusted

snow. How long since he'd felt so perfectly relaxed? In less than a week the nightmare years of pain were receding into a vague memory.

Too bad he couldn't stay on Earth now. If people would just leave him alone he could find ways of amassing wealth. And with a century ahead of him . . . Suddenly Taber realized he wanted a woman very badly.

Through the night he formulated plan after plan, only to discard each. It wasn't until near dawn that he faced the nervousness which had been growing for the last couple of hours. Finally light filtered over the rim of the world far below. He studied the descending slopes. The smooth snow was hard-packed. The low angled light would reveal any crevasse. There was no sign of life or movement. He listened with his augmented hearing and heard nothing apart from a faint whisper of wind. Yet Taber knew he was being watched.

TWELVE:

After sunrise he went to rouse the alien. The *chapayeca* was exactly as Taber had left him the night before. For a panic-stricken moment he thought the alien was dead. Then Taber realized he was not. Nor was he asleep. The alien was frozen into cataleptic rigidity. "Are you cold?" Taber asked.

The alien stared mutely at him and suddenly Taber knew it was fear. "What's wrong?" he asked. "Who's watching us?"

The *chapayeca's* words were unintelligible. The watched feeling grew suddenly intolerable. Taber turned and saw another *chapayeca*.

This alien was a head taller. His coloring was lighter, almost sky blue, with faint streaks and mottlings. Where neck and jaw met was slack skin and a suggestion of wrinkle.

"Who are you?" Taber asked.

"My mother," Chap subvocalized.

"Great!" Taber growled. "I've been dealing with a runaway kid?"

The strange alien made a peremptory gesture. Chap sprang to his feet and disappeared into the ship. The big alien's body began disappearing and Taber suddenly realized there was another ship behind him. "Now just a goddam minute!" he roared. "You've ruined my life on this planet. If you leave I'm going with you!"

The alien turned as if noticing Taber for the first time. He (she?) focused square-pupiled eyes and frowned with effort. Thoughts and images jumbled in Taber's mind and suddenly he realized the alien was communicating. "All right," Taber finally snarled. "I understand now why I can't go with you. But why did you come here to screw up my life in the first place?"

Taber reeled under the impact of sudden total knowledge. He sat abruptly, trying to sort things out. When he looked up again he was alone on the mountain top.

Now Taber knew he had not been dealing with a child. Chap was a young adult. He had guessed right on other things too. Amazing how many things he had guessed right on and still reached the wrong conclusions.

Earth was not interdicted because its inhabitants were dangerous. Nor were they in need of protection. The Galactics, when they thought of Earth at all, assumed it'd blow itself up in time. No danger to civilized peoples. But it could be a disruptive focus if no-ops started dropping in.

The Galactics had made war obsolete. They had done so at the expense of collective, antlike behaviour and individual stupidity. Like the old folks at Río Yaqui, the older Galactics

remembered the bad old days and preferred the slightly stagnant status quo. Peace was insured with a slightly more elaborate version of the thing under Taber's ear. Each Galactic had the operation at an early age. With it came telepathy: instant omniscience. Why acquire obsolete skills like reading, writing, and information retrieval when any answer was already there waiting to be picked out of somebody's mind? Of course, if the answer wasn't already somewhere . . .

The Young Turks wanted to stop all this, reverse the operation and go back to the old-fashioned methods of learning, to exercise their minds in thinking. The old folks were horrified at the disorder and misunderstanding which would be the inevitable price of progress.

So a social, hippie-type problem had developed: A loud dangerous minority was reversing the operation, cutting itself off from the telepathic pool. Which was bad enough in itself, but when they began sneaking into Earthlike planets for firsthand practice in the art of thinking . . . Earth could be a real focus of disruption if many dropouts started dropping in.

Chap had been in trouble because he was a new no-op with no practice. His ship, which any pooled intelligence could've fixed with one hand, was beyond his ability even with his friends' written instructions for, on his own, Chap wasn't very smart. And the turkey-necked FBI man had had the last laugh after all. If Taber hadn't displayed a darker side of his nature they might have taken him home. But the elder *chapayeca* could never forgive this savage for initiating his (her?) son in the arts of violence. It was only reluctantly that he (she?) had in consideration for Taber's many kindnesses conceded one minor point to Chap. And that with some awkward and humiliating conditions. Thinking it over, Taber guessed the elder *chapayeca* assumed him telepathic and was afraid Taber might trail them home like a stray dog. He glanced at the ten o'clock sun. If he wanted to get below the snow line before dark he'd better get moving.

It was two days before he reached a paved road and a ratty pickup gave him a ride to the next town. From the way the rancher opened the window and sat with his head nearly out of it Taber realized the alien starfood smell was getting stronger. How long had it been since he'd performed any natural function? At the town he thanked the driver who was obviously sorry he'd picked up this stranger in the first place.

Farther down the valley Taber infiltrated a crew of agricultural workers and made \$12 before the others began giving him sidelong looks. He didn't really know why he wanted the money but suspected it would be handy.

Two days and one town farther down the valley it was Saturday. That night he ran into a couple of them again. They had a bit of a package on and weren't suspicious. "Come along?" one said.

Taber learned they were going to a brothel. Suddenly he realized why he'd wanted the money. "Excuse me a minute," he said. Inside a service station restroom he peeled off the micron-thick blue suit and packed its negligible bulk into a shirt pocket which he carefully buttoned.

The "girl" was older than Taber. Though inured to many things, she complained about his odor. Taber mollified her with an extra dollar. Came the moment of truth and her study of Taber became curiouser and curiouser. Finally Taber dressed and left. After a quick washup in the gas-station toilet he climbed into the blue suit again. At least it kept the chill away.

Walking through the one-street town Taber decided the thing under his ear was still doing its job. It protected him from bullets or bombs. It had cost him six dollars to learn it also insulated him from *any* bodily contact.

Leaving the lighted part of town, his foot tangled with a week-old San Francisco *Examiner*. Its front page was a large photograph and legend, HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?

After that he kept to the mountains, avoiding the populous coast and valleys. He kept wandering southward, making the

best time he could. Two weeks later, passing through Yosemite, he felt a slight uneasiness. It was three more days before he diagnosed this as hunger. That night he raided an ice box in King's Cañon, growling like a bear and making a great deal of noise when the terrified camper struck a light inside his tent.

Soon he was traveling farther down the slopes, closer to farmhouses. Stealing a chicken near Inyokern he stopped a load of birdshot and yipped like a dog long enough to convince the farmer. The shield protected him but Taber wished he had some more starfood. The can of beans he'd snatched a day ago was inflating his viscera and he felt the harbinger of an old, familiar pain.

The pain was worse next week in Palm Springs when he burglarized a doctor's office and made off with a supply of morphine. Walking down the east side of the Salton Sea he finally buried the useless bag with its bent needles in a sand dune. The shield also protected him from sharp objects.

Nearly mad with pain, he sneaked across the border.

It was in a ditch east of the Mexicali freight yards that Taber had his next meaningful contact with fellow humans. It had been a blistering day walking across the desert, avoiding highways, sneaking across the border to select a spot away from the hobo jungle and yet not so far away that the train would be moving too fast for a crippled and hurting man to hop aboard.

Though he knew they no longer worked, Taber had ritualistically swallowed his pain pills until there were no more. He still had a couple of months' insulin left. Enough to last until he got around to burglarizing a pharmacy.

As soon as the sun went down the desert heat as quickly became desert cold. Taber debated starting a fire. Lately the blue suit hadn't been keeping him quite as warm as he'd've liked. But it was an academic debate for he had no wood or matches and if he'd had any he still didn't want to attract attention.

He lay in the ditch, twitching and mumbling curses. Lately he'd seemed able to find nothing but beans and the resulting gas had made the pain unbearable. Suddenly a man was silhouetted on the skyline above the ditch.

He jumped into the ditch and started going through Taber's pockets. Taber sat up and through blinding cascades of pain he traced the stranger's maternal descentance.

"Sanamabeech!" the stranger shouted, and drove a knife into Taber's midriff. At least, that's what he intended to do.

The odd, yielding sensation startled him. He stared at Taber, waiting for death throes to begin. In that unguarded moment Taber grasped the knife and returned the compliment.

Adrenalin pumped through him and for a moment the pain was forgotten. The man died noisily and hard for Taber had punched upward through his diaphragm, causing the stranger to whistle loudly each time he tried to draw a breath. Finally, Taber searched out his heartbeat and inserted the blade again. This time he twisted it.

The dead man's pockets yielded a dollar, twelve pesos, forty centavos, an American dime, and an Iver-Johnson revolver. It wasn't until after he'd hopped the freight that Taber began hurting again. He broke the revolver and found it held eight .22 longs. A day later Taber got off the train at Obregón and began walking east into the mountains.

At first he could cadge meals at ranch houses, giving the children a few cents from his dwindling store of money. But as he crossed the first low range and neared Yaqui country people were suspicious. Soon Taber realized they had been warned to look out for a man of his description. He began traveling at night again, looting chicken roosts and corn fields. Two weeks later, twenty-one pounds lighter, hurting in every joint and fissure, Taber finally stumbled into the cañon just over the ridge from the holdout village which he knew only as Xbampo. The ship was there under the same tree where they'd parked the last time he and Chap had visited this village.

Taber ransacked the ship. It worked. But he could find no starfood. Finally it dawned on him that the elder *chapayeca* would have cleaned this out too so Taber wouldn't attempt any interstellar passages. Gritting his teeth, he climbed painfully over the ridge, remembering how he'd trotted up it the last time.

Lico was still in the village. Taber brushed off his greetings and anxious inquiries. "Important," he gasped. "I must talk to the *kobanaó* and his staff at once."

While heralds ran about the village rounding up a quorum Taber stretched out on the tailings dump trying to take some of the pain out of his body with the sparse sunshine. As he had already known, it didn't work.

Finally the *kobanaó* and his elders were assembled in the tiny gallery. Taber struggled to his feet and went in. Without preamble he made his offer:

"How would you like to conquer the world?"



He put down his bowl and walked over to the next fire where *chapayecas* relaxed with masks turned to one side, except for the one in electric blue plastic. The man was eating a bowl of *wakawaki* through his mask. Taber felt his hackles rising. No man could maneuver a spoon in and out of a mask that neatly.

For the first time Taber understood the mind paralyzing total fear which medieval man experienced at the thought of witchcraft. Sweat spurted as he struggled to control his breathing. Blast and damn marijuana anyhow. 'Pull yourself together,' he muttered. Abruptly the spasm of fear passed. What was he afraid of? *Chapayecas* calmly eating. None of the Indians seemed frightened.

What was the strange *chapayeca*? Taber was not a zoologist but he knew with absolute certainty that the *chapayeca* had no relationship to any phylum of terrestrial fauna. Several Earth animals walked on two legs and used the other two to grasp things. But none had an electric blue, hairless, and apparently poreless skin, a vaguely human face, with a nose like a proboscis monkey that got caught in a wringer, and larger than human ears which turned toward whomever happened to be speaking...

CHAPAYECA

G. C. Edmondson