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**DOOMSMAN/THE THIEF OF THOTH
A BELMONT/TOWER BOOK — July 1972**

Published by

**Belmont/Tower Books
185 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10016**

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Printed in the United States of America

HARLAN ELLISON:

**“His writing deserves nothing
but praise for its power,
originality of ideas and great
sense of conviction and identity.”**

—*Los Angeles Free Press*

DOOMSMAN

By Harlan Ellison

WHEN THEY brought him to the School, from his home in the Pampas, Juanito Montoya was a thin, sallow-faced youth with a twitch to his eyelids and a feral stealthiness to his manner. He had lived—an orphan at the age of nine—off the land, with no one's help, but simply the fleetness of the young and the rapacity of the ever hungry. The Seekers had found him sleeping in the bombed-out shell of a cathedral in a wasted little village deep in the heart of Argentina; and since he had killed two of their number with sling and dart in an effort to avoid capture, they refrained from burning him to ashes. He barely spoke, even during the struggle, but short, tiny animal sounds came through the layers of dirt that covered his face. So they kept him alive, they captured him with the evening twilight covering them, feeling he was a definite possibility, that he would fit in to the ways of the School. And they brought him in.

Trussed, gagged, and impounded in a force mesh.

There had been no trouble spiriting the boy out of Argentina; not so much because it was merely another section of AmericaState, but because the Seekers were beyond petty boundaries and interests.

They were the Seekers from the School.

Without the School, who knew *what* might happen in the world?

So they had had no difficulty bringing pipe-limbed and furious Juanito Montoya to the School.

All the way in the night-shrouded black jetcopter, the boy struggled in his invisible force bonds, struggled in his

wrist-slicing wire trusses, struggled against the mask adhesive that covered his lower face. Impotently he seethed, and the fear mounted in him like a crazy red monkey, gibbering along his nerves till he felt faint with terror. Who were these black-hooded men who had come to the tiny village? He could see only their little scarlet eyes through the slits in the hoods, and the sight made him dizzy, fascinated with the dizziness. Who were they—and his eyes widened over the adhesive—where were they taking him?

Juanito was not old enough to be a coward. Far from it; indeed, he had seen too much, lived too fast and too wildly to have even become one, had he known the way of going about it. But this was the unknown. This was a nightmare spawned from up North, where things always happened with evil ways.

The jetcopter sped on silently through the night. And soon passed into dawn and later, the day.

Juanito was a perceptive boy. At fifteen he could effectively disable a column of foot-soldiers while sniping from cover, with his sling and dart. He knew the best ways to skin a rabbit and eat it without getting sick. He knew what fire could do, and he knew what smoke could do. He knew the whys and hows and wheres of looting, skulking, hiding . . . surviving.

In a country devoid of warmth or culture or freedom for nearly eighty years, Juanito had done remarkably well for himself. He had neither been caught nor killed. He did not even have a red flag on his dossier at America-State Records.

In point of fact, he did not even have a dossier.

He was a cipher to the great State. Thus, he was perfect fodder for the School. Young, quick-witted, fit to survive, able to murder without compunction, unknown and most important—in the grip of the Seekers. His trip to the School was a long one, but uneventful.

High in the Rockies, the School stood grey and silent from without—if seen at all—while within it was light and efficiency and the sounds of training. It had been built to withstand the winds of time, thrust into the

straight-walled neck of a volcanic chute. A tube of rock, thirty feet thick was the neck of the tube, and like a pencil stuck down inside a roll of notepaper, the School had been built within that chimney rock. Its walls were molybdenum steel, reinforced with cross-grained layers of duroplast and concrete blocks within. It was solid, and invisible from any angle, save above. But even from above it was protected, for a force bubble and a spy net had been erected over the mouth of the tube, and any foreign matter—as large as a bomber, as small as a gnat—passing over the tube without beamed permission, was automatically destroyed by the polarized energy force beams from a battery below. The School stood as solid as the Earth beneath it; quiet outside, anxious within, and constantly working, turning out its students with regularity and thoroughness.

This was AmericaState's little-known, deeply feared School—for assassins.

It had been erected shortly after the War, when the great AmericaState that stretched from one end of the continent to the other had discovered a million little dynasties founded and festering within its very bosom. The School had been founded and the men had been trained on sound principle: with that many small monarchies flourishing from Tierra del Fuego to Point Barrow, from Pernambuco to San Francisco, the thought of sending the worn and decimated AmericaState armies to grind them out and do away with their leaders, was beyond consideration. It was lions chasing shadows, tiring the lions till they lay easy prey for the shadows, who were truly maggots and hyenas and vultures.

The jobs could be done by one man each, if they were the right kind of men. If they were killers, if they knew every means of torture and murder ever conceived, and if they conceived a few of their own when they needed them. Then the State could be kept in its stability of power, and the War would not rage again. If the men were assassins.

So the School had been founded and the men had been trained. Trained for their work with one philosophy hard as diamond, cold as snow, constant as life, final as death. Death was important to them; they lived with it, and their

work was dedicated to it. Their philosophy: death is preferable to failure. Get in, kill, and get out fast!

The School had been built. It had been doing its work with unbelievable thoroughness for over seventy years. To the School for Assassins they brought fifteen year old Juanito Montoya. That was in 2179. Time went swiftly.

2184.

"Down on your stomach!"

"Yo! Up on your feet!"

"Run in place!"

"Throw down on your stomach!"

"Flip over!"

"Up, without hands!"

"Run in place!"

"Cutaway! *Drop* damn you, I said cutaway!"

"Up!"

"Cutaway!"

"Up!"

"Cutaway, cutaway, cutaway, cutaway, *break time!*"

Thirteen (who considered his name good luck, as compared to little Seven in the Apprentice Class who had an affinity for accidents despite his supposedly luck-filled name) met Twenty-two outside the gym.

Thirteen was a tall, slim boy with wedge-shaped hands, so excellent for night work such as strangulation, bear-walking over hot coals on an approach route, underwater demolition and strangulation. That was important, strangulation. They had heard in the School only last week that a man who had been Fifty-five in Class 338 had disposed of a Regent General in the ridiculous Court of Harper, somewhere in Oklahoma using his hands alone. Strangulation was important; hadn't the man received a posthumous plaque on the memory wall in the Chapel?

Thirteen was proud of his hands. He flexed them constantly, while talking, and though he was inordinately vain about them, manicuring them and looking at them, and though he was a bit on the simpering side, occasionally speaking with a lisp, his abilities with his hands kept all laughter from his classmates' lips.

Twenty-two was shorter, nearly a head shorter, with the dark, wavy hair and snapping ebony eyes of the Latin. Though he spoke with the soft lilt of the Latin, also, and made sharp, small, evocative gestures with his slim hands, he had nothing of the fragile gentleness of the inner Latin spirit. Nor did he have the fiery outer appearance. He seemed something quite set apart, with a twitch to his eyelids. A nervous flicker that was heat lightning on the horizon. Here and there and gone and only partially glimpsed.

He was not well liked in his class, for his eyes were too hungry, his manner too brisk. He walked close to walls, and talked with his back to one, constantly. He walked as though he were about to be attacked, and his manner of speaking made it perfectly clear that he suspected you had just that in mind. But Thirteen was his friend, for they were nothing alike, and that will happen.

Thirteen was a born clown who had been reeducated as a killer. Twenty-two was born to rip and tear, a natural instinctive killer.

But now both were killers. In that they were alike, but otherwise they were opposites.

"I wish to God they'd spread that gravel on the gym floor without so damned many sharp rocks in it," Thirteen grumbled, picking tiny bits of stone from his palms. "Those cutaways are murder in a rock field."

Twenty-two smiled quickly, thinly. "You beef too much, Jock."

He caught himself, and turned white. Thirteen gripped him, hard. Thirteen angled him into the alcove, hand on bicep. The alcove was shallow, where the water cooler hung from the ceiling, but it was out of the way of the hordes of students, rushing down the corridor. "Juanito, you've got to remember! They're cracking down on using proper names. I know it's just a new idea they've started this year, but they want it that way, and you can't buck them. I thought you'd stopped using names months ago. What if a proctor heard you?"

"What the hell do you want to do, get us both sent to Isolate?"

Twenty-two nudged the other off with impatient palms. "Okay, okay—sorry, I forgot. I forget sometimes, that's

all; listen, I wasn't born in this lousy School you know? I lived outside once . . . not in a creche like all the rest of you guys."

"Yeah, and you weren't alive once," Thirteen jabbed back roughly. "Watch yourself or you'll be *back* in that condition. By way of the furnace room."

Twenty-two nodded firmly. "Okay, okay. No proper names while we are within these hallowed walls. Two hundred and thirty-six more days, no names. You are Thirteen to me, sir."

"You're the strangest cat I ever knew," Thirteen said, aiming a bolo punch at Twenty-two. It missed, for it was intended to miss, and they walked on toward the snack bar for a bite to eat before the next class—razors. They grinned at each other youthfully, arrogantly.

In the snack bar, the sounds of the monolog for today rolled hypnotically from the wall speakers. It was a lecture on makeshift bludgeons for emergency occasions:

" . . . across the bridge of the nose will smash the bone structure and send splinters into the brain, bringing instantaneous death, if the blow is sharp and inward. Should no such heavy weapon be at hand, a newspaper may be folded the long way four times, folded over across the front, and folded once more to make a tight wedge. This wedge, when held firmly in the hand, with the folded end protruding, has the effective impact power of an M-5 blackjack. A stocking, filled with gravel, dirt—tightly packed—or coins, will serve approximately the same purpose, with the warning that such utensils are not reliable for more than a momentary stunning, if any point of impact but directly behind the right ear is used. In the event . . ."

Twenty-two ignored the monolog as best he could; it was gauged on all mental bands to impress itself onto the core of memory in each student's mind. It was not necessary to be listening to the monolog, for it reached beyond mere awareness. This was one of the primary training aids used in the School. By day or night, sleeping or eating, at work or during proscribed play times—the monologs went on. A new one each day. Marksmanship, proper use of collodin for disguises, how to wire a jetcopter to time-explode, nine hundred and forty gases that can

cripple without killing, the Maori methods of inducing a prisoner to speak his mind, native and abnormal psychology; the subjects were endless and with each new day a new spool was strung into the sono-box, and the monolog began, long before the students were out of their hammocks, long after they had retired to them again.

So it was not precisely "ignoring" that Twenty-two managed. It was more nearly relegation to a sub-level of attention. While he shoved his way through the off-class crowds in the snack bar, he kept watch for Thirty-eight in class 401. That was one class further along than Juanito's own 402. Thirty-eight would be graduating day after tomorrow. Before that happened, Juanito knew he must worm the name from the student assassin.

He had encountered Thirty-eight at a Combats Meet over a year ago; he had been teamed with the stout assassin in the lectro-whip event, and between bouts, when they had been getting their bodies greased with nonconducting swabbing oils, they had talked.

Juanito remembered that discussion well. It had gone:

"My name is Grice. John Grice from Rio Cuerto; that's in Argentina."

It had been inevitable, actually. The Seekers covered a great deal of territory. They took many men from many parts of AmericaState. It was, in fact, a curious thing that Juanito had not met a fellow areaman sooner. But he had perked up, then. He had been in the School for slightly less than four years at that time. He had been miserable, and elated at the same time, all during those years. For he was a creature of freedom, and the restricted, martial life of the School gnawed at his sense of dignity and roving desires. Yet he was joyful to be in the School, for he was learning what he most wanted to learn. How to kill. He had lived in the ruins too long to think success and escape came with luck. It was stealth and skill. Here in the School, he was absorbing the most vital and electric ways of pouncing and preying. He had vowed when he was graduated he would take his first assignment, and the School would never hear of him again. With the School training he could surely elude or outfox or outfight any Seekers who came after him.

But that had been years before, and now four years

later, here was an areaman. An Argentinian, and from so close to Juanito's old environs.

"Yes, of course," Juanito had replied eagerly. "I am from Argentina myself, and from very near Rio Cuerto. I lived everywhere on the Pampas. My name is Montoya. Juanito Montoya. Or Twenty-two, if these oiler slaves can understand Speak."

The School had its own language. A secret blend of all that was fluid and philologically valuable in Spanish, French, English and German, with the preciseness of the Portuguese, and the absence of complexity to be found in Esperanto. They called it Speak. It was a primary password in itself; if another person in the darkness could Speak, then he was partway to being identified as another student of the School.

They spoke to each other in Speak, and Thirty-eight grinned hugely. "These oilers can barely speak at all, much less understand *us*. They are brought in from the surrounding countryside by the Seekers, and hypnotized for one or two jobs—see?" He booted his oiler in the back, knocking the poor, dumb worker onto his side. The oiler got to his knees, a cloddish smile—more idiotic than complacent—breaking his rough features, and thanked the stout assassin profusely in broken English.

"Go on back to work," John Grice commanded imperiously.

The oiler went to work on Grice's thighs with the grease applicator.

Juanito had much respect for this big assassin. He was the model of what a good, well-trained student should be. He carried himself high, and he had a steely glint to his green eyes that marked shrewdness, and he knew how to make men bend to his will. As loftily imperious as he seemed now, in the field he would be either one of a crowd, or hidden as he lurked in waiting, or bravery personified charging an enemy. Juanito wanted to be just like him, and feared he was not.

"When did you get here?" Grice asked absently, as though he were being polite, his thoughts turned elsewhere already.

"I've been here almost four years now," Juanito answered smartly.

"Ah!" Grice caroled. "Then you'll be ready for the Probing soon, won't you? Or have you been to the Probing labs yet?"

Juanito nodded in the affirmative. "Yes, they Probed me just last week."

Grice's full-fleshed face took on a superior confidence. "I came up with only four myself. They later negated three of them. How about you?"

Juanito looked surprised for an instant, then said levelly, "There was only one in my banks. They haven't been able to trace it. The name was Eskalyo."

Grice had looked perturbed then, and annoyed, and his brow had furrowed. "Are you making fun of me?"

Juanito was confused. "I don't know what you mean."

"How did you know Eskalyo was one of the names in *my* bank? The one they can't clear. Have you been prying in the records, or are you a checkpoint spy for Security-Seek?"

Juanito had hastily explained, and soon convinced Grice he was serious, and in no way making fun of the other.

They were talking about the Probing. Each student was forced to undergo a mind probing after he had been in the School close to four years—during which time his memories and thought processes would have been altered enough by the training and the monologs to allow the Probe to do its work peculiarly and properly—to find if there were any names from the petty Monarchies in the memory banks of assassin trainees. There were usually a few names, either picked up through childhood rumor or from isolated cases of actual contact. And the Probe dug these out, and tried to check them. Usually they negated most of the references dug out as being mentioned during adolescence. But occasionally, as in the case of Eskalyo being in Juanito's and Grice's mind, the trackback could not be affected.

These were the cases the School and Probers were most interested in locating, for they invariably contributed some information as to the locating and possible abolition of the Monarchy and its petty ruler.

Thus the two students had talked of Eskalyo, and Juanito pieced together the scant data his own Probing had

revealed, with the facts Grice's mind had vomited up, and he discovered a strange thing.

He discovered that he had seen the man known as Eskalyo three years after Eskalyo had been found and charred by a group of Seekers.

This was startling in itself, but the other thing Juanito Montoya learned from pieced-together information was all the more bizarre and memorable:

He—Juanito, Twenty-two—was the son of Eskalyo, the ruler of the petty Monarchy called Ciudad Rosario. It did not become clear at first, but as Grice rambled on, speaking of those things he knew from childhood, deeper than thought, of the things he had seen and heard, it became clear to Juanito that the son of Eskalyo, of whom Grice spoke, fitted the deeds and description of Juanito.

It was he, Juanito Montoya, who had fled his father when the Seekers had come. It had been himself, the boy who had narrowly escaped death a hundred times, and shocked into a tense forgetfulness of his origins. He recognized the indefinite incidents Grice spilled out from vague, childhood memory; he recognized them as till now lost fragments of his youth.

The flight from Ciudad Rosario. The burrow he had dug on the edge of an old irrigation ditch as the Seekers 4th Armored Regiment had gone past. The killing of small game to sustain life. It all came back now, and he knew he was the son of Eskalyo.

The son of the ruler of a petty Monarchy, somewhere in what had been South America.

And it had set his mind to whirling.

That had been a year before.

Now Grice was about to be graduated, and though Juanito had met with him many times since that day in the Combats Meet, the stout assassin had told him little more that could aid Juanito in his plan. For he had formulated a cunning plan, from the linked scraps of information.

No really valuable information had come from Thirty-eight's lips. Until one day, a week before. He had hinted that all his knowledge of Eskalyo was not from childhood, and handed-down. He had hinted that he knew a way for a man to reach Eskalyo *now*. He had

shied a verbal rock into the deep water of Juanito's consciousness, and it had skipped across, finally sinking and carrying conviction to act with it.

For Grice had said he knew the name of a man in the AmericaState Chambers—torture chambers—in New Chicago who was a contact to Eskalyo. And Juanito Montoya *had* to find out that name; *before* Thirty-eight was graduated day after tomorrow.

But Grice was nowhere among the surging crowd in the snack bar.

Juanito felt his nerves tighten like piano wires; like the rubber bands they attached to the rigged braces on his teeth, when they wanted him bucktoothed for some disguise; like the tightrope they were required to walk during physical training. He knew time was sifting slowly but swiftly into the past, and he *must* learn that name.

Thirteen yanked at his arm. "Hey, what do you want? We're next."

Juanito looked up and saw they were indeed at the head of the line, and how they had gotten there, he did not know. "Oh, I don't know. Hell, just get me a coca-cola fix without double-shoot."

"I thought today was *your* pay?" Thirteen giped back sharply.

"Oh, yeah, yeah," Juanito hastily amended. "My pay."

He dug into the hip slit of his body-tight training uniform of black duroplast, and brought out a handful of the plastoid slips used for currency in the School. "What do you want?"

"I'm low, cat, how about a glucose-herro feed with a twist of lemon peel . . . or no, make it straight; I'm that low."

Juanito edged up to the robomech and dialed what he wanted. In a moment the two vials came slithering down the trough, followed by two screw-on needles and a pair of chaser pills.

He put his plastoid slips in the receiver and the little glass plate over the trough rolled back, allowing him to take the narcotics from the machine.

They moved out of the press, into a corner, and unplugged the ends of their vials, screwing the needles into the syringe-vials, piercing the protective seal. Thirteen

was a sock feeder. He liked his snacks hard and fast. He hit the main line through the fabric of the skintight suit without even rolling the sleeve. A beatific smile spread unbidden across his mouth, and a low, soft air-whooooosh of ahhhhh came from him. He sagged against the wall, and hit one twitch with his left foot boom!

Juanito had never taken to the constant stimulation of the assassin. He wanted no fanaticism or herro-cocaine fogging. He wanted to do what he had to do cool and calm and sweet.

He took his coca-cola fix slowly, feeding it into the bloodstream, drawing it out intermingled with the scarlet fluid, feeding it back in, drawing it out again—kicking it higher—and at last sending it into the bloodstream for its final journey.

It was good. His insides felt cola-happy. But not fogged and hopped-up. His small colon felt sticky good.

Thenmmmn throoo thuh guh-uh-uh-ood uvvv thuh feelinnnguhhhh, *he snapped to alertness!* Grice had come into the snack bar. He was avoiding the fix machines, and heading right for the sandwich counter. He was eating solid food. That must mean he had finished classes, was through his processing, was even perhaps assigned already. He had to get to him now.

With his steps faltering from the fix, and his head higher than his body by three feet, Juanito grubbed in his hip-slit for more plastoid slips, fed them nervously into the stabilizer-robomech. It sprayed his face with a neutro compound, and the fix was diluted in his blood. He was able to function again.

He had not even felt himself walking across the big snack bar to the neutro machine. But now he knew what he was doing, and he elbowed roughly past clots of students, keeping the stout, tight back of Grice firmly in sight.

He caught the assassin by the elbow, and the stout man whirled on him, the feral eyes narrowed—as any good assassin's eyes would narrow under sudden attack.

"What do you want?"

Juanito was shocked and battered back momentarily by the rudeness of the other's tone.

"I—I wanted to speak to you a moment."

"Make it fast. I'm on the way out."

"You, uh, you know a name . . . say, let's go out in the corridor where we can talk more eas—"

"We can talk right here. Say, I haven't got anything to talk with you anyhow, Twenty-two. So why don't you get your hand off me before there's trouble in here." His soft edged face was soft no longer. It was hard and set. He was not joking; there was nothing to say.

Juanito recognized the futility of pressing his point.

He turned and strode away, shoving through the crowd quickly.

At one point in his passage, Thirteen flopped a flaccid hand onto his shoulder, muttering under the effects of the heavy fix. Juanito shook the hand off, and left the snack bar.

He signed the class register for "private study" and went to his cubicle to think.

It took some doing, but it had been the only way. After Grice had been graduated and assigned, Juanito had to wait for his time. One night it came, when he was assigned an all-week Awake Alert—a rigorous test of his stamina which involved the student remaining awake and sharp for seven full days. During the fifth night, he was able to employ the very break-in tactics he had been taught, to rifle the memory banks of the compUvacs in AmericaState Records, School subdivision. The assignment records. He found the punch spool he wanted: the list of assignments of assassins in class 401. Grice's class.

He spun the pool onto the treads, and turned on the emergency power for the smallest compUvac in the office . . . emergency power that would not wake the School, or set off the specially triggered alarms hooked to the energy outlets. It was enough to start the mighty machine working at softer levels, and though the information was dim in the glow box when he read it, he engraved it in his mind carefully.

The frame of light read:

401: 38 GRICE, JOHN GREGORY, Rio Cuerto,

Argentina

ent: 5 Oct 2178; grad: 4 Oct 2184; rating: AAA +
 assgnd: Persistence Sqd, N. Chicago, TDY Alaska Hi

Juanito read it again to make certain he had it correct, then cut the power, respun the reel by hand, and loaded it back into its bin. He sat in the darkness of the Records offices, thinking.

Grice had been assigned to the Persy Squad on constant clean- and mop-up detail in New Chicago. But he was currently on TDY, or loan to the Hi Guard in Alaska, for some job or other.

That meant Juanito had to get himself assigned to Alaska, and fast. He had to see Grice again, under conditions more favorable to Juanito's worming some intelligence from the stout assassin as to who the man in the N. Chicago Chambers was. It was only fifty-four days till graduation and he knew many assignments were already cut. He had to do some fast maneuvering of his orders, or lose out completely.

He pondered the problem for well over a week, trying desperately to drag a solution from the welter of information he held, and the need to find the man in the New Chicago Chambers. Finally, he thought he had hit on an answer; perhaps not the best answer, but one that would do for now.

He went to see the head Probesman.

"Probesman Languor," he said, when he had been seated in that worthy's cubicle, "A thing has been troubling me."

And the Probesman, whose mien and manner were much like those of priests in the world outside the School, replied, "Yes, student brother? Is there a thing with which I can help?"

Juanito nodded, studying the Probesman. The man was no fool. He was big, with a face hewn from granite and lead. His eyes were small, deepset blue circles at the centers of ringed bullseyes that were dark around the eyes. His mouth was a hard, wired line that bespoke of sternness before mercy. He was no fool, this Probesman Languor.

"Ever since my Probing, over a year ago, sir, I have

waited for clearance from SecuritySeek on the name Eskalyo in my banks—" He noted with inner satisfaction that the Probesman started at the mention of the South American's name,—"but no such clearance has come, and I feel impure, sir."

The Probesman's small eyes narrowed down even more, till he studied Juanito through impossible slits. "Oh?"

It was the game of silence now. Who could say the least, and learn the most; for no student *ever* came to a Probesman, unless there was good cause. The Probers were the pariahs of the School. They were the brain-pickers; their job was a necessary one, but who could have respect or affection for a man who knew your very intimate thought and hidden fear and concealed shame? They were more than tolerated, for they were also specially trained for their jobs. But they were never approached as men—only as Probesmen. The affectation of holiness they clung to was a defensive air held over from their first days.

Juanito played the game: "Yes."

They sat silently, looking into each other's eyes.

"Uh—what would you have me do?"

"Have you a suggestion, Probesman?"

"None, for I know not what your problem may be. Can you be more definite?"

"Well, it is touchy."

"Go on."

"I have no real wish to go on."

The Probesman was growing exasperated with the student assassin's hedging and dodging. He lunged verbally: "Well, why have you come to me, then, if you don't want a solution to your problem?"

Juanito stepped into the off-guard opening in the conversation. "I am impure, for there has been no clearance on the name 'Eskalyo' and I want to do penance with a difficult assignment."

The Probesman stared from within the secret caves of his eyes. There was a subterfuge, here, he was certain of that. Why had he not pulled this fellow's dossier before admitting him, and tried to glean some hint of what Twenty-two was after. He continued to stare at the young, dark-eyed assassin with the black hair, but the face before him revealed nothing.

"Where would you suggest?" he asked.

Juanito spread his hands. "That is for you to say. I have no suggestion, but I know your Probe recommendation goes with every order cutting. If you recommended an especially difficult assignment, I'm sure I would get it."

The Probesman said nothing.

Then, "Well, what do you consider a difficult assignment?"

Juanito was careful: "The Court of Harper, perhaps, or Valhalla in New York, or with the Alaska Hi Guard, or even the Seekers 4th Armored in the Everglades . . . I have no choice."

"I will think about it," said the Probesman, carefully. "I will think about it, and if I find you are sincere, you might very well get your wish. In fact, you may regret having come to see me."

"Why should that be?" asked Juanito.

"Things are bad, especially with the Hi Guard, you know that, don't you?"

Juanito nodded. "Yes, that was one of the reasons I mentioned them. I knew it was the severest test I could be asked to stand, but I did not wish to express any preference." The Probesman watched him even more carefully. What was behind that nervous, trembling face? Was there some coup this assassin was trying to bring about? What?

"I will think on it."

Juanito rose, and bowed out of the Probesman's presence. He was not at all surprised, when his orders came through, the day before graduation, when they ordered him to the Alaska Hi Guard. He was not surprised at all. For the Probesman had obviously gone back and read the dossier on Twenty-two. He had undoubtedly seen the name Eskalyo. That was why he was on his way to the frozen North.

To the Hi Guard.

Where John Grice was TDY. Temporary duty to the Hi Guard. And the secret name of a man in New Chicago.

There were always stories circulating around the cadre rooms and about how pleasant it was in Alaska in the summer. How clean it smelled, and how green the grass was, and how clear the skies. And no snow.

Those stories failed to make the distinction that down more toward what had been North America, this was so, but that up past White Horse, in the farthest reaches of AmericaState, it was *always* cold.

Juanito Montoya found this to be all too true. His jet-copter came down through a swirling madness of snow and sleet and found the landing chute only with difficulty. The storm was a perpetual one, raging about the Hi Guard GHQ with such ferocity that the dome was obscured, formless for twenty feet from its plasteel walls.

Juanito was billeted underground, in the far right wing of the GHQ. The building was constructed with regard for easy entrance—to authorized personnel—and egress. Aboveground all that showed was the dome, which sank its body fifty feet into the ground; radiating out from either side of the dome's base were the corridors for all-work.

When he settled, Juanito reported to the commanding officer, a sleeping specimen named Posteur, whose eyes were lidded and whose face was pale.

"I see you have only an AAA rating, Montoya," Posteur ran a slim finger down the check-in sheet. "Why did you lose out on that + after the three A's? You did exceptionally well in the School."

Juanito cared very little for this inquisition. He knew as soon as he was settled in he would be on his own, and the only time he would see this man was on pay day, when punishment was required, or when a special briefing was to be held. The assassins were one-man teams, without strings.

"I had an uncleared name in my banks, sir," Juanito tossed off. He was anxious to find Grice and get out of the cold of Alaska. He had no idea how he would make Grice talk, nor even how he would escape from the Hi Guard once he got the information, *if* he got the information.

"Oh, that's very interesting," Posteur replied. He slid down in his chair, resting his chin on his chest, and clasp-

ing his slim fingers easily. "I've always contended the politics of a man doesn't make him a good fighter. The reverse holds true, also."

Then, as though realizing he should not be conversing so openly with one of his men, Posteur sat up straighter and asked, "Well, now that you're here, how much do you know about the trouble we've got—what you're expected to do?"

Juanito spread his capable hands. "I'm unfamiliar with the situation, sir, in particulars. I was led to believe you have a serious problem with a group known as the Irregulars."

Posteur nodded soberly, indicating in that nod that whatever Juanito had heard, it would not be nearly enough. "Ah. So. You've heard but an edge of what we are suffering with up here.

"It's not as simple a problem as with the Militia in Oklahoma. They can kill Harper, and his Court falls to pieces. In New Chicago, all they have is a mop-up daily, but up here we have a peculiar situation.

"The men who call themselves the Irregulars are the last of a detachment of snipertroops dropped by the Ruskie-Chinks near the end of the war, who mated with a bunch of half-breed women up here. These are their kids. Somehow, and don't ask me where or how because that's what we want to find out, they trained their kids in the one thing they knew: infighting. The kids—by the way, those troops must have multiplied like rabbits, the air or something up here—are all over this area. They tear up fuel lines as if we weren't around, they kill our squads when we send them out, they wreck hell all along the line here.

"Now if there were a central organization, it would be a simple one-assassin job. But there is no organization, merely clans and families who live off the plunder they can roust from us, and by fur trapping."

Juanito listened with half an ear. This was boring and time consuming. He wanted to find Grice

"Sir, excuse me," Juanito decided abruptly to break off this jabber. "Is there an assassin named John Grice here? An expert in duoprene disguises, I believe? He's on tem-

porary duty, assigned to New Chicago, do you know him?"

Posteur looked confused for a long moment, then gradually drew himself out of his bewilderment, and nodded. "Yes, I know him. Why?"

"A friend, sir. He was in the class that was graduated before mine. I wanted to see him again."

"Ah. So." Posteur puffed against his closed lips. "What has that to do with the problem here, and your job, Montoya?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Then why interrupt me?"

"Sir, I believe there's more to Grice than you've been told," Juanito lied, on the spur of the moment. It had suddenly occurred to him that Posteur might take action against him if he brought too much unfavorable attention to bear on himself. So he lied quickly, slyly, with survival as his foremost thought, and survival being the reaching of Grice—for getting to Ciudad Rosario and Eskalyo had become an obsession with him.

"What do you mean; speak up?" Posteur asked quickly.

"I managed to find out, sir, from other members of Grice's class, that one night he had bragged about being on intimate terms with one of the rulers of a petty dynasty in California. I took it upon myself, sir—as you know I have only a triple A rating—to track him down and find out what he knew, perhaps to rout out this petty ruler. And," he added with a sharp, short blush to allay suspicion and instill trust, "I thought I might get that plus also."

Posteur rose and walked around the desk. He was a slim man, and though he looked as though he were sleeping, there was a wire tenseness in his manner. "Hmmm. That's very interesting. Do you know where Grice is now, Montoya?"

"No, sir. I was informed he was here on TDY."

"Temporary duty to the Hi Guard," Posteur mused. He slapped his thigh with a palm. "I sent him out on a mission to the clan of Jukchu, to kill the father chief. He's been gone for a month now, over his estimated time of return. I was starting to worry. Do you think there's a connection?"

Juanito leaped. "Perhaps, sir. I'd like to find out if I may."

Posteur looked at Juanito sharply. "That's all for now, Montoya. I'll call you later today."

"But, sir, I—"

"*That's it, Montoya.* Go back to your billets; I call when I want."

Juanito left the room, worried, annoyed, and wondering if he might never live to be free of the assassin's corps. His room was quiet. And wired.

Four hours later, Posteur called for Juanito. His call brought Juanito up from the bunk with a start, for the voice was directly beside his head. The commanding officer had a subspace receiver hooked into the air of the assassin's room. "Come up here, Montoya."

Juanito sat up on the bed, his face warm with sweat. He had been in the middle of a darkly festering dream. There had been a formless creature stalking him through a forest of eyes, and far off across what seemed to be an Argentinian plain, a great house with roses growing along one wall. It had held more, this dream, but the instant of wakefulness had dispersed it like morning mist.

He awoke sweating, and: "Come up here, Montoya."

He stood up and leaned against the wall for an instant. Without stripping off the top of his skintite, he splashed water across his face from the tiny sink in one corner of the room, and went upstairs.

Posteur was waiting.

"I've decided to send you after Grice. There is something strange here, Montoya, I want you to understand that."

"I don't know what you mean, sir." Sleep and the dream were still swirling in Juanito's mind, and all he could think was that he was being sent after Grice. He was making progress. "What do you mean, sir?"

Posteur stood up and perched on the edge of the desk, swinging his long leg idly. "I think you are lying to me, Montoya. I think Grice is not what you suggested. But I also know he has been gone a month longer than necessary, and you seem to want to find him as badly as I

do. So I'm going to send you out." He reached for a small oilskin packet on the desk top. "This is a flikmap of the route Grice took, and instructions as to the tactics you should employ once you've found—"

"I have my own methods."

"—him. Look, Montoya, I know you've been graduated, and you're a loner, but I still administer the punishment around here. So don't—"

"I have my own methods. Give me the map." He reached for the packet, and as though a lash of understanding had cracked between them, Posteur handed it to the dark-haired assassin.

"I'll bring him back," was all he said.

It was cold, and the village was warm. That was all he could think of for the moment. He lay on the ridge, his face pressed against the snow that was not really cold, not really warm, just there . . . palpable. He lay close to the ground, his legs spread, the feet flat to the earth, and he felt the numbness crawling through his vitals. It had been a long trek across the Alaskan wastes. The tundra had been hard-packed in some places, in others free-blown, and the ice bridges had crumbled as he had walked on them.

It had been a bitter cold experience, something they had not quite prepared him for at the School. Had it not been for the incredible toughening at the School, he would surely have perished in the wastes. But the trail had been marked out luminously on the flikmap, and he had found the village of the Jukchu without trouble.

Now he lay there and watched the lights that moved about the village as the half breeds carried their torches between the rude hutches. He could see why the Hi Guard had had little luck finding these people. The village was set down in a valley hollow that would be missed completely if the Seeker passed a mere ten feet from the edge of the dropoff. Further, the hutches were covered with snow, and the half breeds wore white furs, making them nearly invisible against the landscape.

He could not tell what they were doing with the torches, nor why they were wandering back and forth between

the hutches. They seemed to be remarkably stout. Many of them carried clubs.

If this had been a regiment of the Ruskie-Chink shock troops at one time, they had indeed fallen far. Juanito started belly-crawling down the slope. He was not certain precisely what it was he was after, though he knew his final goal was to be alone with Grice for a half hour. That was all . . . just thirty minutes.

The snow covered him as he half-burrowed down the face of the hill. He moved slowly but steadily, and a little over an hour later had crawled the four hundred yards to the edge of the village area. There he paused, getting his bearings.

The Jukchus were now easily seen to be moving in a pattern. There was a line—swinging around most of the hutches in the village—that entered and left one slightly larger dwelling than the rest. The Jukchus drew their knives as they entered the front door, and licked them clean as they left by a side door. There was a great howling as they entered, and silence from within, and the great howling again as they left. The line moved quickly, and though there were perhaps a hundred Jukchus in the line, Juanito had seen several men enter at least twice. Whatever was going on within that hutch, it might be a partial solution to his finding Grice.

He began elbow-knee low-crawling toward the opposite side of the building from the doors through which the half breeds entered and left.

The wind had risen out of the north, and swept down into the little valley with a sudden maniacal ferocity. Juanito turned the warming nozzle of his skintite up to 72, and felt grateful for the invisible heating elements in the metallic fiber. He continued to crawl, and was pleased for a second by the great gusts of ribbony snow that blanketed him; his chances of being unobserved were enhanced greatly.

When he was no more than ten feet from the prancing, howling line of Jukchu warriors, Juanito angled in toward the building. It was a wooden structure, made by tying together many twigs and branches into bundles, and tying the bundles together to form walls. The walls were then covered with a black, tarlike substance probably brewed

up in great pots, such as the ones Juanito had passed in his slow crawl. He managed to pass around the bulge of the building without being observed, and in a few moments was lying with his ear to the side of the building.

From within, at irregularly spaced intervals, but usually no more than fifteen or twenty seconds apart—he timed them—he heard a swishing sound, as if air were being cleaved. Then, immediately following the swishing, a soft but distinct plop! This continued to happen, but other than the two unidentified sounds, the hutch was silent. Occasionally Juanito could hear the muffled footsteps of the men as they passed through, but even that did not serve to break the almost frightening silence of the hutch.

It was more chilling, that silence, than the cold that ate out of the north, and chewed at Juanito's body.

Juanito drew the palm-sized burner disc from his pouch and set it on the side of the hutch where it clung as though glued. He removed one of his heated skintite gloves—instantly feeling the full force of the frigid Alaskan weather—and using his fingernail quickly traced out the burn pattern on the flat surface of the disc.

It began burning immediately, and in a few seconds had penetrated the wall of the building, leaving a hole as large as Juanito's thumbnail. He removed the palm-sized disc, after negating its smaller burn pattern, and shoved it back into the pouch. Then he put his eye up to the hole.

It was dim inside, but a brazier was flickering a spastic light across the walls and ceiling.

His search for Grice was ended.

Grice was inside. What was left of him.

Juanito had seen some peculiar and terrible things in his years at the School. He had seen men crack from strain, and he had seen stereoplays of torture and death; he had witnessed and practiced many forms of pain infliction, he had learned how to steel himself against the onslaught of many enemies. But the Jukchus had their own particular way of doing it.

For the first time since he could remember, he was ill. Deathly ill. Violently ill, against the snow and the side of the hutch, in dry then slimey heaves. And when it had passed, his head swam with waves of nausea.

He lay there, his face pressed to the clean snow on the other side of him, for the first time in his life lost in fear and fascination of death.

He took some snow in his mouth, and more on his feverish forehead. Then he slumped against the side of the hutch and allowed his eyes to close. In the center of this enemy village, with the remnants of a Ruskie-Chink horror battalion on every side, he slid into reverie.

He had to do it. Madness lay waiting a second away.

After a while, he was able to look through the hole again. He had been wrong; Grice was not alone. There were four others there, and from what little was left of their clothing, he could see they had been members of the Hi Guard, probably sent out to scout for the village and captured by the Jukchus.

The half breeds were slicing them up.

It was a peculiar execution, for execution it had to be. The men had been hung from the ceiling to almost floor level, with ropes under their armpits and thighs. They were, in effect, in a cat's cradle. Other bonds held them in place, and each warrior who came through used his scimitarlike longknife with skill and accuracy. It was not a question of killing, but rather of maintaining life as long as possible.

The Jukchus were a resourceful band, and skilled in this form of death, for one of the men still hanging—like so much beef on a hook—was without legs or arms, half his torso sliced away, and his entrails dangling. Yet he lived.

They all lived.

Grice lived.

Though his eyes were gone, his feet were severed from his body, and the ropes under his armpits were held up by strips of cloth tied to the loops. For he had no arms.

The prisoners uttered not a sound; it was apparent they had been drugged somehow. Then, as Juanito stared through the burnhole in the hutch's wall, he saw Grice's eyes flicker open, and he knew the man was not drugged after all. It was more a case of shock, insensitivity at the nerve ends, at this stage of dismemberment. But Grice was alive!

And Juanito had no way of getting to him.

Even as the assassin watched, warriors passed before him, making their terrible movements on the five things that had once been men, hanging from the hutch's ceiling.

A lean, yellow-weathered Jukchu took a stance, swung his longknife around his head as though it were a cat by its tail, and sliced a chunk of flesh from the body on the end of the line. The swish and plop sounds came to Juanito, and he knew he must act quickly. There was no telling how long this torture had been going on—from the looks of it, of the dried blood on the ground beneath each carcass, for quite some time. It was strictly chance that he had gotten here before Grice was completely cut to shreds.

The possibility of obtaining information from the man was even slight; but any further waiting would result in loss of the one link to the man in the N. Chicago Chambers. Juanito thought swiftly, clearly.

He had to get that sliced hulk out of there, and get it alone for a few moments. He had to make Grice talk. But would—or *could*—Grice talk? Was he lost in a world of shock and half life? Juanito had to take the chance.

He crawled away from the hutch, toward the outer ring of light the torches threw. He saw one Jukchu warrior leaning against a gnarled, white stump of what had once been a hardy bush. The Jukchu was drinking from a leather flasklike bag, and wiping his frozen mustache with gloved hand.

Juanito belly-crawled—just outside the half breed's line of vision—till he was directly behind the man. Then he got to one knee, drew his vibro-blade . . .

And in one fluid movement swarmed over the man driving the shuddering whisper-thin death instrument into the Jukchu's neck. The blade severed the man's vocal cords at the instant before the blade pierced upward into the brain. He died instantly, slumping back against Juanito.

The assassin dragged the man into the shadows, and stripped him of his bulky, animal hide clothing. Then a sparing application of dirt and skin-tinctures from his pouch, the collodin scar to emulate that on the Jukchu's cheek, a bit of plastoid material in imitation of the mous-

tache, and Juanito emerged from the shadows a few minutes later the perfect replica of the dead half-breed.

With little difficulty Juanito managed to get into the line of circling warriors. For an instant he thought he might have trouble, for one of the Jukchus did not care for the crowding, but Juanito mumbled a throaty nothing at the man, and brandished his own longknife. The other fell back a step and placated the apparently angered Juanito with mild blubberings.

Juanito paid no attention to the man thereafter, but advanced as the line advanced.

The group moved swiftly—for how long did it take to slash lick and clean a longknife?

In a few minutes he was at the open door of the rude hutch, and still his plan was not wholly formed. Juanito was relying on instinct and reflexes to carry him. And then he was inside. The hutch smelled terrible.

The odor of musky incense mingled darkly with the smell of dried blood, and worse, the smell of freshly slaughtered meat. Juanito held his breath and then let it out slowly.

He saw a tall Jukchu with weathered yellow skin and a peaked miter standing beside the hanging horrors. After each warrior took his swing, the mitred Jukchu would apply a long stick with a slimey substance on it to the wound; he was caulking the blood off. That explained why the Hi Guards and Grice had not long since died of blood loss.

Juanito's longknife was at the ready, as the man before him took a cut from the cheek of the man beside Grice.

Then Juanito's reflexes were in the ascendant, and he knew the only way to get Grice away from here. The brazier that burned fitfully beside the yellow-skinned Jukchu. As gaily as possible, for such a happy occasion as this was to the Jukchus, he stepped forward. Awkwardly. Clumsily. His shoulder caught the back of the man ahead, busy licking his longknife.

The man stumbled ahead, throwing Juanito—calculatedly—off-balance. Juanito went careening into the mitred Jukchu who threw him back in self-defense. Juanito went into the brazier, flailing it away from himself.

The fire caught in the straw on the floor, on the bound

sheaves of wall matter, on the sticky substance coating the wood bundles, on the Jakchu's clothing. In a second the inside of the hutch was an inferno.

Flames licked greedily up the bodies hung from the ceiling, and the last lights of life died in the tortured eyes of the slashed hulks. Flames bit at the air, and filled the hutch with smoke as the ceiling caught fire. A great blast of heat smashed at Juanito, and he leaped toward the swinging raw meat that was Grice. Even as he dodged forward—as the mitered Jukchu went screaming from the place, his hair and cape afire—the warrior behind him was shoving the line of men back.

"Out! Out!" Juanito kept shouting, and a guttural cry as urgent as his own was picked up by the others.

In an instant, in the time it took for a spider's leg to wither, Juanito had severed the ropes holding up the torso of the half-dead Grice. He beat out the flames and threw himself—clutching the part body to his chest like a baby—through the rear of the flaming hutch.

The snow was aflame with ruby shadows, dancing in a mad tune to the sounds of the Alaskan night. The wind roared down the hills, and the snow swirled crazily, and a lunatic moon gibbered in the trees as Juanito beat back through the wilderness, away from the Jukchu village, carrying his terrible burden.

Grice had to live!

He *had* to name the man.

It was a short life, and ugly. But he *would* know that name. Or Grice would yet learn what torture was.

Somewhere back in the whiteness, under a cliff, in a shallow defile that might someday become a cave, Grice died. But first he talked.

There was not much he *could* say, in his condition, but when Juanito laid the appendageless hulk on the snow, covered and swathed in animal hide clothing from the dead Jukchu, Grice's eyes flickered open. A part of his head was gone, and his hair had been burned off completely. Sooty marks coated his eyelids and forehead. Had he not been stout, there would have been less of him than Juanito had saved.

"M—" Grice managed to mouth, when he looked up at Juanito Montoya. His lips were blood-caked and cracked from no water. His face twitched uncontrollably, and what might have been a smile on anyone else showed as a death's-head grin on his white, exhausted features.

"Hello, Grice," Juanito said in Speak.

Grice slowly—through an arc of less than an inch—nodded his head. His voice came from the black bottom of the sea as he replied in Speak. "H-hello, Montoya. Yuh-yuh—yoo f-found me, hah?"

Juanito acknowledged with a soft, mournful nod. Grice gave the terrible smile again. "You-y-y-you should h-have gotten h-h-here t . . ." he broke into a fit of shallow coughing and blood spattered against the snow, black and warm. His eyes closed and for a second Juanito thought he had lost the link to Eskalyo. Then Grice opened his eyes again and finished his sentence. "—t-two weeks 'go, fella . . . th-that's when they s-st-strung m-me up. Others'd been uh-uhp f-for a week buh-before I got there . . ."

"Try not to talk, Grice," Juanito soothed the dying shell. He wanted him to talk only one phrase, and did not want Grice to waste his breath on anything else.

"They caught you spying out the village, right?" Juanito asked. Grice nodded yes. "Some kind of a ceremony for captured enemies, was that it?" Again the affirmative nod. "Grice, I got you out of there to ask you—"

Grice interrupted, and a flash of fire ran wild in his dying eyes. "Yoo, yuh-you got m-me out there so I'd tell y'how t-tuh find—" a fit of coughing severed the words, but he plunged on through coughs and blood, "—th'm-man in Noo Chii, in't th-that it, Montoy-y-a . . ." His shuddering added the question mark.

Juanito nodded solemnly. "I followed half across AmericaState, Grice. It's important to me, more important to me than anything in the world, that I find Eskalyo. I—I found out he's my—my—"

He did not need to finish the sentence. Grice smiled an arrogant smile and said softly, in a whisper, "Your father."

Juanito's dark eyes opened wider. "How did you—"

Grice smiled again. This time insipidly. "I have you to thank for my being here, Montoya," he said, and there

was no slightest trace of pain or halting in his voice. The clarity before death? Juanito hastened him to speak on.

"You don't th-think you fooled them at the School, do you, Montoya? No one gets his assignment changed just because he goes in to see a Probesman. They changed you because they wanted you to find me—and think you were doing something big and secret. They planted *me*, Montoya! They took me out of classes and planted me at that Combats Meet.

"I'm not from Argentina . . . I'm from Oklahoma . . . but they wanted you to get interested in Eskalyo. They revived those memories of him, and wanted you to think you were outwitting the Seekers and the Probesmen and AmericaState and all of them; then when they made sure you found Eskalyo, they were going to have you kill him—whether you wanted to or not!"

His face was drained. There was only a scrap of life left to be eaten in him. How he managed to go on with such determination, Juanito could not understand.

"So you see, Montoya, you are the reason I'm here. If they hadn't wanted to get you to assassinate Eskalyo, and if it hadn't been imperative that you think you were on your own, I would have had a soft berth in Oklahoma . . . not cut to nothing out here . . ." He began to cry.

"The name!" Juanito pleaded, not yet convinced of the truth of what Grice had said . . . for how could the School make him kill his father if he did not want to do it? He did not believe . . . but he had to know that name.

"Y-yss," Grice trembled. "The man's n-name is Tedus Nur . . . he is head, huh-head executioner—f-fuh-field div . . . divishn . . . N. Chicago Chambers . . ."

The portly assassin's face started to pale toward milk white. Juanito bent low and mumbled, "I—I'm sorry, Grice . . . I'm sorry this had to happen because of me—"

But Grice did not die then

He managed to laugh once more.

A round, full laugh, that was edged with sorrow.

"D-don't b-b-e sorry for muh-me, Mont-t—, don't b-be sorry for m-me. I'm gettin' away easy . . . I f-f-feel sorry for yooo . . . they got hell p-p-planned fo-for you, Monnnnn—"

Then he died.

Oddly enough, Juanito was afraid. There had been an obvious note of pity in Grice's voice. Now why would he pity Juanito?

It was difficult digging the snow for a grave.

Juanito believed. Had he not been able to escape the Hi Guard territory, had the sort of restrictions he had been led to believe AmericaState imposed to keep men in line, been imposed on him to keep him from leaving Alaska, he might have thought Grice was delirious. Or lying. But there had been no difficulty escaping.

One dark night after he had returned to the Hi Guard GHQ and reported Grice's death, the fate of the other missing Hi Guards and the destruction of the Jukchu chieftain—for that had been the mitered Jukchu in the hutch—he slipped out of the GHQ and found—

A jetcopter idling and ready for someone absent.

He took the opportunity, and stole the copter, not realizing til he was four thousand miles away that the ship had been planted, and this was probably what the Seekers and AmericaState wanted. The realization came to him suddenly, shockingly, and he was quick to take remedial steps.

He crash dived the jetcopter into the center of Lake Michigan.

His skintite was equipped to withstand the temperatures of Lake Michigan in the Fall, but it was not a substitute for a life belt. He had to swim for it.

Just within the space of time left to Juanito to stroke, he was sighted by a ChiTroop cutter which bleeped in on him and scooped him from the water.

They did not question his story of having been jaunting in a private craft that had overturned. As they should have. As they would have . . . had not AmericaState wanted them to believe any story he gave them . . . had not AmericaState wanted him to get to Tedus Nur . . . had not AmericaState rigged the jetcopter to trackback its signals, so they would know where he was at any moment.

He knew, then, and the knowledge did nothing to

soothe him. All this effort, all these machinations, were all at the notice of the AmericaState officials. He had had his memories of Eskalyo discovered when he had been initially probed, and the Probers had decided he, Juanito Montoya, would make a good decoy to find and assassinate Eskalyo, in Ciudad Rosario. Was Eskalyo becoming too much of a threat for the AmericaState system? Was there more to this than Juanito suspected? Undoubtedly! Yet they had pulled it off this far: they had aroused his interest in Eskalyo, then planted Grice to let Juanito know he was the petty ruler's son, then arranged it so Juanito would think it was his own idea to seek out Grice and the man in the Chambers, and Eskalyo himself. It had all been a plan, and he had jibbered and capered through it like the puppet they wished him to be.

He cursed himself silently, wishing he had never been found by the Seekers. He cursed the invisible, omnipotent Them who ruled the AmericaState, and for the first time since he could remember, he doubted the stately system; perhaps it was because he had been a child of freedom . . . perhaps it was because he had too much individuality to fully accept what he had been taught at the School . . . perhaps it was just that he was sick of being shunted about. But at that moment of realization he knew the AmericaState way was not the best way to rule the continent. The War had been a severe test, and the men who had come through it with the most strength left had been the ones to establish the School and the Seekers and the Probers and all the other security checks and confining minutia of AmericaState government. But Juanito had never doubted that was the best way; the petty rulers had to go; they were a menace.

Was it so, however? Was that the way of it?

Now he doubted until his brain hurt. Now he knew the regimentation was no good, and the School was no good, and there was a fear in AmericaState—a fear of Eskalyo. Or if there were not . . . why would they be going to so much trouble to convince Juanito he wanted to seek out his father?

It had been chance, obviously, that Grice had been captured. Chance—he had been sent on a mission to keep him busy till Juanito arrived in Alaska—a harmless

mission to keep him out of the way—and he had been captured—and tortured—and died with bitterness red on his lips.

That bitterness had compelled him to speak. To tell the truth about this business to the man he was supposed to have duped.

So Juanito knew.

He knew he was being *driven* to find his father, and the AmericaState officials would give him all the help he needed. Such as an idling jetcopter . . . a ChiTroop cutter . . . or a free passage to Ciudad Rosario—wherever it might be.

Had not Grice been tortured in that way, had not his bitterness overcome his training, Juanito would have stumbled on, thinking he was escaping the assassin's corps, thinking he was going to his father, when all the while he would have been on his way to an assassination.

The ChiTroop cutter skimmed over the water of Lake Michigan, speeding toward N. Chicago, as the other thought struck Juanito Montoya:

How were they going to insure that he killed Eskalyo?

What hidden factors had they? Was he a tool without knowing it? He struggled with himself for a long instant, and finally scoffed it away; he had been trained to kill. That was probably the hold they had over him. They felt sure he would not go back on his training when the moment of assassination came. He chuckled in the sanctity of his mind. They were *so* wrong.

Unlike the many serfs and simple-souled draftees to the School, Juanito had been a creature of the wind, free and on his own: he did not feel grateful for the training, and in an instant he would throw it over. When he reached Eskalyo—his father—he would pledge himself to allegiance no matter what the cost.

His assassin's training would come in handy.

But that was all in time. First he had to find Tedus Nur, head executioner, field division, N. Chicago Chambers.

Tedus Nur was the most hideous creature ever spawned.

DOOMSMAN

Not only his physical makeup—though that in itself was frightening, and perhaps reason for his other defects—but his tone of voice, the look in his eye, his gait, his attitude toward the political prisoners in the Chambers, everything. In everything, his body was reflected. In every word, every deed, every concept and inclination, his dwarf's body was mirrored.

Juanito Montoya instinctively slouched when he met Tedus Nur.

A man with a warped and twisted body such as Nur's would be immediately antagonistic to a straight, tall youth with unscarred, clean limbs. Juanito sensed this, and lessened his own stature accordingly. If it had any effect on the dwarf, Nur did not let on.

He was despicable from the first moment of their meeting.

"What do you want?"

The thin, gashlike mouth opened to reveal less than half the teeth nature had intended. What few were in a broth of saliva were yellow and broken, save for two canines white and clean and deadly-looking, as if Nur were part animal, keeping those two teeth in good case for his animal stages. The mouth opened and a rank smell came forth. The eyes narrowed as the mouth opened, and the banked fires of hatred—an all-directional hatred, for everyone and everything—blazed more brightly from the thinned slits. Nur's eyes were bloodshot and stained about the iris with orange flecks. His eyes were any color. Any sick color. They were not brown, but mud. They were not black but dirt. They were not blue but the color of veins. Nor green but the color of mold.

The nose was a delicate, upturned sweetness, like a cherry thrust atop a pie of dung, or an innocent child lost in a colony of lechers, or a clean thought in the mind of a pervert. The nose was not of his face, but merely loaned from some other.

The head was pointed and nearly bald. It sat on a nearly nonexistent neck that ran into huge, massively corded shoulders . . . segment of a twisted and evil form. Tedus Nur was a crippled dwarf of the most objectionable sort.

"Dammit, I ask what you want? You gone answer?"

Juanito loathed the dwarf at once, but this was the man who would give him the words to lead a son to his father. By plan of AmericaState, to be sure, but Juanito had one ace they knew nothing of:

He *knew* they were maneuvering him, now.

So now he knew, and he knew this play-acting with Nur was important; he must not let on that he knew their plan. He must allow himself to be a dupe. So far as it would bring him to the feet of Eskalyo.

For he had decided: there was where his destiny lay.

With his father.

So he swallowed his loathing of Tedus Nur and replied:

"I was in a private yacht that sank in the Lake. A—uh—friend of mine, John Grice, once told me if I ever had a problem, and was near New Chi, I should look you up, that you would—uh—help me out."

Nur's eyes narrowed still more, if that was possible, and his mouth slitted fine to a sharp reply. "No one is my friend, man. You got a name, you got papers, what you got I should know you come from Grice?"

Juanito swallowed hard. Tedus Nur could tell he was an assassin. Only an assassin wore the ebony skintite and pouch.

Yet he wanted Juanito to declare himself. "My name is Lland Jackh. I come from Oklahoma, near Grice's birth-place. Grice said you would help me find a—uh—certain person."

Tedus Nur grinned. It would have been more soothing had he snarled. He knew Juanito was lying. Juanito knew the dwarf was aware of his lie. It was part of the play-act. Juanito spoke with the lilt of the Spaniard, not with the twang of the Okie. He was obviously from the Argentine—and what did it matter where he obviously was from, or what he obviously *was*, for Tedus Nur had had his instructions.

From the top.

It was his play, all the way.

"Come, man, I take you to my evening's work. I show you how I earn my living."

The dwarf rose off the many pillows piled on the floor of the office and capered toward the door. His wrinkled

and crushed little body was all evil and all purpose as he took a blacksnake bullwhip from pegs near the door. Then he threw open the door—with its latch close to the floor—and bowed low.

“After you, Mr. Lland Jackh!”

Juanito moved out into the corridor, composed of softly glowing green rock. Green rock that was the foundation of the Chambers. The New Chicago Torture Chambers, where political unfortunates were sent for confession and—in every case—execution. It was a huge tower in the center of N. Chi, surrounded by a force mesh that went out for two blocks in any direction. Once a man was condemned to the Chambers, no one bothered to think of him again—he was dead. The tower rose one thousand three hundred feet into the New Chicago sky, the stone and not-stone of it glowing soft green by night and by day.

Beacon to those who sought the stern authority of AmericaState.

Bogey to children warned by their mothers at bedtime.

Source of information from those who sought to overthrow the regimented, assassin-strong, Seeker-filled, Probesman-laden culture of AmericaState.

Cradle of terror.

Gray-halled, green-walled, silent and impregnable graveyard into which a man might disappear and never be seen again. Turned into the capable hands of executioners like Tedus Nur.

“Are you coming, Mr. Jackh?” The little dwarf trotted down the green-lit hallway.

Juanito’s thought swirled back into his mind as water swirls quickly down a drain. “Uh, oh yes, yes of course, I’m coming.”

He followed the dwarf, and wondered how long the play-act would continue. He hoped his end would not come here, between these walls.

From somewhere below, a scream swirled up to pierce his reverie.

Tedus Nur enjoyed his work. In his warped, single-line

way, in his *own* way and in no way Juanito could imagine as sane, he was probably a top man in his field.

His field was cruelty.

Juanito followed the dwarf down a series of baffle corridors and areaways, confusing in the extreme; a minotaur's maze of strange angles and bewildering back-tracks. This was another feature of the escape-proof Chambers.

Finally they came to a stairway, and the dwarf capered and caroled down it as though he were a child bent on a playday. Nur whistled and gibbered to himself like a thing gone mad, winding down and ever down that flight of fearful stairs. A rank and hideous odor came up from below, and though the green walls shone with equal brilliance at any distinct spot, there was a feeling of increasing darkness, of increasing dankness and depth as they descended.

The screams continued, sometimes rising, sometimes falling in pitch, but always there, always commanding and drawing them down down down into the bowels of the Chambers, and perhaps into the bowels of N. Chi itself. Juanito never knew.

When it seemed his legs would wear off at the knees, Juanito heard the little maniac—who had practically flown down the last hundred feet of steps till he was well ahead of the assassin—call a huzzah, and urge him on. He stumbled down the last steps, rounding a curve that brought him in sight of a great hall, with low benches in every direction, and a hundred green doors set in the wall. The doors were all of plasteel, it was obvious, even from that distance, and they were numbered from one to one hundred. From behind the doors, strange sounds could be heard, intermingling and mixing with the sounds from other doors. Down here the screams were not terrifying, but worse, heart-rending.

The dwarf took up an heroic stance, hands on hips, bullwhip dangling, and legs apart, and smiled. He waved a hand about proudly. "Mr. Jackh! My office!"

The benches were black with dried blood.

"What is this hall?" Juanito asked.

"Waiting room," the dwarf answered simply, explaining no further. Yet the manner in which he spoke

those two words was enough to send a tremor through Juanito's shoulders.

"Come with me, won't you?" the dwarf said, and it was by no means a request.

Juanito followed him, expecting anything, and expecting even treachery that would leave him imprisoned in one of these cells for the rest of his life. But he followed, for in the warped and twisted mind of this warped and twisted dwarf lay the answer to the puzzle: Where is Eskalyo? Where is my father?

Tedus Nur strode briskly forward, his eyes all fire and yearning, his hand tight to the mailed grip of the black-snake bullwhip. It was just as they reached door number 76 that Juanito noticed something about the whip.

It was not simply a material construction. There were wire tips protruding from the cat that ended the stalk. Wire tips that ran up through the stalk and into the handle. The handle was equipped with a series of studs that could be controlled from the fingertips.

As Juanito stared down at the whip, the dwarf turned and caught his eyes. "Interesting, eh? A little thing I had them send me from the SecuritySeek Research Labs in Up-Dakota. Guaranteed to make my job easier." He cracked the whip with authority, and sparks blazed a blue and gold arc over his head. Juanito drew back as a faint touch of that current stood his dark hair on end, and burned in his eyes.

If he had ever doubted it, now he knew for certain: the dwarf was criminally insane. A megalomaniac.

"You need a haircut," the dwarf observed, with no relation to anything else, and dismissing it, turned to palm-lock open the door.

His prints were scanned and grooved and compared and okayed, and the door slid back in its trough. The cell within was large, but that did the prisoner no good.

She was bolted to the floor.

By her thighs, her biceps, her wrists, her waist, her feet and her neck. Auburn-haired, closed-eyed, limp and filthy, no shard of clothing left on her body, the girl started at the sound of the whip in the air as Tedus Nur entered, and as though the cry were being torn from her stomach, she screamed for the heavens to take notice.

"Please, please," she whined, "please beat me! Beat me, but don't touch me, please, I'm crying, can't you see that, please, please . . ." Her voice was thick with emotion, and her eyes filled with the sort of tears that were not affectation.

She wished for a beating from that hideous whip, more than the touch of the dwarf. What horrors had the man inflicted on her, Juanito wondered.

"You asked me to help you find a man, Mr. Jackh," the dwarf said, looking steadily at the girl.

"Yes."

"What is that man's name?"

"I—Eskalyo." The hesitation was momentary.

The dwarf turned then to Juanito, and his face was a plea for understanding. My God, thought Juanito, the little scum has emotions after all!

"Mr. Jackh, in my business, I'm told very little about matters of consequence, aboveground. I am told there is an important man on his way to me who will ask me about Eskalyo. I am told to give him all the help I can. I would not show what I am about to show to you, to anyone, sir. But I long for recognition . . . my soul cries out for acclaim . . . so I show you my best work, sir, in hopes when you return to that position of importance your assassin's garb tells me you possess, you will drop the good words about poor Tedus Nur, in the darkness below New Chicago."

His face was beaming with supplication and a sort of beatific need the likes of which Juanito had never encountered. But the dwarf had said *something* Something most important. He had said that Juanito was to be helped, and they had not told the dwarf that Juanito's mission was all the puppet work it had become. They had told no one, obviously, for in that way only could they keep it secret from Juanito. They had told Grice that he played a greater part in the conspiracy. And perhaps they had not even told him—perhaps he had spied out the information on his own.

But whatever the case, Juanito was now in the lap of the information he needed, and he was safe, completely safe, altogether in the driver's seat.

The dwarf had his instructions, and he had to carry

them out. Now Juanito would learn where his father was to be found.

"What is it you wish to show me, Nur?" a new tone of authority suffused Juanito's voice. "Will it lead me to Eskalyo?"

The dwarf's ridiculous head bobbed up and down on the spindly, nearly nonexistent neck, and he chuckled to himself. He threw a flat palm toward the whimpering girl, chained to the floor, and said, "This girl will tell us, sir.

"I have had her in my Chambers for three months now, sir. She was sent to me from Ciudad Rosario—I'm sure they have told you about Ciudad Rosario. A petty monarchy somewhere in Argentina. She is one of the household maids or something there, we have never been quite able to find out what her position was. She was found in the town of Corientes," he mouthed and mispronounced the name fearfully, "that's on the Argentine-Paraguay border—"

"I know where it is, Nur," Juanito interrupted. "Well, what has she said, if she is from Eskalyo's duchy?"

The dwarf looked frightened then, and sheepish.

"N-nothing, Mr. Jackh."

Juanito seized his opportunity.

"Nothing?"

The dwarf nodded dumbly, frightened at the authority in Juanito's tones.

"A good word, is it? A good word with my superiors, is that what you want, you slug!" The dwarf's face darkened, and he cringed down and back in a confusion of anger and fear. "I'll give you many words. But none good. What manner of inefficiency is that, you've had a woman here for three months—" The period three months rang true; that was just about the time Juanito had asked for transfer to the Hi Guard, "—and she has not yet spilled her data. You are to be congratulated, Tedus Nur, really congrat—"

The little dwarf sprang forward then. But not at Juanito. He ripped a fearful cry from his chest and threw himself at the girl. In a moment he was over her, the blacksnake bullwhip ripping the air, the sparks splattering out against the green, glowing walls. Then the whip arched down and struck her naked flesh, and the scream

was a small, stifled thing, all the more terrible for its heaviness and sharpness and shortness.

Even as Juanito started forward, the dwarf struck again and a third time, so quickly Juanito barely saw the movement of the heavily corded arms. Where the lash dug in, great wide stripes of blue-black welts erupted, and blood surged up into the troughs like water in a pod.

Juanito caught the dwarf's arm as the third blow landed, and he ripped the bullwhip from his hands, lifting the little maniac and throwing him bodily against the wall.

Tedus Nur struck the wall and fell on his face. The girl cried no longer; she was unconscious, her hands doubled into futile little fists.

Juanito took the whip in his left hand, and saved his right hand for the dwarf. He was intent on beating the executioner as he had beaten the girl, but sanity returned quickly, and the assassin's sharp mind stopped him.

"Fool!" he snapped at Tedus Nur, who was shaking his head in confusion and pain. "Would you kill the one person who can lead me to the man I seek? AmericaState needs her alive . . . more than you need her pain! Get out of here!"

The dwarf stood up shakily, clinging to the wall which would not support him. He fell again. Enflamed with rage at the dwarf's treatment of the girl, Juanito stepped to the little man and dragged him bodily to his feet. Juanito thrust the shank of the whip into the dwarf's hand, and propelled him from the cell.

As an afterthought he called the executioner back. "Here! You, Nur. Give me your keys to these chains. I will try some of the methods of persuasion used at the School. They are less flamboyant, but I'm sure they will give me the answers I seek." He took the plate of lectro-keys offered subserviently by the midget, and said, "Go to your office and wait for me." Then, "And have a jetcopter waiting, I may have to return to the School at once. Do you understand?"

The midget's face was drained of everything by the fear method. His eyes were lusterless and he nodded his grotesque head jerkily, like a child.

"And speak to no one about this, is that clear?"

Juanito jabbed a finger at the midget, and thrust him

away without bothering to find out the answer. There could be only one answer. The midget was conditioned, as everyone in AmericaState was conditioned, to do what he was told by a superior representative of the America-State officialdom.

The midget was gone, and Juanito turned to look at the girl. Yes, she was Ciudad Rosario. For somewhere along the commingled gene-lines, one of Eskalyo's peoples had mated with the flame-haired folk of Ireland, and down those lines had come the opportunity, which had ended in this girl. Her eyes were the only part of her Juanito could not see, for they were closed, but even under the coating of filth and blood and deep cuts that swathed her young body, there was no question of her attractiveness. Perhaps not beautiful in the exotic sense of the word, but fair in the traditional sense of fair. Lovely to behold . . . even in this pit of evil and death.

Juanito pledged silently to attend to Tedus Nur before he left the Chambers.

He crouched beside the girl, who was deeply lost in unconsciousness, and slowly began to unlock the chains that held her to the scummy floor. Rats ran for their holes at the sounds of the chains dropping away. A sound in the walls was the tap-tapping of another prisoner somewhere down the line.

The assassin lifted the girl's upper body into his arms, and slid her up against his chest. She was quite light; they had obviously been starving her, in addition to the torture—and whatever extra pleasures Tedus Nur had practiced on her. He swung her legs up, and carried her out of the cell, into the great waiting room.

The girl's auburn hair hung down in great waves, and her head was thrown back across Juanito's arm, so the arch of her neck was taut and smooth. He looked at her face, and it was a sweet face, despite what the last three months had done to her. Her body showed the signs of wasting; there were fleshy, fat-lines about her thighs and hips and waist where she had lost weight and the skin had left fat deposits. Yet her figure was still surprisingly feminine, and not too thin to be called starved.

He laid her down on one of the great benches for which there seemed to be no purpose, and looked around for

something to drape over her. There was nothing. The great hall was empty.

Juanito dug in the linings of his pouch and came up with a water spot. He took the tiny expansible plastic container in his hand, and rubbed his palms together rapidly; the water spot expanded with the friction, and combined its elements.

In a few minutes he had a plastic bag filled with pure water, that tasted lightly of chlorine.

He broke off the drink tip and inserted it between her lips. At first the water ran down her face and onto her chest, but then she began sipping lightly. In a moment she was hacking and choking strangely, and her eyes flew open.

Yes, they were green, as Juanito had supposed.

She looked at him, and said nothing. He brought the drink tip to her lips again and she drank greedily. When she had had her fill, he drained the last of the water himself, and threw the bag away.

"Thank you," she said softly. There was a world of suffering in the words, and her eyes were frosted over.

Juanito nodded. He let his face assume an expression of sympathy and deep interest. What the instructor of expressions at the School had called "a look to generate confidence in the subject." It worked, of course.

Juanito had no interest in this girl whatsoever. She was merely another step to Eskalyo, and as such, he would play her for her worth, and then pass on. He was going to Ciudad Rosario if it killed every link in the chain; but he was going. That was the way of an assassin.

"If I carry you part of the way, do you think you could walk the rest, up those stairs?" he waved a hand at the huge staircase around the corner at the end of the great hall.

She looked at him warily. "Who are you?"

Juanito had to take a chance. "I'm Eskalyo's son," he replied levelly. "I was in the School for assassins when I was probed, and found out. I've been trying for a long time to get back to my father."

Her eyes had widened steadily as he spoke till now they were huge with incredulity. "You're lying," she breathed.

Juanito forged ahead. "Listen to me. What I say is truth, but whether you believe me or not, I don't care. I've killed men to get this far, and I'm not afraid to continue doing it. But I'm going to get to my father, if I have to kill everyone in the world . . . everyone in this damned AmericaState. Do you understand me?"

She did not answer. More, she refused to answer; her silence was an electric thing; it defied words; it defied him, and in so doing—by mere silence—she infuriated him.

"Did the dwarf torture you?"

Again, silence. Then, slowly, an infinitesimal nod. A nod that embodied a great deal of strength despite horror.

"What he did was as nothing to what *I* will do to you, if you don't take me to my father." The words were soft as ashes, spaced as nails in flesh.

Her face drew down in a knot of determination; she was not going to reveal any more to Juanito than she had to Tedus Nur.

So Juanito did something to her.

It bothered him to have her break up that way, but when cooperation cannot be obtained through coercive means, the assassin is trained to bring it about through the next most direct. The case had called for insistence, and even a bit of callousness, and Juanito's training had responded promptly. When he had revived her the second time, she was prepared to believe anything he said; should he have assured her he was the Director of AmericaState, she would have nodded and accepted him with a curtsey. But all he wanted was a direction to Eskalyo and Ciudad Rosario.

"You can't get there without me," she assured him, her spirit broken, but her position the same as before. "There are things about the route no one knows outside of the monarchy. And there are checkpoints. You'll have to take me back with you if you want to get there alive."

Juanito drew his vibro-blade from its slide sheath and held it under her nose. Immature bravado rang in his voice as he snapped, "I've been looking for my father for

a long time now. With this I'll get there. Don't order me around. Don't tell me what I have to do."

The girl sucked in breath raggedly, and she slumped her shoulders. "All right. All right." Weariness rose and fell like a tide in her voice. "If you don't believe me, then try and get there yourself. I'm willing to take you; you say you are who you are, and I'm too—too tired to argue, but I can't change it when I say that without me you won't get in."

Juanito considered. He recognized his own adolescence in threatening her so openly with the blade. He sheathed it again, and nodded his agreement. "All right. If you aren't lying, I'll have to chance it. There's a copter waiting upside, I hope. Just follow my lead, and pretend what I do is the way it is. Don't cross me or we'll both die."

The look in her eyes said she did not care if either of them died, but she would cooperate. Juanito felt a vague restlessness in his stomach; things were moving along, he was getting where he wanted to get—or was he?

"Let's go."

He helped her to her feet, and she refused when he offered to carry her. She walked ahead of him, across the hall and around the corner, then up the stairs. She carried herself proudly, though she was covered with filth and slime and despite the fact that she was completely without clothing. Her nudity did not seem to disturb her, and she held herself high, though the weariness and despair in her claimed that regal carriage as they climbed. Juanito was finally forced to carry her the last hundred feet of steps.

When they entered Nur's office, the girl was feigning unconsciousness.

Juanito snapped, "She has more information than I'm able to dredge up here. I'm taking her back to the School where I can use more advanced methods on her. Do you have the copter ready?"

Tedus Nur was smoking a cigar. It looked like a huge green protuberance, thrust from his gnomelike face. He arched his thick eyebrows in amusement at Juanito's words. "Oh?" and "Is that so?" and "Oh, to be sure, to be sure, sir," he mumbled and gibed as Juanito spoke. His tones were ridicule, his movements insulting.

"Well! I want to take my prisoner, now," Juanito used the same tones of authority as before.

But this time Tedus Nur laughed. His laugh was compounded of gut-rumbling and spittle and the cigar bobbing up and down between his fleshy lips. "You smell bad, assassin. You smell very bad; you smell to me like an old fish! An old one, Mister Lland Jackh!" he mustered himself on his throne of pillows and burst into riotous laughter. "Smell bad, smell bad, you smell *so* bad to me. You don't even smell like what you're supposed to be, assassin!"

Juanito moved toward the door. The dwarf rose off his pillows. "Oh no!"

Somehow, the dwarf's mind had snapped. Despite his instructions from SecuritySeek, Tedus Nur had lost his senses, and was trying to stop the assassin from getting to Eskalyo.

Juanito whispered sharp words to the girl and she dropped from his arms as Juanito drew his vibro-blade. The blade sang in the air as the assassin threw it overhand. It imbedded itself in the dwarf's throat, and carried him back against the wall with its impact. A fountain of blood gushed forth from the little man's throat and he had just a second to utter a sharp, piglike squeal.

Only a second lapsed before he died, open-eyed, and clutching his cigar. Then the curtains at the other side of the room parted, and Juanito found himself staring at the bell muzzle of a ten-thread disruptor, on a tripod mount, with three prison guards—ChiTroop guards—tending it. He had but a split instant to glean the situation and understand what was going on:

Juanito threw himself forward, even as the gunner depressed the automatic fire stud. Juanito prayed the girl was out of the line of fire as he assumed she was. He was in mid-air as the ten-thread bolt spread blue beneath his legs. He sailed over the muzzle of the deadly weapon and crashed into the three ChiTroopers. They were bowled backward by the impact of his body, and the disruptor was knocked sidewise. Its blue beam crackled and spurted at the ceiling, burning a wide swath through plasteel and paint and continuing to burn as Juanito struggled with the ChiTroopers.

The assassin caught the first man with a flat edge of closed hand across the bridge of the nose. The guard dropped with a sharp, convulsive yelp and lay quite still. His companions were busy extricating themselves from the tangle of arms and legs and disruptor tripod stems—and trying not to bring the weapon down on themselves at the same time—as Juanito barreled into them. He brought two fingers into the eyes of one ChiTrooper, blinding the man instantly and sending him back against the alcove wall crying and clutching at the soggy pulps of empty sockets.

The third guard finally managed to get to his feet, just as Juanito rose to one knee. The ChiTrooper kicked out and his heavy boot clipped Juanito across the temple. The assassin tried to roll with the strike and managed to keep from fainting at the pain. His head felt as though it had been ripped away.

Faintly, he heard the sound of the office door closing as the girl left.

The ChiTrooper came back for another full kick, and Juanito grabbed the booted foot as it swung past his ear. With a quick flip he turned the man's leg, and the guard stumbled backward. Juanito was on his feet in a moment and pummeling the man backward with vicious rights and lefts to face and midsection. He caught the ChiTrooper across the right ear with a smashing right that sent the guard down in a heap. Juanito's foot caught him in the throat, and the man's head snapped back, as his eyes glazed over.

The next kick opened the guard's head.

Juanito did not stop to gasp for breath, nor to consider the pain that throbbed like a gong in his head. He stepped over the bodies and ripped the ten-thread disruptor from its tripod with a flick of the fastening bolts. As he burst into the hall, the disruptor still spewing blue destruction from its bell mouth—still ripping open walls and ceiling as it swung in his grip—he quickly took his bearings, remembering how the ChiTroops from the cutter had brought him to Tedus Nur's office when he had first entered the Chambers.

The landing deck was to the right and down a side cor-

ridor, then up a short flight of steps to the deck itself. He started running in that direction.

He met several ChiTroopers as he ran; he did not turn off the disruptor. The beam burned through the guards and the walls behind them.

The landing deck was not empty. A jetcopter with the legend CHAMBERS PERS OFFICIAL was just swinging off to the right, rising as the wind rose, and heading toward the South.

Another copter sat empty and untended at the far edge of the deck, the same words written on it. Juanito burned down half a dozen crewmen and hangarsmen who tried to intercept him, and in a few minutes was rising off deck, tracking the other jetcopter on the sonorad. There was no opposition from ChiTroop copters in the area; his luck was holding; despite what he had done to Tedus Nur and his Chambers setup, they wanted him to get through to Eskalyo; they undoubtedly still thought he would try to assassinate the petty monarch. They did not know how wrong they were.

Whatever hold they thought they had on him, to get him to kill his own father, they were wrong, so wrong. He was determined now to join Eskalyo in whatever fight the man was waging against AmericaState—and it must be a severe one for the Director and the Officials to let him get away with so much, just so he would make it through without knowing he was being *allowed* through, to kill his father—and to see the structure come tumbling down.

That was the most important thing now.

And to that end he must catch the girl in the copter ahead. She was his one last link with his father, and he had to get to her.

—what weapon did AmericaState hold that could make him kill his father? He wondered, and still could not answer the question—

The copter beat its way toward the south, keeping a clean distance behind the first machine. When they had passed over what had been the Rio Grande River, Juanito decided to board the first copter. He cut in the jets and soared after the girl. Apparently she caught sight of him on the sonorad, for the other ship abruptly dipped and tried to cut him off between two canyon walls. Jua-

nito set the machine to autotrack and went back into the storage hold. There he found a fly-belt and propulsor unit which he strapped on carefully. Then he went back frontships, to see what positions the two ships held. They had gained on the mountains, and his ship had gained on hers. She did not seem as familiar with jet cut-in as she was with the standard copter controls; though there were few persons who did not know how to operate a jetcopter, it was apparent that the girl had been away from them for some time. Her handling of the ship was erratic, and she was doing a bad job of keeping herself hemmed off between the canyon walls.

Juanito knew she would never make it the full seven-mile length between the high rocky bluffs. If he were going to use her as his admission card to Ciudad Rosario, he had to get her, and get her now.

Sonorad was tracking the ship and at the same time estimating the length left to them between the canyon bluffs. The indicator said slightly less than seven miles, and they were jetting at a constant two thousand feet above the swollen Rio Grande. At least, Juanito was cruising at that set level, though the girl's copter was weaving and dipping as though she were unable to stick tightly.

Juanito set the autotrack to gain, pace and hold and stepped to the cab lock. He palmed it open and caught a blast of wind and slipstream that tossed his dark hair about his eyes. He pulled the flybelt's bonnet over his back and snapped it down around his forehead, and gripped the plastic molding at the edges of the lock.

The two copters drew closer, and once Juanito grabbed frantically for the inner wall as the ship dipped to falcon down on the leading copter. As the ship steadied, Juanito moved once more into the icy blast of the open lock. He could see the top of her auburn hair as the ship zeroed in, and then the copter was directly over the other . . . then slightly to the left of it, perhaps ten feet above.

Juanito leaped out and away and at the same time depressed the activator stud on the flybelt and propulsor unit. The jets caught and he felt himself coasting. By lifting his elbows and dropping them, he was able to maneu-

ver the unit, and he dropped steadily to the dark black ship below.

Sonorad in the girl's ship picked him up when he was free of the overhead copter's image, and she tried to pull away. She applied her jets incorrectly and the copter started to drop. But Juanito was in under the rotors and astride the cab by then. He scrabbled for purchase and caught his balance only with the use of the still-firing propulsor unit. Then he wire-walked forward, till he was over the copter's cab lock.

It was double bolted from within, of course.

The wind whipped at him, and the slipstream, plus the added impetus of his flybelt threatened to rip him from the sleek surface of the copter. Only his grip on the cowl-ing edge between the cab and fuselage kept him anchored.

He reached with one hand to his pouch, and brought out the burn disc. Then, gripping it in his teeth, he crawled across the cab top till he was behind the girl, and over her head. He flattened himself to the plastoid, gripping as best he could, and plonked the disc against the plastoid itself. He set it for widest burn, and watched as the hole spread out to a distance of three feet in circumference, with only thin struts of material left to hold the disc in place.

When the hole was burned—just as the girl looked up and saw him lying face down, looking in at her—he jabbed the disc off. He scooped it into his pouch, and standing erect, jumped at the three thin struts still blocking the hole.

They gave under his weight and he came crashing down into the cab of the copter.

Then he snapped off his flybelt.

"That wasn't smart," he said to her.

Her face was a mask of despair.

"We're late," he said brusquely. "We'd better get moving. Get away from the console."

She rose slowly, wearily, and he sat down on the cot behind the control chair to remove the propulsor unit from its bulky place on his back. When he had shrugged out of it he took the control seat and cut in the jets properly. The copter above them continued to hang on, and

Juanito suddenly thought he had a way of confusing the autotracking devices AmericaState had obviously put on him, so they would know where he was at any moment in his search for Ciudad Rosario.

They could not know there were two copters here now, for wherever the equipment was based, it was not that accurate for two shapes flying so close together. When they got down lower inside the canyon, the walls narrowed, and Juanito picked a crevice through which one ship might barely pass—but through which two was an impossibility.

He angled the ship through carefully, applying speed only at the last instant so the other copter's autotrack could not save it. The other ship crashed against the left wall of the opening, and exploded out into the canyon.

That was for the benefit of AmericaState SecuritySeek.

He quickly set the copter down on a ledge three hundred feet down the crevice, and turned off the motors. Now there was *no* image on the autotracking devices AmericaState had unquestionably trained on him. The canyon walls absorbed the stray inevitable images his copter cast, and the explosion would lead the techs on the autotracking devices to believe that Juanito Montoya had cracked up in the canyon of the Rio Grande.

While they waited, Juanito talked to the girl:

"No!"

"Well, then, if you want that to happen to you, try to lose me or cross me or get me angry, just get me angry, and you'll find I'm not fooling; I want to find my father, girl, and I won't stop till I do. What's your name . . ."

He waited, and she looked up at him with surliness in her eyes. She was now clothed in a mechanic's zip-jumpup they had found in a locker backship. She sat now, with hands folded in her lap, and her face quite drawn with exhaustion and fear.

She did not answer.

"I've tried to tell you you have nothing to fear from me," Juanito spoke softly, cajolingly, "but I'm desperate to find my father, and I'll let *nothing* stand in my way." Three months of applied torture in Tedus Nur's N. Chi Chambers had not broken her, yet fifteen minutes with the assassin had convinced her he could make a rock

Speak, should he desire to do so. She feared him and mistrusted him—it was in her eyes, her expressions—and only his torture could make her speak.

Soon after she refused, though she cried and drew ragged breaths . . . she talked.

"My name is Elena Dympna. I was with Don Eskalyo for fifteen years, since my father died. My father worked for Don Eskalyo, too. I was—uh—separated from a caravan that left Ciudad Rosario. I—"

She went on, and told trivialities that did not interest Juanito, but when she came to the part of locating the petty monarchy, she cut off quickly. But Juanito did not press it; she would take him there.

He "persuaded" her to give him starting directions, and three hours after the explosion of the first copter, they took off again.

They passed over the Isthmus of Panama two hours later.

They had flown out over the Gulf of Panama, and headed straightaway toward the western bulge of the continent, the autotrack's primary coordinates Latitude 5°S , Longitude $80^{\circ} 4$ minutes W. They passed over Paita four hours later on jet and rotor drive.

That night the Tropic of Capricorn was left behind, and still they were heading south, toward Santa Clara Island, the great dark expanse of the Pacific chopping and heaving far below.

They did not cross land again.

When they were past the last jutting land area, where Aruacc lay sleeping in the early afternoon sun, Juanito half-suspected the truth. Ciudad Roarsio was not on land. An island perhaps, or—

The latter thought was fantastic. He put it from his mind.

But it came back in strength when they turned west on the forty-first meridian. Latitude $41^{\circ} 8' 7''$ South and Longitude 85° West was empty ocean, the Pacific cold and deep.

"Here," she said and closed her eyes.

Juanito did not doubt her. She could not have been lying so effectively. "Elena, where is my father?"

Her eyes grew defiant, and Juanito could see in them a resignation to death; she was sure he would kill her when she spoke. But her chin came up, and through the filth on her face she smiled softly—perhaps the first smile in more than three months.

"Where is your father?" the smile deepened, and there was a subtle mocking twist to it. "Sixteen hundred fathoms below."

Then it struck Juanito Montoya fully, why America-State had been unable to locate the petty monarchy of Ciudad Rosario. A country under the sea. In the deep, black waters of the Pacific the biggest threat to America-State rule lay quietly hidden, even as the School lay hidden in the mountains.

"How do we get there?" Juanito asked.

"You really want to find him, don't you?" she asked. "Even though he'll probably have you killed at once."

"Why should he do that?"

"You're an assassin. Anyone can see that from your dress, your—" Her words faltered as she thought of his ways of inducing speech, "—actions, the way you talk. If I don't trust you, why should Eskalyo?"

"He will trust me. He will know me."

She snorted ruefully.

"I am his son."

"He has no son. I know."

Juanito, for the first time since he had entered the School, felt complete and absolute anger washing him. His sensitive mouth drew up in a snarl, and he said, "What do you know? Do you know what it is to know how to kill, and nothing more? Do you know what life can be like on the Pampas with no food, and little shelter, and the cold coming down? You know!" His half-laugh was all bitterness and fury. "Can you know what it is to live like a hunted thing, and when you are found, what it is like to be taught how to murder men in the neatest, most rapid manner?"

"I—"

He cut her off. "You know! You know nothing, girl. But I tell you this, and you know enough now not to doubt me. I *will* find my father. And if I don't—" He

drew a spare vibro-blade from his pouch, and tested the edge with a finger. It sang darkly in his hand.

"But I *will* find him. Now . . . how do I get to Ciudad Rosario . . . is there a land entrance?"

She smiled softly. Determined to keep whatever secret she might have. "Try the island of Juan Fernandez . . . *mas a tierra.*"

"I didn't ask where I might try, I asked if there was a land entrance there. Is that the place?"

"No."

"Is there a place?"

"No."

"How do I get down to it?"

She laughed at him then.

And she would not stop laughing, even when he laid hands on her. The laugh was not hysterical, nor was it even taunting; it was merely satisfied. Completely, wonderfully satisfactorily satisfied.

He tried to get her to stop. The School way. After a while she did. Then he asked her again.

"How do I get down there?"

"Why, you dive, assassin, that's the only way."

And she laughed again, renewed humor in what she had said. Sixteen hundred fathoms. No chance. Pressure. The creatures that lived in that deep. The darkness. The water and the suffocation. Then he felt everything slipping away; his mind groped futilely for the School solution.

There was none.

Day had come and gone. The evening had set in, and Juanito had fed both himself and Elena from the meager copter stores in the tiny kitchenette backship. But still no solution came to him. There was something wrong here. It was apparent he was now fighting a different enemy. He had escaped AmericaState—at least temporarily—and though he still wondered what weapon they would employ to force him to assassinate his own father, he knew he had a new adversary,

Eskalyo. Don Eskalyo, and the men of Ciudad Rosario. For until they knew who he was, and were willing to

accept him, they would try to destroy him. If they found out about him. If they knew he wanted in.

Juanito had a feeling Elena Dymyna knew something he did not. Something important. Something like Eskalyo's knowing they were there, and that Juanito was coming down. For he had already decided. If diving was the only way to get down, then dive he would.

Again, he had a feeling. The feeling he would not have to attempt a sixteen hundred fathom dive. They would find *him*. That was what he knew.

So he tied her in the locker backship, and took the copter down to fifteen feet above the chopping aqua surface of the Pacific. It was dark down there. Dark and hidden.

He turned his skintite's heat control higher than even it had been in Alaska. Then he unpalmed the lock, and threw down the ladder. It plopped onto the water with a smacking sound, and floated there, rising and falling in rhythm to the beat of the waves.

Then he rose high on his toes, thrust forward with all the power of his legs, and dove cleanly for the ocean.

He struck true and slid down without effort or sensation of having hit water. In a few moments the water had closed over him so completely that the darkness of blindness enveloped him.

It was colder than he had imagined. Colder than the grave, and he hoped that if Eskalyo patrolled these waters—as Elena's attitude led him to suspect—the patrol would find him quickly. He went down.

The layers of darkness came up to meet him, and, like veils of thinness in the mist, parted only to be replaced by more and thicker veils.

His breath was short now. He reversed his kick, and shot toward the surface. The skintite was keeping the worst of the cold from him, but he had no gloves and the skintite's cowl could only keep off so much chill from his head and face. He broke surface like a dolphin, splashed twice to allow his lungs time for filling, and surface dove under.

He continued diving for three hours, then climbed the ladder to rest.

It was a short rest, and though when he lay down on

the contour couch his eyes closed instantly, the time sense in his mind brought him to full and sharp wakefulness a mere hour and twenty minutes later.

He took the deep dive again.

It was approaching evening. What little warmth the air had held now was gone when he surfaced. However, the water was a few degrees warmer. The darkness was now not only below, but above, and when he surfaced his mind found no release from the nightmare world beneath the waves; he was forced to live in it, both with air and without. Once, he thought he had already broken the surface, and let his breath out. The water rushed into his lungs, and he came to the top choking, gasping, visions of tarantulas in his eyes.

Then, after the second three-hour diving period, and the short rest, his search came to an end. He had not found Don Eskalyo.

But Eskalyo found him.

They came up from below, a blue aura surrounding them. Three of them. Muscled even through the plasteel-cloth suits to such an extent that Juanito could see the ripple and surge of their bodies clearly. They wore flippers on their feet and soft bubblelike helmets covered their heads. Powerpaks were strapped to their backs, and each one carried a spear gun of a design Juanito had never encountered in the Armaments Classes at the School. He could see their faces through the bubbles, for the blue glow that surrounded them cast light out into the surrounding darkness. Their hands were covered by insulated gloves with spike tips at the finger end. The breather apparatus, attached to the powerpak, sent out streamers of bubbles behind them as they shot up from under Juanito's feet. They came on like sharks, and circled him warily.

This was their element.

From moment to moment their heads inclined at different angles, their feet turned in and out, their legs were crossed and opened and moved rhythmically, their spike-tipped hands waved almost in ballet femininity. They were speaking to one another; signaling to each

other; planning underwater strategy; their movements were their semaphore.

And they came around and around, circling like the sharks they so resembled in their black suits.

Juanito's lungs cried for air.

With a reverse scissor, Juanito flailed backward out of their decreasing circle, and he sent himself up toward the surface. Their element? It was, and he had no choice but to get them into *his* area, if he expected to see Eskalyo, and not be drowned out here.

He struggled toward the surface, and even as he saw the plastoid of the ladder floating above him, lying on the watertop, a shzzzzz sounded behind him and one of the spears sheared past, trailing its stream of bubbles and the thin wire cord that would be rewound to reel in the missile.

He arched forward, kicking frantically, and made the surface an instant before the three patrolling guards shot up around him. In an instant he was up the ladder, and scrambling for the cab of the copter.

They floated below him, blue fog in the darkness, for a handful of seconds, then there were three distinct splashes, and they were gone, back to wherever they had come from.

Juanito pulled himself over the sill of the lock, and went to the small stack of towels he had prepared for his returns from diving; they were not precisely towels, nor even roughly so. They were wiper clothettes, used to sop extra lubricant from the rotor and jet tubes. But they were thick, and served the purpose more than well enough.

He dried himself carefully, set the skintite's dryer to quick dry, and pulled the cowl from his head. Then he sat down to think.

He heard her kicking in the locker, and remembered it had been a good nine hours since she had eaten. It didn't matter; he made no move to release her.

Thoughts tumbled all about Juanito Montoya. There were several things he knew now:

First, Eskalyo was somewhere below, in a city beneath the ocean. But sixteen hundred fathoms was not three hundred fathoms, and if men had come up from down

there, on patrol, they must have had some way of equalizing the pressure.

Second, if such a system of equalizers existed, as they must, he could not logically expect to use that system without being discovered.

Third, if they knew he was here—sonorad more than likely—and had sent men up to find out who it was diving so suspiciously above their city, they must be concerned about being discovered.

Fourth, if that were the case, then they would have more adequate defenses set up below. He could not expect to get through those defenses alive.

There was a fifth, but the fifth was a blank.

The solution lay in joining, not fighting. He had to get one of those suit-and-bubble affairs, and go with a patrol, back to the deeps. He had to capture a deepsman.

They remained in the water, and could disappear at a moment's notice, merely by submerging. Then too, they had the spear guns.

Yet . . .

He had School training. What would the Subterfuge instructor have recommended? Juanito pondered long, and to no avail. His eyes lit on the hump of the plastoid ladder, hanging over the edge of the lock.

A picture formed in his mind. He congratulated himself; it was a complete picture, a brilliant picture, it solved the problem neatly. In a short time, he knew he would be before his father.

If nothing went wrong.

When the next patrol came up, six hours later, they hung close under the surface and watched the bobbing movement of the ladder above them. Finally, one of them swam off to the north, and surfaced. He was behind the copter, but he could see the ladder hanging down clearly.

The man they had come after was hanging from the ladder.

He was upside-down, his foot tangled in the cording of the ladder, held rigidly in place while one leg flopped over free, and his arms hung down the length of the ladder, almost to the water line. He was three-quarters of

the way down the ladder, and strangely, he looked . . . dead.

The deepsman sank beneath the waves and swam quickly to his companions.

A flick of his hand: *he seems to be dead.*

An inclination of the head: *what are you talking about?*

A swirling of arm about body: *he's hanging upside-down from the ladder, and there's a knife wound in his throat. I could see it from where I was.*

Much movement. *Let's see.*

They broke to the top, and looked above them. The man from the copter was certainly dead. He was hanging there, blood stained down his throat, making the front of his dark skintite even darker. His arms hung loose, and his entire body swayed with the random movement of the ladder. His leg hung off the side, flopped back, and the tangled leg had been caught only by chance. That was apparent from the look of the entanglement. Someone had slashed the man's throat.

"I'm going up," the first deepsman, the one who had first gone up to observe, said. Now that they were free of the water, they spoke aloud. The other two nodded. "Cover me," he said sharply.

They wagged their spear guns at him.

He slung his own spear gun over his shoulder and grabbed for a rung of the ladder. He started to climb hand over hand, warily watching the copter for other occupants. The man on the ladder was not quite dead, he could see that from here. But not long before dead, for the blood still flowed . . . yet slowly . . . pulsing as though he were unconscious.

The deepsman was halfway up the ladder then, and staring beyond the man on the ladder. No danger there, but he might have friends. His two partners below, watched carefully, speaking to each other softly. They both knew their spear guns were not accurate in air.

The deepsman was starting to climb past the dying man up there, ready to search the copter . . .

The man was not dead!

As the deepsman climbed over him, he arched his back

rigidly, came up, grabbed the ladder below the deepsman's feet with one hand, and from the palm of the other hand—concealed till now—a vibro-blade slid into view. The man on the ladder drove the blade into the spine of the deepsman, and the bubble-headed man screamed shrilly, collapsing, and nearly tumbling free of the ladder.

As the two other patrollers watched, unable to fire for a second, so shocked by the suddenness of what had transpired, the man on the ladder rose full length, and grabbed the now dead deepsman as he fell past. The copter shivered as the weight thumped across the other man's arm, and then they were steadied.

The two deepsmen below yelled their vengeance, and fired almost simultaneously. The bolts *shusssssed* past the climbing man as he hauled his burden into the copter.

Juanito dumped the body into the lock, and the copter flailed away into the sky . . . while the deepsmen watched. They pressed the reel-in studs on their weapons, and the bolts came slewing through the water, back to lock position in the muzzles of the spear guns.

The deepsmen looked at each other for a long moment, and one of them said, in thick Spanish, "He was a good fellow."

The other did not reply.

They both submerged.

The Pacific was cold and dark and actively still.

While above, things were happening.

The copter swirled down from the low-scudding clouds and dropped toward the water. Juanito Montoya was now clad in a shark-black suit, breather apparatus, a propellant unit and head bubble. His spear gun was loaded and cocked. He waited.

As the copter settled, the sun's rays began to cross with great trepidation the broken, pyramided surface of the ocean. Soft sounds came from the water, were met by the shrill and harsh sounds of the ship's rotors, jets, creakings, and were frightened into background persistence.

The ship settled to within ten feet of the Pacific, and a black shape exploded from the lock. The shape arched

out over the deep azure sea, and then struck hard, in an instant—gone.

Juanito Montoya dove, and dove. There was no sense to it, he could see that now: there was a darkness in his eyes and forcing all matter in his brain to the sides, hiding, crouching from the darkness that had unbidden come timidly at first then with the bravado of the conqueror to live in his skull. Why Eskalyo? To what end? Freedom? He did not believe in it for the people of AmericaState any more than the Seekers or the Probesmen or any of the others did; it was a hard world godammit, and there was no quarter to even take or get, because it just did not exist!

So strike.

Strike up and slash deep!

So why seek out Eskalyo?

No reason. But he was diving. He was going. The drive was there and he would do it. The Pampas had been so sweet, so fine, so quiet sometimes. Diving!

What would he say? Could he? Inside the bubble, he was crying. Stop it! God damn your stinking tears, *stop!* Cry . . .

A school of some vague fish hurled past in the darkness just beyond his blue glow. In the copter, a naked man lay on the deck, hardly any blood at all dried on him. There had been an even, straight slit cut in the tight diving suit, below the ribs, just at the right side of the spinal column. Juanito had mended it carefully.

It was cold down there and dark.

That was the worst.

Not the great lumbering something that bore over him, causing him to fight the current as it swam by, leaving him with a nameless dread of that great thing . . . not that . . . not the sharp-toothed things that lived and fasted then feasted then whirled back to the deeps for darker thoughts . . . not that . . . and not even the schools and groups and herds and crowds and couples that went by him, going up, coming down, detouring past as his blue lantern winked down and down and down toward Ciudad Rosario.

There was a surging oneness to it all now. A light-headed allness and a—what?—a newness that told noth-

ing, yet spoke the secrets of the music of the bottomless eternity that was all his, now his, his alone, in his heart so sweet for the first time in his life *I'm coming father!* of him and all of it.

Oh, stop it!

There was one world for him. A world of death at the helm, and life and goodness and hatred and dependence and violence as its crew members, with hope its supercargo, Dame Hope, all in white and sparkling with the colors of the universe so sweet like the taste of guava jelly and tiny blades of clear mint in the mouth when it was fresh in the day. All that Dame Hope, you offer, and I spit on your beautiful face so the froth runs down your chin, because you don't know can't know could never ever not *ever* know that you are riding death's ship, like the Flying Dutchman, doomed forever so God doesn't even pity you, doomed to ride that ship till it turns to dust motes and goes away.

So that—

He saw the first of the pressurizing units.

It was a bubble, all steel, and impregnable.

He knew he could not get in. They would have guards, they would have defenses. He had to go on down. He turned on his back and paddled away, then down again. The pressure might crush him, but he was banking they had set up the system not only to handle the equalizing problem, but to do it within the limits of the men's comfort. In an emergency, he might be able to make the next one down. This was an emergency.

He stopped thinking, for thinking could only make it worse. He had killed too often, thought too many bad things. He did not want to cry again.

It would be all right soon, when the *** and the sharp little " " " of his thoughts settled to the floor of his mind, resting as the whales rested in the colorless ooze of the ocean bottom. He dove, and thought no more. It was a long time.

It was a bloody descent. The guards were not so alert in the lower pressurizing spheres. They had been lulled

by the security of a sphere above them, reasoning that a man could not dive as deep as the next spheres, and so *must* stop at the sphere above. They were wrong.

Down he went, and long stretched into the unending gloom of the deep. The blue aura flickered and shone around him, not so much as a headlight in the darkness, but as a deterrent to those roamers of the ocean who ate what swam.

A bloody descent, for three men died in that second sphere, and three in the third sphere, and two in the fourth. Nine men of Eskalyo had already died, so Juanito could find his father.

Was it worth it? He didn't know, but the drive was in him and he had to go down and down and down to see Eskalyo. And he knew how to kill; he had been taught well at the School. It was all he knew, so he did it without thought or compunction. The remorse was a strange, gnarled thing, altered in shape, and was not remorse by the time he felt it. But in its way and its form, it was there.

Finally, when he thought surely he could go no deeper, it rose out of the ooze and slime of the bottom, surrounded by reefs of coral and miles-high trees of sea growth. It was a pink glow at first. A halo coruscating in the depths, thrust up between the jaws of a subsea canyon. Thrust up and pulsing, like some cosmic lightning. As he swam down, stroking strongly now that the goal was almost in sight, the city rose up out of the canyon. It was a dome, sunk down on a plateau inside the subsea canyon. It was perhaps twenty-five miles in circumference, and the dome rose up a good five miles in its arch. It was huge and impressive, and totally pink with a light all its own. He could see why they had named it what they had named it.

Ciudad Rosario.

The patrol shot up to meet him. Ten of them. They had their spear guns drawn, and there would be no chance to talk them out of what they had in mind. Juanito struggled backward and lodged himself in between two shafts of coral, sighting aim on the leader of the oncoming group. The muzzle of his own spear gun was thrust through a break in the coral, and as the deeps-

man's face grew clear inside the bubble helmet, Juanito depressed the firing stud. A muffled report and the bolt *shussssshed* away at lightning speed, trailing bubbles and its cord.

The spear took the man high in the chest and bowled him backward, carrying him over and feet over and over, till finally he hung there, limp in the water, his blood spreading out in a dark cloud around him. Juanito stabbed at the rewind stud and the mechanism on the spear tip exploded the bolt free of the dead flesh. The bolt returned in a twinkling, and though the nine remaining members of the patrol team had scattered, Juanito set the spear back to full power and waited.

They dropped down from atop. He had somehow forgotten for an instant that this was not free air, but the carnal ocean, and they came down from above, and grabbed him.

He struggled with them, but they were in their element, and it was not hard for their rippling muscles to command his. He wrenched free suddenly and tried to break out from between the coral shafts.

Then one of the deepsmen raised a thin tube of metal, aimed it and a bolt of deep azure substance struck Juanito Montoya. The assassin felt the power of it wash him and his body was limp as seaweed. The hurt was growing though, and then—abruptly—it was gone . . .

Everything was gone . . .

He slid off into a dark, darker than the darkness of the sea.

He was walking on a spongy road that sucked and plopped and made vile noises with its million mouths. It was a grey road, and it wound downward toward a bog that sucked and plopped and made even more vile noises with its million mouths. His feet were caught in the stuff, and he could walk only with an extreme effort. His hands were free, and he wielded a long knife of heroic proportions that was dripping rainbow-shaded blood. His mouth was covered with tape. All around him were screams.

He—
—awoke!
!

"Who are you?" The man before him was tall, with a tight, urgent competence to his body, though it was apparent the man was past the prime of life. At least sixty, perhaps older, with a fine downy white goatee that came from his chin. His eyes were dark black and though silver dodged through his hair, still the black mat of it was high enough to be combed without white streaks. His nose was aquiline and had been broken once, and set poorly. His hands were delicate yet reminded Juanito of Thirteen, from his class in the School; Thirteen, whose hands were strangler's hands. These hands were veined, but not quite killing hands. They were—what?—*doing* hands perhaps. Yes, that was it; they were hands that accomplished.

"My son." The man spoke the words so softly, so simply, they told Juanito many things. This was his father, this was Don Eskalyo. Somehow, his father had found out who he was.

"How . . ."

"Probing," Eskalyo admitted, and shook his head in an indefinite little movement. "We learned it all. All of it."

"I've come a long way, Father." There was no weariness now, and neither—surprisingly to Juanito—was there a lack of emotion, affection. He felt warmth for this man. For the first time in his life, with the exception of Jock—Thirteen—he felt a kinship, a nearness to someone. Juanito Montoya had come home.

"They sent me out to kill you," Juanito said, unnecessarily.

Eskalyo's face held a strange expression. Not fear. Not hatred. Not determination. More, a soft-edged resignedness. What was to be, was to be. It was not a good expression.

"Yes, I know all that. They know they cannot defeat me. They know we have something on our side that means their end . . ."

Juanito nodded. "I know what it is, I found it also. I saw what AmericaState has become. A tyranny. I saw it in New Chicago, and in Alaska, and—"

—and what they have made of you. Yes, all of that, my son.” Eskalyo drew a deep breath.

He went on. “The AmericaState is seething; it won’t be too long now, when everything will explode like the volcanos around us, here at the bottom of the sea. We know that, and *they* know it, and they fear me. I have contacted the petty monarchies all across the continent, and they are ready, ready to strike when the day is right.”

Juanito listened, thrilled for the first time in his life. He had run and hidden and killed, and now he was part of a cause, something to work for and hope for and pray for.

“You came with Elena,” Eskalyo said in clipped accents.

Juanito nodded. “She is locked in a locker in the cop-ter.”

“She is your half-sister,” Eskalyo said. Then, when the shock had worn away slightly, and Juanito thought of how he had treated her, how he had forced her to lead him here—for it was the only way he knew to deal with people—he could not speak.

“I want to join you, Father,” Juanito hurriedly said, when the mist in his mind had cleared. “I wish to fight with you. I’ve been trained. I can fight and I can kill. I can—”

Juanito stopped abruptly. Eskalyo was shaking his head. “No, Juanito, you cannot join me.”

“But—but—why?”

“A culture produces certain kinds of men. These men are products and it is not their fault they have been ruined and altered and corrupted. But they are part of that culture, and any culture that takes them in runs the risk of the original sin all over again.”

“I don’t . . . know what—what you mean . . .” Juanito stammered.

Eskalyo did not have a chance to continue.

The weapon AmericaState was prepared to use, so the assassin would kill his father, came into being. How it had been planted, how it had been concealed in Juanito’s brain so that even he did not know it was there, no one would ever know. But the tiny beamed transceptor in his

skull, snugged down in the brain tissue, placed there by the Prober when he had first discovered Juanito was Eskalyo's son, and beamed to Don Eskalyo's thought patterns, as constructed from early retinal and thought patterns of Juanito—blazed.

The deadly beams slashed from Juanito's eyes. Eskalyo had but a split-second to duck. Unbidden, Juanito's eyes followed his father, and the bright orange beams of destruction continued to stream forth, and Eskalyo dodged, ducked, flopped and rolled across the floor.

Juanito screamed, for the pain was terrible. He screamed because this was his life, being taken from him. He screamed because now that he had found his father he did not want to lose him! "No! No no no, stop!" he screamed at himself, but could do nothing. His eyes were drawn to his father, and he could not stop the beams of force from firing. He tore at his face, but the beams continued, and his eyes would not close, then—

Three deepsmen stepped out from behind curtains, their spear guns leveled, and they aimed at Juanito. "Wait, stop!" Eskalyo yelled, all the while dodging and struggling to keep out of the line of the beams.

He could not bring himself to kill his son.

"Kill me, kill me!" Juanito shrieked, and made to grab a spear gun from one deepsman, even as his eyes were averted, still turned on his father.

They would not fire for their Don had not given his word. Juanito struggled, like a man hag-ridden, and he clutched at his pouch, and drew forth the vibro-blade, bringing it up to—

He was blind. He was dying, but worse, he was blind. Perhaps if he had been able to see, it might not have been so bad. He lay dying on the floor, blinded by his own hand, the soggy, pulped remain of half his face an aching pulse.

He was dying, and there was nothing to say. He had come a long way, and he knew it was this way all along. He was bound to death.

He had been doomed from the outset. Like a piece of wood, caught at the edge of the beach; it might roll with the waves for a long time, till it was thrust up onto the sands, where it would rot, still forever. Or, it might roll back into the ocean, and be lost in the waves. Either way, it was lost, even as he was lost.

He had nothing to say. That was the way of the assassin. He held tightly to his father's hand, and it said *I'm home, Father, now I'm home*. He did not speak, but Don Eskalyo heard the silent words whispering on the air.

Soon, he died. Quietly. Not at all the way he had lived, so young to die, so full of violence. Quietly he died.

And Eskalyo was silently glad it had happened this way, terrible way it had happened. Glad, for he knew he was saved by the very AmericaState that had tried to destroy him. He had been saved by their instrument, his son. A son he would have had to kill himself—for that was what he was about to tell Juanito before the weapon exploded into life.

He was going to tell him that no matter if a man is innocent or guilty, if he is a product of an evil system, he is doomed.

He would have had to tell him that no matter how hard Juanito tried, the new world had no place for him and his violence. It had no place for a man who knew nothing but death. Eskalyo would have had to deal the death blow himself, and he had been saved from it.

The world would be clean some day soon. It would be free of all AmericaState had brought about—even free of men like Juanito Montoya.

The means was *not* worth the end. The manner in which Juanito Montoya had gotten to Ciudad Rosario, the way in which he had treated Elena, they were all typical of the man, and no change could be brought about that would be final and complete. So, an outcast in the world that had made him, Juanito would have been condemned by his father's hand. To protect the world Juanito wanted to see.

It had had to be that way.

Now it was finished. It was silence and depth.

Later, they took him out far out into the Pampas, and buried him where the birds would not fly over him, and

DOOMSMAN

the wind would not disturb him, and he could find the one peace left to a man who knew only the way of the assassin.

Sleep.

THE THIEF OF THOTH

by Lin Carter

I

HAUTLEY QUICKSILVER, who was among the most celebrated and certainly the most distinguished of all the Licensed Legal Criminals and Confidential Agents in the Near Stars, lived with all the luxurious refinements and civilized comforts available to those who have achieved the ultimate peak of their profession.

He had a castle of organic pink quartz on the planetoid Carvel in that asteroid belt known as The Chain of Astarte. It had been designed to his specifications by none other than Smingoth Whibberley, the most noted, controversial, and widely imitated architectural philosopher of the 36th century A.C. There Hautley lived alone with his quaint hobbies, his curious pets, and his truly extraordinary collection of hand weapons culled from 1,376 different planetary cultures. No less than sixteen hundred varieties of weapon were represented in his arsenal—among them devices designed to stab, slice, puncture, detonate, envenom, stun, paralyze, render immobile, implode, decapitate, unlimb, eviscerate or otherwise render hors de combat an unwary opponent. With each of these, Quicksilver had made certain he acquired a thorough professional competency upon which depended (and not infrequently) the adroit performance of his occupational duties, if not indeed continuance of life itself.

Quicksilver's castle clung to a sheer crag of dark green coral which rose from a sea of heavy opal smoke. This vaporous ocean entirely mantled the surface of the planetoid and the pinkly alabastrine hue of his castle formed a delicate aesthetic contrast against the melting and changing hues of the

heavy vapor, the rough emeraldine coral, and the tea-rose sky, with the sullen disc of Astarte a smouldering ruby on the dim horizon.

This horizon looked to be far more distant than it actually was. Carvel was a terraformed planetoid with a diameter of only forty-nine kilometers. A permanent and artificial magnetic field, generated by certain ingenious devices situated at the core of the worldlet, continuously distorted the gaseous molecules of which the atmosphere was composed, lending the optical effect of a stupendous lens. This created the illusion of vast distances, pleasing to the eye.

The coral peak to which clung the pink quartz buildings was but one among a scattered forest of similar monoliths which rose from the opal sea at irregular intervals over the entire surface of Carvel. Carvel itself was one of several thousand similar worldlets that encircled the otherwise planetless star—a dying red Supergiant with an M1 spectrum, comparable to Antares but somewhat less in magnitude. This chain of tiny planetoids, in which Carvel was but a minor gem, encircled the russet star like a necklace of jewels around the throat of some dusky queen; and among the whirling myriads, Carvel was lost and hidden.

The very nature of Hautley's profession was such that extreme privacy was eminently desirable. And he had many enemies. His versicle upon this topic was pointedly clear:

*Hardest of all: to find
One needle in a mountain of its kind.*

2

PROFESSIONALLY SPEAKING, of course, Quicksilver's source of remuneration would drastically suffer if his dwelling were completely impossible to locate. No clients beat a pathway to

one's portal, if that portal's whereabouts are forever unknowable.

Hence, Hautley was "at home" to qualified visitors on alternate Zandays. Potential clients might phone him—on a very private line—whose continually fluctuating wave-lengths were published every second Oomday in the personal columns of the New Andelsprutz (Alpha Centauri IV) *Times-Clarion*—and, if their business sounded sufficiently promising and their credit rating met his rather elevated standards, Quicksilver would switch on the radiobeacon which guided his clientele blindly through the planetary jungle of spinning rocks whose orbits he alone knew, and to which he always referred as the "moat" of Quicksilver Castle.

This particular Zanday, his visitor was a bland, soft-spoken little mouse of a man with vapid, characterless features, pale eyes of contrasting colors, thin salmon hair, and drooping eyelids tattooed with the green caste-mark that denoted a IV-Class Scholar of the Validian Psychodiscipline.

In a muted, shallow voice (only slightly blurred on the vowels, either from nervousness or tension), this insipid would-be client introduced himself as "the Learned Pawel Spiro, Resident Locutioner in Thothic Archeology at the Boghazy-the-Great Memorial Museum in Tavory, on Alcazar III." Spiro spoke rapidly, softly, in an ingratiating and self-deprecating manner, not once lifting his eyes to Quicksilver after a first keen all-encompassing appraisal.

". . . The, ah, Museum is interested in retaining your, ah, services, Ser Hautley," Spiro murmured in his fawning slightly hesitant voice, "on, ah, a mission of extreme, ah, delicacy."

"Which is?" Quicksilver prompted, the resonant timbre of his masculine baritone in striking contrast to the little man's fuzzy articulation.

". . . To, ah, appropriate a certain article of not inconsiderable, ah, historic and scientific interest, and, ah, of monetary value. . . ."

"This article is . . . ?" Hautley inquired, patiently.

The Learned Pawel Spiro twisted his soft, white, slightly moist hands together, in a further symptom of tension or nervousness, or both. He cleared his throat with a phlegmy, glottal sound.

". . . An archaic jeweled headpiece which is a relic of the extinct, primordial Cavern Kings of the planet Thoth, ah,

that is, Thoin IV in the, ah, the Derghiz Cluster . . . We, er, the Museum, that is, understand, Ser Hautley, that your, ah, fee for professional services rendered is rather, er, rather superlative . . .”

“I fear so,” Quicksilver drawled lazily. “You will, however, find my professional competency equally superlative.”

A small pallid smile flitted over Spiro’s loose lips, flitted, and was gone in an eye-blink.

“. . . So we have been given to understand, Ser Hautley. You will, ah, appreciate that we are unaccustomed to such dealings, and consulted the Central Orion Better Business Bureau and the Alphard Chamber of Commerce from which planet, I believe, your, ah, firm derives its charter . . .”

“Of course.”

“Our treasury is equal to meeting your fee . . . ah, however, for any expenses above and beyond, ah, reasonable limits, the Department whose spokesman I am, must request an itemized summary of expenditures . . . and we would like delivery of the relic within, ah, ninety days of the date of the contract . . . ?”

Hautley smiled slightly.

“The contract has not yet been thumbprinted,” Hautley gently reminded his nervous client. And he thought to himself: *There is something about this little man that . . .*

3

QUICKSILVER removed a slim green tube from the bloodwood case on the desk before him, set it between his lips, and inhaled thoughtfully until the autoigniter tip flared. A pungently stimulating vapor permeated the tower chamber wherein they sat. He smoked his aromatique meditatively in silence for a few moments, watching the slight tense movements of Pawel Spiro’s hands with lazy impassive face and

mirror-bright eyes whose detailed scrutiny was scalpel-sharp.

This Quicksilver, foremost Licensed Legal Criminal and Confidential Agent in half a galaxy, was a lean, lithe, agile young man of only seventy-six, patently of homonid stock, although, perchance, admixed with a touch of anthrofelinesque blood inherited from a paternal great-grandmother.

From throat to wrist and heel he was clothed in sprayed satin of seven subtly differing shades of black. His face was dyed mahogany, the features hard, ascetic, with prominent cheekbones, feline jaw, and a broad and high forehead which plainly denoted an astonishing calibre of intellectual capacity. His hair, falling in meticulous antique locks over his brow, was colored pewter-grey due to a cosmetic endocrine adjustment currently in mode. A characteristically whimsical light flashed in his oblique mirror eyes (from which affectation, as well as his alert and mercurial temperament, he derived his suragnomen).

"This headpiece"—he spoke abruptly, shattering the silence—"is popularly called The Crown of Stars is it not? And I believe it is venerated and guarded by a fanatic cult who have sworn death to the interloper and crown-lifter—death according to indescribably bizarre and barbaric torments—am I not correct, Learned Spiro?"

Flustered, Pawel Spiro stammered inarticulately for a moment, then cleared his throat with another of those annoying, phlegmy little coughs Quicksilver found so distasteful.

"Er . . . ah . . . hem! I believe that is, ah, correct, Ser Hautley . . ." he admitted.

"Yes—?"

"It, er, the cult object is worshiped by the Neothothic Priesthood . . . fourteenth-generation descendants of the original settlers. They have, ah, evolved a form of ancestor worship in regard to the so-called Cavern Kings, a mysterious race which flourished, decayed and became extinct on Thoin IV some centuries before the first Survey Service ships arrived from Galactic Center, during, I believe, the semi-legendary reign of the Galactic Imperator Drongerghastus the Inimitable, the 'Opener of the Starways' . . ."

"What exactly were these Cavern Kings?" Hautley inquired.

"A race of, ah, highly intelligent beings evolved from the lizard, as we are from the simians. To be precise: from the order *Sauria*, family *Lacertidae*, genus *Lacerta*; a species

somewhat similar to *C. niloticus*, and resembling to some degree the common 'monitor' or the familiar 'gecko' . . . ah, extraordinary creatures of unusual cultural development, although of pre-Space and probably of pre-Electric technology. Their curious architectural monuments, a matter of tapering towers awry-tilted and of only quasi-Euclidean geometry, and peculiar in that the cities are subterranean . . ."

"Underground towers? An unique concept," Hautley said gravely. Caught up in that technical enthusiasm to which the Validian Scholar is ever susceptible, Pawel Spiro nodded several times, flushing pinkly with intellectual excitement.

"Decidedly unique, Ser Hautley! Ah . . . unfortunately, naught remains of their cultural artifacts save for these curiously subterranean urban structures (which clearly argue the racial heritage of the lizard!), and which remain to this day among the most notable archeological enigmas of the entire Cluster . . . and, of course, the . . . Crown of Stars."

Quicksilver extinguished his aromatique in the nearby vacuum trap, and regarded the client with a slight quizzical smile.

"Any relic so rare must be worth . . . a fortune?" he queried gently.

The Learned Pawel Spiro looked decidedly unhappy.

"Ah . . . yes, I believe so . . ."

The quizzical smile deepened, gaining an overtone of ironic mockery.

"It is—is it not, in point of fact—completely priceless—in fact, beyond price?"

Spiro's unhappy expression intensified into one of positive gloom.

"Well . . . yes!"

"In such a case, then," Quicksilver said smoothly, "my usual fees would be . . . doubled."

PAWEL SPIRO blinked, winced, coughed softly, fluttered his plump white hands, straightened the notched lapels of his conservative maroon oversuit, and said faintly:

"But, Ser Hautley, you will understand, ah, the cult object is prized more for its scientific value than the, er, merely monetary worth of . . ."

Hautley elevated an amused eyebrow mockingly.

"It is studded with rare jewels, is it not, Learned? Hence, I believe, the name—Crown of *Stars*?"

"Er . . . well, yes . . ."

"It is, is it not, a superb work of the goldsmith's art—open-scrolled goldwork, rather akin to the High Phriote style, and set with one hundred fifty-seven precious and semi-precious jewels, among which are the only known specimens of no less than thirteen otherwise completely mythical varieties of gemstones?" Hautley pressed.

Pawel Spiro wilted like day-old spaghetti.

". . . Yes."

"Then the double fee is invoked, as is customary when I deal in such rarities."

Spiro looked at him with a trace of keen suspicion in his watery, lackluster eyes.

"You seem . . . familiar . . . with the Crown, Ser Hautley."

The most celebrated Confidential Agent among the Near Stars laughed sardonically.

"But of course, Learned, in my craft as a licensed and legal thief, assassin, spy, murderer, pirate, I have a certain professional interest in outstanding items of rare jewelry!"

"Of course," Spiro said sadly.

"Then you agree to the fee?"

"Ah, yes, I believe I can justify it to my senior colleagues."

Quicksilver regarded him with a meditative eye. The fee, ordinarily large, thus doubled became quite exorbitant. There was something that did not quite ring true about this Pawel Spiro. What museum could afford to pay a doubled Quicksilverian fee?

He permitted another *aromatique* to ignite itself, and lazily lay back in his luxurious *pneumo-lounger* whose extensible components automatically compensated to his relaxed position. Through the vast crystalline panes, the dull light of sinking Astarte cast a sullen shaft of rubied luminance across the bloodwood desk. In the hard, straight chair directly opposite the desk, the little man fidgeted uncomfortably.

And coughed discreetly.

"You will, ah, accept our commission then, Ser Hautley?"

"There is one further item that somewhat intrigues me," Quicksilver drawled casually.

"What, ah item?"

"Why?"

Spiro blinked: "Why what . . . I do not understand . . ."

"Nor, to be honest, do I!" Quicksilver fixed him with a glittering eye. "Why do you want the Crown of Stars at such a cost? While due to the peculiar nature of my Charter, it is perfectly legal for me to appropriate a valuable object from its present owners—so long as I do so upon duly contracted commission—it is *illegal for you or the Museum to display or even possess stolen property.*"

5

SPIRO RELAXED; Quicksilver noted that for this argument, at least, the little scholar had come prepared.

"That we could hardly display a stolen artifact, ah, openly, it is true enough . . . however, the Museum will see to it

that, ah, unofficial word of our major new, er, aquisition circulates throughout the field of archeology. Boghazy-the-Great will therefore gain higher status among comparable institutions and a more notable prestige in the minds of archeological scholars and leading historians. Our celebrated Monograph Series—particularly those issues relating to the study of Thothic archeology and prehistory and the aesthetics of the Laceridaen Cavern Kings—will attract a more respectful attention due to our newly found and unique authority in the field.”

“Umm,” said Hautley.

Pawel Spiro glibly continued: “And, moreover, upon the completion of that fifteen-year period demanded by the Carina-Cygnus Quadrant Criminal Code, Section V, Paragraph 12, Sub-paragraph *b*, ‘Statute of Limitations’—we may then openly and without fear of legalistic reprisal display the cult object in fullest legality.”

Quicksilver reached a decision.

He stood up, terminating the interview.

“Where may I contact you, Learned Spiro?”

The little man gaped, then grinned. “Imperial House, Chitterling, on Vassily II. I have reserved a suite under the assumed identity of ‘Dr. Smothly.’ Does this, ah, mean you accept our commission?”

“Before we can print a contract, I must investigate the means by which the Crown is guarded and watched. You will appreciate, I am sure, that I owe it to my reputation as a craftsman not to bungle a job. I must therefore ascertain the probable degree of success I may enjoy if I undertake your interesting assignment.”

“But, ah, we feel that time is of the—” Pawel began, tentatively.

“Quite,” Hautley snapped. “You will hear from me within twenty-seven hours, I promise you!”

WITHOUT FURTHER discussion or ceremony, Quicksilver curtly ushered his flustered client out and saw to it that the radiobeacon guided his modest little runabout back through the protective "moat" of spinning planetoids.

He then repaired with alacrity to the chamber wherein this lengthy interview had taken place, and adroitly detached the minicamera from its hiding place among the ornamental moldings on a tall display case bearing his brilliant collection of Diophrasian crystalloid formicles, arranged as to the thirty-one possible permutations of hexagonal matrices.

Retiring to an adjoining laboratory, he swiftly ran the reel of photo-sensitive tape through a Mark XII developmat and selected nine of the finer prints from the series.

He returned to his chamber and dialed the offices of the Boghazy-the-Great Memorial Museum at Tavory on Alcazar III in the Biallo-Perseids.

Securing the appropriate extension, Quicksilver glibly talked his way up the chain-of-seniority until he reached the Chancellor of the Department of Derghiz Archeology—Pawel Spiro's ultimate superior—that is, if the pallid, mousy little man Quicksilver had interviewed was, indeed, whom he had claimed to be!

In a moment, the phone's screen was filled with the skeel-paneled interior of a stately office, showing a desk cluttered with papers and scholarly journals in neat reel boxes, and a litter of photonic implements, stereo copies of artifacts, and other materials. It shortly filled with the likeness of the Chancellor, a portly, pink-faced Cartouchan with truly enormous ultra-marine moustachios (obviously the result of decades of loving cultivation). Barely visible amidst this wealth of hir-

sute adornment, a snapping green eye curtly inspected him. The Chancellor impatiently demanded his business.

No more glib tongue nor facile set of wits existed among the Near Stars, than those of Hautley Quicksilver—

“Very Learned, I am hight Thomas Jefferson Pouchier, Senior Staffwriter for *Star* magazine. In the very near future, we contemplate devoting considerable space to a featured article on the very brilliant work your Department is performing in the inadequately recognized field of Carina-Cygnus prehistory and neoculture.”

The fat pink face beamed. The curtness evaporated like hydrogen ice in a nuclear oven, and was replaced by the very essence of chuckling geniality.

“Well, well, well! Yes, and, ah, Ser Thomas, of what assistance may I be to your superb periodical, which my staff and myself peruse at frequent intervals, ha ha?” the Chancellor wheezed good-humoredly.

“Why, Very Learned, my call in fact concerns a member of your staff, in point of fact. Yes . . . I am assigned to compose a few brief paragraphs of the body text on one of your underlings, ah . . .” pausing to glance at a scrap of paper, Hautley returned to the jovial visage: “. . . one Learned Pawel Spiro,” he concluded, deliberately mispronouncing the surname.

The quivering moustachios wavered slightly; the hearty warmth cooled a bit in eye and smile.

“Umf. Yes, yes, hm, fine man. His specialty—Thothic archeology, you know—dead end, of course. Exhausted, what? Ehh . . . my own field, now, hrumph! The famous Monolith Builders of Delta Carina 10334 . . . ah . . . ?”

Hautley allowed admiring envy to tinge his features.

“Fascinating field, Very Learned . . . spectacular! But . . . alas! . . . my superior, Senior Full Editor, the Lord Daughtmer Rohm, is preparing the central section, dealing with your own magnificent if not fully appreciated accomplishments in that field. Rank hath its privileges, you know, ha ha! But,” Quicksilver interposed smoothly, “I have a choice of several photos of Learned Spiro, simple two-color monodimensionals, nothing more, of course—far removed from the tridimensional full-spectrum center-spread Lord Daughtmer plans for you—and I wonder if you would be kind enough to advise us on the Spiro spots? Tell me, then,

are any of these particularly good likenesses of your underling?"

He fanned out the prints and held them before the receiver of the phone. The Cartouchan ran a disinterested eye over the set.

"Ehh . . . good likenesses, all, yes, yes. Mmmf. That one of Spiro picking his nose—very good, quite characteristic. Hmf. But . . . ah . . . tell me, Staffwriter, the section on myself, now, are you certain it's the center—"

"Lord Daughtmer will very shortly be contacting you for an extended personal interview, of course, Very Learned, so I'd best clear the extension. Oh, one more question, if I may trouble you just a bit more. Is this Spiro at the Museum now, or do you know where I could contact him?"

The Chancellor whooshed thoughtfully through his amazing moustachios, like a walrus coming up for air.

"On a sabbatical at present. For a month, I believe—due back the 15th of Jones, or somewhere thereabouts. One of my secretarial assistants could most probably—"

"Of course! But have you any idea where he went?"

The fat pink cheeks puffed out.

"Hrgm . . . The Hub Stars . . . yes, yes. Gesualdo V. Probably find old Spiro pottering away in the Empress Pavalia the Amiable Memorial Librareum. Yes."

Quicksilver thanked him fulsomely, rang off, and phoned the Librareum at the center of the galaxy. He was informed by the robot communication-monitor that the Hub-channels were currently busy, due probably to the coming nuptials of the Prince-Heir to the Galactic Throne, and it would take an hour for his call to be connected. He gave the robot his unlisted and ever-changing phone frequency and asked to be called as soon as the spaceways were clear.

Well, it was lunch time anyway. A good morning's work! Hautley rose, stretched, and dialed a nourishing lunch on the autochef. Nothing heavy, as the afternoon might be busy—a light repast—brisket of sea-serpent with Arcadian mint-sauce and a bracing pot of steaming, fragrant, freshly brewed stimulac. As the chef ticked away, Hautley mused that his tenuous suspicions regarding the validity of Pawel Spiro seemed ill-founded. Pending development from the Librareum, it

seemed that the little scholar was the genuine article . . . ah, well, as he had once observed in a pithy versicle:

*Beware: the "fake" that you
Swiftly detect is very often—true!*

7

AFTER A BRISK LUNCH, Quicksilver skimmed swiftly through his voluminous files, which covered in exhaustive detail every major, and a considerable portion of minor, crimes committed or attempted within the Near Stars during the past hundred lustrums. These files were microized and computer-stored in a handy desk-top file no larger than a modern plixiter. Setting the index-auditor to its fullest selectivity, he rapidly punched out the code that stood for "Crimes of extraplanetary origin/Location: *p* Thoin IV, *cl* Derghiz, *g-a* Car-Cyg, *quad* One /First priority: attempted theft," and sat back, sipping his stimulac and savoring its robust caffein flavor while the file clattered and tinkled to itself.

Later, smoking an after lunch aromatique of his own private blend, he glanced over the reports.

They were very interesting.

No fewer than eleven attempts had been made to acquire the coveted Crown of Stars by semi- or quasi-legal means, varying from legitimate purchase through blackmail, extortion, hypno-conditioning, political influence, economic pressure, mindwashing, psychohyastalic implementation, and such. The highest price that had been offered for honest purchase was a truly cosmonomical sum set forth by King Oswal the Pious of the Altair Regnum. The royal collection of antiquities was justly famed as the finest private museum in all of the Carina-Cygnus galactic arm; his offer had been curtly refused. So much for pseudo-legal attempts on the Crown.

Thus far, exactly thirty-nine serious attempts at theft had

been perpetuated. All had been foiled, and, with one single exception, the would-be thieves had been executed in an ingenious variety of methods by the grimly fanatic Neothothic Priesthood. This lone exception was the Master-Burglar of Capitan, the widely notorious Dugan Motley, now in retirement.

Quicksilver took his half-emptied cup of stimulac over to the liquor panel and filled it to the brim with *crème de schmaltz* '67. Then he dialed Information/Central and crisply entered an eleven-word request. While the stupendous computer-directory that occupied the planetary cores of Nycon I, II and III hummed and chattered madly to itself, he drank the stimulac *royale* and meditated on Neozen philosophy. All too soon the directory informed him that no Dugan Motley, formerly of Capitan in the Deltabelta Cluster, was listed in any of the three galactic arms.

Listed or unlisted, Hautley must find him. Only Dugan Motley of all the thieves to attempt seizure of the Thothic cult object had survived the merciless punitive efforts of the pseudo-ancestor-worshipping priests. Therefore, only Motley could reveal in explicit detail the means and methods by which the Crown was hidden and guarded. Motley he must locate!

Hautley thought for a moment; then with a crisply decisive motion he called Information/Central again. The former Master-Burglar of Capitan had worked with a lifelong confederate who rejoiced in the name of Shpern Hufferd. Motley's unavailability did not necessarily extend to his old comrade, or so Quicksilver hoped. Happily, his hopes proved true. Shpern Hufferd still resided at Thieves' Haven, the outlaw planet in the Gap.

Quicksilver phoned him, but there was no answer. Restlessly, he tossed down the last of his brandy-laced stimulac and went into an adjoining tower. From a glass-barred cage, a footlong mini-dragon with canary-yellow body scales and batwings that deepened into orange emitted a friendly jet of steam. Freeing his pet, which swiftly scrambled to a position atop his right shoulder, Quicksilver paced moodily, caressing the dragon's wrinkled snout with a forefinger.

He resolved to pay a personal visit to Hufferd; perhaps the confederate could be persuaded, either through a proffered sum of munits or a clever gambit, into revealing the

current whereabouts of his former partner. Anyway, Hautley's mercurial moods chafed at extended inaction.

Before he could leave, however, the signal flashed above the wall phone. An incoming call . . .

8

IT WAS ANOTHER potential client, a tall, saturnine aristocrat who abruptly waved off Quicksilver's protests that he was at the moment contemplating undertaking a commission. The caller's counter argument was persuasively eloquent. In a gruff, clipped voice he flatly offered one million munits if Quicksilver would set his previous commitment aside and undertake the new assignment. Before so dazzling an argument, Hautley's preoccupation with Pawel Spiro evaporated.

The least he could do was to listen to what the man had to say—after all, Quicksilver was a businessman.

Philosophically, he switched on the radiobeacon and guided his second visitor of the day down to the surface of the small planetoid.

Client-prospect #2 introduced himself as The Royal Heveret Twelfth, Proprietor of Canopus. He was quite a dandy, despite his frosty manner—slim as a dancing master, clad in a tight fawn velvet with a great emerald trembling like a drop of liquid green fire in his left earlobe, he had carmine hair arranged in exquisite locks that foamed over his high peaked collar of snowcat fur. His eyes, dyed vermillion, flashed with supercilious, sardonic superiority. In a curt, cold voice, His Dignity came to the point with disconcerting directness:

"This is Our certified check for one million monetary units, drawn on the Royal Bank of Orion. Fetch for Us the antique, jeweled crown of the extinct Cavern Kings of the planet Thoth. It is the fourth planet of the star Thoin IV in the Derghiz Cluster in the First Quadrant of the Carina-Cyg-

nus Arm. The Crown is to be delivered to a post office box registered under the pseudonym of H. Veret in the Chantilly Port Mail Center. When you have secured and delivered the Crown, place an entry in the personal columns of the Chantilly Port *News-Sentinel*, saying: 'Done. Q' "

Quicksilver's face remained impassive, but his mind reeled. Two clients in one morning after the same thing!

"I—" he attempted. But the Royal Heveret was not quite finished. Raising a peremptory hand, he continued:

"As soon as your entry appears, the Royal Bank will be instructed to pass the check, and Our connection will be severed. Is this clear?"

"Quite, but—"

A slim hand was extended, holding a folder.

"Here is a complete dossier of information relevant to the Crown of Thoth, together with the key to the post office box. Time is of the—"

The small canary-colored dragon clinging to the broad shelf of Quicksilver's right shoulder hissed furiously like a berserk teakettle as the hand neared, and gold eyes sparked viciously. Heveret Twelfth withdrew the hand hastily, and gingerly dropped the file folder on an adjacent corner of Quicksilver's desk.

Hautley accepted the folder and leafed through it noncommittally, while His Dignity lifted a pounce box to his nostrils and sniffed delicately, regarding the small dragon with a sour eye. Then the Proprietor of Canopus cleared his throat distinctly, and glanced at his ring-watch.

"Come, come, my man! Let Us print the contract; you must be about the business."

Hautley shuffled the documents together and lay them down. Leaning back, he regarded the Royal Heveret with a polite but quizzical glance.

"I was not aware that Your Dignity was given to the hobby of collecting rare antiquities," he commented.

Heveret Twelfth smiled thinly, baring a brace of incisors inset with rose-diamond chips after the current mode.

"Our motives cannot be of any conceivable effect on this business arrangement, hence are irrelevant. Come, come, Ser Hautley, let us thumbprint your contract and be off. As the quaint folk-phrase of Our native realm has it: 'Tym-zah waystin.' "

Hautley demurred. "I shall need leisure to check over the

data in this dossier. Your Dignity will understand that my professional reputation, humble though it be, rests upon each successful case. I dare not risk accepting a contract which upon mature consideration I discover to be beyond my meagre abilities."

But Heveret Twelfth was not to be put off.

"Our time is precious, Ser Hautley, and matters of State press. We must conclude this matter now. There is no question of the fee—two million, if you need monetary stimulus to reach a swift decision!"

Behind his imperturbable mask of suave impassivity, Hautley boggled at the incredible stipend thus dangled before him. But it was his curiosity that was aroused, not his cupidity. What was there about the reptilian artifact that had triggered this stampede to his door? He was determined to find out. He was equally determined to accept no contract he might later regret. Our Quicksilver possessed in the extreme, as the patient reader will doubtless discover ere this history concludes, a superb sense of professional ethics.

Thus Hautley persisted in his firm equivocation. With tact unruffled and demeanor serene, he remained adamant to His Dignity's impatient efforts at persuasion, firmly declining to commit his services prior to a depth check of the relevant factors. Suavely extracting a phone number from the reluctant blue blood, he ushered his royal visitor out, promising to deliver a definite answer within twenty-seven hours.

As client-prospect #2 ascended vertically into the superstratosphere, Hautley shook his head in numb bafflement. What in the Name of Arnam's Sacred Beard was going on?

Intenser bafflements awaited in near futurity, though Quicksilver knew it not.

No SOONER had the supercilious monarch exited, and Hautley returned to his tower chamber for an intensive perusal of the

Thothian dossier, than his phone flashed. It was the followup: his call to the Librareum was now ready to be put through: would Ser Hautley accept it? Ser Hautley would.

Quicksilver spoke to a prim woman of indeterminate but well-preserved age, modestly attired in a black spray gown with opal-dusted sternum and exquisitely coiffed hair of a delicate selection of thirteen contrasting shades of off-grey.

Passing himself off as the Very Reverent Abdul Nagoob von Kessel, a peripatetic Pseudobaptist evangelist checking the moral behavior of his recent converts, Quicksilver deftly inquired of the recent comings and goings of Pawel Spiro. Modestly shielding her opal-dusted sternum with a sheaf of overdue notices, in deference to a Man of the Cloth, the Librarian was able to give him some very interesting information.

"The Learned has been in residence at the Librareum for some months now, Padre, engaged in research towards a monograph on, ahem, nuptial customs of the Y'harqakukluk III Owl People," she replied with a reverent flutter of her lashless lids.

"Bless you, sister," Hautley said benignly. "You are positive, then, that Brother Pawel has not gone off planet? The opportunities for moral transgression in so sophisticated a region of the galaxy as The Hub . . . fleshpots, scarlet women, the loathsome juice of the grape, even (Allah, Buddha and Father Sigmund preserve us!)—spiritous beverages of fermented liquors—!"

The Librarian-General rolled up her eyes in an extremity of horror. "Oh, no, Father—I mean, yes, Father, I am quite certain. I see the Learned every day; I am convinced he has not left the planet for an instant."

Hautley expressed his appreciation in a lengthy blessing on the Librarian-General's *ka* which, had it been effective, should have spared her some millenia in Purgatory, concluding with an extempore rendition of appropriate texts from The Nine Gospels which added measurably to his monthly phone bill. He rang off and sat back, stroking with an idle fore-finger, the little canary-yellow dragon which clung cozily to his left shoulder.

So . . . Pawel Spiro, it would seem, was a client of that rare variety called *phonus-balonus*. A fake. But a good one; very good; in fact, professional class . . . odd . . .

And what about Heveret Twelfth? Was His Dignity also

spurious, or the genuine article? Without delay, Hautley set about checking the *bona fides* of the Canopan monarch.

Directly in front of the door was a rather slippery place where the parquet flooring was polished with a frictionless compound. Part of the door's archway was a sleek panel of glossy chrome set at the average hand-height. To avoid falling on his imperial snoot, the Proprietor of Canopus had to grab this polished panel. Hautley snapped a photogram and ran it through the enlarger: sure enough, prints of the right hand, and beauties they were, clear as crystal.

Then he called the Royal Archives at Phungalumdum on Canopus II, securing no less elevated a personage than the Third Assistant Under-Archivist: a shriveled and vituperous gnome with a silvery spike of beard and snapping purple eyes, who testily demanded his business.

Hautley Quicksilver, Man of Two Thousand Faces, donned the vapid, sweatily eager *persona* of a Collector.

"My name is Feuvél Coradayne, the collector—perhaps you've seen my collection on the video?—No?—Well, ha ha, I have a modest little collection of Objects which have been in the possession of Royalty . . . a fascinating hobby, you understand, fascinating!" he burred.

"Yes, yes, get on with it," the Archivist snapped. "Never heard of you or your collection in me life: what do you want?"

"Well—I've recently been offered a crystal goblet from which I am told His Dignity Heveret Twelfth is believed to have imbibed a princely beverage. Naturally, I wish to have the Royal association confirmed, before adding it to my little things, ha, ha."

"Naturally. Well?"

Hautley held up the enlargement; the fingerprints clearly visible.

"These are presumably the prints of His Dignity's dexter digits. Could check them for me? You must have His Dignity's fingerprints in your files. I'd like to be certain of their validity."

"Of all the nonsense! Oh, very well."

The gnome vanished to stage left, returning a few moments later with a silver-mounted set of fingerprints. He peered closely at them, then at the enlargement Hautley was holding before the scanner.

"Absolutely identical; no question about it. Is that all? I'd

like to get back to my quat wunkery, if you don't mind!"

Hautley was profuse in his thanks, which partly mollified the irate mood of the withered Archivist, who promptly faded from the picture.

So.

Heveret Twelfth would seem to be legit, if Pawel Spiro was not. Interesting . . . very.

But enough of this pottering around with phone calls and fingerprints. The game's afoot, and Hautley felt the old familiar itch to be about it. A swift check confirmed that his cruiser was in readiness for instant departure. Dugan Motley, the notorious Master-Burglar of Capitan must be located, and the only clue to his present whereabouts lay with his lifelong confederate, Shpern Hufferd, who dwelt at Thieves' Haven in the Gap. Hautley decided to enship without delay, before another confounded call came in to hold his investigations up further.

And then the phone flashed again.

It was another scintillating call. But this time there was a difference. It was on an official Imperial Galactic Government frequency, as his specially installed telltale informed him. It was, in fact, a police call.

Hautley sighed, but flicked the screen into life. After all, it could hardly be another client asking him to purloin the Crown of Stars from the Crypts of the Cavern Kings of Thoth!

10

THE SCREEN filled with a voluptuous specimen of femininity.

"Senior Inquiry Specialist Barsine Torsche, officially requesting instructions to land and deliver a Crown commission from the Carina Intelligence Depot. Priority prime/4."

It was with difficulty that Quicksilver repressed the pungent expletive that rose unbidden to his lips. He had worked with Senior Inquiry Specialist (or S.I.S.) Torsche on earlier occasions and, while she was a decorative creature and quite efficient, he found himself uncomfortable in her presence for some inexplicable reason. Perhaps his reluctance to endure her proximity was mere masculine modesty—the pitiful girl was thoroughly smitten with his virile charm, was, in fact, madly in love with him, an emotion he did not reciprocate. Or perhaps it was due to professional pride, for Hautley found her frequent caustic comments on his conduct of a caper difficult to endure with equanimity.

Whatever the deep-rooted source of his discomfort, he did not intend to be burdened with her in any case, as he was too intrigued with this matter of the Crown of Thoth to even entertain the notion of another commission. He resolved to fob her off with a mild subterfuge.

“Regret inability to accept,” he said coldly. “I am otherwise engaged at present.”

“Hi, Haut, is that you? Switch on your vision, will you? I thought I was talking to that creepy butler you keep around.”

He complied, permitting her to observe the stern set of his visage, but repeated his refusal in obdurate terms.

“I am considering two commissions at the moment, S.I.S. Torsche,” he said, eyeing her stonily. Then, adding a lie, continued: “And have in fact accepted a retainer on one. Hence I fear my schedule is too occupied at the moment to undertake any further—”

She shaped her warm pink mouth into a tiny moue.

“Oh, aren’t we hoity-toity, Hautley! But this one will interest you. The Lord Commissioner of Internal Security himself!”

“I am busy!”

A stormy look entered her undeniably lovely eyes.

“Hautley,” she said between her teeth, “busy or not and retainer or no, you can’t refuse a commission from a member of the Crown Cabinet! You’ll just have to set your other case aside for the nonce.”

He ground his teeth sourly. She was right, of course; he couldn’t rebuff a Crown commission. Article XIX of his Criminal Charter was quite explicit on the point. Hautley’s Charter, by the way, which licensed him as a fully accredited brother in the Thieves’ Guild, was issued by the Alphard

Chamber of Commerce. The Alphard Anarchate was, of course, the famous star system in whose culture criminality was fully legal and honest employment not only against the law, but punishable by disembowelment with electric needles. An interesting society, in many ways—virtually unique. The Anarchate had been, of necessity, recognized diplomatically by the Imperial Commonwealth a few *lustra* ago, when its cooperation became tactically valuable during the explosive Comalte Crisis.

Hautley viewed Barsine Torsche bitterly, his silvery pupils mirroring distaste. As the immortal Sherlock of legend had his feminine nemesis in Miss Irene Adler, so Hautley Quick-silver had his Barsine Torsche. It was a pity such a wench had to be so lucious a wisp of girlish charm—it would be easy to loathe a withered spinster given to orthopedic footwear and health tonics. It was distinctly not easy to react in any other than a glandular manner to the voluptuous Miss Torsche! She had skin like magnolia petals and thick, silky, fluffy hair of metallic indigo, filled with tiny witch lights. Her lips and eyes were dyed a watermelon pink. And between the strategically arranged interstices of her frock (a wispy thing of floating gauze in melting opal hues), could be glimpsed firm curves of tender white flesh.

Well . . . she had him.

"Oh, very well," he rasped harshly. "I suppose I'll have to take a look at the commission." His thin, superbly expressive lips creased in a sardonic, mocking grin. "Just what does the Lord High Panjandrum want me to do?" A short bark of dry laughter escaped him. "Steal the jeweled Crown of Stars from the Crypts of the Cavern Kings of Thoth, I suppose?"

He knew the jesting reference would elude her, since she had not been apprised of the two attempts in the past hour to secure his services for precisely that exploit. Hence he was unprepared for the violent reaction which met his gaze in the phone's screen.

Her dewy eyes widened incredulously. Her perfect lips parted in a strangled gasp of sheer amazement. Her pallid complexion paled to an ashen hue.

"Hautley . . . have you been taking ESP shots, or have you always been telepathic? *How on earth did you know what the Commissioner wanted?*"

11

ONLY QUICKSILVER's habit of iron self-control kept his jaw from drooping halfway to his knees. Luckily his disciplined features retained their accustomed impassivity, even though inwardly he blenched from the shock of astonishment. Mastering himself, he permitted one lean hand to trigger a proximity switch.

"The b-beacon's on, Barsine. I'll guide you down."

While the radiobeacon piloted the police ship through the whirling meteor-moat of Quicksilver Castle, the lord of the manor tossed back a stiff snootful of Old Space Ranger and felt the knotted tension of his solar plexus dissolve as the potent beverage ricocheted off his tonsils and sloshed comfortably into his abdomen. He had recovered his usual aplomb by the time Smeedley, the butler, ushered Barsine Torsche into his tower chamber.

Smeedley, nine feet tall, cadaverous and gaunt as a Zulu *assegai*, bowed creakily, and said in a rusty quavering voice of aristocratic accent: "Miss Torsche, Ser Hautley. Will there be anything further, Ser?"

"I think not, thank you, Smeedley. Wait. Yes. A drink, Barsine?"

She arched one eyebrow. "At nine o'clock in the morning? Oh, well. Why not?"

He deliberated. A connoisseur of the most discerning palate, he riffled through a mental selection of appropriate beverages, finally selecting a mild little liqueur, exotic but amusing.

"Two tots of Rissoveur '32, Smeedley, I think. The glasses to be chilled to 72° and the liqueur, of course, served at blood heat. A sprig of crabgrass, fresh cut, in each glass."

A slight, approving smile spread Smeedley's bloodless lips in a rictus of admiration.

"At once, Ser."

The gaunt butler in formal black creaked his way out.

"Really hitting the old rotgut these days, aren't you, Haut?" Barsine cracked, distinctly unimpressed. "Doesn't it hit you in the old reaction time? Are you still the fastest gun in the Carina-Cygnus Arm, or getting trembly from the booze you slosh up?"

A pained expression flitted across Hautley's features.

"Please . . . a morning tot of Rissoveur is a social ritual in the finest circles," he said. She grinned hoydenishly.

"Yeah. Where I come from, it's a straight gin! But never mind. To business, before that vampire butler of yours comes flapping in. I don't know how you stumbled on it, but the Commissioner picked you to lift this Crown thing—I've got all the poop right here in this dossier." She slapped it down on his desk, as it happened, right beside a similar dossier which Hautley had received only thirty-two minutes before from Herveret Twelfth.

"And, speaking of that, Haut—how the clabberdoxing scintillation did you know what the Commissioner wanted? You don't have an Ear planted in the Depot offices, do you, or a spy-eye?"

"Of course not! It was . . ."

"Well?" she demanded curiously. He smiled coolly.

"It was elementary, Barsine. Pure deduction. I couldn't explain how we professionals do these things—sheer intuition."

Her expression was skeptical but resigned. Her pink lips pouted and parted to ask another question, but just then Smeedley came wobbling into the chamber on insecure and doubtless arthritic joints, bearing two frosty drinks on an iridium salver. They toasted each other. Barsine, no epicure, tossed her drink down with a casual flip of the wrist, but Hautley savored the delicate bouquet with first the left tonsil, then the right, accepted four drops into his mouth to stimulate the salivary glands, then consumed the exquisite beverage with tranquil sips, meditating briefly on the Eleventh Proposition of Monsalietsin's *Quantum Philosophy*.

Barsine watched him with a dubious look as he made a little ritual over drinking the aromatic fluid. She looked adorably lovely in her lime-green boat-cloak and opaline frock, standing against the crystalline pane through which the ruddy

skies of Carvel glimmered. Pity she was so insensible to the finer things in life, Hautley mused. Of course, the poor thing was obviously madly in love with him, and fighting it every inch of the way, which explained her rude remarks and pretense of impatience at his aplomb. Ah, well. Her affectation of dislike added a certain piquance to their relationship, but Hautley's keen eye clearly saw through the mask to the depth of her quite understandable passion for him.

This, as often happens, dampened whatever degree of ardor he might otherwise have felt for so delectable a morsel of warmly curvaceous girlflesh. By temperament he was opposed to an easy conquest and was attracted by a chill rebuttal, which always implies eventual conquest after a tempestuous seige. Or, as Quicksilver phrased it in one of his wittier versicles:

*Dearer to me: the prize I take,
Than gifts that other people make!*

12

HE PUT HIS EMPTY GLASS down with a click on the glass-topped desk beside the two file folders.

"Unless you want to gargle some more booze, Hautley, let's get down to business," Barsine proposed in her customary rude and abrupt manner. Hautley shot her a chill glance and riffled idly through the dossier, which contained substantially the same information as did that of the Proprietor of Canopus.

"Such a discussion is fruitless," he said suavely, "for, as I told you on the phone, I have accepted a retainer from another client."

"Hautley! Article XIX of your Charter—"

"I have," he said, permitting the timbre of his voice to rise a mini-decible or two, drowning out her complaint, "a legal

and binding obligation to my client. Were I to break the contract, why, by Onolk's iridium duodenum, Barsine, I could be sued for a fortune—and lose my scintillant Charter in a twinkling. You know that!" A feigned indignation seethed in Hautley's tone.

The girl regarded him dubiously.

"When we talked on the phone," she said, eyeing him narrowly, "you said you were considering a commission and had accepted a retainer. Have you actually thumbprinted a contract, Hautley?"

Lying magnificently, Quicksilver acknowledged that he had in fact done so.

"I didn't mention it before because I was curious to learn why the Imperial government wants me to purloin this—whatzit—Crown of Stars," he cleverly admitted, going on the premise that half a truth was better than none.

Her watermelon-pink lips tightened. "As to that, well, unless you're available for the job, I certainly can't give you classified information, you know . . . but . . . even if you are legally contracted to another client, perhaps he could be persuaded to waive your services for the moment, giving priority to the government?"

Quicksilver's mind worked with its customary speed. He could not tell Barsine the truth, i.e., that he suspected he could abscond with the Neothothic cult object within a day or two, as he did not wish to reveal to her the very interesting fact that others were in this chase for the Crown of Stars besides H.M. Government. Therefore . . . To cover the pause, he poured her another dollop of Rissoveur '32 (even though the glasses had by now heated to room temperature and any connoisseur in the galaxy would have refused a tot of Rissoveur improperly chilled) and snapping open the box atop his desk, offered the girl a smoke, which she refused.

Hautley drew on his aromatique until it ignited, and pulled the pungent vapor deep into his lungs, deep in cogitation.

"And, of course, you'll understand I simply can't take your word alone, Hautley," she said primly. "I'll have to see your contract myself, in order to satisfy my superiors that you do in point of fact have a prior and legally binding contract."

"Of course," he murmured, mind racing. "I have it right here."

"How urgent is your client's job? Perhaps if an official of Cabinet rank . . . ?"

"Oh, very urgent, very urgent indeed," Hautley said firmly. "I doubt if my client could be persuaded by a mere government official . . . royalty himself, you know . . ."

"Well—may I see the contract, then?" she persisted.

He sighed, and snapped his *aromatique* in twain. From the severed unlit portion, a jet of lime-green gas erupted, wreathing Barsine's visage in its vaporous veil. The young woman collapsed loose-jointedly on the wall-to-wall carpeting of deep-pile and priceless *ormthak* fur, and sprawled there for all the worlds like a marionette whose strings have suddenly been severed.

Hautley regarded the recumbent and deeply somnolent Miss Barsine Torsche with detached pity. He disliked playing such low tricks—his noble nature revolted at the necessity for subterfuge, particularly on an agent of the Imperial government—but, quite simply, he had no choice.

Were Barsine's superior (a crusty and most irascible old curmudgeon named Lord Admiral Temujin J. Weatherwax III—"Old T.J." to his staff) to be apprised that no less than two other parties were also after the Neothothic cult object, the entire Depot might panic, and impress their orders on Ser Hautley Quicksilver without delay. And that would never do. For always, and in every endeavor, Quicksilver chose to walk his own way, giving deference to none. As one of his more polished and lapidary *versicles* put the matter:

*Freedom: to seek my star,
Unheeding who may seek to guide—or bar.*

13

WORKING WITHOUT undue haste, but also without a single wasted motion, the cleverest agent in Near Space selected a blank contract from his file, inserted the document into the *typovox* and dictated eleven crisp sentences. Snapping it from

the machine, he affirmed his thumbprint with practised dexterity.

He then chose, from the photograms he had taken of the digital impressions left by Heveret Twelfth on the doorjamb, a superb thumbprint. He photographed it again, reversed the negative, duplicated it upon a plastic cube in nitrate of impervium. From a pocket in his utility-girdle, which he customarily wore next to his epidermis beneath his garments, he withdrew a bulb of acid and sprayed the plastic cube with a corrosive mist.

An instant later he inked an excellent thumbprint to the contract with the plastic cube. The acid spray had eaten away the lucent substance from around the near-microscopic lines of impervium nitrate, making, in effect, a rubber stamp. The ink utilized in the process was a special mixture of his own; intermingled with the coloring matter with a chemical compound that exactly duplicated the sweaty oils which with the human skin was permeated.

He then placed the document in a sealed oven of peculiar design, concealed within a free form sculpture which stood a few feet away. This oven was a miniature gammatron accelerator, and would "age" anything placed within it by artificially induced radioactive impregnation. The document, when removed from the accelerator, would pass any carbon-14 test to which it could be put: every molecule, including the typovoxed matter and the two thumbprints, were exactly forty-seven minutes old.

The forged contract in his hand, he then bathed Barsine Torsche in a jet of counteractive gas, lifting her back into her chair.

She awoke instantly, unaware of any time lapse, due to the instantaneous action of both the narcotic vapor and its counter-agent. He proffered, with great aplomb, the fruit of his labors for her perusal. She read it carefully, not neglecting to check it for proper age with the carbon-14 meter unobtrusively attached to her left wrist, disguised as a mere bauble of gems. A tiny crease of exasperation formed between the twin indigo arches of her perfect brows.

"Well, you're right, Haut. You daren't break this one! Old XII sounds a perfect terror, and from what I've heard of his temper, I doubt if a round dozen Cabinet ministers could make him budge a millimeter. Oh, scintillance! 'Old T.J.' will be frothing when he hears you are unavailable . . . but

about how long will it take you to vaporize this scut, anyway?" she asked, referring to the completely falacious caper outlined in the forged contract—a vital political assassination. Hautley shrugged.

"A solid month, I expect. His Dignity's enemy seems to have anticipated an attempt to scrag him. He's a clever devil," Hautley said, permitting a note of professional admiration to seep into the clinical detachment of his cool tones, as he extemporized with suave eloquence. "A surgeon has extracted the ulna bone from the right forearm. An aluminum tube has been inserted in its place, a tube packed with those new molecule-sized ultratransistors and micro-printed circuits. The miniscule gadgetry projects a field of force impervious to any material object larger than a proton—transparent, in fact, only to those more harmless octaves of the electro-magnetic spectrum such as normal gravity, average extremes of heat and light. This force shell completely armors his body—"

"Space! How does the poor bastard breathe?" Barsine asked, fascinated. Hautley's agile wits raced keenly.

"Air, within his self-imposed prison, is manufactured and re-processed by a tiny recycling plant concealed in the left tibia, which has also been replaced with an aluminum tube," he said glibly. She marvelled.

"Clever devil! With all that hardware clanking around in his innards, I should think he'd be afraid of getting the hiccups and joggling something loose!"

He smiled at her jape.

"Or of taking a shower! Suppose he short-circuited the old tibia there, eh? Ha ha!"

"Ha," he joined her, "ha."

"So how do you plan to clobber ol' invulnerable—if you don't mind a mere amateur prying into, snort, snort, 'Professional' secrets?"

Did he detect a note of unseemly levity in her query?

Was it possible Barsine Torsche was not taken in?

He permitted a worrisome frown to crinkle the bland expanse of his mahogany-hued brow.

"Don't know. Studying the problem now. Rather busy, as I said before, Barsine . . ."

She sighed. "Ah? So. Well, this gal can take a hint when she's not wanted."

She rose lithely and went to the door. Pausing there, she turned a keen glance on him.

"I hope you're not trying to put one over on me, Hautley Quicksilver!"

His mobile features assumed a hurt expression.

"Cause if you are, let me warn you, me bucko! 'Old T.J.' 's really boiling on this one. And Carina-Cygnus won't be big enough to hold 'Old T.J.' and you if he finds out . . . well . . . that's it, Quicksilver!"

A look of hurt innocence filled his mercury-colored eyes.

"Barsine! Really!"

She ground her teeth. "Oh, all right . . . bye now, Haut. Got to buzz along and find your replacement—see you in the newsfax! No, don't call old Creepy—I know the way out."

And she was gone. To find a replacement for Hautley Quicksilver!

Leaning back in the auto-adjusting pneumo, he permitted himself a small quiet smile of complacency. She would hunt far to find an agent of comparable talent—as his swift simulation of a legal contract and smoothly-concocted story gave full proof!

But now—to work. As an esteemed (and, no doubt purely legendary) pioneer of Hautley Quicksilver's profession was wont to put it—*the game's afoot!*

14

WOBBLING AND CREAKING on insecure joints, his butler and valet, Smeedley assisted him in donning working clothes, in this case what Hautley oft referred to as his "business suit."

The rainment consisted of virtually a portable armory.

The cuff buttons were incendiary grenades.

Each shoelace was a triplex nylon garroting-cord.

His belt buckle was a miniaturized radio transceiver whose aerial was a metallic thread indistinguishably woven throughout the warp and woof of his tunic. His shirt, of a thin but

airtight fabric, was double strength, lined with a duplicate panel, inflatable, and made, in watery moments of need, an admirable life raft.

Ingenious compartments in boot heels and shoulder pads contained a variety of interesting substances and devices.

A flat flexible tube sewn into the lining of his jacket contained a virulent acid wherewith door locks could be eaten away.

One jewelled cuff link was a minute laser gun.

The other concealed a nuclear grenade capable of demolishing a medium-sized metropolis.

A back tooth, in actuality a hollow plastine receptacle, contained deadly poison.

Other teeth contained: a sleeping powder of sufficient concentration as to thrust the entire population of a small town into the arms of Morpheus (if admixed with the local drinking water by tossing it into the reservoir): an incredibly minute reference library of scientific and technical works which could be viewed through the microscopic lens concealed beneath the nail on his left forefinger; a variety of poisons, truth drugs, and other potent fluids and concoctions—including, I should add, a potent aphrodisiac.

Be prepared, was the Quicksilver motto. *For anything!*

Once strapped and belted into this amazing assortment of gadgetry, Hautley Quicksilver was virtually a one-man army.

And now to depart, after final instructions to Smeedley.

"Return the library books due next Gormsday . . . water the delphiniums . . . feed the Venus' fly traps . . . monitor all in-coming calls . . ."

"Yes, Ser Hautley."

"And above all, Smeedley, for Onolk's sake don't forget to tend my prize Prince Rupert von Hentzau *odontoglossums*! I plan to enter the Sirian Sector Flower Show next month, and they're bound to carry off a silver ribbon."

"Oh yes, Ser Hautley!"

Instructions given, Quicksilver bounded into his sleek little cruiser—the fastest thing in space—and launched the vessel through a camouflaged exit disguised as a crater. Up from the surface of the planetoid Carvel he rocketed, threading his way through the whirling maze of tiny asteroids with the skilled dexterity and deft touch of a master pilot. With a precise twirl of the wheel he avoided two sizzling meteor storms, and thus gained clear space at last. The ship's computer brain

was thoroughly familiar with the orbits of the eleven thousand four hundred and sixty-two bodies that made up the deadly "moat" of Quicksilver Castle, and could easily have assumed the responsibility of piloting the vessel, but Hautley liked to do it on manual controls "just to keep his hand in," as he put it.

Behind and to one side of the hurtling silver needle that was Hautley's trim little craft, a sullen spark of somber crimson glowed like a dying coal. That was the aged red Supergiant, the star Astarte, wherefrom the system had originated in primordial times.

Thieves' Haven, the outlaw planet, lay some seventeen thousand light-years towards the galactic Hub. It was a lone and sunless world, deep sunk in the black and starless rift between the innermost galactic arm, that of Sagittarius, and the midmost, second arm of the galaxy, called Carina-Cygnus. This rift between the two arms was called "The Gap," and thence Hautley must wend his way.

It would of course, consume some millenia of time, were he to proceed for so vast a distance at the sub-photonic velocities attainable on mere planetary drive.

Hence, as he pointed the needle sharp prow of his lean and rakish craft Hubwards, he flicked the switch that would activate special mechanisms, thus transposing his craft into that mathematically-impossible, illusory and paradoxical quasi-continuum called pseudospace.

With a bone-shaking subsonic whine, the Bettelheim-Ortleigh-Robton Drive engines engaged. Their superbly counterpoised semigears clashing smoothly in custom designed cusps of synthetic rose diamond, the drive engines built about the hurtling little craft a magnetic field of enormous force, way up in the thousand-billion-gauss range—a cocoon of magnetic lines of force of such stupendous magnitude that they warped the very fabric of space itself, bending space until it "snapped," forming a bubble of closed three-dimensional space around the sleek cruiser—in effect, creating a private little universe to contain the ship.

Within this artificial mini-cosmos, light remained the limiting velocity as in the greater cosmos beyond—but the acceleration of photonic energy within the miniature universe was several million times swifter than in the outer cosmos of "normal" space-time.

HURTLING TOWARDS THE GAP at a relative velocity of several thousand light-years per hour, Quicksilver relaxed and switched the ship's controls over to the automatic pilot which was a portion of the computer-brain. Now to assume one of the many disguises for which he was justly famed in criminal chronicles. These were a strict necessity, as without doubt many of the outlaws inhabiting the criminal planet would recognize Hautley at a glance—and the fewer individuals who were aware of his doings, the safer he would feel.

After all, if the scofflaw class were in any way involved in this three-way contest to purloin the Neothothic cult object, as was highly probable, Quicksilver saw no reason to advertise openly his own participation in the struggle, until conditions suggested it might be advantageous to do so. Hence, he entered a small mirror-walled cubicle where reposed the various materials from which he affected his seemingly miraculous disguises.

The small canary-yellow dragon he had permitted to accompany him thus far in his quest. Now he removed the little creature from its customary perch on his broad left shoulder, slipped it into an iridium wire cage and left it happily crunching away at a handful of iron pyrite crystals while he sat down at the cosmeticon.

Staring at his several reflections in the multi-angled mirrors, he began swiftly and smoothly to alter his appearance not only beyond all recognition, but also beyond any detection as well. A slightly radioactive hypospray was set against his head. Lightly pressed against his flesh, it squirted a pressure jet of radionic vapor painlessly through the cells of his flesh, entering his brain via the third interstitial suture of his skull. This harmless injection provided a temporary and mi-

nute stimulus to the cyno-pituitary gland, which would within minutes bleach the ordinary mahogany color of his skin to the hue of strawberry red.

Another innocuous and fast-acting chemical spray violently agitated the hair follicles of his scalp. As he watched in the mirror, the pewter grey of his meticulous locks assumed a satiny black coloration, darkening as the tide of artificial tint crept up from the chemically stimulated roots.

Next followed a facial spray. He bathed his features with astringent vapor from a pressure bulb, whose reaction was to crease the flesh of his face with a network of semi-permanent wrinkles, which added considerably to his apparent physical age. A touch of biostatic plasmoid deftly applied to the arch of his nose, the ridge of his brow and the line of his steely jaw altered his profile physiognomy subtly but surely. This synthetic and pseudo-living plasmoid flesh would stand up to anything less than an electro-microscopic analysis.

Then followed a few minor alterations in his costume. A loose-fitting singlet and padded hose of contrasting iridescents with slight and unobtrusive pads at shoulder and spinal curvature made Quicksilver appear somewhat stooped and hollow-chested, as well as lending a false slope to his brawny shoulders.

The man who now looked back at Quicksilver from the multi-mirror was an almost total stranger. The only thing about his face, physique, posture and seeming age which could remind one of Hautley Quicksilver was the mirror-bright eyes with which his pride and inborn love of tempting danger forbade him to tamper.

Only intimate physical examination by an experienced and suspicious surgeon could disclose the subtle cosmeticry used to mask his appearance. And as for the defensive gadgetry and miniature armory of weapons with which his "business suit" was invested, only a detailed search by an electronic expert and a clever tailor could uncover those.

Quicksilver was ready for action.

And even upon the moment, the automatic pilot chimed. The ship was nearing her destination.

NOW SEEMINGLY an older gentleman of scholarly and inactive habits, a citizen of the planet Rowrbazzle 12 from his strawberry complexion and ebon locks, Quicksilver closed up the cosmeticon cubicle and stepped before the glowing control console of the ship. He relaxed the powerful magnetic lines of force that enclosed the vessel, and, with yet another bone-shivering subsonic drone, it re-entered "normal" space near the edge of the Gap.

As the ship proceeded on normal planetary rocket drive, Quicksilver mused over the several curious aspects of the case his research has thus far uncovered.

Point #1: Three forces, seemingly independent of each other, sought possession of the Neothothic jewelled crown. The question was: *why*?

Granted, the Crown of Stars was a fabulously rare artifact, worth an immense sum of money either for its intrinsic worth as an item of jewelry or for its historic and archeological value as the only known non-architectural artifact of a mysterious planetary culture, the Cavern Kings of Thoth. But either of these values hardly seemed sufficient motive for the Imperial government, a planetary monarch, and an unknown masquerader pretending to be a famous scholar, to simultaneously develop an interest in purloining the object. Why were individuals from three such widely different areas of expertise suddenly displaying such an extraordinary desire in the Crown?

An unidentified individual posing as an archeologist, but perhaps more truly of a criminal profession, a supercilious planetary prince, motives unknown; an intelligence agent, acting under orders of the Emperor's Cabinet. What did these three have in common? Desire for wealth—power—knowl-

edge? No, it was something else, some as yet unknown factor which Hautley Quicksilver's acute perceptions had yet to untangle from this raveled knot of mixed motives and unanswered questions.

A small vertical crease, indicative of intellectual tension, formed between his ebon arched brows.

This much at least hinted at the key to the puzzle: *one of the three was known to be an imposter.*

Although Pawel Spiro's story hung together, and his disguise was clever enough to fool the camera—and to elude detection by a known colleague, his esteemed superior—the real Pawel Spiro was busily at work in the center of the galaxy on anthropological–archeological research, while a phony Pawel Spiro, half a galaxy away, was holed up in a glossy tourist trap of a hotel, awaiting word from the foremost private investigator in Known Space.

Who was the pseudo Spiro? Why did he want the Crown? And, perhaps more importantly, whom did he represent?

And come to think of it, was the pseudo Spiro the only fake among Hautley's three would-be clients? What of Heveret Twelfth? True, his fingerprints seemed to match those retained in official Canopan records, but that was only proof to a degree.

Quicksilver smiled thinly. In these days of advanced technology, the criminal mind had resources vastly superior to those of the good old days. It was no longer impossible to fake fingerprints. Indeed, without greatly taxing his imagination, the galaxy's ace investigator could easily bring to mind no less than eight different ways of so doing, to wit:

1. Invisible fingertip sheaths bearing raised imprints.
2. Skin graft, or entire digital transplantation.
3. Homosculpture.
4. Bribery of the Archives official whom Quicksilver had interviewed, or replacement of the genuine archivist with a criminal accomplice.
5. The simple forgery of fake fingerprint records, cunningly smuggled into the Canopan Archives.
6. Dialic biostasis.
7. Narcotic persuasion or hypnotic implanting of false information regarding the fingerprints of His Dignity in the mind of the Archivist.
8. And last, but not least, time-prolapse, by means

of an Anchidean protomorph, or a laboratory duplication thereof.

However, as yet Hautley had no positive evidence as to the identity of the individual who had attempted to retain his professional services while claiming to be the Proprietor of Canopus. This facet of the case would bear further study. He filed away among other temporarily unanswerable questions the matter of the true identity of the so-called Heveret Twelfth.

No more time for deliberation. The ship was approaching 'Thieves' Haven . . .

17

THE OUTLAW PLANET in the Gap was not very much larger than his own domain of Carvel in the Chain of Astarte. And unlike the Astartean system, this one consisted of a single minor planet, rather than a belt of asteriods, a system moreover devoid of even a parent star, for Thieves' Haven drifted alone in the blackness of the abyss-like rift between the two galactic arms. Rumor had it that the planetoid had once been a rogue world wandering space until it fell under the scrutiny of a band of master space-thieves who had the worldlet terra-formed at vast expense, triggering a nuclear "round-robin" effect in the planetoidal core for heat, and stimulating the ionic field about the new atmosphere for sunlight, or a near equivalent thereof.

Landing at the planet's only spacefield, Hautley locked his ship and consulted his timepiece. Less than two hours had elapsed since he had bade farewell to Pawel Spiro back on Carvel. The imposter would presumably suspend independent operations until receiving final word from Hautley Quicksilver, who had promised to either accept or decline his con-

tract within twenty-seven hours. Twenty-five hours remained before Hautley must make up his mind. And within this interval, he must accomplish a variety of routine tasks.

He must locate Shpern Hufferd, and extract from the retired accomplice of Dugan Motley the current location and present pseudonym of the Master-Burglar of Capitan.

He must secure a personal interview with this Dugan Motley, and pump him of relevant information regarding Motley's famous attempt to steal the reptillian artifact, in particular, a description of the various measures taken by the Neothothic priesthood to protect their jewelled treasure from thievery; and the means by which Dugan Motley, and Dugan Motley alone of all the criminals who had attempted to steal the Crown, had escaped from the grip of the fanatic Crown-guardians unharmed and unpunished.

He must furthermore decide which, of the three potential clients who had applied for his services, he would accept a contract from, and if at all possible, find out who or what was behind the imposter posing as Pawel Spiro.

Quite a list of things to be done within a mere twenty-five hours, but Hautley remained undaunted by the enormity of this caper. He proceeded about his business, having berthed his craft in a rented dock.

Emerging from the subterranean docking facilities to the upper levels of the outlaw world's one city, fittingly named Hideout, he took a glidewalk into the business district.

It was a fantastic metropolis, this capital city of Crime. Fabulous avenues lined with palaces of wine and gourmet foods, as well as most of the other pleasures which the flesh fell heir to (including thirteen totally new and original vices especially invented for Thieves' Haven by a team of galactically-famed psychologists, chemists and anatomical specialists retained by the local planetary government, known as The Syndicate, a generation earlier at incredible fees). Quicksilver had never before had occasion to land on the outlaw planet in the Gap in all his excitement-packed career, and he looked forward to a tour of the incredible City of Criminals.

While he gaped and gawked at the sights, the swiftly moving power-driven glidewalk carried him through a whirling panorama of storefronts and neon illuminated signs indicative of the pleasures that awaited within.

Others rode the glidewalk besides him, of course. And

there was one of these that kept an unobtrusive eye on the stoop-shouldered form of the disguised Hautley Quicksilver.

This individual, a bald-domed, grey-complexioned Orgotry in fluorescent scarlet tights slashed with dead-black piping and puckered ruffs, ostensibly coughed into a cupped hand. Actually, between hacking spasms of glottal throat-clearing, the Orgotyr whispered into a ring-radio:

"It's Quicksilver, chief. What are my instructions?"

Although Hautley knew it not, yet another, a fourth claimant was interested in the Crown of Stars!

18

ALL ABOUT THE GLDEWALK whereon the disguised Hautley Quicksilver rode, closely shadowed by an unknown observer narrowly watching his every move, towered the glittering facades of gaming houses and gambling palaces wherein were installed no fewer than eleven thousand, four hundred and sixteen different games of chance devised and maintained for the sole purpose of parting a man from his munits.

For those whose tastes demanded a different sort of stimulus, there were establishments catering to bizarre tastes wherefor princely fees, one could titillate even the most jaded palate by torturing an android, or synthetic human female to death, or where one could indulge in an astounding variety of narcotics, including eleven brand new ones the chemists of Thieves' Haven had invented. For those habitués so saturated with over-use of narcotic stimulants, and who thus required something rather special to send them off to Cloud-cuckooland, other houses of pleasure proffered "super-boilermakers" in which thirty or forty different drugs were expertly blended, compounded and homogenized, and then injected directly into the living brain tissue.

Yet other stores offered quiet nooks where one could spend

a tranquil and contemplative hour or two of quiet meditation in the racks of the galaxy's most celebrated and inclusive pornographic, necrophiliac and homophagic library, with adjacent film collection for those troubled by a meagre vocabulary.

Against the velvet backdrop of the Gap-black sky, phantasmal illusion-signs outblazed the stellar skies of other planets with multi-hued advertising spectaculars.

AH FONG'S DE LUXE DREAMARIUM

Murder! Rape! Torture! Mass Atrocities!

Even Suicide For The Ultimate

In Thrills!

Have Your Kicks In The Finest Man-

Made Synthetic Dreams & Illusions

*

PEG-LEG FAUNTLEROY

PRESENTS: "MANHUNT"

Track Down And Kill Your

Enemies! Satisfaction Guaranteed!

Risks Eliminated!

Why Pay a Psychosurgeon??

Our Androids Guaranteed to Simulate

Mom, Dad, the Wife, or Anyone Else You Hate!

So Work Off Your Frustrations

The Fauntleroy Way!

(Genuine Blood Supplied by

Hemoglobin Associates, Ltd.)

*

ONE-EYE GROGAN'S HOUSE

OF TEN THOUSAND GAMES

"Lose Yer Shirt in Surroundings

Of Palatial Elegance

And Class!"

*

MADAME FAFH'S PALACE OF JOY

Women of a Million Worlds,

Specially Trained to Serve You!

Also, For

Them As Likes,

Boys, Men,

Neuters, Albino Hermaphrodites
And Highly Talented Dogs!

As he rode along, ostensibly gawking at the sights, Quicksilver tuned his wristphone to the planetary wavelength, and consulted the Central Directory of Thieves' Haven for the address of Shpern Hufferd. He promptly learned that the former professional associate of the now retired Master Burglar of Capitan now resided in a somewhat decayed suburb of the planetary capital. From this informative item, Quicksilver swiftly deduced that Hufferd now dwelt in somewhat reduced circumstances, despite a highly profitable career in galactic crime.

It reminded Quicksilver of one of the less philosophical and more practical versicles of his own composition, which went something like this:

*Resolved: for crime to pay its best
Your loot you wisely shouldst invest.*

However, it also indicated that, being low on funds, old Shpern Hufferd might be induced to part with Dugan Motley's current address for a small exchange of monetary units.

Waiting for the next intersection, Quicksilver stepped off the express glidewalk onto a sideway and headed towards the less populous suburbs of the city of Hideout.

Behind him, the bald-domed, grey-complexioned Orgotyr in the scarlet fluorescent tights slashed with dead-black piping and puckered ruffs stepped off the moving walk, and was replaced by a kind-faced individual in severely tailored spray-on slacks with triple-gathered dockets down the cuff; from his sandy hair-tufts and pallid visage, an inhabitant of Wollheim 4.

Through the gaudy neon-illuminated night hurtled Hautley and his accompanying shadow.

Quicksilver treaded gingerly between the maze of intersecting slideways and glidewalks, moving from strip to strip according to the precise directions he had received from the Central Directory of Citizens (a tourist service of Thieves' Haven Chamber of Commerce).

As he negotiated the moving roads, the position of his "tail" (if this historian may, for the moment, lapse into the criminous jargon of the era) was taken by a variety of individuals, including a plum-skinned Schloim from Pazatar 9, a white-furred and dual-headed entity from Wolverine 3, and,

as the sequence returned to his original shadow, the bald-domed, grey-complexioned Orgotyr showed up again.

Thus kept under continuous surveillance, Quicksilver made the trip from the downtown business section of Hideout to the remote and rather decayed suburbs wherein he hoped to locate Shpern Hufferd.

19

SHPERN HUFFERD lived in a ramshackle development between the Diomazian Sulphur Works and the Autophan Sewage Canal, a region that could with admirable accuracy be described as odoriferous. In this section of town none of the immense and immensely expensive illusion-display signs lit up the velvet darkness of night. The dilapidated rows of prefabricated hovels were drowned in purpureal gloom, an omnipresent pall broken only by the occasional, fitful and sputtering light in crude primary colors, of a few antediluvian and malfunctioning "neon signs" which blazoned forth such curt legends as JOE'S EATS; O'LEARY'S BAR & GRILL; WUN LONG PAN'S HAND LAUNDRY; MAXIE'S SODA-LUNCH; ZELIM QUANG'S ELITE OVO-SNAVE, and similar inscriptions.

Quicksilver left the slideway and perambulated the few remaining blocks to his goal by the time-tested expedient of shank's mare. His interchangeable followers vanished. The streets were fashioned entirely of antiquated qwikplast, much stained and splotched by age and neglect. Filthy water gurgled in noisome gutters. Sagging housefronts sagged at odd angles above the street, shadeless windows leering emptily like the vacant eyesockets of human skulls—a distinctly foetid and rundown neighborhood. That a once celebrated criminal of the calibre of Shpern Hufferd should have sunk so low as to inhabit a swinish hovel of such squalor as these. . .

Sidestepping adroitly in order to avoid the rotting carcass of a starved housecat, Hautley found himself before Shpern Hufferd's address. According to the directory, the former criminal rented the first floor flat of the decayed two-story Living Home, a prefabricated hovel manufactured at a pitance by Prefabricated Hovels, Inc.

There were no lights in the bleared and grease-filmed window.

Nor did Hautley extract any reply when he sounded the buzzer. On the off chance that its mechanism might be inoperable, Hautley resorted to a manual signal and knocked, again eliciting a negative response.

Presumably, Shpern Hufferd was not at home.

Hautley glanced about him, taking in the ill-lit and dubious condition of the neighborhood. Directly across the street was another two-story building, its bottom level devoted to an establishment purveying doubtful liquors, the upper story seemingly residential in character. A few mangy local citizens lounged about under a buzzing street light, or slouched moistly in the gurgling gutters, seemingly victims to the inebriating beverages on sale in the street-level bar.

If Shpern Hufferd were out, there were no way of forming an accurate estimate as to the time of his arrival home. And Hautley distinctly did not wish to remain standing in front of his residence all night. For one thing, the neighborhood was clearly disreputable. For another, he did not wish to draw attention to the fact that someone wished to interview the former associate of Dugan Motley.

The best idea would be to simply wait inside. Hautley bent to examine the lock. It was an antique electronic-key model, which could be opened only by the appropriate wave length to which it was attuned.

Hautley dipped one hand beneath his garments and withdrew a cunningly devised and miniature all-purpose electronic key from one of the innumerable pockets and pouches of his "business suit."

He pressed the tubelike end of this small device against the keyhole and spun the dockets. The instrument rapidly ran through several thousand frequencies in less than 1.07 seconds, eventually striking upon the precise frequency to which the lock was attuned.

The door iris dilated and Hautley stepped quickly into a pitch-black room, illuminated only by fitful flashes of dim

neon through the grease-smeared windowpanes, through which the illuminated sign of the bar across the street shone as it flashed on and off.

Hautley felt certain none of the dilapidated loungers loitering about the street had noted his swift and unobtrusive entry into the flat.

Standing motionless in the dark room, he quested about with keen-honed and delicate senses. The air of the long-closed room was stifling. A variety of odors assaulted his nostrils with outrageous impact. There was the scent of a certain brand of rotgut brandy known as Ol' Space Marshall. Added to which was the overwhelming reek of boiled cabbage, a lingering taint of garlic, and more than a wisp of overripe garbage. Hautley's soul, that of an esthete shrank from this malodorous ambush, and all but wilted before the barrage.

He turned from the door, reaching for a light switch, when, as it so very often does in Quicksilver's perilous line of work, the totally unexpected sneaked up and caught the galaxy's ace investigator flatfooted.

To be precise—lights flared, dazzling his eyes, and when his vision cleared he found himself staring directly down the cold grim throat of a General Nucleonics Mark IV coagulator pistol . . .

A rasping voice sounded in his ears from behind the weapon. "One quiver of yer pinky finger, me fine bucko, an' I'll zap ye down where ye stand, puttin' a foine big blood clot two seconds from yer black heart! Freeze now, blast ye, or—"

Needless to say, Quicksilver froze.

WITH A SWIFT all-encompassing glance, Quicksilver noted his immediate surroundings, including the man who stood behind the pistol. A small dingy room and a small dingy man. His

opponent was old, balding, well past the 150 mark, and rapidly going to seed. Also to pot, Quicksilver noted, as he eyed the other's quivering paunch and drooping jowls.

However, the hand that gripped the coagulator was steady as a rock.

The little old man peered fiercely at him with rheumy, bloodshot little eyes. He cackled harshly, exposing a gaping maw wherein the worn stumps of two or three greenish teeth wobbled insecurely.

"That's it, me lad! Not a quiver o' yer eyelid, or I'll curdle yer red stuff to blood puddin'," he wheezed. Hautley complied with unruffled demeanor.

Hufferd, if indeed it were he, and Hautley suspected such was the case, looked him up and down curiously.

"Never saw ye before in all me days, so I'll be askin' yer name, me lad, before I clot ye. Speak up! Who th' divil be ye, heh?"

Quicksilver's mind raced at flashing speed, weighing psycho-semantic-emotional factors, and spoke in a curt clipped voice of steely sternness.

"Captain Rex *Dangerfield*!" he snapped.

His verbal blockbuster had the desired effect. At the unexpected and shocking news that he held the most feared crime-fighter in the entire galaxy at gun point, Hufferd gaped, gasped, and gagged. His gun hand flinched and wavered, no longer pointing straight at Hautley's heart.

Quicksilver's right leg flashed out in a neo-karate stroke. The coagulator went flying, clattering into a corner amidst broken crockery and noisome garbage. Hautley dove on his paralyzed prey, and it took him only 1.04 seconds to secure his aged opponent in a firm hammerlock.

"C-captain D-dangerf-field!" Shpern Hufferd spluttered, writhing feebly in Quicksilver's iron grip. "B-but wh-what the d-divil 'ud ye be wantin' wif an ol' duffer th' loikes o' me? I haven't tipped me fumbly ol' mitt in twenny-foive year or more, I b-been livin' the peaceable loife o' a retoired, lawr-a-bidin' citizen an' tax-payer, I have! Thar wuz I, takin' a li'l nap in t'other room, when I heard ye unlock me door—wot was I to think, I asks ye!—so natcherly I gits me gun and comes t' see what scut be pussyfootin' aroun' me quarters. What c'd the loikes o' yez, Cap'n, be wantin' from the loikes o' me. . ."

"Just one thing, Hufferd. The present whereabouts of your

former partner-in-crime, the notorious Dugan Motley. Quick! Speak up, and I'll not run you in," Quicksilver deadpanned in a level voice.

Hufferd goggled incredulously.

"Th' boss? Why, Cap'n, it's been many th' long year since I—"

His quavering voice broke off on a querulous note, and the fat little bandit sagged limply in Quicksilver's steely arms. Had he fainted from the unaccustomed shock of this encounter? Hastily, Hautley stretched him out on the dusty floor and tried to arouse him from his swoon. Then his hands grew still, and his bright mirror-eyes narrowed to glinting icy slits. . . .

Shpern Hufferd would never awaken from this swoon.

A tiny poison needle bristled from behind one sagging jowl. The little old man's eyes were glazed in sudden death.

Hautley recalled the faintly audible hiss of compressed air his sensitive ears had noted a split second before the little gnome had slumped lifeless in his embrace. *A needle gun!* Fired from somewhere beyond the window, perhaps in the street outside. . . .

He sprang lithely to the rectangle of grease-smeared plastic set in the street wall of the hovel. Sure enough, a minute hole punctured the pane.

Mind flashing into high gear, Quicksilver calculated the angle of fire from a swift mental reconstruction of the position of Shpern Hufferd's body at the moment it was struck, and the angle of the needle when it entered his flesh. The shot had come from a second-floor window of the building directly across the street. Keeping well out of the line of fire, Quicksilver peered at the structure opposite. As he had already noticed, prior to entering the flat, the first floor was a bar, the second floor seemed to be of a residential nature. The upper windows were unlit, seemingly unoccupied. But the murder shot could have come from no other position.

Hautley cursed briefly in three different languages. If only Hufferd had not switched on the room lights when he had Quicksilver at gun point! If the room had remained in darkness, the unknown assassin across the way would have had to fire blindly, and the chances were that Shpern Hufferd would still be alive this moment. But now he would never speak to reveal the hiding place of the Master Burglar of Capitan . . .

Quicksilver exploded into a whirlwind of action. There was little if any time to be wasted. Valuable intelligence could be wrung from the unknown assassin, but Hautley must be swift to capture the villain before he eluded pursuit by mixing with the crowd.

The galaxy's ace criminal ground his weight upon one certain edge of his left bootheel, wherein a hollowed compartment contained a micronegagrav of his own exclusive design. The cunning device engaged, nullifying the gravitational forces about Hautley's body.

He hurtled into the air in a long spring of uncoiling power. The window of Shpern Hufferd's flat splintered into a cloud of gritty particles as Hautley's body zoomed projectile-like through the aperature—arched into mid-air above the foetid street—flipped head over heels—and came crashing through the window of the room above the bar.

Hautley landed in a fighting crouch, gun at the ready, amidst a litter of shattered plastic.

But the room was empty!

21

A BROKEN-DOWN BED slumped in one corner of the room, and against the further wall, the remains of a cheap pneumo sagged. Cheap garish 3D girlie prints hung on the walls. The floor was uncarpeted, sheathed in wear-resistant plastic, and liberally sprinkled with dust, aromatique butts, and even a used ovo-snave wrapper or two. It stank of mildew, of old meals, cheap booze, and smoke.

But it was empty. The assassin, or assassins, had fled. Hautley sprang to the door and tried it, but it was locked. The murderer of old Shpern Hufferd must have left only an instant or two before, for the chemical stench of a needle-gun still hung on the stale, vitiated air.

Hautley darted one hand into his "business suit," and withdrew a slim silvery tube which he pointed at the door. Time was of essence; he could easily pick the lock with his all-purpose electronic key, but precious seconds were a-wasting. The silver tube flashed blindingly. The plastic door sagged, its center panel sprawling limply like wet tissue. The door frame around the lock dribbled down in rivulets of smoking, stenchful stuff that puddled the floor and left the metallic lock still fastened, hanging onto the wall's edge. Hautley sprang through the smoking gap into a dusty ill-lit hall. Empty.

At the end of the hall was a staircase which led down to the bar on the first floor. Quicksilver went down into a large room crowded with shabby loungers inbibing pungent fluids, smoking noisomely, filling the air with a concatenation of odors and gabble. He caught the eye of a huge red barkeep in a checkered apron, chewing on the stump of an aromatic. He beckoned the fellow over with a flick of his fingers.

"What's yers, bo?" the oaf growled around the much-chewed stump of his smoke.

"Information," Quicksilver said crisply, showing him a bright iridium coin in the palm of his hand.

The fellow leered inquiringly, revealing an uneven row of moss-green molars.

"Ask ahead, sport," he invited.

"The rooms upstairs—any of them taken?"

"Mmph. Lessee now. Yer can take yer pick, bud. De Mozart Room, de John Philip Sousa Room, de Oiving Boilin Room, dey is all free. Oney one taken is de Meredith Wilsson Room, what is let to a party till 2:30."

Quicksilver smiled thinly. "Cultural, aren't we!"

"De ol' songs are de best, kid," the scarlet-visaged barkeep leered, chewing on his smoke.

Quicksilver cast a swift eye about the crowded noisy saloon. It was a motley horde, the spewings of the gutters of a hundred worlds. But nowhere amidst the seedy loungers did his keen orb perceive a grey-complexioned Orgotyr in fluorescent scarlet tights slashed with dead-black piping and puckered ruffs, a kindly-faced Wollheimian in severely-tailored spray-on slacks with triple-gathered dockets down the cuff, a plum-skinned Schloim from Pazatar 9, or a white-furred and dual-headed entity from Wolverine 3. (May your historian point out that Hautley Quicksilver had known he was being

followed all the time? I just wanted to call this to your attention.)

Hautley showed the barkeep the coin glinting in his palm again, then asked who had taken the Meredith Wilsson room for those hours. The barkeep spat into the sawdust-strewn floor, and shrugged with a mountainous heave that set his various bellies and chins bobbling gelatinously.

"Jeez, mac, I dunno who he is. Stranger in town, never sawr him before . . ."

"Can you describe him, my good man?"

"Mmmf," the barkeep mused, dubiously, rubbing one ham-sized hand over his stubbled jowls as if to massage into heightened activity some dormant organ of recollection.

"Yeah, I guess so . . . lessee . . . he was a grey-complexioned Orgotyr in flourescent tights slashed wid dead-black pipin' an puckered ruffs. I t'ink!"

"I thought so. And for what reason did he retain the accommodations of your upstairs suite?"

"Said he had a game goin'."

Hautley's mirror-bright eyes flashed like chips of ice.

"And so he did, my man. The kind of game you hunt with a gun."

Hautley tossed the fellow the coin and returned to search the Meredith Wilsson Room swiftly but efficiently. He had not thought to be so lucky as to actually discover a clue, but the Gods of Chance were with him for a change. Near the shattered window he came across a curious talisman whose nature he could not at the moment recall. It was a bit of odd purple metal, no larger than a humanoid thumbnail, worked into the likeness of a hollow ellipse with a smaller circle contained within it—a symbol something like an eye. Strange. He could not recall having ever seen its like. He nonetheless slipped it into a pocket for a closer examination at a later time.

Returning to the street by way of the noisy saloon, he re-entered Hufferd's flat by means of the electronic key. Even though the former confederate of the Master Burglar of Capitan was defunct, Hautley hoped to find something in his quarters which might reveal the present location of Dugan Motley. Anything would do—an address book perhaps, or an old letter.

The light was burning. As soon as Hautley entered the room, he stopped dead . . .

The assassin, whether it was the grey-complexioned Orgo-tyr in fluorescent tights slashed with dead-black piping and puckered ruffs, or one or another of his compatriots, had been busy while Quicksilver had interrogated the crimson-faced barkeep.

For the flat had been ransacked. It was a shambles. And any clue to Dugan Motley's hiding place that Shpern Hufferd might have had hidden away, must certainly have been discovered during such a thorough search.

Once more the Opposition had scored. Lips tightened grimly, eyes cold as intergalactic space, Hautley vowed silently that this would be their last coup at his expense.

But he was wrong . . .

22

THE SHABBY APARTMENT had, quite literally, been turned upside down. Everything had been sifted through, including Hufferd's garbage. The room looked as if a double-barreled cyclone had held a track meet in it for a Boy Scout troop of midget tornadoes. Even the rotting furniture had been torn apart. Hufferd's ragged clothing had been torn up the seams; the grease-flecked, fly-spotted stikfast plastic wallpaper had been ripped off the walls in sheets.

It looked completely hopeless. The enemy would surely not have left any clues to the whereabouts of Dugan Motley laying around for Quicksilver to find, after this kind of a ransacking. Hautley's only hope for locating Dugan Motley, now that Shpern Hufferd slept in Abraham's bosom, lay in finding a clue amidst the rubble. So he swiftly but minutely searched the wreckage.

Twenty minutes later he found the clue for which he searched. He was leafing rapidly through the books in Hufferd's small collection, when he noticed that one of the

titles was, by a suspicious coincidence, the memoirs of Dugan Motley himself, a colloquial and not-unflavorful tome called *Crime Does Not Pay (Much)*, disseminated by the Brasilia Press, Sol III, Centaurus Sector, Quadrant II. A passing glance at the title page revealed something stamped with smudged red ink above the publisher's address: a series of code-numbers.

107-A-s/M.

He looked at the cryptic inscription thoughtfully. It seemed to be nothing more than one of those public library subject codes so enigmatic to the layman. The only difference was that Hautley Quicksilver was no layman! Among his enormous fund of miscellaneous expertise, was a thorough familiarity with the common subject codes used through the civilized galaxy—the Fenster-Cosgrove Decimal System—and this was not it. The Fenster-Cosgrove code was numerical only, and this included alphabetical symbols.

Quicksilver's lips twisted grimly in a quirk of humor. It would have fooled most searchers—the book itself was certainly battered and thumbed enough to pass for an ex-library copy—and the stamped row of symbols was so ordinary, most people would not have thought twice about them. But Hautley Quicksilver was not "most people," and most people were not Hautley Quicksilver!

It was a clever gambit, hiding a clue to Motley's habitat on the one thing in the whole apartment which had the name of Dugan Motley printed all over it . . . but what did the symbols mean? 107-A-s/M. It was not a phone number, that was obvious: they had sixteen digits. Nor was it a homing system wave length, and certainly not a set of galactographic coordinates. What, then, could it . . .

A street address!

Of course! His admiration for old Shpern Hufferd's intelligence multiplying by quantum-jumps, Quicksilver swiftly committed the number to memory. The old purloined letter trick! Leaving the "concealed" information right smack out in the open for anyone to trip over it! He grinned, and looked at the title page again. In full, it read:

CRIME DOES NOT PAY (MUCH)

The Memoirs of
the Master-Burglar
of Capitan

Dugan Motley

107-A-s/M

Brasilia, Sol III

Quadrant II

**BRASILIA PRESS / Centaurus Sector, / BRASILIA PRESS
Quadrant II**

He widened his smile perceptibly. Once you spotted the trick, it was actually almost impossible to miss the clue! Just letting your eye slide down the center of the page, you saw this:

Dugan Motley

107-A-s/M

Brasilia, Sol III

Centaurus Sector,

Quadrant II.

He pulled out his personal phone and called the public library of Thieves' Haven, asking for the custodian of the planetary directories division. Brasilia turned out to be the capital city of the planet, Sol III, and there was only one street in the alien metropolis which could match the initials "A-s/M—Avenida san Miguel—so his hunch had proved right, and he was one jump ahead of Grey-Complexion & Company! It seemed obvious they had missed the clue in their search of the flat, for surely they would never have left it intact for Hautley to find, but would have seared the title-page to ash, or carried the book along with them when they left.

He took the slideway back to the spaceport, fully expecting armed interception at every moment of the trip, but the journey, although a trifle tedious, was uninterrupted.

His slim little speedster, the fastest thing in space, was seemingly untampered with, but just to be certain no nasty explosive devices had been planted aboard her, he went over the graceful little craft with great care, and found nothing. Either the forces of Grey-Complexion & Company had not tried, or they had tried to get into the ship but were unable to penetrate the several electronic guardians he had activated before quitting the craft a half an hour earlier.

The speedster flashed into deep space. With a bone-shivering subsonic drone the Bettelheim-Ortleigh-Robton Drive en-

gaged, and soon Quicksilver was hurtling towards the distant planet of Sol III at seven hundred and fifty-seven light-speeds per hour.

23

WHILE EN ROUTE, Quicksilver again altered his outward appearance. Blue facial pigmentation, a scalpwig of scarlet bristles, a padded pneumatic suit, and he was now one of the Blue Nomads of Cordova 6, Aristocrat Class, and obviously a tourist from his ritual accouterments.

The ship's computer brain spoke through the wall-vox, reminding him of the time. He ordered a snack.

Over a luncheon of boiled wyvern tongue and diced karoly, Quicksilver consulted the ship's small but remarkably comprehensive reference library. Ordovik's *Galactic Religious and Related Symbolism* gave him the answer to the question of the Purple Eye he had found in the Meredith Wilsson Room above the bar.

The metallic token stood for the planet Thoth itself. And there could be little question that this was more than mere coincidence. Obviously, Grey-Complexion and his pals were also after the Crown of Stars, which made yet a fourth entry in the race for the enigmatic cult object! Hautley read the relevant information in Ordovik, to see if he could learn anything else of value.

The circle within the ellipse represented the planet, which, as it happened, was ringed with a whorl of phosphorescent purple vapor. This particular form of the symbol identified its possessor as a member of the Neothothic Priesthood. Were the fanatic cultists aware their treasure was the object of plots? Or was the Eye what might be called a purple herring, planted to confuse and mislead him?

Time (as the ancient maxim ran) would tell.

Next he checked his library for information on Sol III, a planet with which he was not familiar. He learned the planet was an oblate spheroid of medium size with an oxygen-base atmosphere and one grav. Its native culture was very old indeed, although somewhat backwards technologically. The native name for Sol III was "Earth"—quaint conceit, that!—and the Centaurus Sector lay in the Orion Spur, that minor archipelago of suns that jutted rimwards from the Carina-Cygnus Arm of the galaxy.

The leading native language was called Portingee or Portuguese or something like that. Sampling it, Hautley grimaced delicately: an uncouth, barbarous jargon, but he supposed he must subject himself to it. He unfolded the hypnopedia from the wall, dialed the appropriate file number, and settled down before whirling lights for a brief snooze from which he would awaken within an hour or less, his mind artificially "imprinted" with a complete colloquial familiarity with the local native language, social customs, cultural mores, etc.

When he awoke, the ship had already emerged from the mathematical paradox in which it traveled at ultraphotonic velocities, and it was with a slight headache and a sour eye that Quicksilver viewed the muddy looking planet that swam up towards him in the viewplate.

Only one moon—how bizarre!

He spiraled down into a soupy atmosphere and hung in mid-air while the sphere revolved beneath him, until the continent called South America slid beneath him. He touched down at Brasialia, and emerged from the ship.

Now to find Dugan Motley! He hoped it would not take long. As he selected an aircab—there were no glidewalks to be seen, and you could not get anywhere in the capital city of Brasilia unless you want to hoof it on the city's odd mosaic-paved stationary ways—he wondered why, of all the planets in the civilized galaxy, Dugan Motley would have chosen so remote and stagnant a backwater as this little planet, a stellar mediocrity if ever he saw one.

Probably nothing had happened here since Time began.

His aircab ascended into the steamy drizzle. The driver was surly and sullen—at first anyway. Once he sized up Quicksilver as a free-wheeling Galactic tourist with a pouch full of munits, he became more cooperative. Judging from this specimen, the Earthmen were slim, brown-skinned little people with straight black hair and ebon eyes. And to judge from

their general demeanor, it seemed they still harbored a grudge-feud against Galactics. As the wheezing little aircab clove the rainy sky on its sputtering rotors, Hautley idly wondered how long it had been since Galactic Imperial forces had opened up this quaint portion of the Orion Spur to the civilizing influences of a superior culture. A modest inquiry directed at the swarthy little driver, elicited, interspersed amongst some foul language and a number of pungent epithets, the information that the Conquest had occurred way back in A.D. 1968, according to the local calendar. From the lowness of this numerical designation, Hautley assumed "1968" must have been at the very dawn of Earthling civilization. In all the millenia since passed, the Earthlings did not seem to have improved their technological levels with particular alacrity, he noted, appraising the aircab itself, virtually a museum-piece, with its ungainly nuclear power-pack, which must have occupied a good cubic foot of space . . .

Puttering along at a dismally slow crawl of 500 m.p.h., the cab left the city of Brasilia proper, and entered into airspace above its several suburbs. Before Hautley had completed smoking his second *aromatique*, they were above endless squares of suburban homes, amusing antiques with their biodomos which thermostatically simulated a perfect *Nordamericano* climate and each with its identical elm tree on the front yard and a two-copter garage in the rear. Now they were over the fashionable Matto Grosso suburb.

The farther they flew, the higher the fare mounted, and the higher the fare mounted, the more sizable grew the potential tip in the driver's expectant mind, and the more sizable proportions the tip assumed, the more affable grew the surly little cabby. He became, in fact, downright cordial, and, as they began to near their destination, he had thawed to the degree of volubly pointing out the local sights. Such as the marina at the mouth of the Orinoco River, Blasco Ibanez National Park, and the replica of the Lost City of "Z" for which a local folk hero called "Colonel Fawcett" had been searching when he met a grisly and enigmatic end somewhere in the trackless and swampy wilds of the great Amazonian jungle whose matted wilderness had once sprawled in oozy grandeur where now block after block of suburban homes marched in stereotyped squalor. (This exact-size duplicate of the Lost City, Hautley learned from the now loquacious cabby, gratuitously passing on quaint nuggets of local color, had been constructed entirely

from tens of thousands of "Mr. Frosty" sticks contributed by the schoolchildren of the Earth. Sadly, for antiquarians such as Quicksilver, the Lost City of "Z" had been torn down some centuries ago so that a fly-in video theatre could be constructed on its site by an enterprising realty entrepreneur.)

Ah! progress! thought Hautley, wryly.

24

ONE HUNDRED AND SEVEN Avenida san Miguel proved to be a palatial mansion whose stately lines reflected the well-aged patina of an aristocratic colonial culture. It was prefabricated entirely out of pastel nonresinous plastics, in a style which nostalgically reminded Hautley of childhood visits to grandma's farm. This imposing structure rose amid flowering parks with gracefully meandering walks and a clutter of greenhouses and comparable outbuildings of similar nature. *The old boy* (Quicksilver mused) *has certainly done all right for himself!*

Hautley's driver landed the aircab with a bounce and a thump that must have loosened half the nuts and bolts holding the craft together. Hautley, however, was grateful to have come down in one piece. From the sounds it had made in flight, the antiquated vehicle either had a bad case of asthma, or could be expected to blow a gasket or lose a venturi at any moment during flight. Quicksilver paid the exorbitant fare, added a gratuity whose sheer opulent munificence made the cabby's toes curl with ecstasy; and rang the doorbell.

He proffered his card to the robotler, eschewing, for just this once, a *nom de plume*, and while waiting, glanced about him curiously. Everywhere was rose-marble from far Capuchine and grillwork of fine Phriote craftsmanship, chastely ornamented with a zircon-studded chromium relief illustrative of various culture heroes from the local religion (Juarez, Mickey Mouse, Fidel Castro, Zorro and Joan Blondell, to be

precise.) Hautley's sardonic brows mounted. What luxury! What taste! Dugan Motley, it seemed, had certainly invested his criminally-gotten gains wisely and well . . .

A deep-chested foghorn voice in full-throated bellow interrupted these cultural musings.

"By dog, the great Quicksilver himself landing on mine doorstep, it is! Scintillate me for a no-good, a joy it is for you to meeting up with me—no?"

Surging mountainously in advance of the prim and staid robotler, came Dugan Motley himself, all seven foot-three inches and 325 pounds of him, dwarfing the automataton as he waddled into the hall. A gigantic, fiercely-bristling piratical beard of flaming crimson, twinkling eyes merry and bright and blue as the earth sea, Caribbean, he lumbered forward, his immense paunch of heroic, nay! mythological proportions swinging from side to side as he strode, with one fat iridium ring glittering from his left earlobe.

Beaming smiles and thundering forth articulate welcomes and little goat-cries of enthusiasm, he bore down on the startled Quicksilver like a super-dreadnaught descending in full force upon a tiny rowboat, enveloping him in a vast, bone-crunching bear hug, thumping him on the back with pats of spine-pulverizing impact; and firing off floor-shaking salvos of hearty booming laughter that caused the bric-a-brac to jingle, several alabaster busts to quake on their fluted pedestals and aroused seismic waves of tinkling among the crystal chandeliers.

The Master Burglar ushered Quicksilver into a first-floor den only a few microns smaller than the Grand Imperial State Audience Chamber itself. Pushing his guest into the seductive embrace of a cozy pneumatique that instantly adjusted to his contours and began a subtle massage job on his shoulder muscles, Dugan waddled over to the wall and thumbed a dial.

The wall sank into the floor soundlessly, revealing to Hautley's stunned gaze the most astounding collection of cut-crystal decanters filled with potables of every hue in the spectrum—an alcoholic's dream of the Land of Oz.

Roaring with Falstaffian joviality, Dugan Motley grinned through the bristling bush of his bright beard.

"You, my friend, the great Quicksilver of about whom I have so much heard, you will drink—what?" He gestured expansively, using for the gesture a hand only slightly smaller than a medium-sized ham.

"Your choice you will taking, please, of two hundred and eleven thousand, four hundred thirty-six different varieties of booze, rotgut and panther's sweat (as the earthly Ancients would say, ho ho). So what is it you are choose? Or to the smoking perhaps-maybe? Sniff? Inject? Nasal-spray? Nerve center electrostimulus? Ovo-Snave? You ask—I got!" he boomed, crimson with the flush of hospitality.

"In other words—name my poison, eh?" Quicksilver smiled. For once his aplomb was overwhelmed by the sheer prodigality of the Master Burglar's generosity. He assumed a judicious air and pondered the row of sparkling decanters.

"Well . . . Chateau Moskowitz, Dugan, if you have it."

"If I am having it—to laugh, to laugh it is! Seventeen more bottles I am having than the Emperor himself in the Imperial booze collection, har-har." Dugan slapped his wobbling paunch with one massive hand, a wallop that would have staggered a bullock. "The bottles, the drinking, it is a lonely, sick old man's only joy," he snorted. "But no, yes—scut me for a snazzer, I will having the same, by dog!" Waddling over to the wall of spirituous beverages, the fat man selected a crystal bottle.

"Vintage of '022, is okay being by you, mine boy? Heh?" he rumbled inquiringly.

Hautley nodded. "A good year, I believe, yes."

Dugan slopped the priceless beverage into two diamond-studded cups and they toasted each other.

"To crime," Quicksilver proposed aptly.

"To crime, har har!"

They drank.

DUGAN MOTLEY gargled down his brew with snorting appreciation, and wiped the back of his hand across his whiskery mouth.

"Pfthaa! Hot damn and by dog, now, but that has the genuine old-fashioned Moxie, or am I be-lying in my molars, heh? Heh!" he belched.

"Excellent," Hautley commented. Judiciously he swizzled the pallid sparkling wine about the outer rim of the goblet with a practised twist of the wrist. He threw back his head to languidly savor the bouquet with first the left nostril, then the right, and then with the left again, as it was particularly sensitive.

"A charmingly unpretentious little wine," he pronounced, after sampling it thoughtfully. "Ever so cautiously verging on audacity, but sweetly retiring from the brink, blushing, as it were. But pleasant, very . . . ah . . . humble, but touched with an amusing degree of self-confidence."

"Hot damn," Dugan Motley rumbled, admiringly. Hautley inserted the very tip of his tongue into the fluid and sipped frowningly.

"Hmm . . . from the, ah, the west side of the vinyard, I should say," he continued. "More sun in the afternoons, you know," he improvised, at Dugan's gape of non-comprehension. "Brings out the tannic acid in the soil, of course. Yes . . . on the whole, a very hospitable little wine. Very."

Dugan's huge red face split in two with a grin that revealed a display of ivories that would have quickened the heart of a pianist.

"Ho, it is the true connoisseur, this Quicksilver, by hot damn and hot dog! What expertise and know-how, not to mentioning the savvy too! Oh, the joy it is to an old lonely sick man's heart, the very sight of you is bringing,—the great Quicksilver!"

"Happy to meet you, too," Hautley said. "I've always been an admirer—"

Dugan's cement-mixer voice roared on over Hautley's polite interpolation like a bulldozer sliding over a cabbage patch. "Upstairs—I can show you!—I am keeping scrapbooks full of you, yes! That time on Zanuck 3 when the ruby eye from the idol of N'gumba-Yoh-Yoh the Corn Goddess you are the stealing of! What finesse! And the timing, how smooth!"

"Tut, now!" Hautley said modestly.

"And the kidnaping for the huge ransom of that Prince from Niekas 12—how you are, with the adroits and the subtles, too, hoy! And him the Prince, too, a forty-foot Crocodile

Man! Oh, the marvelousness of it all! To an old man's heart it is like a breath of the good old days . . ."

Against his innate sense of modesty, Quicksilver could not help but bask before the warmth of this praise like earth poet of pre-antiquity Walter Savage Landor before the fires of life.

"Old!" he protested, rallying the old bandit. "Why, Dugan you sound like a real old-timer, but from the looks of you, I'd swear you're not a day over two hundred! Come on, now, I'd thumbprint an oath to the fact."

"Oh, har har har!"

They joshed back and forth over the sparkling wine, as two veteran professionals will upon their first meeting. But it was grim business that had brought Hautley speeding to this quaint backwater of a planet, and he was impatient to get the social amenities out of the way so that he could get down to the brass tacks of business, as it were. He had no slightest doubt in mind, that Dugan Motley would refuse to give him the inside information he required. For, as yet, he had not found a chance to reveal to the bluff, swaggering old space-pirate the disquieting news that the evil forces against whom Hautley was opposed in a duel of wits had ruthlessly murdered in cold blood Dugan's old partner in crime, helpers, in-offensive Shpern Hufferd.

For a brief while, however, he delayed passing on that unhappy news, and the two supercriminals toasted each other in the sparkling beverage and recounted old exploits, lovingly discussed the fine points of criminal technique, and fingered over with the appreciation some of the mightiest deeds in the annals of criminality. But, then, once the social amenities were exhausted, the Master Burglar came swiftly to the point.

"So." Fixing Hautley with an inquiring eye. "Now, not for the compliments exchange are you visiting old Dugan Motley, eh? No. Nor for the reminiscence doing, eh? Quicksilver, my friend, you have business in mind, right am I?"

"Right," Quicksilver agreed.

"Then shall we to it, pell-mell?"

"DUGAN, OLD BOY," Hautley began without preamble, "you are the one man in the galaxy who tried to turn the Crown of Stars trick and came back with his throat uncut, even though you didn't manage to snaffle the gemmy thing. What I want to know is very simple. To Wit:

- (1) How is the Crown guarded?
- (2) How far did you get before you got caught?
- (3) Why did you fail to get the Crown?
- (4) How did you get caught at all, and you the snorpest scraggling fizzler that ever flad a flid in this neck of the galaxy?"

The Motley paunch heaved alarmingly with a series of seismic chuckles that wreaked havoc with cheek, jowl and upper torso in general. Hautley patiently waited while the mirthquake slowly subsided. As it did, at length. Wheezing and wiping tears of honest laughter from his bright twinkling eyes, the fat old man tossed off a last goblet of Chateau Moskowitz '022 as lightly as if it were nothing of higher potency than a beaker of carrot juice.

"So, my japer, that be's the caper, heh? The great Quicksilver planning to 'crown' a bee-youtiful career by snipping the Crown o' Stars itself, heh, me bucko? Oh, har har har!"

"That's it, all right," Hautley said firmly. "And the question is, Dugan, will you help me by giving me all the dope I need to make a try? You're the only one that tried and got caught and still got away with an un-laser-broiled epidermis. I'd sure like to know what sort of guards I face, and exactly how you pulled off so brilliant a coup. Will you help me, Dugan?"

"Yes, yes," the old man grumbled, wagging his head dole-

fully, pendulous jowls a-wobbling. "Yes . . . old Dugan tried, the poor fat old feller . . . tired and failed, dog rot the frazzled luck o' the Motleys! But better luck and all success, sez I, to me friend, the so great Quicksilver, on top of whom's shoulders the cloak o' fame I worn so long has passed!"

Hautley's mirror-bright eyes flashed eagerly.

"Then you'll help me, Dugan?"

"Aye, me spruce young bucko!" the old pirate beamed, triggering off another series of seismic chuckles that went joggling and jiggling down his monstrously fat facade. "Happily will I be to tell to you all the ins of this dog-rotted Crown, and especially the, har har, outs!"

"Great! That's fantabulous, Dugan! Let me get my soundscriber." Hautley dug out of his "business suit" a miniature tape-recorder and snapped it on.

"Well, to beginning with, mine friend the great Quicksilver," Dugan began pompously, "you see, the Crown is—is—"!

"That's enough free gas, Gutsy, hold it right there!"

Dugan's voice broke off with an astounded snort.

Quicksilver's hand flew towards his concealed weaponry, but the hard, cold, level voice from behind them said:

"Freeze, Blue Boy, unless you want a ventilated duodenum. Everybody stay nice an' quite, 'cause I got a itchy trigger-stud finger, and this thing might go off. That's right!"

The steely-hard, ice-cold voice came from approximately seven feet three inches behind him, Hautley's keen sense of hearing told him. That would place its point of origin directly in front of the third in the series of French doors he recalled seeing when first he had entered this first-floor room. Secure in the knowledge that no criminal could recognize him in his current disguise as one of the Blue Nomads of Cordova 6, Aristocrat Class, what with his indigo-hued facial pigmentation, his scalpwig of scarlet bristles, his padded pneumatic suit, etc., Hautley froze motionless and stared straight ahead of him into the mirror behind the wall of liquor bottles. There he could see the reflections of the intruders who had so rudely broken in upon his colloquy with the Master Burglar of Capitan.

His heart sank, momentarily. He saw—as he had half-expected to see—a grey-complexioned Orgotyr in fluorescent scarlet tights slashed with dead-black piping and puckered ruffs, a kind-faced Wollheimian in severely tailored spray-on slacks with triple-gathered dockets down the cuff, a plum-

skinned Schloim from Pazatar 9, and a white-furred and dual-headed entity from Wolverine 3.

This, he reflected, philosophically, was certainly not one of his better days.

But he had no one to blame but himself. For he had carelessly neglected to take a precaution both elementary and extremely vital to one employed in his precarious profession—a precaution so natural to his thinking, that he had once put it down on paper for the delectation of future versicle-lovers in this manner:

*Observed: he who would die in bed
Keeps one eye fixed behind, one fixed ahead!*

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OF THE FOUR intruders, he noticed that one bore a General Nucleonics Mark IV coagulator. The second fiend was armed with a Cariocan boomerang-dirk of razor keen-edge knife-wood. The third aimed a deadly little ionic flasher the size of his little finger, but potent enough in destructive potential to reduce this princely structure to smouldering cinders.

The fourth hefted a cross-compensating megawatt neuron-icparalyzer tube with sawed-off muzzle and a Freggley-Smythe-Wickett Model Alpha-12 robot-aimed radar-sighted spotter.

Here's a deadly crew, Hautley sighed.

Still seated immobile, he delicately and unobtrusively began shifting his weight in such a manner as to exert particular pressure on his left boot-heel, which was hollowed and contained therein a pressure-sensitive charge of flash-powder. Using the subtle arts of muscle-control Hautley had learned as a wee lad from the Adepts of New Tibet, or Blavatsky 3, as it was known to the tourism guide-books, he allowed the exertion of extraordinary thrust to build up—using, of

course, only those sinews from kneecap to heel, the rest of his body lax as flaccid wax.

But this time, to no avail . . .

"Plax off, bubby!" the grey-complexioned one snarled, lifting one cruel lip in a nasty sneer. "Forget all about the charge of pressure-sensitive flash powder in the left boot heel, or I'll air-condition your liver and your duodenum!"

Hautley sighed, but complied, permitting the thrust to slacken. Of course, the grey-complexioned Orgotyr in fluorescent scarlet tights slashed with dead-black piping and puckered ruffs had completed his natty sartorial ensemble with a set of X-ray contact lenses—how could Hautley have overlooked so obvious a gambit?

You're getting mighty lax, he told himself severely.

Purpling with indignation, Dugan Motley huffed and wheezed like a beached Orc. Apoplectic fury seethed in his stout old heart. Incoherent with boiling rage, he rumbled and snorted sulphurously. Hautley keenly realized that any moment now the old war-horse would do something foolish, like charging the four intruders like a bull walrus in mating season. He must do something quickly, to stave off this suicidal outburst on the part of his fat old host, whom he had unmeaningly embroiled in a private feud.

"Relax, old-timer!" he said in a mollifying tone.

"Relax, is it?" the Master Burglar roared.

"Sure. Be smart. They've got us zaxed like a couple of chowders in a second-rate Chowdery! Be smart, ease off, and watch your arteries."

Grey-complexion grinned nastily at this, but old Dugan was still trembling with infuriated rage.

"By dog and hot damn, my arteries can go plax themselves! Had the ruddy little blighters ripped out last year and replaced with spliced plastex tubing, fore an' aft, did I! But I am boiling with the insultedness! To a guest in mine home, the sticking-ups should happen! An old fat man, sick and lonely, I still have my prides! Me, *me*, on whom in my days none ever got the droppings! OOOOoooo—the shame of it all!"

He broke off, to fix the grinning quartet with a glare of sufficient wattage to boil aluminum.

"Kill me quick, you scuts, before I am dying of the galloping embarrassments—AARGGHH. *Akk. Gukk . . .*"

"Always happy to oblige, Fats," leered the kindly-fea-

tured Wollheimian in severely tailored spray-on slacks with triple-gathered dockets down the cuff. Leveling his cross-compensating neuronc paralyzer tube, he sprayed Dugan Motley with a pale lavender ray-beam.

Dugan sagged, limbs and paunch flopping in several different directions simultaneously. The effect was that of a half a ton of monkey-blubber suddenly freed of its casing.

Rapping a hard oath, Hautley whirled into violent action.

One hand plucked a slim, deadly little needler from his tunic, as he whirled—

—But, even as he whirled, a hissing, crackling noise of ray gunfire exploded behind him with all the vehement sound effects of twenty pounds of frozen, oily bacon quick-fried in a berserk shortwave-oven.

“All right, Quicksilver,” an icy female voice redolent of ill-repressed wrath seethed behind him. “You’re safe enough now, but not when I get my hands on you, you trickster you!”

He whirled to see the unexpected figure of Barsine Torsche behind him, standing victoriously with a smoking pistol astride the recumbent bodies of the four intruders, who lay rigid as tent poles, blue sparks snapping from their finger tips.

28

“I WONDER, Barsine, if you realize how lovely you look when you are angry,” Hautley purred, with that suave self-possession that seldom deserted him, even under the most horrendous of circumstances.

She snorted.

“Thought you could fool *me*, did you? Phooey!” she crackled. “I had a hunch you had something up your sleeve beside your arm. So I hid off-planet at the edge of your meteor-moat

and waited to see if you would come hightailing out of there—which you did!”

“Barsine, I—”

“You buzzed off Carvel before I could even finish having a smoke! So I just followed along after you. If I’d stopped to think what I would do if I were Ser Smart-Nose H. Quicksilver, C.A., I’d have thought of checking up on old Shpern Hufferd, former confederate of the notorious Dugan Motley—which is just what you did.”

“Barsine . . . !”

“Well?”

“So I went to check up on Shpern Hufferd: what, may I ask, does that prove? I told you I was on a job for His Dignity the Proprietor of Canopus—perhaps I wanted to hire Hufferd for the job of scragging Heveret’s political foe?”

Her adorably small jaw settled grimly.

“Won’t do, Quicksilver! I checked the records. You did not register any contract with anybody this whole entire week, for any caper. So . . . either you were lying, and flashed a phony contract under my nose, or you’ve been cheating on your income tax by not reporting commissions—which is it?”

Hautley was not trapped into a disclosure that easily.

“How could you possibly follow me through pseudospace?” he scoffed shrewdly. “When a ship is under Bettelheim-Ortleigh-Robton Drive transposition it is, by very definition, undetectable, even by gazdar . . .”

She smirked triumphantly.

“Simple, you simpleton. When I left your flashy villa, I stuck a ‘tracer’ on your hull. Now, let’s stop shilly-shallying. Who was it who hired you to go after the Crown of Stars, and what did you learn from poor old Dugan Motley—”

Hautley jumped, and turned to bend over the recumbent body of their host.

“Yes, by Arnam’s Beard! I knew I’d forgotten something—what about poor old Dugan? They zapped him down, just as you came crashing the party. I wonder if the old walrus is still with us, or . . . ?”

He made a swift examination of the body with his pocket medikit. Face cast in an expression of unusual solemnity, he rose slowly upon completion of the task.

“Well?” Barsine inquired anxiously. “Is the old geezer okay, or did they . . . ?”

"No, not with the coagulator, thank Space. They zapped him with the neuroncic paralyzer."

She relaxed. "Thank the Plenum! He's an old rum-guzzling reprobate, but I'd hate to see him fried. If it's only an n-gun, the effects wear off—"

"In fifty-six hours!" Hautley grated tautly. "I can't wait that long for the information I need, and I didn't get one erg of intelligence regarding Thoth from him before the Baddies zapped him down. No, there's no point in hoping for help from this quarter. His brain'll be in stasis where I can't question it. Damn! Now what'll I do!"

"What about these four scuggers?" Barsine indicated the four tent poles, still faintly sparking from their finger tips. "Maybe they know something?" Quicksilver eyed them disdainfully.

"Not them—mere hirelings. Turn 'em over to the local native police, will you Barsine, while I—"

"Oh no you don't, Hautley Quicksilver! I know you and your tricks! You'll buzz off in your speedster the microsec my back is turned if I don't keep you in sight! No siree, from here on we work together, or you don't work at all!"

He sighed, but complied. "Well, at least help me drag them into the front hall. You hit them with such a charge, they're beginning to singe Dugan's priceless Artemisian tapestry-carpet."

While Barsine had Dugan's robutler phone for medical aid, and then summoned the local police to pick up the unconscious scuggers, Hautley searched the spark-discharging bodies with swift but microscopic care. He found—nothing.

Moments later they were winging back to downtown Brasilia in Dugan's own aircar. Within moments they were in the sleek cabin of Quicksilver's slim speedster, the fastest thing in space, and the quaint old planet Earth was fading behind them into the sunset.

"So. What's your—our—next move?" Barsine demanded, while making certain subtle repairs in her facial cosmetics.

"Next, my lass, I make a try at lifting the Crown of Stars," he said grimly.

AN HOUR LATER they circled in orbit about the planet Thoth. The trip from Sol III to Thoin IV in the Derghiz Cluster had been rapid and uneventful, consuming a half-hour at most. As they emerged from pseudospace into the normal continuum, Hautley, having donned yet another of his remarkable disguises, deftly removed the Triple-X Spasmodic Frammistator from the drive engine, replacing the delicate component with an identical, though severely fractured, duplicate.

His callboard whistled for attention. Wiping graphite from his hands with a scrap of waste, Hautley thumbed the switch to Receiving and delivered a bland smile into the irate features of a Neothothic Archimandrate.

"Identify yourself at once! *Screech, crackle*. No ship permitted on or about, *whee, ziggle*, this planet by Section 12, Paragraph Z of our Charter of Planetary Sovereignty with your *zeek, wheetle*, Imperial government!" the irate Archimandrate sizzled, obviously having worked up a fine, ecclesiastical frenzy.

"Hi, there!" Hautley beamed jovially. "Sorry, friend, but I can't budge. Cracked my only Spasmodic Frammistator right smack in two coming through a nasty gravity-vortex a parsec back. Lucky to be able to transpose into Normal so near a fine inhabited-type planet like yours!"

"What? *Zeek, week, weezle*. What ship are you?"

"HMS *Pinafore*, out of New Poughkeepsie, Altair, bound for Y'ha-nthlei in the Arkham Cluster, friend. I am the Most Honorable John Jacob Jingleheimer-Smith, second son of the Duke of Poughkeepsie, owner and pilot, and this is my . . . ah . . . secretary, Miss Ethel Glutz. Request-permission-to-land-for-emergency-repairs."

The irate Archimandrate burst into a superb torrent of

profanity (revolving on rather recondite mythological is symbolism derived, no doubt, from the Neothothic *cultus*). While he seethed and bubbled sulphurously, in bets between *zeek wheetles*, Hautley kept a bland, faintly embarrassed expression in place, but studied the Thothite narrowly. The people of Thoin IV were descended from nine-point-nine homonid norm stock, but the preponderance of monoatomic fluorohydrates in their soil and atmosphere had, over the fourteen-generation timespan since Frist Landing, embued their features with a delicate and not unattractive shade of mingled puce and mauve. Solar radiation from their primary (a Blue Giant), filtering through the weird ring of purple neon which encircled the planet, had tintured their facial hair a peculiar rare shade of canary yellow. Hautley thought the combination a not unpleasant one; rather decorative, actually.

He had read about this planet's ring of purple gas: it was a galactic rarity. At one time, Thoth had a moon, but the planet being a very old one, its sole satellite had eventually reached Roche's Limit and had disintegrated some centuries before. Since the satellite had been a solid globe of neon-ice, perhaps the debris of some comet's tail, a plume of free gas which condensed aeons ago into the ice ball, the kinetic energy released by the moon's destruction had produced heat, returning the ice-sphere to neon gas again. The vaporized ice-moon had formed this extraordinary ring of violet gas through the simple action of centrifugal force. So rare and extraordinary was it, that this natural feature was listed in the *Tourist's Guide to Central Derghis* (117th Edition) as one of the Seven Hundred Wonders of the Universe.

While these thoughts had passed through Hautley's mind, the Archimandrate, having temporarily exhausted his supplies of religious invective, broke off, wheezing.

Hautley amiably took up the burden of the conversation.

"Sorry, Padre," he grinned amiably, "but we have no choice—nor do you. According to the first article of the Universal Space Emergency Act of 11,493 Imperial Calendar, as ratified by the entire Imperial Enclave and countersigned by His Supreme Intelligence the Emperor Emil Fotheringay XIV—and I quote—"No planet may refuse shelter, haven, aid or sustenance to a Distressed Spaceman, as defined herein, under full penalty of economic sanctions." End quote. And I might also call your attention, padre, to the Humane Activi-

ties Act of 11,483, Article Seven, paragraphs 3, 12, 27, and Appendix F—”

“All right, all right!” Under the barrage of expertise, the stiff-necked ecclesiastic wilted. “You and Miss Glutz may descend in your dinghy, but be certain your pile is on ‘neutral’ and your craft in a stable orbit. And don’t call me ‘padre’!”

Curtly the Archimandrate gave detailed landing instructions. It would seem that Hautley and Barsine could not just land any old place, but must follow very specific directions and descend in one certain area. Hautley recorded the landing instructions and broke the connection.

Barsine was still sizzling. “Miss Ethel Glutz, am I” she said with a certain touch of coldness in her mellow mezzo-soprano. “No doubt that ridiculous name reflects your true feelings for me, you louse. Listen here, Hautley—”

He stemmed her flow of invective with a lifted palm.

“Please,” he said, with a pained expression. “There just might be an audio spy beam fixed on us from Thoth. So remember, I am Ser John or Very Honorable. And no temper. We are working now—Ethel.”

She went into a chill silence, which was exactly what he had wanted. He was not really worried about the possibility of any converse between them being carried to listening ears below via aural scrutiny. A planet whose inter-world communications rig was so antiquated (*zeek, zizzle*) would hardly have installed anything so sophisticated as an audio-conductor beam . . .

They cast off the dinghy and drifted down Thothwards.

THOTH, OR THOIN IV, was a small, cold, windy ball of rock. Bleak, barren, devoid of tree or leaf—a wilderness of stone stretching off on every side. No wonder the ancient and ex-

inct Cavern Kings had constructed their unique civilization underground.

They were met at the landing stage and escorted from their craft by a silent group of priests in full lizard-suit regalia, including dragonish false heads with eye-holes in the throat-plates and imitation claws. Hautley's bland attempts to chaffer with the ecclesiastics was severely rebuffed. One and all, the priests virtually radiated disapproval on all wave lengths.

The portly Archimandrate conducted them personally to the quarters apparently set aside for uninvited guests. The trip was short and swift, but Hautley did manage to observe something of the remarkable architectural style for which the extinct super-reptiles were widely known: a subtle matter of sloping walls, multiplanal ceilings and chambers of dodecahedral rather than cubicular format. Oddly impressive, in a non-Euclidian sort of way.

The Spartan simplicity of their quarters was depressing, to say the least. Two narrow cots with a privacy partition set between. Beside each cot stood a berrywood stool, a small three-legged tabouret for personal effects, and a washbasin. The walls themselves, eye-wrenchingly leaning awry at bewildering angles, were devoid of ornament or color. They were left to their own devices as soon as they had reached the cell. The only reply to Hautley's amiable flow of chatter had been a curt, snappish remark to the effect that their dinner would be served in two hours, while Temple artificers wrought repairs in the fractured Spasmodic Frammistator. The lock clicked in the door and they were alone.

Hautley stretched out on the lumpy cot and smoked. It would seem that the frequent and fruitless attempts to steal the Crown of Stars had developed within the breasts of the Neothothic priesthood an unhealthy degree of suspicion towards chance droppers-in. He had no doubt their quarters were bugged as thoroughly as Thoth's limited technology permitted. This was, in fact, more than Hautley's hunch. While being whisked via various shortcuts to their present abode, Hautley had felt the warning tingle of a penetrascope which must have been concealed in one or another of the chambers adjoining the corridor. This brief but penetrating subelectronic tickle was the response of his sensitive nervous system to the bath of *theta*-beams emitted by the 'scope, as they searched his physical structure down to the molecular level.

He remained unruffled by the occurrence. Anticipating a penetrascope, he had abandoned his customary "business suit" this once, and the equipment he did carry was completely unobservable by any, even sophisticated, means.

Using the eye-blink code devised by Imperial Intelligence, Hautley conveyed this and other relevant warnings and information to Barsine, while carrying on, at the vocal level, with a brainless stream of bright chatter. When dinner arrived it was spooned out by a grumpy old frater who ignored Hautley's cheery greetings as pointedly as he was swift to pocket the tip. *Déjeuner* by the way, was not exactly up to Hautley's accustomed level of gustatory expertise—a soppy affair of lukewarm gruel and buttermilk. No doubt healthy enough, but hardly Hautley's idea of an ideal din-din.

Night fell. Here in the underground city it might have been hard to tell, except that about seven o'clock the lights went out automatically. This was what Hautley had been waiting for. Within split seconds of the falling of abrupt darkness, Quicksilver made his move. His equipment for this caper was merely two simple articles: a self-inflating balloon dummy of approximately Hautley's bodily dimensions, which under cover of darkness he whisked from behind the portable light-baffle he had carried invisibly into the citadel, thence whisking himself out of sight behind the second of the two articles, the light-baffle itself. This was accomplished within split seconds. He presumed that even if their quarters were under infra-red surveillance during the hours of darkness, the lethargic fraters would need at least a few seconds to make the change-over from visible light surveillance to the night-sight variety. During those few precious mini-seconds, he became hidden from any form of vision behind the baffle, while the rubber dummy took his place in the cot, with the covers drawn up over its head.

At Barsine disrobed on the other side of the partition, they exchanged a few final phrases, then settled down, ostensibly, to sleep . . .

In a flash the invisible Quicksilver was out of the room, having picked the lock by an ingenious system of conflicting magnetic currents. The corridors were poorly lit by a system of dim night lights. Hautley moved through their coiling maze without faltering. His studies of Neothothic architecture had suggested to him that the treasure vault wherein the cherished cult object was kept would be concealed most prob-

ably in a circular sub-basement directly below the main body of the cavern-city, which was the only settlement on the inhospitable little world.

He wove his agile path past formidable barriers—guards, light-traps, alarm-triggered cameras and automatic self-sighting disruptor cannons (all of which he eluded, since the light-baffle rendered him completely invisible). The usual death-traps and poised weights were child's play to avoid. Fierce watchdogs he simply strode past, having temporarily paralyzed their keen sense of smell with a potent deodorant spray. This unimpressive gamut run, he found himself within the lowest sub-basement within less than 22 minutes. This was it: the sanctum sanctorisimus of the whole shebang! Beyond that door, if his careful calculations proved correct, he should find the fabulous Crown of Stars itself! He manipulated magnetic forces, and the door swung open . . .

Utterly appalled to the roots of his being, Hautley reeled in mind-numbing shock!

Of course, he had suspected *something* like this. Some sort of incredibly ingenious, supra-humanly clever, diabolical method by which the Crown would be protected from the touch of desecrating, light-fingered hands . . .

But not for something like *this!*

Rising in thirty-seven tiers of stone like narrow shelves around the curved walls of this circular adytum, stood the fantastically valuable Crown of Stars itself—*hopelessly lost somewhere amid seven hundred and seventy-six exact, precise, microscopically-detailed DUPLICATES.*

Sternly repressing a cold shudder at the damnable, fiendish simplicity of it all, Hautley was ironically reminded of one of his own verses, to wit:

*Hardest of all: to find
One needle in a mountain of its kind.*

THE DESK CLERK at The Imperial House, Chitterling, Vassily II, was a feather-headed young Birdwoman, obviously an Aurochroid from one of the Gryx planets. She impartially distributed a glassy, professional smile midway between Hautley Quicksilver and Barsine Torsche.

"May I render assistance, Ser and Madame?"

"Yes. The name's Quicksilver. Is Doctor Smothly in?"

"One moment please." She turned to the communicator console that winked and twinkled, sending flickers of multi-hued light across the gleaming marble floor of the hotel lobby. Addressing her attentions to a whisper-mike, she then turned another antiseptic smile in their general direction. "Room 11, 209-Q. Go right up, Ser Quacksalver, Dr. Smothly is expecting you."

"That's Quicksilver. Thanks."

The grav tube whisked them to the 11,209th floor with pneumatic efficiency. Hautley, his mahogany features and mirror-bright eyes impassive, as were, indeed, his meticulously arranged pewter-grey locks, palmed the door which slid open before him. Barsine Torsche, who had accompanied him, was now inexplicably nowhere to be seen. He stepped into the room.

"Ah, Ser Hautley!" Pawel Spiro, nervous, even flustered, approached him. "I had been expecting you to phone shortly, not to come in person, and the twenty-seven hour delay you requested is not yet transpired! May I assume that your call indicates your decision to accept my retainer on your professional, ah, services?"

"You may," Hautley said with his accustomed suavity. He viewed the little mouse of a man with quiet pride, smiling benignly. Spiro ran a plump soft hand nervously through his

salmon-tinted hair and cleared his throat with that tentative little glottal noise Hautley had found so annoying a few hours earlier.

"Then, ah, you will appropriate the cult object for the Museum . . . ?"

Hautley's modest smile broke loose of its moorings.

"Learned, you have retained the services of no mere fumble-fingered scugger, but of Hautley Quicksilver himself. With such as I, to think is—to act. *Behold!*"

With his left hand, he disengaged the light-baffle he had been unobtrusively carrying, revealing to sight—

"*AH!*"

Spiro's sharp, involuntary indrawal of breath was almost a cry of pain. For there, dangling from the outstretched fingers of Quicksilver's right hand was the Crown of Stars itself! Its incredible frosting of curious gems glittered and flashed and sparkled in the indirect ceiling-illuminants. The lacy, open-scrolled goldwork gleamed with satiny highlights along the coiling arabasques of precious metal. Not only was the Crown a stunning work of the goldsmith's art, but a fascinating aura of antiquity and alienage clung about it as well. Automatically, Pawel Spiro extended one hand to grasp the cherished object. Quicksilver's smile hardened.

"Not—quite—yet, I think! First we have to settle the little matter of . . ."

"The price? Of course!" Pawel gabbled. Perspiration dribbled down his pudgy features. He clawed within his jerkin for a checkbook, but Hautley's eyes caught and held his with the bright glitter of fractured ice.

"A matter of professional pride, rather than price," he purred. "For I am unaccustomed to consummating a contractual agreement with a client *hiding his true name and identity under the veil of a pseudonym!*"

Spiro's reaction was delicious. His jaw dropped. His eyes goggled incredulously. Then Quicksilver dropped the bomb-shell.

"Yes, I mean you—*Captain Rex Dangerfield!*"

Silence echoed crashingly through the palatial suite. Hautley's voice turned to a smooth, ironic purr.

"I suspected, of course, as soon as I discovered you were not the true Pawel Spiro. Your 'cover' was good, very good; highly professional, even, comparable to my own disguises. Everything dovetailed—appearance, mannerisms, mo-

tive, timing. I deduced from the polished performance you could only be another professional such as I."

Pawel was watching him with dull glazed eyes like blunt pebbles in a face devoid of expression or mobility. Hautley expanded, basking in the drama of the revelation.

"While enroute from Thoth to your hotel here on Vassily II I dialed your Personnel Computer at the Carina-Cygnus Intelligence Depot, your official headquarters. It was not difficult to obtain a print of your dental history. My mirror-eyes, in this instance, contain X-ray contact lenses. Your fillings and bridgework—alas!—we have come so far technologically, but the age-old problem of dental caries is still with us! The moment you greeted me I X-viewed your dental structure, compared it mentally with the records, and as I had suspected for some time, you are none other than the galaxy's most feared and feted crime-fighter, Captain Rex Dangerfield!"

Quicksilver smiled with cool mockery. "As a Confidential Agent myself, I rarely go through the difficult, time-consuming work of altering my own dental structure to conform to a new disguise. And I doubted if even so famed and fearless an Agent as yourself, my dear Dangerfield, would do so either. Those in our profession will go to every conceivable length to alter fingerprints, retinagraphs, even palm and footprints, but when it comes to making a special visit to Painless Potter the friendly neighborhood dentist, ah! That's too much to ask in the cause of duty!" He chuckled. Dangerfield remained impassive, one hand hooked within his jerkin, doubtless clutching a checkbook as a drowning man clutches a straw. Then he spoke.

His voice was calm and conversational. Dangerfield said: "The ornamental buttons on my surcoat are shock-projectors, two-dimensional microminiaturized printed-circuit models activated on the psionic level. I am standing facing you in full. My upper button is aimed at the clump of muscles directly above your heart. If you attempt to draw a weapon or make a sudden move I will fire a paralyzing shock into your heart muscles and you will die instantly of psionically-induced heart failure! Now toss the Crown of Stars over here."

Hautley's air of unruffled aplomb was never more unshaken. He smiled and continued: "In a moment, surely. But don't you want to know how I figured you for the most celebrated crime-fighter in the galaxy, even before comparing

your pearly white choppers to the dental records? It was very, very simple and will only take a moment. The level of your disguise's artistry was such that only four men in the galaxy, including myself, could have accomplished it with such a degree of finesse. The other two men are known to me; we have worked together on one occasion or another. That left only Captain Rex Dangerfield, master of disguise. You and I have never met before. I doubted very much if my four friends would dare the risk of attempting to pull off an imposture under my very nose. That left only you, Captain."

"You are very intelligent, Quicksilver," Dangerfield said tonelessly. "Too intelligent for your own good . . ."

"Now," continued Quicksilver smoothly. "As to your motive: there could be only one motive. In the course of an official investigation, I presume, you stumbled across some evidence that the Neothothic cult object contained some extraordinarily valuable 'thing.' Something so valuable as to thrust even the Crown's own intrinsic or historic value into the pale. You have had a busy and long career, Captain; many temptations have come before you, as they have come before me. But here you are, risking your professional reputation, your name and career, your very life—the value of the 'thing' must be truly inestimable. Thus, I suspect it to be a *technological secret*."

"You are quite correct, damn you," Dangerfield said in cold tones quite unlike the hesitant, wavering voice of Pawel Spiro. "The Cavern Kings of Thoth were not, as has been universally believed, of 'pre-space' technology. In fact, they possessed an amazing variety of energy weapons, a science of armaments many millenia in advance of our own level of military technology. A man who had control of such secrets could conquer the galaxy, master the Empire itself, rule the entire Universe! I learned of all this from a renegade-Neothothic priest, defrocked, exiled, and eager for revenge. He revealed under the psychoscope that one of the gems in the Crown is an energy-retaining galina crystalloid upon which is molecularly recorded in universally comprehensible mathematical terminology the entire weapons technology of the extinct race of lizardmen!"

"But he had already blabbed the same info elsewhere, hadn't he?" Hautley deftly interposed. "To Heveret Twelfth of Canopus, for one—Heveret, whose royal predecessor, Heveret Eleventh, was one of the most ambitious warlords of

the last century. Number 12's greatest desire was to outdo the exploits of his Pop, and as soon as he got the word, he began getting ideas. But your talkative ex-frater also sold the news to two other blokes as well—one of them a gangland chieftain on Thieves' Haven, who sicced a passel of Bad Guys on the trail of the lore; the second, some official less corruptible than you of the Imperial government, who triggered an official Intelligence survey of the problem of purloining the Crown and the whole technology, a survey which ultimately led to the government's attempted retaining of my own services in that capacity. Ah, it's been quite a round-robin, hasn't it, Rex, old boy?"

"Well, the party's over as of right now, Quicksilver," Dangerfield sneered. "Just toss the Crown over to the sofa; gently now, no tricks! Don't try any games like pitching it at my head or kicking it into the pit of my stomach, or I'll give you a coronary on the spot!"

"Right-o, gently it is. *Now*, Barstine."

The heart-stopping buttons on Dangerfield's surcoat vaporized in a searing puff of metallic steam.

In the other corner of the room, Barsine Torsche stepped from behind the light-baffle which had enabled her to enter the room directly behind Quicksilver under full invisibility, and to record every word of this conversation on her ring-recorder. In her right hand she held a multigun, whose nondirectional ionic-blast component had just disintegrated the deadly buttons with a curved beam. Now the neuronc stun-gun component felled Dangerfield like a disrooted kazolba tree, and stiffened him out safely in stasis.

"Captain Rex Dangerfield, I arrest you under the provisions of Public Criminal Code A-12, Sub-section 4, on the charges of Illegal Use of Official Secrets, Criminal Impersonation, Conspiracy Towards Violating Planetary Sovereignty, and General Knavery," she intoned formally above the recumbent figure, just to complete the record. Then, de-activating the recorder, she turned to the bland, smiling Hautley.

"Okay, toss over the junk jewelry, Quicksilver, c'mon!" she snapped. "Your government needs that technology."

"No government needs so deadly a weapon as an advanced energy-weapons science," he laughed lightly. "Especially, considering the fact we have no enemies. Or if the government does, then it's up to them to find someone smarter than me to do the job!"

"You mean . . ." she gasped.

"I mean. No, Barsine, your simple, childlike faith in me is touching, but even the one and only Hautley Quicksilver couldn't figure out a way to tell the one true Crown of Stars in that warehouse full of phony copies. I didn't even try, frankly. All I needed for my purpose was to snag just one of 'em, to confront 'Pawel Spiro' with. If your boss, 'Ol' T.J.,' wants the Crown, he'll have to steal it himself!"

Her lovely eyes glowed with dawning comprehension, then flashed with fury.

"Oh! Hautley. Quicksilver. You. Beast!" she hissed between clenched teeth (which is a difficult trick to perform: try it yourself and see). "All the scintillating way from Thoth to the hotel you've been refusing to tell me how you picked the right Crown, and I've been wracking my brains till they're as limp as day-old asparagus, trying to figure out how you did it! Now it turns out you didn't do it, at all! You are the most insufferable, superior, supercilious, smug *grulzak* in the Known Universe. I hate you!"

He reached out a casual arm and pulled her into a smothering embrace.

"That is inaccurate. You utterly adore me, and you know it . . . poor child!" he commented. Then he kissed her with such expertise that her toes curled up and her kneecaps wilted like day-old asparagus, to match the above-described condition of her intellectual equipment. Then he made the mistake of releasing her.

KRAK!

Her palm connected with his cheek stunningly. Crimson with fury, she slapped a gravity-neutralizer on Dangerfield's forehead and towed him out of the room like a suitcase. Hautley sighed, gingerly touching his stinging cheek.

"Such passion," he yawned, boredly. "Why does she keep up this dull pretence of fighting it? The girl's mad for me, obviously."

He had a versicle expressive of this amorous ennui:

Grim jest: they yield at touch of hand.

Too easy conquest is . . . too bland!

We shall leave the indomitable Quicksilver at that point, enveloped in his own comfortable delusions.

THE END

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