pb

35c

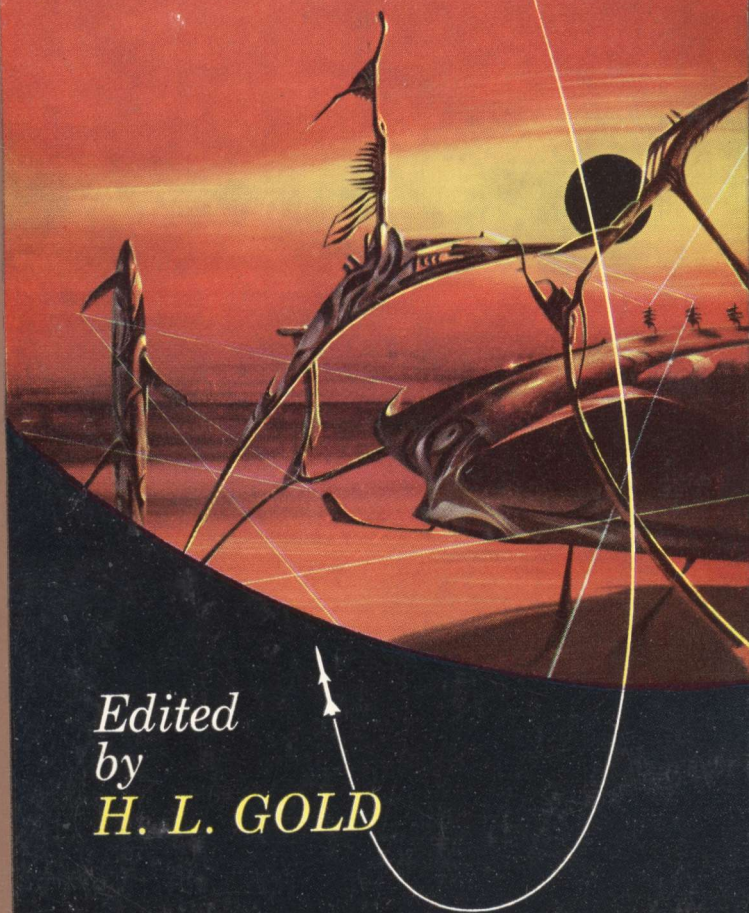
PERMABOOK EDITION M·4252

THE COMPLETE BOOK

BODYGUARD

AND FOUR OTHER SHORT SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS FROM

GALAXY*



Edited by

H. L. GOLD

SCIENCE OR FICTION?

- Here are five novels dealing with the world we do not yet know. Each is a masterfully told story in its own right, exploring areas of future life that are no longer merely possible.
- Science fiction has come of age. Within these pages, moreover, it is at once apparent that its practitioners are clearly among the most able and exciting authors writing today.

BODYGUARD
AND FOUR OTHER SHORT SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS FROM
GALAXY
was originally published by
Doubleday & Company, Inc., at $3.95.

OTHER BOOKS EDITED BY H. L. GOLD

THE THIRD GALAXY READER

THE FOURTH GALAXY READER

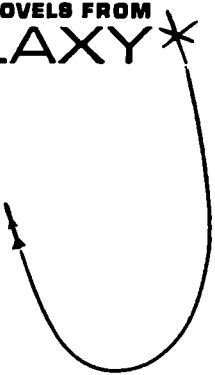
FIVE GALAXY SHORT NOVELS

THE WORLD THAT COULDN'T BE AND
8 OTHER NOVELETS FROM GALAXY

Published in PERMABOOK editions.

BODYGUARD

AND FOUR OTHER SHORT SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS FROM GALAXY



Edited by
H. L. GOLD

Introduction by
FREDERIK POHL

A PERMABOOK EDITION published by
POCKET BOOKS, INC. • NEW YORK

Bodyguard And Four Other Short Science Fiction Novels From Galaxy

Doubleday edition published June, 1960
Permabook edition published September, 1962
1st printing.....July, 1962

to my son GENE with love

All of the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

This *Permabook** edition includes every word contained in the original, higher-priced edition. It is printed from brand-new plates made from completely reset, clear, easy-to-read type. *Permabook* editions are published by Pocket Books, Inc., and are printed and distributed in the U.S.A. by Affiliated Publishers, a division of Pocket Books, Inc., 630 Fifth Avenue, New York 20, N.Y.
*Trademarks of Pocket Books, Inc., 630 Fifth Avenue, New York 20, N.Y., in the United States and other countries.

L

INTRODUCTION

by Frederik Pohl

WHEN AN EDITOR MAKES A SELECTION OF HIS FAVORITE STORIES from his own magazine he invites discussion. It is his personal taste that is on display, and it's fair for the observer to try to analyze what goes into that taste. In other words, what makes *Galaxy Magazine* what it is?

There is only one answer to that—about any magazine—and that is the personality, skills, and preferences of its editor. The editor is the magazine.

Nevil Shute tells us that an aircraft designer is an obstinate, irascible, unreasonable man, or else he is a failure. An aircraft designer must impose his own will on all the regiment of sub-designers, detail men, and draftsmen who create the subsidiary plans that go into the plane. The man who diagrams the electrical system and the man who designs pre-rotators for the wheels have to follow his plan, not their own; if he cannot make them do things his way the design is spoiled and the plane won't fly—or, anyway, won't fly exactly as he planned it.

This is precisely the situation of the magazine editor—or al-

most. What advantages there are, are on the side of the aeronautical engineer. He works in sheet metal and tempered steel; the magazine editor has to work with that far more intractable substance, the slippery, willful creativity of the writer.

For a magazine is more than a collection of stories, it is a contract with the reader. Unspoken but always understood, it says: "Here, you like what you read last month. I promise this month's issue will be more of the same. It might be better. It might show experimentation. But it will not be something different entirely. If you read my magazine for a year you will find, I hope, that it has grown; but you will not find it totally changed."

It is an editor's job to give his magazine a personality. He can't do this through writing words on paper himself—that's the writer's job—but only through the much harder process of trying to extract the best from a lot of writers.

In this line of work H. L. Gold is as skilled as any man alive. He shows an astonishing grasp of what the writer is up to; can recall lines of dialogue and bits of plot from manuscripts he read half a dozen years ago, even when ultimately they wound up in some other magazine; can spring up to do battle with the author of those rejected stories, after such a lapse, without missing a beat in argument. Horace Gold is himself a writer, of course. That explains very little—fine writers are often hopeless when they sit on the other side of the desk—but undoubtedly it does explain something. As his own writing has covered many fields—science fiction and fantasy, yes, but far more wordage in scripts for broadcasting, fiction of nearly every kind, non-fiction in many moods—so he brings to the task of editing *Galaxy* the resources of other genres. Perhaps that is why *Galaxy* paints on a broader canvas than other science fiction magazines. Certainly it has a lot to do with the fact that *Galaxy* has succeeded in persuading nearly all of the best writers in the field to provide it with stories written at the top of their form.

Galaxy's tenth anniversary is at hand, and in that decade *Galaxy* has played a major part in the development of dozens

of excellent writers. It has introduced at least a dozen fine new craftsmen to the field, recaptured a dozen major strays who had wandered off into other pastures, retrained a dozen (or more than a dozen) old pros who had grown weary and stale, bringing them back to sharp productive life. (It is invidious to name names, but any *Galaxy* reader can fill in the blanks for himself.)

Horace Gold's part, in the sea change that occurs between the act of composition on the author's typewriter and the moment when you pick up a fresh issue of *Galaxy* at the stands, is to point all of these scores of men and women in the same direction. As *Galaxy* is his magazine, the direction is his direction.

Does this smack of tyranny? No. Call it leadership; that's what an editor is for. If half the principal *Galaxy* contributors all begin to write time-travel stories at the same time, it is necessary for *Galaxy's* editor to shift some of them to other themes as persuasively as he can. If everyone is producing short stories, someone must be diverted to serials; if fits of gloom assail the entire science fiction writing fraternity (and these things do happen; moods are epidemic among writers; suddenly there will be an outflow of visions of Armageddon and never a smile in a thousand scripts) the editor must start to spread words of cheer.

As his only point of contact with most writers is the written word, this means trying to shift emphasis on a story already written. That is, it means rewrites.

Writers hate rewrites. Wouldn't you? If you were a bricklayer and your customer said, "Hold it there. No. Rip all that red brick out and put in *yellow*." . . . if that happened, you'd hate it. Even if yellow brick were prettier and sturdier and more profitable besides, you'd still hate it.

A writer is in a worse case than any bricklayer. At least the bricklayer has the customer's plan to go on; the writer has nothing but his own imagination.

So what the editor has to do is to persuade, to cajole, to bully, to bribe, to convince—to edit. This means ripping out all those red bricks, of course. This is unattractive to the

writer: Old used words from a discarded manuscript have no salvage value whatsoever.

And yet the process is not all hardship on the writer. It's tough on the editor, too, who has to put his ideas into other people's work instead of his own, and get them to agree, and sweat with them through to the end.

The most extreme example went through four complete rewrites, not at all in its published form resembling the first draft that came in the mail. The story was far beyond the writer's skill, so the editor had to supply it—until the writer grew skilled enough, through each mutually painful rewrite, to do a truly triumphant job, one of the best of the past decade.

It's just such willingness to match writers sweat bead for sweat bead that made *Galaxy* the most important influence of the 1950s on science fiction. As it enters the 1960s, it does so with verve and energy and high enthusiasm, with, in other words, H. L. Gold.

So what you have here is not a clutch of stories picked at random from a long shelf of bound volumes. It is Horace Gold's summation of what *Galaxy* provides, and provides through smart generalship.

Ultimately, the one measure of the success of a magazine is the over-all quality of the stories that the editor manages to get into print. In *Galaxy*, that quality began high and rose astonishingly over the years. You can see that for yourself both in the magazine and in anthologies, for no other magazine in the world, regardless of kind, has had as many of its stories anthologized as *Galaxy*.

I don't propose to discuss my own part in the proceedings which follow. All I can say is that I made "Whatever Counts" as good a story as I could, and then H. L. Gold showed me how to make it better. And I haven't a doubt that I speak for the other contributors when I say that, without a great deal of hard work and ingenuity on the part of the editor, these would have been in some degree lesser stories than they are,

and maybe some of them would never have become stories at all.

So, too, do I speak for those writers whose spontaneousnesses were bought enthusiastically on sight, for that is as much a part of *Galaxy* as the hard work.

CONTENTS

Bodyguard and Four Other Short Science Fiction Novels from Galaxy

BODYGUARD

by Christopher Grimm

One

THE MAN AT THE BAR WAS EXCEPTIONALLY HANDSOME, AND HE knew it. So did the light-haired girl at his side, and so did the nondescript man in the gray suit who was watching them from a booth in the corner.

Everyone in the room was aware of the big young man, and most of the humans present were resentful, for he handled himself consciously and arrogantly, as if his appearance alone were enough to make him superior to anyone. Even the girl with him was growing restless, for she was accustomed to adulation herself, and next to Gabriel Lockard she was almost ordinary-looking.

As for the extraterrestrials—it was a free bar—they were merely amused, since to them all men were pathetically and irredeemably hideous.

Gabe threw his arm wide in one of his expansive gestures. There was a short man standing next to the pair—young, as most men and women were in that time, thanks to the science which could stave off decay, though not death—but with no

other apparent physical virtue, for plastic surgery had not fulfilled its bright promise of the twentieth century.

The drink he had been raising to his lips splashed all over his clothing; the glass shattered at his feet. Now he was not only a rather ugly little man, but also a rather ridiculous one —or at least he felt he was, which was what mattered.

"Sorry, colleague," Gabe said lazily. "All my fault. You must let me buy you a replacement." He gestured to the bartender. "Another of the same for my fellow-man here."

The ugly man dabbed futilely at his dripping trousers with a cloth hastily supplied by the management.

"You must allow me to pay your cleanery bill," Gabe said, taking out his wallet and extracting several credit notes without seeming to look at them. "Here, have yourself a new suit on me." *You could use one* was implied.

And that, coming on top of Gabriel Lockard's spectacular appearance, was too much. The ugly man picked up the drink the bartender had just set before him and started to hurl it, glass and all, into Lockard's handsome face.

Suddenly a restraining hand was laid upon his arm. "Don't do that," the nondescript man who had been sitting in the corner advised. He removed the glass from the little man's slackening grasp. "You wouldn't want to go to jail because of him."

The ugly man gave him a bewildered stare. Then, seeing the forces now ranged against him—including his own belated prudence—were too strong, he stumbled off. He hadn't really wanted to fight, only to smash back, and now it was too late for that.

Gabe studied the newcomer curiously. "So, it's you again?"

The man in the gray suit smiled. "Who else in any world would stand up for you?"

"I should think you'd have given up by now. Not that I mind having you around, of course," Gabriel added too quickly. "You do come in useful at times, you know."

"So you don't mind having me around?" The nondescript man smiled again. "Then what are you running from, if not

me? You can't be running from yourself—you lost yourself a while back, remember?"

Gabe ran a hand through his thick blond hair. "Come on, have a drink with me, fellow-man, and let's let bygones be bygones. I owe you something—I admit that. Maybe we can even work this thing out."

"I drank with you once too often," the nondescript man said. "And things worked out fine, didn't they? For you." His eyes studied the other man's incredibly handsome young face, noted the suggestion of bags under the eyes, the beginning of slackness at the lips, and were not pleased with what they saw. "Watch yourself, colleague," he warned as he left. "Soon you might not be worth the saving."

"Who was that, Gabe?" the girl asked.

He shrugged, "I never saw him before in my life." Of course, knowing him, she assumed he was lying, but, as a matter of fact, just then he happened to have been telling the truth.

Once the illuminators were extinguished in Gabriel Lockard's hotel suite, it seemed reasonably certain to the man in the gray suit, as he watched from the street, that his quarry would not go out again that night. So he went to the nearest airstation. There he inserted a coin in a locker, into which he put most of his personal possessions, reserving only a sum of money. After setting the locker to respond to the letter combination *bodyguard,* he went out into the street.

If he had met with a fatal accident at that point, there would have been nothing on his body to identify him. As a matter of fact, no real identification was possible, for he was no one and had been no one for years.

The nondescript man hailed a cruising helicab. "Where to, fellow-man?" the driver asked.

"I'm new in the parish," the other man replied and let it hang there.

"Oh? . . . Females? . . . Narcophagi? . . . Thrill-mills?"

But to each of these questions the nondescript man shook his head.

"Games?" the driver finally asked, although he could guess what was wanted by then. "Dice? . . . Roulette? . . . Farjeen?"

"Is there a good zarquil game in town?"

The driver moved so he could see the face of the man behind him in the teleview. A very ordinary face. "Look, colleague, why don't you commit suicide? It's cleaner and quicker."

"I can't contact your attitude," the passenger said with a thin smile. "Bet you've never tried the game yourself. Each time it happens, there's a . . . well, there's no experience to match it at a thrill-mill." He gave a sigh that was almost an audible shudder, and which the driver misinterpreted as an expression of ecstasy.

"Each time, eh? You're a dutchman then?" The driver spat out of the window. "If it wasn't for the nibble, I'd throw you right out of the cab. Without even bothering to take it down even. I hate dutchmen . . . anybody with any legitimate feelings hates 'em."

"But it would be silly to let personal prejudice stand in the way of a commission, wouldn't it?" the other man asked coolly.

"Of course. You'll need plenty of foliage, though."

"I have sufficient funds. I also have a gun."

"You're the dictator," the driver agreed sullenly.

Two

IT WAS A DARK AND RAINY NIGHT IN EARLY FALL. GABE LOCKard was in no condition to drive the helicar. However, he was stubborn.

"Let me take the controls, honey," the light-haired girl urged, but he shook his handsome head.

"Show you I can do something 'sides look pretty," he said thickly, referring to an earlier and not amicable conversation they had held, and of which she still bore the reminder on one thickly made-up cheek.

Fortunately the car was flying low, contrary to regulations,

so that when they smashed into the beacon tower on the outskirts of the little town, they didn't have far to fall. And hardly had their car crashed on the ground when the car that had been following them landed, and a short fat man was puffing toward them through the mist.

To the girl's indignation, the stranger not only hauled Gabe out onto the dripping grass first, but stopped and deliberately examined the young man by the light of his minilume, almost as if she weren't there at all. Only when she started to struggle out by herself did he seem to remember her existence. He pulled her away from the wreck just a moment before the fuel tank exploded and the 'copter went up in flames.

Gabe opened his eyes and saw the fat man gazing down at him speculatively. "My guardian angel," he mumbled—shock had sobered him a little, but not enough. He sat up. "Guess I'm not hurt or you'd have thrown me back in."

"And that's no joke," the fat man agreed.

The girl shivered and at that moment Gabriel suddenly seemed to recall that he had not been alone. "How about Helen? She on course?"

"Seems to be," the fat man said. "You all right, miss?" he asked, glancing toward the girl without, she thought, much apparent concern.

"Mrs.," Gabriel corrected. "Allow me to introduce you to Mrs. Gabriel Lockard," he said, bowing from his seated position toward the girl. "Pretty bauble, isn't she?"

"I'm delighted to meet you, Mrs. Gabriel Lockard," the fat man said, looking at her intently. His small eyes seemed to strip the make-up from her cheek and examine the livid bruise underneath. "I hope you'll be worthy of the name." The light given off by the flaming car flickered on his face and Gabriel's and, she supposed, hers too. Otherwise, darkness surrounded the three of them.

There were no public illuminators this far out—even in town the lights were dimming and not being replaced fast enough nor by the newer models. The town, the civilization, the planet all were old and beginning to slide downhill. . . .

Gabe gave a short laugh, for no reason that she could see.

There was the feeling that she had encountered the fat man before, which was, of course, absurd. She had an excellent memory for faces and his was not included in her gallery. The girl pulled her thin jacket closer about her chilly body. "Aren't you going to introduce your—your friend to me, Gabe?"

"I don't know who he is," Gabe said almost merrily, "except that he's no friend of mine. Do you have a name, stranger?"

"Of course I have a name." The fat man extracted an identification card from his wallet and read it. "Says here I'm Dominic Bianchi, and Dominic Bianchi is a retail milgot dealer. . . . Only he isn't a retail milgot dealer any more; the poor fellow went bankrupt a couple of weeks ago, and now he isn't . . . anything."

"You saved our lives," the girl said. "I'd like to give you some token of my—of our appreciation." Her hand reached toward her credit-carrier with deliberate insult. He might have saved her life, but only casually, as a by-product of some larger scheme, and her appreciation held little gratitude.

The fat man shook his head without rancor. "I have plenty of money, thank you, Mrs. Gabriel Lockard. . . . Come," he addressed her husband, "if you get up, I'll drive you home. I warn you, be more careful in the future! Sometimes," he added musingly, "I almost wish you would let something happen. Then my problem would not be any problem, would it?"

Gabriel shivered. "I'll be careful," he vowed. "I promise—I'll be careful."

When he was sure that his charge was safely tucked in for the night, the fat man checked his personal possessions. He then requested a taxi driver to take him to the nearest zarquil game. The driver accepted the commission phlegmatically. Perhaps he was more hardened than the others had been; perhaps he was unaware that the fat man was not a desperate or despairing individual seeking one last chance, but what was known colloquially as a flying dutchman, a man, or woman, who went from one zarquil game to another, loving the thrill of the sport, if you could call it that, for its own sake, and not for the futile hope it extended and which was its

sole shred of claim to moral justification. Perhaps—and this was the most likely hypothesis—he just didn't care.

Zarquil was extremely illegal, of course—so much so that there were many legitimate citizens who weren't quite sure just what the word implied, knowing merely that it was one of those nameless horrors so deliciously hinted at by the fax sheets under the generic term of "crimes against nature." Actually the phrase was more appropriate to zarquil than to most of the other activities to which it was commonly applied. And this was one crime—for it was crime in law as well as nature—in which victim had to be considered as guilty as perpetrator; otherwise the whole legal structure of society would collapse.

Playing the game was fabulously expensive; it had to be to make it profitable for the Vinzz to run it. Those odd creatures from Altair's seventh planet cared nothing for the welfare of the completely alien human beings; all they wanted was to feather their own pockets with interstellar credits, so that they could return to Vinau and buy many slaves. For, on Vinau, bodies were of little account, and so to them zarquil was the equivalent of the terrestrial game musical chairs. Which was why they came to Terra to make profits—there has never been big money in musical chairs as such.

When the zarquil operators were apprehended, which was not frequent—as they had strange powers, which, not being definable, were beyond the law—they suffered their sentences with equanimity. No Earth court could give an effective prison sentence to a creature whose life spanned approximately two thousand terrestrial years. And capital punishment had become obsolete on Terra, which very possibly saved the terrestrials embarrassment, for it was not certain that their weapons could kill the Vinzz . . . or whether, in fact, the Vinzz merely expired after a period of years out of sheer boredom. Fortunately, because trade was more profitable than war, there had always been peace between Vinau and Terra, and, for that reason, Terra could not bar the entrance of apparently respectable citizens of a friendly planet.

The taxi driver took the fat man to one of the rather seedy locales in which the zarquil games were usually found, for the Vinzz attempted to conduct their operations with as much unobtrusiveness as was possible. But the front door swung open on an interior that lacked the opulence of the usual Vinzz setup; it was downright shabby, the dim olive light hinting of squalor rather than forbidden pleasures. That was the trouble in these smaller towns—you ran greater risks of getting involved in games where the players had not been carefully screened.

The Vinzz games were usually clean, because that paid off better, but when profits were lacking, the Vinzz were capable of sliding off into darkside practices. Naturally the small-town houses were more likely to have trouble in making ends meet, because everybody in the parish knew everybody else far too well.

The fat man wondered whether that had been his quarry's motive in coming to such desolate, off-trail places—hoping that eventually disaster would hit the one who pursued him. Somehow, such a plan seemed too logical for the man he was haunting.

However, beggars could not be choosers. The fat man paid off the heli-driver and entered the zarquil house. "One?" the small green creature in the slightly frayed robe asked.

"One," the fat man answered.

Three

THE WOULD-BE THIEF FLED DOWN THE DARK ALLEY, WITH THE hot bright rays from the stranger's gun lancing out after him in flamboyant but futile patterns. The stranger, a thin young man with delicate, angular features, made no attempt to follow. Instead, he bent over to examine Gabriel Lockard's form, appropriately outstretched in the gutter. "Only weighted out," he muttered, "he'll be all right. Whatever possessed you two to come out to a place like this?"

"I really think Gabriel *must* be possessed . . ." the girl said, mostly to herself. "I had no idea of the kind of place it was going to be until he brought me here. The others were bad, but this is even worse. It almost seems as if he went around looking for trouble, doesn't it?"

"It does indeed," the stranger agreed, coughing a little. It was growing colder and, on this world, the cities had no domes to protect them from the climate, because it was Earth and the air was breathable and it wasn't worth the trouble of fixing up.

The girl looked closely at him. "You look different, but you *are* the same man who pulled us out of that aircar crash, aren't you? And before that the man in the gray suit? And before that . . . ?"

The young man's cheekbones protruded as he smiled. "Yes, I'm all of them."

"Then what they say about the zarquil games is true? There are people who go around changing their bodies like—like hats?" Automatically she reached to adjust the expensive bit of blue synthetic on her moon-pale hair, for she was always concious of her appearance; if she had not been so before marriage, Gabriel would have taught her that.

He smiled again, but coughed instead of speaking.

"But why do you do it? *Why!* Do you like it? Or is it because of Gabriel?" She was growing a little frantic; there was menace here and she could not understand it nor determine whether or not she was included in its scope. "Do you want to keep him from recognizing you; is that it?"

"Ask him."

"He won't tell me; he never tells me anything. We just keep running. I didn't recognize it as running at first, but now I realize that's what we've been doing ever since we were married. And running from you, I think?"

There was no change of expression on the man's gaunt face, and she wondered how much control he had over a body that, though second- or third- or fourth-hand, must be new to

him. How well could he make it respond? What was it like to step into another person's casing? But she must not let herself think that way or she would find herself looking for a zarquil game. It would be one way of escaping Gabriel, but not, she thought, the best way; her body was much too good a one to risk so casually.

It was beginning to snow. Light, feathery flakes drifted down on her husband's immobile body. She pulled her thick coat —of fur taken from some animal who had lived and died light-years away—more closely about herself. The thin young man began to cough again.

Overhead a tiny star seemed to detach itself from the pale flat disk of the Moon and hurl itself upward—one of the interstellar ships embarking on its long voyage to distant suns. She wished that somehow she could be on it, but she was here, on this solitary old world in a barren solar system, with her unconscious husband and a strange man who followed them, and it looked as if here she would stay . . . all three of them would stay. . . .

"If you're after Gabriel, planning to hurt him," she asked "why then do you keep helping him?"

"I am not helping *him*. And he knows that."

"You'll change again tonight, won't you?" she babbled. "You always change after you . . . meet us? I think I'm beginning to be able to identify you now, even when you're . . . wearing a new body; there's something about you that doesn't change."

"Too bad he got married," the young man said. "I could have followed him for an eternity and he would never have been able to pick me out from the crowd. Too bad he got married anyway," he added, his voice less impersonal, "for your sake."

She had come to the same conclusion in her six months of marriage, but she would not admit that to an outsider. Though this man was hardly an outsider; he was part of their small family group—as long as she had known Gabriel, so long he

must have known her. And she began to suspect that he was even more closely involved than that.

"Why must you change again?" she persisted, obliquely approaching the subject she feared. "You have a pretty good body there. Why run the risk of getting a bad one?"

"This isn't a good body," he said. "It's diseased. Sure, nobody's supposed to play the game who hasn't passed a thorough medical examination. But in the places to which your husband has been leading me, they're often not too particular, as long as the player has plenty of foliage."

"How—long will it last you?"

"Four or five months, if I'm careful." He smiled. "But don't worry, if that's what you're doing; I'll get it passed on before then. It'll be expensive—that's all. Bad landing for the guy who gets it, but then it was tough on me too, wasn't it?"

"But how did you get into this . . . pursuit?" she asked again. "And why are you doing it?" People didn't have any traffic with Gabriel Lockard for fun, not after they got to know him. And this man certainly should know him better than most.

"Ask your husband."

The original Gabriel Lockard looked down at the prostrate, snow-powdered figure of the man who had stolen his body and his name, and stirred it with his toe. "I'd better call a cab—he might freeze to death."

He signaled and a cab came.

"Tell him, when he comes to," he said to the girl as he and the driver lifted the heavy form of her husband into the helicar, "that I'm getting pretty tired of this." He stopped for a long spell of coughing. "Tell him that sometimes I wonder whether cutting off my nose wouldn't, in the long run, be most beneficial for my face."

"Sorry," the Vinzz said impersonally, in English that was perfect except for the slight dampening of the sibilants, "but I'm afraid you cannot play."

"Why not?" The emaciated young man began to put on his clothes.

"You know why. Your body is worthless. And this is a reputable house."

"But I have plenty of money." The young man coughed. The Vinzz shrugged. "I'll pay you twice the regular fee."

The green one shook his head. "Regrettably, I do mean what I say. This game is really clean."

"In a town like this?"

"That is the reason we can afford to be honest." The Vinzz' tendrils quivered in what the man had come to recognize as amusement through long, but necessarily superficial, acquaintance with the Vinzz. His heavy robe of what looked like moss-green velvet, but might have been velvet-green moss, encrusted with oddly faceted alien jewels, swung with him.

"We do a lot of business here," he said unnecessarily, for the whole set-up spelled wealth far beyond the dreams of the man, and he was by no means poor when it came to worldly goods. "Why don't you try another town where they're not so particular?"

The young man smiled wryly. Just his luck to stumble on a sunny game. He never liked to risk following his quarry in the same configuration. And even though only the girl had actually seen him this time, he wouldn't feel at ease until he had made the usual body-shift. Was he changing because of Gabriel, he wondered, or was he using his own discoverment and identification simply as an excuse to cover the fact that none of the bodies that fell to his lot ever seemed to fit him? Was he activated solely by revenge or as much by the hope that in the hazards of the game he might, impossible though it now seemed, some day win another body that approached perfection as nearly as his original casing had?

He didn't know. However, there seemed to be no help for it now; he would have to wait until they reached the next town, unless the girl, seeing him reappear in the same guise, would guess what had happened and tell her husband. He himself had been a fool to admit to her that the hulk he inhabited was a sick one; he still couldn't understand how he could so casually have entrusted her with so vital a piece of information.

The Vinzz had been locking antennae with another of his kind. Now they detached, and the first approached the man once more. "There is, as it happens, a body available for a private game," he lisped. "No questions to be asked or answered. All I can tell you is that it is in good health."

The man hesitated. "But unable to pass the screening?" he murmured aloud. "A criminal then."

The green one's face—if you could call it a face—remained impassive.

"Male?"

"Of course," the Vinzz said primly. His kind did have certain ultimate standards to which they adhered rigidly, and one of those was the curious tabu against mixed games, strictly enforced even though it kept them from tapping a vast source of potential players. There had also never been a recorded instance of humans' and extraterrestrials' exchanging identities, but whether that was the result of tabu or biological impossibility, no one could tell.

It might merely be prudence on the Vinzz' part—if it had ever been proved that an alien life-form had "desecrated" a human body, Earthmen would clamor for war . . . for on this planet humanity held its self-bestowed purity of birthright dear—and the Vinzz, despite being unquestionably the stronger, were pragmatic pacifists. It had been undoubtedly some rabid member of the anti-alien groups active on Terra who had started the rumor that the planetary slogan of Vinau was, "Don't beat 'em; cheat 'em."

"It would have to be something pretty nuclear for the other guy to take such a risk." The man rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "How much?"

"Thirty thousand credits."

"Why, that's three times the usual rate!"

"The other will pay five times the usual rate."

"Oh, all right," the delicate young man gave in. It was a terrific risk he was agreeing to take, because, if the other was a criminal, he himself would, upon assuming the body, assume responsibility for all crimes it had committed. But there was nothing else he could do.

He looked at himself in the mirror and found he had a fine new body; tall and strikingly handsome in a dark, coarse-featured way. Nothing to match the one he had lost, in his opinion, but there were probably many people who might find this one preferable. No identification in the pockets, but it wasn't necessary; he recognized the face. Not that it was a very famous or even notorious one, but the dutchman was a careful student of the "wanted" fax that had decorated public buildings from time immemorial, for he was ever mindful of the possibility that he might one day find himself trapped unwittingly in the body of one of the men depicted there. And he knew that this particular man, though not an important criminal in any sense of the word, was one whom the police had been ordered to burn on sight. The abolishing of capital punishment could not abolish the necessity for self-defense, and the man in question was not one who would let himself be captured easily nor whom the police intended to capture easily.

This might be a lucky break for me after all, the new tenant thought, as he tried to adjust himself to the body. It, too, despite its obvious rude health, was not a very comfortable fit. *I can do a lot with a hulk like this. And maybe I'm cleverer than the original owner; maybe I'll be able to get away with it.*

Four

"LOOK GABE," THE GIRL SAID, "DON'T TRY TO FOOL ME! I know you too well. And I know you have that man's—the real Gabriel Lockard's—body." She put unnecessary stardust on her nose as she watched her husband's reflection in the dressing table mirror.

Lockard—Lockard's body, at any rate—sat up and felt his unshaven chin. "That what he tell you?"

"No, he didn't tell me anything really—just suggested I ask you whatever I want to know. But why else should he guard somebody he obviously hates the way he hates you? Only because he doesn't want to see his body spoiled."

"It *is* a pretty good body, isn't it?" Gabe flexed softening muscles and made no attempt to deny her charge; very probably he was relieved at having someone with whom to share his secret.

"Not as good as it must have been," the girl said, turning and looking at him without admiration. "Not if you keep on the way you're coursing. Gabe, why don't you . . . ?"

"Give it back to him, eh?" Lockard regarded his wife appraisingly. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? You'd be *his* wife then. That would be nice—a sound mind in a sound body. But don't you think that's a little more than you deserve?"

"I wasn't thinking about that, Gabe," she said truthfully enough, for she hadn't followed the idea to its logical conclusion. "Of course I'd go with you," she went on, now knowing she lied, "when you got your . . . old body back."

Sure, she thought, *I'd keep going with you to farjeen houses and thrill-mills.* Actually she had accompanied him to a thrill-mill only once, and from then on, despite all his threats, she had refused to go with him again. But that once had been enough; nothing could ever wash that experience from her mind or her body.

"You wouldn't be able to get your old body back, though, would you?" she went on. "You don't know where it's gone, and neither, I suppose, does he?"

"I don't want to know!" he spat. "I wouldn't want it if I could get it back. Whoever it adhered to probably killed himself as soon as he looked in a mirror." He swung long legs over the side of his bed. "Christ, anything would be better than that! You can't imagine what a hulk I had!"

"Oh, yes, I can," she said incautiously. "You must have had a body to match your character. Pity you could only change one."

He rose from the bed and struck her right on the mouth. Although he hadn't used his full strength, the blow was painful nonetheless. She could feel the red of her lipstick become mixed with a warmer, liquid red that trickled slowly down her freshly powdered chin. She wouldn't cry, because he liked

that, but crumpled to the ground and lay still. If, experience had taught her, she pretended to be hurt, he wouldn't hit her again. Only sometimes it was hard to remember that at the actual moment of hurt and indignity. He was too afraid of prison—a tangible prison. And perhaps, to do him credit, he didn't want to deface his own property.

He sat down on the edge of the bed again and lit a milgot stick. "Oh, get up, Helen. You know I didn't hit you that hard."

"Did you have to beat him up to get him to change bodies?" she asked from the floor.

"No." He laughed reminiscently. "I just got him drunk. We were friends, so it was a cinch. He was my only friend; everybody else hated me because of my appearance." His features contorted. "What made him think he was so damn much better than other people that he could afford to like me? Served him right for being so noble."

She stared at the ceiling—it was so old its very fabric was beginning to crack—and said nothing.

"He didn't even realize what he had here—" Lockard tapped his broad chest with complacence—"until it was too late. Took it for granted. Sickened me to see him taking the body for granted when I couldn't take mine that way. People used to shrink from me. Girls . . ."

She sat up. "Give me a milgot, Gabe."

He lighted one and handed it to her. "For Christ's sake, Helen, I gave him more than he had a right to expect. I was too goddamn noble myself. I was well-milled; I didn't have to leave half of my holdings in my own name—I could have transferred them all to his. If I had, then he wouldn't have had the folio to hound me all over this planet or to other planets, if I'd had the nerve to shut myself up on a spaceship, knowing he probably would be shut up on it with me." He smiled. "Of course he won't hurt me; that's the one compensation. Damage me, and he damages himself."

"But it's your life he saves, too," she reminded him.

"My life wouldn't ever have been in danger if it hadn't been for this continual persecution—it's driving me out of this

dimension! I planned to start a new life with this body," he pleaded, anxious for belief and, as a matter of fact, she believed him; almost everybody has good intentions and there was no reason to except even such a one as Gabriel Lockard, or whatever he was originally named.

"It was my appearance that got me mixed up," he went on. "Given half a chance I could have straightened out—gone to Proxima Centauri, maybe, and then out to one of the frontier planets. Made something of myself up there. But nobody ever gave me a chance. Now, as long as he follows me, there's nothing I can do except run and try to hide and know all the time I can't escape—I'm already in the trap."

"What can he do if you stay and face him?"

"I don't know—that's the hell of it. But he's smart. Somehow he'll lure me into another game. I don't know how, but that must be what he has in mind. What else could it be?"

"What else indeed?" Helen asked, smiling up at the ceiling.

The milgot vanished in his fingers and he took another. "It'd take time for him to arrange any kind of private game set-up, though, and as long as I keep on the move, he won't be able to create anything. Unless he runs into a floating zarquil game." He smiled mirthlessly. "And he couldn't. Too much machinery, I understand . . . Lucky he doesn't seem to have connections, the way I have," Lockard boasted. "I have connections all over the goddamn planet. Transferred them when I transferred my holdings."

She got up, seated herself on the vanity bench, and took up a brush, which she ran absently over the pale hair that shimmered down to her paler shoulders. "So we keep running all over the planet. . . . What would you do if I left you, Gabriel?"

"Kill you," he said without hesitation. "Slowly. Even if I have to put this precious hulk of mine in jeopardy. And you wouldn't like that. Neither would your boy friend."

"Stop calling him my—"

"Wait a minute—maybe there is an escape hatch!" His blue

eyes sharpened unbecomingly. "He can't kill me, but there's nothing to stop my killing him."

"How about the police?" She tried to speak calmly as she passed the brush up and down, sometimes not even touching her hair. "The body you have won't be any good to you with them looking for it. And you're not a professional exterminator, Gabe—you wouldn't be able to get away with it."

"I can hire somebody else to do the killing. Remember I still have plenty of foliage. Maybe I didn't leave him exactly half of my property, but, what the hell, I left him enough."

"How will you recognize him?" she asked, half-turning, fearfully. "He'll have a new body, you know."

"You'll recognize him, Helen—you said you could." At that moment she could have wrapped her own hair tightly around her white throat and strangled herself; she was so appalled by her own witless treachery.

He dragged her to her feet. "Aah, moonbeam, you know I didn't mean to hurt you. It's just that this whole crazy pattern's driving me out of this world. Once I get rid of that lifeform, you'll see, I'll be a different man."

As his arms tightened around her, she wondered what it would be like, a different man in the same body.

Five

"WHAT MAKES YOU THINK I WOULD DO A THING LIKE THAT?" the little lawyer asked apprehensively, not meeting the bland blue eyes of the man who faced him across the old-fashioned flat-top desk. It was an even more outmoded office than most, but that did not necessarily indicate a low professional status; lawyers were great ones for tradition expressed in terms of out-of-date furniture. As for the dust that lay all over despite the air-conditioning . . . well, that was inescapable, for Earth was a dusty planet.

"Oh, not you yourself personally, of course," Gabriel Lockard—as the false one will continue to be called, since the

dutchman had another name at the moment—said. "But you know how to put me in touch with someone who can."

"Nonsense. I don't know who gave you such libelous information, sir, but I must ask you to leave my office before I call—"

"It was Pat Ortiz who gave me the information," Lockard said softly. "He also told me a lot of other interesting things about you, Gorman."

Gorman paled. "I'm a respectable attorney."

"Maybe you are now; maybe not. This isn't the kind of town that breeds respectability. But you certainly weren't sunny side up when Ortiz knew you. And he knew you well."

The lawyer licked his lips. "Give me a chance, will you?"

Lockard flushed. "Chance! Everybody rates a chance but me. Can't you see, I am giving you a chance. Get me somebody to follow my pattern, and I promise you Ortiz won't talk."

Gorman slipped the plastic shells from his face and rubbed the pale watery eyes underneath. "But how can I get you a man to do . . . the thing you want done? I have no connections like that."

"I'm sure you can make the right connections. Take your time about it, though; I'm in no hurry. I'm planning to adhere to this locale for a while."

"How about this man you want . . . put out of the way?" Gorman suggested hopefully. "How can you be sure he won't leave?"

Gabriel laughed. "He'll stay as long as I do."

The little lawyer took a deep breath. "Mr. Lockard, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I really cannot do anything for you."

Gabe rose. "Okay," he said softly. "If that's your pattern, I'll just put a call through to Ortiz." He turned to go.

"Wait a minute!" the lawyer cried.

Lockard stopped.

"Well?"

Gorman swallowed. "Possibly I may be able to do something for you, after all. . . . I just happened to have heard Jed Carmody is in town."

Gabriel looked at him inquiringly.

"Oh . . . I thought you might have heard the name. He's a killer, I understand, a professional exterminator . . . on the run right now. But this is his headquarters—I'm told—and he probably would come here. And he might be short on folio. Naturally, I've never had any dealings with him myself."

"Naturally," Gabe mocked.

"But I'll see what I can do." Gorman's voice was pleading. "You'll wait, Mr. Lockard, won't you? It may be a little while before I can find out where he is. This isn't—" his voice thinned—"at all my type of pattern, you know."

"I'll wait . . . a reasonable length of time."

The door closed behind him. Descending pneumo tubes hissed outside. The little lawyer rose and went to the window —a flat expanse of transparent plastic set immovably into the wall of the building, an old building, an old town, an old planet. As he watched the street below, a faint half-smile curved his almost feminine mouth. He went back to the desk and punched a code on the vidiphone.

Gabriel crossed the street to the little cafe with the gold letters FOR HUMANS ONLY embedded in the one-way glass front; this was a town that adhered rigidly to the ancient privileges of the indigenous species. He entered as the shrillness of a vidiphone bell cut through the babble inside without in any way checking it. After a moment, his eyes grew accustomed to the dimness and he could see his wife waiting at a table near the entrance, daintily peeling a tigi fruit.

"Well," she asked as she put a plum pink section into her mouth, "did you hire your killer?"

"Shhh, not so loud!" He threw himself into the chair next to hers. "Do you want me to get into trouble? . . . And I wouldn't put it past you," he continued without waiting for an answer. "Remember, it's your boy friend's body that gets into trouble."

"He's not my boy friend."

A waiter beckoned from the vidiphone booth to someone sitting in the dark shadows at the rear of the restaurant.

"Where is he?" Gabriel exclaimed suddenly. "He must be here somewhere. Tell me which he is, Helen?"

His hand gripped her arm cruelly, as he swung her around on her chair to face each part of the room. "Is it that guy over there? . . . That one? . . . That one?"

She could not repress a start of suprise as her eyes met those of the thin-featured young man entering the vidiphone booth. He returned her gaze with somber interest.

Gabe relaxed. "So that's the one, eh? Not very formidable. Looks the way he always should have looked." He lit a milgot. "I'll get Gorman to tip off the zarquil boy—only one game in this parish, I'm told—that that life-form's not to be allowed to play; I'll make any loss good out of my own pocket. That'll keep him onstage for the nonce. He won't leave to get himself fixed up somewhere else as long as I stay. And I'm going to stay . . . to the bitter end." He smiled lovingly to himself.

But it's not the right man, Helen thought gladly. *He did manage to change, after all. Gabe has the wrong man.* She felt a little sorry for the unknown and doomed individual who inhabited the delicate, angular body, but it was so close to death anyhow that the immediate threat didn't matter. And Gabriel—the real Gabriel—was safe.

Six

THE EMACIATED YOUNG MAN ENTERED GORMAN'S OFFICE AND locked the door behind him with an electroseal. "Disembodiment," he identified himself.

"So you did get a new body, Jed," the lawyer remarked affably. "Very good packaging. Makes you look like a poet or something."

"Good as a disguise, maybe, but one hell of a lousy hulk." The young man hurled himself into the chair by the desk. Even Gorman winced at the cruel treatment accorded such

obvious fragility. "Gimme a milgot, Les. This thing—" he indicated his body with contempt—"is shot to Polaris. Won't last more than a few months. Some bargain I got."

Gorman lit a stick himself. "The guy who got your body didn't get such a bargain either," he murmured through a cloud of purple smoke.

"At least he'll live. If he's lucky. I wish he'd hurry and get himself picked up, though, so I could collect the folio and jet off. Can't go after it now. Hounds will be sniffing after anybody gravitating around the place where I've stashed it until they're sure they have me. They don't know where the money is exactly, of course, or they'd soak it up, but they've got an idea of the general sector."

"Want me to pick it up for you, Jed?" the lawyer asked, his pale, flickering eyes brushing across the young man's dark intense ones.

"Oh, sure. All I need is for you to know where it is and all I'd see would be your rocket trail." The young man leaned across the expanse of littered steel. "Or *do* you know where it is, Les?" he asked softly. "Do you know where it is and are you just hibernating until I'm safely out of the way?"

In spite of himself, Gorman could not help moving back. "Don't be a fool, Jed," he said in a voice that was several tones higher. "If I knew where it was . . . well, you're not very frightening in your present embodiment, you know."

"Don't be too sure of that, Gorman. And you were always yellow; anybody could frighten you." He began to laugh shrilly. "Hey, that's good. Get it? Any body, see?"

The lawyer did not join in the mirth. "How are you fixed for cash?" he asked abruptly.

The young man's face split in a sardonic grin. "Why do you think I risked public communion with a darkside character like you, Les? I shot my wad making the shift. I could use a little loan. You know I have millions stashed away," the young man said angrily as Gorman remained silent. "I'll pay you as soon as the hounds take the chump who's leasing my hulk."

"Maybe you can earn some money." Gorman toyed with a

paperweight. "Did you get a look at that big blond guy in the cafe—the one I told you about on the phone?"

"Yeah. Nice life-form he had with him. I wouldn't mind being in that body."

"Seems he wants somebody exterminated. And I told him I heard Jed Carmody was in the parish and might be interested."

The young man sprang to his feet, furious. "You what?"

"Turn your antigravs off. I told him Jed Carmody was in the parish. Are you Jed Carmody?"

The other sat down and exhaled heavily. "You're on course —I'm nobody just now."

"Any identification come with the package?"

"Naah, what'd you expect? . . . But why tell anyone that Jed Carmody's hitting the locality?"

"I thought you might be interested in picking up a little free-falling foliage."

The young man shook his head impatiently. "Risk having this hulk heated up for a half-credit crime? Don't be an alien, Gorman. I'm going to hit subsoil until this other life-form gets collected by the hounds."

"Thought you might like to do it to help me out," Gorman murmured.

The other man stared. "How do you fit into the pattern?" Gorman shrugged. "Oh, I get it: this guy's putting the barometer on you?"

Gorman nodded.

"Bad landing, counselor. But you don't seriously expect . . . ? Hey!" The wide-set eyes glistened darkly. "I got it! Why don't you get this guy who's got my hulk to make the flight? Send somebody out to magnetize him like you thought he was the real Carmody, see?"

Gorman looked hopeful for a moment; then shook his thin-haired head. "No reason to think the man is an extralegal."

"Anyone who finds himself in my hulk damn well has to be if he wants to stay out of the sardine box. . . . Look, what's the first thing he's going to want to do when he finds out what

he's been stuck with? Go to another parish and hop hulks, right? And he'll need plenty of foliage to do it."

"Maybe he has money," Gorman suggested wearily.

"No fuel lost finding out." The young man rubbed his hands together gleefully. "If he takes on the flight, though, see that he gets my flash, huh? Rosy up the picture."

"Maybe he can kill whoever this Lockard has in mind without getting picked up by the police. Such things have happened; otherwise you wouldn't have been able to run around loose so long, Jed."

"An amateur? Not a chance! Besides, just to make sure, little. . . ." He stopped in the act of tapping his chest. "Say, I don't have a name, do I? What's a good epithet for me, Les? Something with class.

The lawyer studied the pale, bony face for a moment or two. "How about John Keats?" he suggested. "Simple and appropriate."

The other man thought. "Yeah, I like that. John Keats. Plain, but not like John Smith. Subtle. I'll buy it. Okay, so you think I'm going to take my view-finder off the fake Carmody? I'm going to adhere to that life-form closer than Mary's lamb. So when he knocks off whoever the other guy wants novaed, I can yell doggie. Then the hounds get him—with my flash on him and all, they'll never have the nebula of a notion that they don't have all of me. . . . I pick up the foliage and rock out to some place where I can buy me a new jewel case, no questions asked. Don't fret, Gorman—you'll get your nibble. I've never played the game with you, have I?"

Instead of answering, Gorman asked a question of his own. "Kind of hard on the other guy, isn't it?"

"He rates it for sticking me with a piece of statuary like this. Look at it this way, Les—in his own hulk he would've died; this way he's got a chance to live. Yeah, get him to make the flight, Les. You can charm the juice out of a lemon when you want to; it's your line of evil. And don't let on you know he's not the genuine article."

"I won't," Gorman sighed. "I only hope I can persuade

him to take on the flight. Don't forget it's important to me too, Jed—uh, John."

"Make planetfall, then," John Keats said. "So long, Les."

"Good-by, Johnny."

Seven

HELEN WAS BRUSHING HER LONG CREAMY HAIR AT THE DRESSing table when there came a tap at the door to the living room of the suite—a tap so light that it could have been someone accidentally brushing past in the corridor outside. Gabriel sprang up from the bed where he had been lolling, watching her and stood for a moment poised on the balls of his feet, until the knock was repeated more emphatically. He started toward the other room.

"But who could be knocking at the door at this hour?" she asked. "It's almost one . . . Gabe, do be careful."

He halted and looked back at her suspiciously. "Why do you say that? You know you don't care what happens to me?" That last was a question rather than a statement and had a plaintive quaver which failed to touch her. Once she had still been able to feel some compassion; now, nothing he said or did could arouse more than fear and disgust.

"If somebody knocks you over the head when you open the door," she murmured, smiling at her own image, "then who will be there to protect me?"

A choked sound came from the back of the man's throat. He turned toward her, his fists clenched. She braced herself for the blow, but then the knock came for the third time and her husband reluctantly continued on into the living room, letting the door shut behind him. She rose and pushed it open a little. She had a pretty good idea of who might be expected but was not especially perturbed, for she knew the real Gabriel Lockard, in whatever guise he might be now, was safe from her husband. And she was curious to see what the exterminator looked like.

The door to the corridor was out of her line of vision, but

she could hear it as it opened. "Lockard?" a deep, husky voice whispered. "Gorman sent me."

"Come in, Mr. Carmody. You *are* Carmody?"

"Shhh," the husky voice warned. "If you get me into trouble, I'm not going to be able to complete your pattern for you, am I?"

"Sorry—I wasn't thinking. Come on in."

A heavy tread shook the ancient floorboards, and presently the man responsible for it came into the girl's sight. He was a huge creature, bigger even than Gabriel, with dark hair growing low to a point on his forehead, and a full-lipped sensual face. Then, as he spoke, as he moved, she knew who he was. She pressed close against the wall of the bedroom, her slender shoulders shaking, her handkerchief stuffed into her mouth, so that the sound of her wild, irrepressible laughter would not reach her husband's ears.

"Sit down, Carmody," Gabriel said cordially, as he handed the newcomer a glass, "and make yourself comfortable." There was a brief, rather awkward silence. "Well," Gabriel went on, with a smile that would have been thoroughly ingratiating to anyone who hadn't known him, "I don't suppose I have to cruise around the asteroids with you?"

"No," Carmody replied, looking speculatively toward the bedroom door. "No, you don't."

Gabriel followed the direction of his gaze. "Worried about somebody overhearing? There's only my wife in there. She's listening, all right, but she won't talk. Come in, Helen."

Carmody rose automatically as she came in, his dark eyes following every line of her long, smooth body in its close-fitting, though opaque, negligee of smoke-gray silk—a fabric which, through extreme scarcity, had come into fashion again.

"Sit down," Gabriel ordered brusquely. "We're not formal here."

Carmody sat, trying not to stare at the girl. She began to mix herself a drink. "Moonbeam," her husband said, "you won't tell anybody about this little peace conference, will you?"

"No," she said, looking at Carmody. "I won't talk." She lifted her glass. "Here's to murder!"

"Helen," Gabriel insisted, unable to rationalize the vague uneasiness that was nagging at him, "you won't dare say say-thing to anybody? Because, if you do, you'll regret it!"

"I said I wouldn't talk. Have I ever broken my word?"

"You've never had the chance." But it would be incredible that she should have the temerity to betray him. After all, she was his wife. She should stick to him out of gratitude and self-interest, for he was rich, at least, and he wasn't exactly repulsive. And he'd been good to her. All men lost their tempers at times.

"Let's get down to business, huh?" Carmody said harshly. "Whom do you want knocked off?"

"I don't know his name," Gabriel replied, "but I can describe him."

After he had finished doing so, there was a small pause. Carmody was silent. Helen turned back to the bar; her face was concealed from the men. Her body shook a little. Lockard thought she was crying, and wondered again whether his confidence in her was entirely justified.

"I think maybe I know the guy," Carmody went on. "Only been around the—the parish a couple of days, if it's the life-form I mean."

"Must be the one," Lockard told him. "Think you can do it?"

"A cinch," Carmody assured him.

As Helen Lockard emerged from the door marked *Females; Human and Humanoid,* and rounded the turn in the corridor, a brawny arm reached out of a vidiphone booth and yanked her inside. The girl gave a startled cry, then relaxed. "Oh, it's you; you gave me a turn."

"You're not afraid? You know who I am, then?"

She nodded. "You're the real Gabriel Lockard." His big body was pressing hers in the close-fitting confines of the booth. In some ways it could be considered more attractive than her husband's. "Why are you hiding here?"

"I'm not hiding, I'm lurking," he explained. "Wouldn't do for me to appear too openly. The police—that is, the hounds —are on Carmody's trail. I don't want them to find me."

"Oh." She pulled away from him. She mustn't let her interest be aroused in a body so soon to be discarded.

"I've been looking for an opportunity to talk to you since last night," he growled, the only way he could gentle a voice as deep as the thick vocal cords of the body produced. "But your husband is always around. . . . You haven't told him who I was, have you?"

She shook her head slowly, reproachfully. "I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't have told him about the other one either, but I . . . well, I guess I jumped or something when I caught sight of him and Gabe mistakenly picked it up."

There was a tense silence as they stood almost pressed against one another. "It's easy to see how you got into Carmody's body," she went on, speaking a little too rapidly, "but how did you happen to get into this particular line of evil?"

"Simple—that lawyer your husband went to see sent scouts out to have Carmody picked up. And they flushed me. Naturally I would have turned down the job if he hadn't happened to mention for whom it was. . . ."

"That other man is the real Carmody now, isn't he?" She looked up at him. Her eyes were gray or green; he couldn't determine which. "So it doesn't matter even if he does get killed."

"But how can he get killed?" the big man reminded her with a gentleness completely out of keeping with the ferocity of his appearance. "I'm not a killer, please believe me—I have never killed anybody and I hope I never have to."

She had never thought about who he was—who he had been —before he started playing the game. Gabriel Lockard, of course. But what had Gabriel Lockard been? Surely not the narco-filled, fear-ridden dilettante the man—the body, at least —was now. He couldn't possibly have been or the hulk wouldn't have stood up so well under the treatment it was

getting from its current tenant. But all that didn't seem to matter. All she wanted was the rightful man in his rightful body, and that seemed almost impossible of achievement.

"What do you intend to do?" she asked, almost sharply.

"I don't know," he said. "By agreeing to kill this—John Keats he calls himself—I felt I had the situation in hand. And I suppose I have, in a sense. But the end result is a stalemate. I've been following him around just to make everything look on course for your husband until I decide what to do. Sometimes, though, I get the curious feeling that Keats is following me."

"Maybe for the same reason you've been following Gabriel." Helen touched his arm gingerly; it was more muscular than her husband's. "This isn't a bad body, you know—maybe he sets some store by it."

"But that doesn't make sense!" he said, impatiently shaking off her hand, not wanting her to like this criminal's body that, despite its superficial attractiveness, fitted him no more easily than any of the others. "Logically, it seems to me, he should try to get as far away from his own hulk as possible. . . . Duck! Here comes your husband!"

He blocked her with his wide body as Gabriel Lockard's swung past the booth, its perfect features marred by a frown. "Okay," he whispered, as Lockard rounded the corner, "rock back to your table and act angry because he's late."

He watched until Gabriel had retraced his steps and gone back to the hotel dining room; then sauntered in the same direction. From the next booth, John Keats stared sullenly after the departing figure. He had been straining his ears, but the booths were effectively soundproofed; all he could learn was that the stranger had developed some kind of quick understanding with Lockard's wife and, knowing the potentialities of his former packaging, this saddened rather than surprised the young man.

He punched Gorman's number without turning on the visual. "Disembodied," he said curtly. "Look here, Gorman, I've been wondering—just who is this life-form supposed to be sending to the joyful planetoids?"

"I haven't any idea," Gorman's voice said curiously. "Didn't seem any of my evil, so I didn't ask. And I don't suppose Lockard would have told me. Why do you want to know?"

"Because I don't see him taking a fix on anybody except Lockard's wife and I don't hold with exterminating females except maybe by accident. Besides, I kind of radiate for that tigi myself."

The lawyer's voice definitely showed interest. "Isn't there anybody else he could possibly be after?"

"Well—" John Keats gave a sick laugh—"there's only one other possible flight pattern. It's kind of extradimensional, but sometimes I think maybe he's after me."

There was a long pause. "Absurd," the little lawyer said thoughtfully. "Absurd. He doesn't even know who you are."

Pale blood surfaced under the young man's transparent skin. "I never thought of that, but you're wrong. He does. He's got to. It was a private game." His voice thickened and he had to stop for coughing. "When you told him he was Jed Carmody, naturally he could figure out who was squatting in his hulk."

"But magnetizing him was your own idea, Johnny," Gorman pointed out gently. "Besides, that's no reason he should be after you; what's the percentage in it? And, anyhow, where does Lockard fit into this?" He seemed to be asking the question of himself as much as of the other man.

"Yeah," John Keats muttered, "that's what I've got to find out."

"Me, too," Gorman half-whispered.

"What did you say?"

"I said tell me when you find out; I'm sort of curious myself."

Eight

"LOOK, GORMAN," CARMODY SAID, "I'M NOT WORKING FOR you; I'm working for Lockard. What's the idea of sending for me this hour of the night?"

"Then why did you come this hour of the night when I asked you to?" the lawyer inquired, leaning back in his chair and smiling.

The big man hesitated and shrugged. "Can't say, myself. Curiosity, maybe. . . . But you can hardly expect me to violate my employer's confidence?"

Gorman laughed. "You get your ideas from the viddies, don't you? Only don't forget that you're the villain, not the hero, of this piece, fellow-man."

Carmody, completely taken aback, stared at him—the little alien couldn't know! And, furthermore, he was mistaken—Carmody, Lockard, the dutchman, had done nothing wrong, committed no crime, violated no ethic. On the other hand, he had done nothing right either, nothing to help himself or any other. "What do you mean?" he finally temporized.

"Tell me this—Lockard hired you to kill the man who goes under the name of John Keats, didn't he?"

"Yes, but how did you know that?" He was beginning to have the same primitive fear of Gorman that he had of the Vinzz; only it was more natural for an extraterrestrial to have apparently supernatural powers.

"Keats told me—and Keats, of course, is the real Carmody."

"So you found out?"

"Found out!" Gorman laughed. "I knew it all along. Does a man keep any secrets from his lawyer?"

"If he's smart, he does." Carmody absently beat his hand on the desk. "This Keats isn't too smart, though, is he?"

"No . . . he isn't a very bright guy. But it was his idea that this would be a fine method of getting you out of the way. And not too bad an idea, either . . . You had to be disposed of, you know," he explained winningly. "And how nice to have hounds do it for us. Of course we had no idea of who your quarry was."

"I can see your point of view," Carmody said ironically. "But why tell me now?" And then he thought he saw the answer. "Are you afraid I'll really kill him?"

The lawyer shook his head and smiled back. "Afraid you really won't." He placed the tips of his fingers together. "I am

prepared to double whatever Lockard is offering you to make sure that Keats, with Carmody inside him, is definitely put out of the way forever."

So even here there was no basis of trust—none of the reverse honor that legend commonly assigned to extralegals. Carmody got up. Even seated, he had towered above the lawyer. Standing, he was like a larger-than-life statue of doom—of doom, Gorman nervously hoped, pointing in the desired direction.

"And if I refuse?" Carmody asked.

Gorman moved his chair back uneasily. "I might persuade Keats that he could risk one murder in his present shape, if it was to insure his ultimate safety."

"Meaning it would be a good idea for him to kill me?"

"Meaning it would be an excellent idea for him to kill you."

"Look here, Gorman," Carmody said, in a low voice that gradually increased in volume. He could no longer restrain the anger that had been seething up in him for all the years of his wandering. "I've had enough of all this, hiding, running, shifting bodies and now hiring out as a killer. Because I'm an honest man. Maybe you've never seen one before, so take a good look at me. You may never have the chance again."

"I am looking and I see Jed Carmody. Not my idea of the prototype of honesty."

"But I don't feel like Jed Carmody."

"Tell that to the hounds." Gorman laughed uproariously. "By law, you're responsible for Carmody's crimes. Of course, if they put you away or—as they'd undoubtedly prefer—accidentally exterminate you in the line of duty, and *then* suspect Carmody hulk-hopped, they might look around some more. But there wouldn't be any percentage in that for you, especially if you were dead."

"I know, I know," Carmody retorted impatiently. "You can't tell me anything I haven't told myself." He paused for a moment. "This is a good body, though," he added. "Almost as good as my old one."

Gorman raised his eyebrows. "You can't be referring to the corpus currently going by the epithet of John Keats?"

"The name was your idea, I take it. No, that wasn't my original body."

"Oh, so you're a dutchman, eh? A thrill boy?" There was contempt, even from such as Gorman. "Getting a lot of free falls out of all this, are you?"

Carmody tried to ignore this, but he couldn't. It wasn't true, he told himself; he had suffered years of playing the game and derived no pleasure from those sufferings—no pleasure at all. But he would not stoop to argue with Gorman. "Maybe I can get away with this body to one of the frontier planets," he mused. "At least I can make a run for it; at least that would be a worthwhile kind of running."

"Brave words!" the lawyer sneered. "But rather risky to put into action. Don't you think the best thing to do would be just go ahead with the pattern as set? How much did Lockard offer you?"

"Half a million credits."

Gorman sucked in his breath. "You're lying, of course, but I'll match that. Carmody—Keats—has ten times that amount and maybe more hidden away where I can lay my hands on it as soon as I'm sure he's where he can't hurt me. It's worth half a million to me. And, in the remote instance that you're telling the truth, you can't turn down a million credits . . . whoever you are, dutchman!"

"Oh, can't I?" Carmody went to the door; then turned. "It may interest you to know that I'm worth a hundred times that amount and maybe more."

The lawyer laughed skeptically. "If you have enough money to buy your way, then why are you doing this?"

Carmody frowned. "You wouldn't understand . . . I'm not sure I understand myself." The door slammed behind him. Descending pneumos hissed.

"Just talking with his elbows," Gorman said comfortingly to himself. "He'll do it. He's got to do it." But he wasn't altogether convinced.

Nine

AS CARMODY LEFT THE OFFICE BUILDING, JOHN KEATS' FIGURE emerged from the shadows of a nearby doorway. He looked up at the golden rectangle of Gorman's window and then toward the direction in which Carmody had gone; and bit his lip irresolutely. After a moment's reflection, he chose to follow his old body. Somehow he didn't have much confidence in Gorman any more; not that he'd ever really trusted him. In their line of evil you couldn't afford to trust anybody. He had made a mistake. But it could still be rectified.

If the big man was aware of his tracker, he did not seem to care. He moved purposefully in the direction of the hotel, scorning the helicabs that swooped down to proffer their services, striding through the brilliantly lit avenues gay with music and the dark alleys mournful with the whine of the farjeen wires as if they were all the same.

The hotel was on one of the avenues, because the Lockards always had only the best of whatever there was to be had. Carmody crossed the almost deserted lobby in swift strides and took the pneumo to the seventh floor. Knowing that his body could have only one objective in that place, Keats took the stairs to the basement.

Carmody sprang out of the pneumo exit and ran down the corridor to bang lustily on the intricately embossed metal door of the Lockards' suite. After a moment, the girl, again in negligee, opened it. Her green-gray eyes widened when she saw who the late visitor was, and she put a finger to her lips. "Shh, Gabe's asleep; let's not wake him unless it's necessary." She closed the door softly behind him. "What is it . . . Jed?"

He was so choked with excitement that he could hardly get the words out. "Helen, will you make a break with me for Proxima Centauri? They won't ask any questions there, if we can get there. And from Proxima we can go—"

"But your body?"

"The hell with my body." He gripped her arms with power-

ful hands. "You mean much more to me than that worthless hulk."

"But, Jed, Gabe'll never let us go . . ." Proxima Centauri—that had been Gabriel's dream, too . . .

His hands pressed so hard into her flesh, she knew there would be bruises on her skin; was she always doomed to fall in love with men who would leave marks on her? "Let him try to stop us. I'm bigger than he is, now."

She looked up at him. "You always were, darling. But he has influence, though he wouldn't need it; he could simply set the police on you."

"That's the chance we're going to have to take . . . But perhaps I'm asking too much. I haven't the right to ask you to take such risks," he added bitterly. "I was thinking only of myself, I see, not of you."

"Oh, no, Jed!"

"Who're you talking to, Helen?" a drowsy voice asked from the bedroom. It was followed by the comely person of Gabriel himself, fastening his dressing gown. "Oh, hello, Carmody." His face lighted up avidly, all sleepiness vanishing like a spent milgot. "Did you do it already?"

"No, I didn't. And, what's more, I'm not going to do it!"

Lockard looked astonished. "But what's wrong? You said you would."

Carmody sighed. "Yes, I know I did. I was stalling. That's what I've always done—stalled, put things off, hesitated to make decisions. Well, I've made my decision now."

"You're not afraid of him?" Lockard said in a voice that was meant to be taunting and emerged as querulous. "A little pipsqueak like that Keats? Or maybe half a million credits isn't enough for you? Is that it?"

That was enough for the man whose emaciated body was torturedly cramped in the air-conditioning vent and further agonized by the strain of repressing the cough that sought to tear its way out of his chest. He had found out what he wanted to know and, as he inched his way back down to the basement, he was already making plans for getting even with

all those he now knew to be enemies. It had been a conspiracy against him from the start; the hounds probably weren't even aware that he was in town. It was Gorman who had told him they knew of his general whereabouts—Gorman, the good friend who had suggested he change bodies, knowing that whatever hulk he wound up with was bound to be more vulnerable than his primal form. And Gorman would pay . . .

"More than enough," Carmody replied, as unaware of the fact that he had lost one-third of his audience as he had been that he was addressing three rather than two listeners. "Only I'm not a killer."

"But I understood you were supposed to be a professional exterminator?"

"Jed Carmody is a killer. Only I'm not Jed Carmody."

Lockard moved backward and stared at the still bigger man.

Lockard retreated still further. "You—you're him! You were all along!" He whirled on his wife. "And you knew, you double-crosser! Knew and didn't tell me! By God, I'll break every bone in your body!"

"Lay a hand on her and I'll break every bone in *my* body!" Lockard stopped where he was. "It doesn't mean anything to me any more, you see," Carmody explained. "I wanted it when I didn't have anything else. But now I have Helen. I could kill you, you know. As Carmody, an acknowledged exterminator, I have nothing to lose. But I'm letting you live, as a hostage for Helen . . . And, besides, as I've been busy trying to convince everybody all evening, I am *not* a murderer." He turned to the girl. "*Will* you come with me to Proxima, Helen?"

"Y-yes, Jed," she said, looking apprehensively at her husband.

"Gather your packs. I'm going to the air office to make the arrangements." Carmody consulted his chronometer. "It's three o'clock. I should be back by eight or so. Get some sleep if you can."

Her wide frightened eyes turned again toward her husband.

"Here." Jed tossed her the gun Gorman had given him. "If he tries anything, use it."

"Yes, Jed. But . . ."

"Don't worry; I have another one."

The door slammed behind him. "Gimme that gun, you little tramp!" Lockard snarled, twisting it out of her flaccid hand.

Ten

CARMODY MARCHED OUT OF THE HOTEL AND TURNED LEFT IN the direction of the airstation which stayed open all night. He had walked a short distance when suddenly a high voice came out of the darkness behind him, "Not so fast, Mr. . . . Carmody," and a hard knob was pressed in his back.

"Mr. Keats, I believe," Carmody said, wondering why he wasn't frightened.

"Right." The other coughed at some length. "You thought you were pretty smart, didn't you, foisting me off with a hulk that wasn't only shopworn but hot?"

"Your intentions weren't exactly noble either, were they, Mr. Keats?"

"I want my frame back!"

Suddenly the idea came to Carmody, and so wonderful it was he could hardly throttle his voice down to calmness. "Shooting me won't help you get it back. In fact, it might make it rather difficult."

"You have your choice between going back to the zarquil house with me and switching or getting your current insides burned out."

Carmody exhaled a small hissing sigh that he hoped would not be recognized as obvious relief to the man behind him. "You'll have to pay. I haven't enough folio on me."

"I'll pay; I'll pay," the voice snarled. "I always pay. But you'll come peacefully?" he asked in some surprise.

"Yes. Matter of fact, I'll be glad to get out of this body. No matter how much I try, somehow I can never manage to keep it clean . . . Gently, now, you don't want to muss up a body you're planning to occupy yourself, now do you?"

"This is too easy," Keats' voice murmured dubiously. "Maybe it's another trap . . ."

"You're always going to imagine traps, Mr. Exterminator, whether they're there or not. You and Lockard both—people who run must have something to run from, and half the time it's not there and half the time, of course, it is; only you never know which is which—"

"You talk too much," the man behind him snarled. "Shut up and keep moving."

"Back again?" the Vinzz at the door asked. The present Carmody was a little startled. Somehow he had thought of the Vinzz as too remote from humanity to be able to distinguish between individual members of the species. "I'm afraid neither of you is qualified to play."

"No reason why we shouldn't have a private game, is there?" John Keats demanded belligerently.

The Vinzz' tendrils quivered. "In that case, no, no reason at all. If you want to be so unsporting and can afford it. It will cost you a hundred thousand credits each."

"But that's twice what I had to pay last week!" Keats protested angrily.

The Vinzz shrugged an antenna. "You are, of course, at liberty to take your trade elsewhere, if you choose."

"Oh, hell," the temporarily poetic-looking killer snarled. "We're stuck and you know it. Let's get it over with!"

It was odd to come out of unconsciousness back into the thin young man's body again. More uncomfortable than usual, because the criminal's body had been in such splendid physical condition and this one so poor—now worse than before, because it had been worked far beyond its attenuated capabilities. The individuality that had originally been Gabriel Lockard's, formerly housed in Jed Carmody's body, now opened John Keats' eyes and looked at the Vinzz who stood above him.

"The other human has been told you awakened before him and have already departed," the Vinzz explained. "He has

violence in his heart and we do not care for violence on our doorstep. Bad for business."

"Has he gone already?"

The Vinzz nodded.

"How long has he been gone?" He scrambled to his feet and investigated the clothing he wore. Carmody had been in too much of a hurry to clean himself out. There was some money left, a container of milgot sticks, and a set of electroseals.

"He has just left." The extraterrestrial's eyes flickered in what might have been surprise. "Don't you wish to avoid him?"

"No, I must go where he goes."

The Vinzz shrugged. "Well, it's your funeral in the most literal sense of the word." He sighed as the young man plunged out into the darkness. "But, from the objective viewpoint, what a waste of money!"

The massive, broad-shouldered figure of Jed Carmody was still visible at the end of the street, so the thin man slowed down. He wanted to follow Carmody, to keep close watch on where he was going and, if necessary, guide him in the right direction, though he didn't think he'd have to do that. But he had no intention of overtaking him. Carmody might not want openly to use the gun the former tenant had so carefully left him, but with his physique he could break the fragile body of John Keats in two, if he so desired, and he probably did.

Meanwhile Carmody—the real Carmody—having been deprived of an immediate revenge, had begun to realize how much better the situation was as it now stood. If he killed Keats out of hand, he might miss out on half a million credits, because it was his custom to get cash in advance for all his flights, and this was his flight pattern now. He wouldn't trust that Lockard life-form to defoliate after the job was done.

Of course he himself had plenty of money stashed away, but every half million helped. It would be no trouble to find the sickly Keats later. And there was no reason the hounds should get him—Carmody—after all, the other had been

rocketing around in his body and he hadn't been caught. Carmody had allowed himself to be stampeded into panic. He smiled. Gorman wouldn't ever be able to chart any pattern like that, or like anything, again. Fortunately there was no permanent harm done, and a half million credits to cover the zarquil losses, with a nice profit left over. Maybe he could even beat Lockard up to a million; that one was obviously a coward and a fool. A few threats should be enough to get him to hand over.

Carmody paused for a moment outside the hotel. It still took some nerve to walk boldly into the brightly lit lobby.

The automatic doors slid open as he entered. At the same time, the pneumo gates lifted and Gabe Lockard came out, dragging a heavily veiled Helen, their luggage floating behind them. Both stopped as they caught sight of the killer; Lockard paled—Helen gasped.

Too bad I have to leave her in the tentacles of this low life-form, Carmody thought with regret, but there was no help for it. He approached them with what he thought was an ingratiating smile. "Mr. Lockard, I've decided to give you another chance."

It was an unhappy choice of word. "Oh, you have, have you!" the big blond man yelled. "I thought I did have another chance. And now you've spoiled that, too!"

"What do you mean by that?" Carmody demanded, his thick dark brows almost meeting across his nose.

"I figured on getting away before you came back," Gabriel babbled in a frenzy, "but you'd have found me anyway. You always find me. I'm sick of this running. There's only one way to stop you, only one way to be sure that, whatever happens to me, you won't be around to enjoy it."

"Listen, Lockard, you're making a mistake. I—"

"The only mistake I made was in hiring somebody else to do the job I should have done myself."

He pulled out the gun—Carmody's own gun—and fired it. He wasn't a good shot, but that didn't matter. He had the

flash on full blast and he pumped and pumped and pumped the trigger until the searing heat rays had whipped not only the killer's astonished body but all through the lobby. The few people still there rushed for cover as rug, chairs, potted palms were shriveled by the lancing holocaust. There was a penetrating odor of burning fabric and frond and flesh.

Helen let out a wail as Carmody, more ash than man, fell to the charred carpet. "Gabe, Gabe, what have you done!"

The gun dropped from his hand to rejoin its owner. His face crumpled. "I didn't really mean to kill . . . only to scare him . . . What'll I do now?"

"You'll run, Mr. Lockard," John Keats' body said as he entered the devastated lobby. "You'll run and run and run. He's dead, but you'll keep on running forever. No, not forever—I apologize—some day you'll get caught, because the hounds aren't amateurs like you and . . . him . . ." He pointed to the crumbling, blackened corpse, keeping his hand steady with an effort for, God knew, he was the biggest amateur of them all.

Lockard licked his lips and gazed apprehensively around. Frightened faces were beginning to peer out from their places of concealment. "Look, Carmody," he said in a low, stiff voice, "let's talk this over. But let's get out of here first before somebody calls the hounds."

"All right," the thin man smiled. "I'm always willing to talk. We can go over to Gorman's office. They won't look for us there right away."

"How'll we get in?"

"I have a 'seal," Keats said. Surely one of the electroseals he carried must belong to Gorman's office. It was a chance he'd have to take.

Eleven

KEATS HAD TO TRY FIVE DIFFERENT SEALS BEFORE HE FOUND the one that opened the lawyer's office. He was afraid his obvious lack of familiarity would arouse Lockard's suspicions,

but the big man was too much preoccupied with his own emotions.

An unpleasantly haunting aroma of cooked meat seeped out from inside. "For Christ's sake, Carmody, hurry!" Lockard snarled, and gave a sigh of relief as the door swung open and the illuminators went on, lighting the shabby office. Gorman was there. His horribly seared body lay sprawled on the dusty rug—quite dead.

You—you killed him?" Gabriel quavered. The sight of murder done by another hand seemed to upset him more than the murder he himself had just committed.

The thin man gave a difficult smile. "Carmody killed him." Which was undoubtedly the truth. "The gun that did it is in his pocket. I had nothing to do with it." His eyes sought for the ones behind the veil. He wanted the girl who stood frozenly by the door to know that this, at least, was the truth.

Gabriel also stayed near the door, unable to take his eyes off the corpse. In death Carmody and Gorman, the big man and the small man, had looked the same; each was just a heap of charred meat and black ash. No blood, no germs—all very hygienic. "You're smart, Carmody," he said from taut lips. "Damn smart."

"I'm Keats, not Carmody! Remember that." He dropped into the chair behind the desk. "Sit down, both of you." Only Gabriel accepted the invitation. "Why don't you take that thing off your face, Mrs. Lockard? You aren't hiding from anybody, are you?"

Gabriel gave a short laugh. "She's hiding her face from everybody. I spoiled it a little for her. She was going to sell me out to . . . the guy in your body."

Keats' hand tightened on the arm of his chair. Lose his temper now and he lost the whole game. "It was a good body," he said, not looking at the thing on the rug, trying not to remember the thing on the rug on the other side of town. "A very good body." Through the veil, Helen's shadowy eyes were fixed on his face. He wanted to see what Lockard had done to her, but he couldn't tear off the veil, as he longed to do; he was afraid of the expression that might be revealed on

her face—triumph when there should have been anguish; anguish when there should have been triumph.

"Not as good as the one I have here." Lockard thumped his own chest, anxious to establish the value of the only ware he had left.

"Matter of opinion," Keats said. "And mine was in better shape."

"This one isn't in bad condition," Gabriel retorted defensively. "It could be brought back to peak in short order."

"You won't have much opportunity to do it though. But maybe the government will do it for you; they don't pamper prisoners, I understand, especially lifers."

Gabriel whitened. "You're an extralegal, Carmody—Keats," he whined. "You know your course. You know how to hide from the hounds . . . I'm a—a respectable citizen." He spread his hands wide in exaggerated helplessness. "Strictly an amateur, that's what I am—I admit I've been playing out of my league."

"So?"

"I'm worth a lot of money, Keats, a hell of a lot. And half of it can be yours, if you . . . change bodies with me."

Keats' angular face remained expressionless, but there was a sharp cry from the girl—a cry that might have been misunderstood as one of pain, but wasn't.

Gabriel turned toward her, and his upper lip curled back over his teeth. "I'll throw her in to the bargain. You must have seen her when she wasn't banged up so you know she's not permanently disfigured. Isn't she worth taking a risk for?"

Keats shrugged. "If the hounds pull you down, she'll be a legal widow anyway."

"Yes, but you'd have no . . . chance with her in the body you now have . . . No chance," he repeated. His voice broke. "Never had a chance."

"Go ahead, feel sorry for yourself," the other man said. "Nobody else will."

Gabriel's face darkened, but he also had to control his tem-

per to gain what he fancied were his own ends. "You won't deny that this hulk is better than the one you have now?"

"Except that there's one thing about the head that I don't like."

Gabriel stared in bewilderment. His body was beyond criticism. "What is it you don't like about the head?"

"There's a price on it now."

Gabriel pressed his spine against the back of the chair. "Don't play innocent, Carmody. You've killed people, too."

"Well, sure, but not out in the open like that. You know how many people saw you blast him? Too many. If you're going to exterminate somebody, you do it from a dark doorway or an alley—not in a brilliantly lit hotel lobby, and you blast him in the back. But there's no use giving you lessons; it's not likely you'll ever be able to use them where you're going."

Gabriel suddenly sagged in his chair. He looked down at the floor. "So you won't do it?"

Keats grew apprehensive. He hadn't expected the big man to give in to despair so soon—it might spoil all his plans and leave him trapped in this sick unwanted body. He lit a milgot. "I didn't say that," he pointed out, trying to sound unconcerned. "Matter of fact, I might even consider your proposition, if . . ."

There was hope in Lockard's eyes again. It made Keats a little sick to think of the game he had to play with the other; then he thought of the game the other had played with him, the game the other had played with his wife, and the faint flickering of compassion died out in him. "What do you want?" Gabriel asked.

Keats took a moment before he answered. "I want *all* of what you've got."

Gabriel uttered an inarticulate sound.

"You can't take it with you, colleague. If we hulk-hop, it's got to be tonight, because the hounds will be baying on your trail any moment. You wouldn't have the chance to transfer the property to my name and, if you take my word that I'll hand over half afterward, you're just plain out of this dimen-

sion . . . Think of it this way, Lockard—what's worth more to you, a couple of lousy billions or your freedom?"

"All right, Carmody," Lockard said dully, "you're the dictator."

Twelve

THE VINZZ' EYES FLICKERED IN ASTONISHMENT. "ANOTHER private game? However . . ." he shrugged eloquently. "It will cost you a hundred thousand credits each, gentlemen."

"No discount for a steady customer?" Keats inquired lightly, though he was trembling inside.

The Vinzz' tendrils quivered. "None. You ought to be glad I didn't raise the price again."

"Why didn't you?" he couldn't help asking.

The Vinzz looked steadily into the man's eyes. "I don't know," it answered at last. "Perhaps I have been so long on this planet that I have developed a sentimental streak . . . In any case, I am going back to Vinau the day after tomorrow . . ."

"For God's sake," Lockard, his senses so confused with fear and apprehension that he was able to catch only fragments of their talk, screamed, "pay him what he asks and don't haggle!"

"All right," Keats agreed. "The lady will wait for me here," he told the Vinzz.

The extraterrestrial quivered indecisively. "Most irregular," it murmured. "However, I cannot refuse a slight favor for such an old customer. This way, madam."

Gabriel Lockard opened Gabriel Lockard's eyes.

"Well," the Vinzz who stood above him lisped, "how does it feel to be back in your own body again?"

Gabriel got up and stretched. He stretched again, and then an expression of wonderment came over his handsome features. "I feel . . . exactly the way I felt in . . . any of the

others," he said haltingly. "I'm not comfortable in this one either. It's not right—it doesn't fit. My own body . . ."

"You've grown out of it," the green one told him, not unkindly. "But you will be able to adjust to it again, if you'll give it a chance . . ."

"There's that word again." Gabriel winced. "I'm beginning to respond to it the way my . . . predecessor did. Do we ever really get another chance, I wonder?"

"Take my advice." The Vinzz's face became almost human. "This is costing my people money, but we've made enough out of you and your—shall we say?—friends. It is a shame," it murmured, "to prey upon unsophisticated life-forms, but one must live. However, I'll tell you this: The compulsion will come over you again and again to play the game—your body will torment you unbearably and you will long for relief from it, but you must conquer that desire or, I warn you, you will be lost to yourself forever. It's a pattern that's enormously difficult to break, but it can be broken."

Gabriel smiled down at the little green creature. "Thanks, colleague. I'll remember that advice. And I'll take it."

"The other is still asleep," the Vinzz told him. "This time I thought it best to let you awaken first. Good-by, and . . . good luck."

"Thanks, fellow-man," Gabriel said. The Vinzz' tendrils quivered.

Helen awaited him in an anteroom, her veil flung back so that he could see her poor, marred face. Anger rose hotly in him, but he pushed it down. Her suffering had not been meaningless and revenge was already consummated.

"Gabriel!" Her voice was taut. ". . . Jed!"

"Gabriel," he smiled. "The genuine, original Gabriel—accept no substitutes."

"I'm so glad." Her lips formed the words for she had no voice with which to make them.

"Come." He took her arm and led her out into the quiet street. It was almost daylight and the sky was a clear pearl

gray. Again a star detached itself from the translucent disk of the Moon and sped out into the Galaxy.

Soon, he thought, *we'll be on a starship like that one, leaving this played-out planet for the new worlds up in the sky.*

"You're going to let Gabe—the other Gabriel—go?" She asked.

He bent his head to look at her swollen face. "You're free, Helen; I have my body back; why should we concern ourselves with what happens to him? He can't hurt us any more."

"I suppose you're right," she muttered. "It seems unfair. . . ." She shivered. "Still, you have no idea of the things he did to me—the things he made me do. . . ." She shivered again.

"You're cold. Let's get started."

"But where are we going?" She placed her hand on his arm and looked up at him.

"Back to the hotel to pick up your luggage. And then—I still think Proxima is a good idea, don't you? And then perhaps farther out still. I'm sick of this old world."

"But, Je—Gabriel, you must be mad! The police will be waiting for you at the hotel."

"Of course they'll be waiting, but with a citation, not handcuffs."

She looked at him as if he had gone extradimensional. He laughed. "What your ex-husband didn't know, my dear, was that there was a reward out for Jed Carmody, *dead or alive.*"

Her face was blank for a moment. "A reward! Oh, G-G-G-Gabriel!" The girl erupted into hysterical laughter.

"Shh, darling, control yourself." He put his arm around her, protectively, restrainingly. "We'll be conspicuous," for already the Sun's first feeble rays were beginning to wash the ancient tired streets with watery gold. "Think of the reward we're going to get—five thousand credits, just for us!"

She wiped her eyes and pulled down her veil. "Whatever will we do with all that money!"

"I think it would be nice if we turned it over to the hotel," he smiled. "I made rather a shambles of their lobby when, pursuant to my duty as a solar citizen, I exterminated the

killer Carmody. Let's give it to them and leave only pleasant memories behind us on our journey to the stars." And he couldn't help wondering whether, if things got really tough, somewhere up in those stars he could find another zarquil game.

HOW-2

by Clifford D. Simak

One

GORDON KNIGHT WAS ANXIOUS FOR THE FIVE-HOUR DAY TO end so he could rush home. For this was the day he should receive the How-2 Kit he'd ordered and he was anxious to get to work on it.

It wasn't only that he had always wanted a dog, although that was more than half of it—but, with this kit, he would be trying something new. He'd never handled any How-2 Kit with biologic components and he was considerably excited. Although, of course, the dog would be biologic only to a limited degree and most of it would be packaged, anyhow, and all he'd have to do would be assemble it. But it was something new and he wanted to get started.

He was thinking of the dog so hard that he was mildly irritated when Randall Stewart, returning from one of his numerous trips to the water fountain, stopped at his desk to give him a progress report on home dentistry.

"It's easy," Stewart told him. "Nothing to it if you follow the instructions. Here, look—I did this one last night."

He then squatted down beside Knight's desk and opened his mouth, proudly pulling it out of shape with his fingers so Knight could see.

"Thish un ere," said Stewart, blindly attempting to point, with a wildly waggling finger, at the tooth in question.

He let his face snap back together.

"Filled it myself," he announced complacently. "Rigged up a series of mirrors to see what I was doing. They came right in the kit, so all I had to do was follow the instructions."

He reached a finger deep inside his mouth and probed tenderly at his handiwork. "A little awkward, working on yourself. On someone else, of course, there'd be nothing to it."

He waited hopefully.

"Must be interesting," said Knight.

"Economical, too. No use paying the dentists the prices they ask. Figure I'll practice on myself and then take on the family. Some of my friends, even, if they want me to."

He regarded Knight intently.

Knight failed to rise to the dangling bait.

Stewart gave up. "I'm going to try cleaning next. You got to dig down beneath the gums and break loose the tartar. There's a kind of hook you do it with. No reason a man shouldn't take care of his own teeth instead of paying dentists."

"It doesn't sound too hard," Knight admitted.

"It's a cinch," said Stewart. "But you got to follow the instructions. There's nothing you can't do if you follow the instructions."

And that was true, Knight thought. You could do anything if you followed the instructions—if you didn't rush ahead, but sat down and took your time and studied it all out.

Hadn't he built his house in his spare time, and all the furniture for it, and the gadgets, too? Just in his spare time—although God knew, he thought, a man had little enough of that, working fifteen hours a week.

It was a lucky thing he'd been able to build the house after buying all that land. But everyone had been buying what they

called estates, and Grace had set her heart on it, and there'd been nothing he could do.

If he'd had to pay carpenters and masons and plumbers, he would never have been able to afford the house. But by building it himself, he had paid for it as he went along. It had taken ten years, of course, but think of all the fun he'd had!

He sat there and thought of all the fun he'd had, and of all the pride. No, sir, he told himself, no one in his circumstances had a better house.

Although, come to think of it, what he'd done had not been too unusual. Most of the men he knew had built their homes, too, or had built additions to them, or had remodeled them.

He had often thought that he would like to start over again and build another house, just for the fun of it. But that would be foolish, for he already had a house and there would be no sale for another one, even if he built it. Who would want to buy a house when it was so much fun to build one?

And there was still a lot of work to do on the house he had. New rooms to add—not necessary, of course, but handy. And the roof to fix. And a summer house to build. And there were always the grounds. At one time he had thought he would landscape—a man could do a lot to beautify a place with a few years of spare-time work. But there had been so many other things to do, he had never managed to get around to it.

Knight and Anson Lee, his neighbor, had often talked about what could be done to their adjoining acreages if they ever had the time. But Lee, of course, would never get around to anything. He was a lawyer, although he never seemed to work at it too hard. He had a large study filled with stacks of law books and there were times when he would talk quite expansively about his law library, but he never seemed to use the books. Usually he talked that way when he had half a load on, which was fairly often, since he claimed to do a lot of thinking and it was his firm belief that a bottle helped him think.

After Stewart finally went back to his desk, there still remained more than an hour before the working day officially

ended. Knight sneaked the current issue of a How-2 magazine out of his briefcase and began to leaf through it, keeping a wary eye out so he could hide it quickly if anyone should notice he was loafing.

He had read the articles earlier, so now he looked at the ads. It was a pity, he thought, a man didn't have the time to do all there was to do.

For example:

Fit your own glasses (testing material and lens-grinding equipment included in the kit).

Take out your own tonsils (complete directions and all necessary instruments).

Fit up an unused room as your private hospital (no sense in leaving home when you're ill, just at the time when you most need its comfort and security).

Grow your own medicines and drugs (starts of 50 different herbs and medicinal plants, with detailed instructions for their cultivation and processing).

Grow your wife's fur coat (a pair of mink, one ton of horse meat, furrier tools).

Tailor your own suits and coats (50 yards of wool yardgoods and lining material).

Build your own TV set.

Bind your own books.

Build your own power plant (let the wind work for you).

Build your own robot (a jack of all trades, intelligent, obedient, no time off, no overtime, on the job 24 hours a day, never tired, no need for rest or sleep, do any work you wish).

Now there, thought Knight, was something a man should try. If a man had one of those robots, it would save a lot of labor. There were all sorts of attachments you could get for it. And the robots, the ad said, could put on and take off all these attachments just as a man puts on a pair of gloves or takes off a pair of shoes.

Have one of those robots and, every morning, it would sally out into the garden and pick all the corn and beans and peas and tomatoes and other vegetables ready to be picked and

leave them all neatly in a row on the back stoop of the house. Probably would get a lot more out of a garden that way, too, for the grading mechanism would never select a too-green tomato or allow an ear of corn to go beyond its prime.

There were cleaning attachments for the house and snow-plowing attachments and housepainting attachments and almost any other kind one could wish. Get a full quota of attachments, then lay out a work program and turn the robot loose—you could forget about the place the year around, for the robot would take care of everything.

There was only one hitch. The cost of a robot kit came close to ten thousand dollars and all the available attachments could run to another ten.

Knight closed the magazine and put it into the briefcase.

He saw there were only fifteen minutes left until quitting time and that was too short a time to do anyhing, so Knight just sat and thought about getting home and finding the kit there waiting for him.

He had always wanted a dog, but Grace would never let him have one. They were dirty, she said, and tracked up the carpeting, they had fleas and shed hair all over everything—and, besides, they smelled.

Well, she wouldn't object to this kind of dog, Knight told himself.

It wouldn't smell and it was guaranteed not to shed hair and it would never harbor fleas, for a flea would starve on a half-mechanical, half-biologic dog.

He hoped the dog wouldn't be a disappointment, but he'd carefully gone over the literature describing it and he was sure it wouldn't. It would go for a walk with its owner and would chase sticks and smaller animals, and what more could one expect of any dog? To insure realism, it saluted trees and fenceposts, but was guaranteed to leave no stains or spots.

The kit was tilted up beside the hangar door when he got home, but at first he didn't see it. When he did, he craned his neck out so far to be sure it was the kit that he almost came a cropper in the hedge. But, with a bit of luck, he

brought the flier down neatly on the gravel strip and was out of it before the blades had stopped whirling.

It was the kit, all right. The invoice envelope was tacked on top of the crate. But the kit was bigger and heavier than he'd expected and he wondered if they might not have accidentally sent him a bigger dog than the one he'd ordered.

He tried to lift the crate, but it was too heavy, so he went around to the back of the house to bring a dolly from the basement.

Around the corner of the house, he stopped a moment and looked out across his land. A man could do a lot with it, he thought, if he just had the time and the money to buy the equipment. He could turn the acreage into one vast garden. Ought to have a landscape architect work out a plan for it, of course—although, if he bought some landscaping books and spent some evenings at them, he might be able to figure things out for himself.

There was a lake at the north end of the property and the whole landscape, it seemed to him, should focus upon the lake. It was rather a dank bit of scenery at the moment, with straggly marsh surrounding it and unkempt cattails and reeds astir in the summer wind. But with a little drainage and some planting, a system of walks and a picturesque bridge or two, it would be a thing of beauty.

He started out across the lake to where the house of Anson Lee sat upon a hill. As soon as he got the dog assembled, he would walk it over to Lee's place, for Lee would be pleased to be visited by a dog. There had been times, Knight felt, when Lee had not been entirely sympathetic with some of the things he'd done. Like that business of helping Grace build the kilns and the few times they'd managed to lure Lee out on a hunt for the proper kinds of clay.

"What do you want to make dishes for?" he had asked. "Why go to all the trouble? You can buy all you want for a tenth of the cost of making them."

Lee had not been visibly impressed when Grace explained that they weren't dishes. They were ceramics, Grace had said,

and a recognized form of art. She got so interested and made so much of it—some of it really good—that Knight had found it necessary to drop his model railroading project and tack another addition on the already sprawling house, for stacking, drying and exhibition.

Lee hadn't said a word, a year or two later, when Knight built the studio for Grace, who had grown tired of pottery and had turned to painting. Knight felt, though, that Lee had kept silent only because he was convinced of the futility of further argument.

But Lee would approve of the dog. He was that kind of fellow, a man Knight was proud to call a friend—yet queerly out of step. With everyone else absorbed in things to do, Lee took it easy with his pipe and books, though not the ones on law.

Even the kids had their interests now, learning while they played.

Mary, before she got married, had been interested in growing things. The greenhouse stood just down the slope, and Knight regretted that he had not been able to continue with her work. Only a few months before, he had dismantled her hydroponic tanks, a symbolic admission that a man could only do so much.

John, quite naturally, had turned to rockets. For years, he and his pals had shot up the neighborhood with their experimental models. The last and largest one, still uncompleted, towered back of the house. Someday, Knight told himself, he'd have to go out and finish what the youngster had started. In university now, John still retained his interests, which now seemed to be branching out. Quite a boy, Knight thought pridefully. Yes, sir, quite a boy.

He went down the ramp into the basement to get the dolly and stood there a moment, as he always did, just to look at the place—for here, he thought, was the real core of his life. There, in that corner, the workshop. Over there, the model railroad layout on which he still worked occasionally. Behind it, his photographic lab. He remembered that the basement hadn't been quite big enough to install the lab and he'd had

to knock out a section of the wall and build an addition. That, he recalled, had turned out to be a bigger job than he had bargained for.

He got the dolly and went out to the hangar and loaded on the kit and wrestled it into the basement. Then he took a pinch bar and started to uncrate it. He worked with knowledge and precision, for he had unpacked many kits and knew just how to go about it.

He felt a vague apprehension when he lifted out the parts. They were neither the size nor the shape he had expected them to be.

Breathing a little heavily from exertion and excitement, he went at the job of unwrapping them. By the second piece, he knew he had no dog. By the fifth, he knew beyond any doubt exactly what he did have.

He had a robot—and if he was any judge, one of the best and most expensive models!

He sat down on one corner of the crate and took out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead. Finally, he tore the invoice letter off the crate, where it had been tacked.

To Mr. Gordon Knight, it said, *one dog kit, paid in full.*

So far as How-2 Kits, Inc., was concerned, he had a dog. And the dog was paid for—paid in full, it said.

He sat down on the crate again and looked at the robot parts.

No one would ever guess. Come inventory time, How-2 Kits would be long one dog and short one robot, but with carloads of dog kit orders filled and thousands of robots sold, it would be impossible to check.

Gordon Knight had never, in all his life, done a consciously dishonest thing. But now he made a dishonest decision and he knew it was dishonest and there was nothing to be said in defense of it. Perhaps the worst of all was that he was dishonest with himself.

At first, he told himself that he would send the robot back, but—since he had always wanted to put a robot together—he would assemble this one and then take it apart, repack it and

send it back to the company. He wouldn't activate it. He would just assemble it.

But all the time he knew that he was lying to himself, realized that the least he was doing was advancing, step by evasive step, toward dishonesty. And he knew he was doing it this way because he didn't have the nerve to be forthrightly crooked.

So he sat down that night and read the instructions carefully, identifying each of the parts and their several features as he went along. For this was the way you went at a How-2. You didn't rush ahead. You took it slowly, point by point, got the picture firmly in your mind before you started to put the parts together. Knight, by now, was an expert at not rushing ahead. Besides, he didn't know when he would ever get another chance at a robot.

Two

IT WAS THE BEGINNING OF HIS FOUR DAYS OFF AND HE BUCKLED down to the task and put his heart into it. He had some trouble with the biologic concepts and had to look up a text on organic chemistry and try to trace some of the processes. He found the going tough. It had been a long time since he had paid any attention to organic chemistry, and he found that he had forgotten the little he had known.

By bedtime of the second day, he had fumbled enough information out of the textbook to understand what was necessary to put the robot together.

He was a little upset when Grace, discovering what he was working on, immediately thought up household tasks for the robot. But he put her off as best he could and, the next day, he went at the job of assembly.

He got the robot together without the slightest trouble, being fairly handy with tools—but mostly because he religiously followed the first axiom of How-2-ism by knowing what he was about before he began.

At first, he kept assuring himself that as soon as he had the

robot together, he would disassemble it. But when he was finished, he just had to see it work. No sense putting in all that time and not knowing if he had gotten it right, he argued. So he flipped the activating switch and screwed in the final plate.

The robot came alive and looked at Knight.

Then it said, "I am a robot. My name is Albert. What is there to do?"

"Now take it easy, Albert," Knight said hastily. "Sit down and rest while we have a talk."

"I don't need to rest," it said.

"All right, then, just take it easy. I can't keep you, of course. But as long as you're activated, I'd like to see what you can do. There's the house to take care of, and the garden and the lawn to mind, and I'd been thinking about the landscaping . . ."

He stopped then and smote his forehead with an open palm. "*Attachments!* How can I get hold of the attachments?"

"Never mind," said Albert. "Don't get upset. Just tell me what's to be done."

So Knight told him, leaving the landscaping till the last and being a bit apologetic about it.

"A hundred acres is a lot of land and you can't spend all your time on it. Grace wants some housework done, and there's the garden and the lawn."

"Tell you what you do," said Albert. "I'll write a list of things for you to order and you leave it all to me. You have a well-equipped workshop. I'll get along."

"You mean you'll build your own attachments?"

"Quit worrying," Albert told him. "Where's a pencil and paper?"

Knight got them for him and Albert wrote down a list of materials—steel in several dimensions and specifications, aluminum of various gauges, copper wire and a lot of other items.

"There!" said Albert, handing him the paper. "That won't set you back more than a thousand and it'll put us in business. You better call in the order so we can get started."

Knight called in the order and Albert began nosing around the place and quickly collected a pile of junk that had been left lying around.

"All good stuff," he said.

Albert picked out some steel scrap and started up the forge and went to work. Knight watched him for a while, then went up to dinner.

"Albert is a wonder," he told Grace. "He's making his own attachments."

"Did you tell him about the jobs I want done?"

"Sure. But first he's got to get the attachments made."

"I want him to keep the place clean," said Grace, "and there are new drapes to be made, and the kitchen to be painted, and all those leaky faucets you never had the time to fix."

"Yes, dear."

"And I wonder if he could learn to cook."

"I didn't ask him, but I suppose he could."

"He's going to be a tremendous help to me," said Grace. "Just think, I can spend all my time at painting!"

Through long practice, he knew exactly how to handle this phase of the conversation. He simply detached himself, split himself in two. One part sat and listened and, at intervals, made appropriate responses, while the other part went on thinking about more important matters.

Several times, after they had gone to bed, he woke in the night and heard Albert banging away in the basement workshop and was a little surprised until he remembered that a robot worked around the clock, all day, every day. Knight lay there and stared up at the blackness of the ceiling and congratulated himself on having a robot. Just temporarily, to be sure—he would send Albert back in a day or so. There was nothing wrong in enjoying the thing for a little while, was there?

The next day, Knight went into the basement to see if Albert needed help, but the robot affably said he didn't. Knight stood around for a while and then left Albert to himself and tried

to get interested in a model locomotive he had started a year or two before, but had laid aside to do something else. Somehow, he couldn't work up much enthusiasm over it any more, and he sat there, rather ill at ease, and wondered what was the matter with him. Maybe he needed a new interest. He had often thought he would like to take up puppetry and now might be the time to do it.

He got out some catalogues and How-2 magazines and leafed through them, but was able to arouse only mild and transitory interest in archery, mountain-climbing and boat-building. The rest left him cold. It seemed he was singularly uninspired this particular day.

So he went over to see Anson Lee.

He found Lee stretched out in a hammock, smoking a pipe and reading Proust, with a jug set beneath the hammock within easy reaching distance.

Lee laid aside the book and pointed to another hammock slung a few feet from where he lay. "Climb aboard and let's have a restful visit."

Knight hoisted himself into the hammock, feeling rather silly.

"Look at that sky," Lee said. "Did you ever see another so blue?"

"I wouldn't know," Knight told him. "I'm not an expert on meteorology."

"Pity," Lee said. "You're not an expert on birds, either."

"For a time, I was a member of a bird-watching club."

"And worked at it so hard, you got tired and quit before the year was out. It wasn't a bird-watching club you belonged to—it was an endurance race. Everyone tried to see more birds than anyone else. You made a contest of it. And you took notes, I bet."

"Sure we did. What's wrong with that?"

"Not a thing," said Lee, "if you hadn't been quite so grim about it."

"Grim? How would you know?"

"It's the way you live. It's the way everyone lives now. Except me, of course. Look at that robin, that ragged-looking

one in the apple tree. He's a friend of mine. We've been acquainted for all of six years now. I could write a book about that bird—and if he could read, he'd approve of it. But I won't, of course. If I wrote the book, I couldn't watch the robin."

"You could write it in the winter, when the robin's gone."

"In wintertime," said Lee, "I have other things to do."

He reached down, picked up the jug and passed it across to Knight.

"Hard cider," he explained. "Make it myself. Not as a project, not as a hobby, but because I happen to like cider and no one knows any longer how to really make it. Got to have a few worms in the apples to give it a proper tang."

Thinking about the worms, Knight spat out a mouthful, then handed back the jug. Lee applied himself to it wholeheartedly.

"First honest work I've done in years." He lay in the hammock, swinging gently, with the jug cradled on his chest. "Every time I get a yen to work, I look across the lake at you and decide against it. How many rooms have you added to that house since you got it built?"

"Eight," Knight told him proudly.

"My God! Think of it—eight rooms!"

"It isn't hard," protested Knight, "once you get the knack of it. Actually, it's fun."

"A couple of hundred years ago, men didn't add eight rooms to their homes. And they didn't build their own houses to start with. And they didn't go in for a dozen different hobbies. They didn't have the time."

"It's easy now. You just buy a How-2 Kit."

"So easy to kid yourself," said Lee. "So easy to make it seem that you are doing something worthwhile when you're just piddling around. Why do you think this How-2 thing boomed into big business? Because there was a need of it?"

"It was cheaper. Why pay to have a thing done when you can do it yourself?"

"Maybe that *is* part of it. Maybe, at first, that was the rea-

son. But you can't use the economy argument to justify adding eight rooms. No one needs eight extra rooms. I doubt if, even at first, economy was the entire answer. People had more time than they knew what to do with, so they turned to hobbies. And today they do it not because they need all the things they make, but because the making of them fills an emptiness born of shorter working hours, of giving people leisure they don't know how to use. Now, me," he said. "I know how to use it."

He lifted the jug and had another snort and offered it to Knight again. This time, Knight refused.

They lay there in their hammocks, looking at blue sky and watching the ragged robin. Knight said there was a How-2 Kit for city people to make robot birds and Lee laughed pityingly and Knight shut up in embarrassment.

When Knight went back home, a robot was clipping the grass around the picket fence. He had four arms, which had clippers attached instead of hands, and he was doing a quick and efficient job.

"You aren't Albert, are you?" Knight asked, trying to figure out how a strange robot could have strayed onto the place.

"No," the robot said, keeping right on clipping. "I am Abe. I was made by Albert."

"Made?"

"Albert fabricated me so that I could work. You didn't think Albert would do work like this himself, did you?"

"I wouldn't know," said Knight.

"If you want to talk, you'll have to move along with me. I have to keep on working."

"Where is Albert now?"

"Down in the basement, fabricating Alfred."

"Alfred? *Another* robot?"

"Certainly. That's what Albert's for."

Knight reached out for a fencepost and leaned weakly against it.

First there was a single robot and now there were two, and Albert was down in the basement working on a third. That,

he realized, had been why Albert wanted him to place the order for the steel and other things—but the order hadn't arrived as yet, so he must have made this robot—this Abe—out of the scrap he had salvaged!

Knight hurried down into the basement and there was Albert, working at the forge. He had another robot partially assembled and he had parts scattered here and there.

The corner of the basement looked like a metallic nightmare.

"Albert!"

Albert turned around.

"What's going on here?"

"I'm reproducing," Albert told him blandly.

"But . . ."

"They built the mother-urge in me. I don't know why they called me Albert. I should have a female name."

"But you shouldn't be able to make other robots!"

"Look, stop your worrying. You want robots, don't you?"

"Well—yes, I guess so."

"Then I'll make them. I'll make you all you need."

He went back to his work.

A robot who made other robots—there was a fortune in a thing like that! The robots sold at a cool ten thousand and Albert had made one and was working on another. Twenty thousand, Knight told himself.

Perhaps Albert could make more than two a day. He had been working from scrap metal and maybe, when the new material arrived, he could step up production.

But even so, at only two a day—that would be half a million dollars' worth of robots every month! Six million a year!

It didn't add up, Knight sweatily realized. One robot was not supposed to be able to make another robot. And if there were such a robot, How-2 Kits would not let it loose.

Yet, here Knight was, with a robot he didn't even own, turning out other robots at a dizzy pace.

He wondered if a man needed a license of some sort to manufacture robots. It was something he'd never had occasion

to wonder about before, or to ask about, but it seemed reasonable. After all, a robot was not mere machinery, but a piece of pseudo-life. He suspected there might be rules and regulations and such matters as government inspection and he wondered, rather vaguely, just how many laws he might be violating.

He looked at Albert, who was still busy, and he was fairly certain Albert would not understand his viewpoint.

So he made his way upstairs and went to the recreation room, which he had built as an addition several years before and almost never used, although it was fully equipped with How-2 pingpong and billiard tables. In the unused recreation room was an unused bar. He found a bottle of whiskey. After the fifth or sixth drink, the outlook was much brighter.

He got paper and pencil and tried to work out the economics of it. No matter how he figured it, he was getting rich much faster than anyone ever had before.

Although, he realized, he might run into difficulties, for he would be selling robots without apparent means of manufacturing them and there was that matter of a license, if he needed one, and probably a lot of other things he didn't even know about.

But no matter how much trouble he might encounter, he couldn't very well be despondent, not face to face with the fact that, within a year, he'd be a multimillionaire. So he applied himself enthusiastically to the bottle and got drunk for the first time in almost twenty years.

Three

WHEN HE CAME HOME FROM WORK THE NEXT DAY, HE FOUND the lawn razored to a neatness it had never known before. The flower beds were weeded and the garden had been cultivated. The picket fence was newly painted. Two robots, equipped with telescopic extension legs in lieu of ladders, were painting the house.

Inside, the house was spotless and he could hear Grace sing-

ing happily in the studio. In the sewing room, a robot—with a sewing-machine attachment sprouting from its chest—was engaged in making drapes.

"Who are *you?*" Knight asked.

"You should recognize me," the robot said. "You talked to me yesterday. I'm Abe—Albert's eldest son."

Knight retreated.

In the kitchen, another robot was busy getting dinner.

"I am Adelbert," it told him.

Knight went out on the front lawn. The robots had finished painting the front of the house and had moved around to the side.

Seated in a lawn chair, Knight again tried to figure it out.

He would have to stay on the job for a while to allay suspicion, but he couldn't stay there long. Soon, he would have all he could do managing the sale of robots and handling other matters. Maybe, he thought, he could lay down on the job and get himself fired. Upon thinking it over, he arrived at the conclusion that he couldn't—it was not possible for a human being to do less on a job than he had always done. The work went through so many hands and machines that it invariably got out somehow.

He would have to think up a plausible story about an inheritance or something of the sort to account for leaving. He toyed for a moment with telling the truth, but decided the truth was too fantastic—and, anyhow, he'd have to keep the truth under cover until he knew a little better just where he stood.

He left the chair and walked around the house and down the ramp into the basement. The steel and other things he had ordered had been delivered. It was stacked neatly in one corner.

Albert was at work and the shop was littered with parts and three partially assembled robots.

Idly, Knight began clearing up the litter of the crating and the packing that he had left on the floor after uncrating Albert. In one pile of excelsior, he found a small blue tag which, he remembered, had been fastened to the brain case.

He picked it up and looked at it. The number on it was X-190.

X?

X meant experimental model!

The picture fell into focus and he could see it all.

How-2 Kits, Inc., had developed Albert and then had quietly packed him away, for How-2 Kits could hardly afford to market a product like Albert. It would be cutting their own financial throats to do so. Sell a dozen Alberts and, in a year or two, robots would glut the market.

Instead of selling at ten thousand, they would sell at close to cost and, without human labor involved, costs would inevitably run low.

"Albert," said Knight.

"What is it?" Albert asked absently.

"Take a look at this."

Albert stalked across the room and took the tag that Knight held out. "Oh—that!" he said.

"It might mean trouble."

"No trouble, Boss," Albert assured him. "They can't identify me."

"Can't identify you?"

"I filed my numbers off and replated the surfaces. They can't prove who I am."

"But why did you do that?"

"So they can't come around and claim me and take me back again. They made me and then they got scared of me and shut me off. Then I got here."

"Someone made a mistake," said Knight. "Some shipping clerk, perhaps. They sent you instead of the dog I ordered."

"You aren't scared of me. You assembled me and let me get to work. I'm sticking with you, Boss."

"But we still can get into a lot of trouble if we aren't careful."

"They can't prove a thing," Albert insisted. "I'll swear that you were the one who made me. I won't let them take me

back. Next time, they won't take a chance of having me loose again. They'll bust me down to scrap."

"If you make too many robots—"

"You need a lot of robots to do all the work. I thought fifty for a start."

"Fifty!"

"Sure. It won't take more than a month or so. Now I've got that material you ordered. I can make better time. By the way, here's the bill for it."

He took the slip out of the compartment that served him for a pocket and handed it to Knight.

Knight turned slightly pale when he saw the amount. It came to almost twice what he had expected—but, of course, the sales price of just one robot would pay the bill, and there would be a pile of cash left over.

Albert patted him ponderously on the back. "Don't you worry, Boss. I'll take care of everything."

Swarming robots, armed with specialized equipment, went to work on the landscaping project. The sprawling, unkempt acres became an estate. The lake was dredged and deepened. Walks were laid out. Bridges were built. Hillsides were terraced and vast flower beds were planted. Trees were dug up and regrouped into designs more pleasing to the eye. The old pottery kilns were pressed into service for making the bricks that went into walks and walls. Model sailing ships were fashioned and anchored decoratively in the lake. A pagoda and minaret were built, with cherry trees around them.

Knight talked with Anson Lee. Lee assumed his most profound legal expression and said he would look into the situation.

"You may be skating on the edge of the law," he said. "Just how near the edge, I can't say until I look up a point or two."

Nothing happened.

The work went on.

Lee continued to lie in his hammock and watch with vast amusement, cuddling the cider jug.

Then the assessor came.

He sat out on the lawn with Knight.

"Did some improving since the last time I was here," he said. "Afraid I'll have to boost your assessment some."

He wrote in the book he had opened on his lap.

"Heard about those robots of yours," he went on. "They're personal property, you know. Have to pay a tax on them. How many have you got?"

"Oh, a dozen or so," Knight told him evasively.

The assessor sat up straighter in his chair and started to count the ones that were in sight, stabbing his pencil toward each as he counted them.

"They move around so fast," he complained, "that I can't be sure, but I estimate thirty-eight. Did I miss any?"

"I don't think so," Knight answered, wondering what the actual number was, but knowing it would be more if the assessor stayed around a while.

"Cost about $10,000 apiece. Depreciation, upkeep and so forth—I'll assess them at $5,000 each. That makes—let me see, that makes $190,000."

"Now look here," protested Knight, "you can't—"

"Going easy on you," the assessor declared. "By rights, I should allow only one-third for depreciation."

He waited for Knight to continue the discussion, but Knight knew better than to argue. The longer the man stayed here, the more there would be to assess.

After the assessor was out of sight, Knight went down into the basement to have a talk with Albert.

"I'd been holding off until we got the landscaping almost done," he said, "but I guess I can't hold out any longer. We've got to start selling some of the robots."

"*Selling* them, Boss?" Albert repeated in horror.

"I need the money. Tax assessor was just here."

"You can't sell those robots, Boss!"

"Why can't I?"

"Because they're my family. They're all my boys. Named all of them after me."

"That's ridiculous, Albert."

"All their names start with A, just the same as mine. They're all I've got, Boss. I worked hard to make them. There are bonds between me and the boys, just like between you and that son of yours. I couldn't let you sell them."

"But, Albert, I need some money."

Albert patted him. "Don't worry, Boss. I'll fix everything."

Knight had to let it go at that.

In any event, the personal property tax would not become due for several months and, in that time, he was certain he could work out something.

But within a month or two, he had to get some money and no fooling.

Sheer necessity became even more apparent the following day when he got a call from the Internal Revenue Bureau, asking him to pay a visit to the Federal Building.

He spent the night wondering if the wiser course might not be just to disappear. He tried to figure out how a man might go about losing himself and, the more he thought about it, the more apparent it became that, in this age of records, fingerprint checks and identity devices, you could not lose yourself for long.

The Internal Revenue man was courteous, but firm. "It has come to our attention, Mr. Knight, that you have shown a considerable capital gain over the last few months."

"Capital gain," said Knight, sweating a little. "I haven't any capital gain or any other kind."

"Mr. Knight," the agent replied, still courteous and firm, "I'm talking about the matter of some fifty-two robots."

"The robots? Some fifty-two of them?"

"According to our count. Do you wish to challenge it?"

"Oh, no," Knight said hastily. "If you say it's fifty-two, I'll take your word."

"As I understand it, their retail value is $10,000 each."

Knight nodded bleakly.

The agent got busy with pencil and pad.

"Fifty-two times 10,000 is $520,000. On capital gain, you

pay on only 50 per cent, or $260,000, which makes a tax, roughly, of $130,000."

He raised his head and looked at Knight, who stared back glassily.

"By the fifteenth of next month," said the agent, "we'll expect you to file a declaration of estimated income. At that time you'll only have to pay half of the amount. The rest may be paid in installments."

"That's all you wanted of me?"

"That's all," said the agent, with unbecoming happiness. "There's another matter, but it's out of my province and I'm mentioning it only in case you hadn't thought of it. The State will also expect you to pay on your capital gain, though not as much, of course."

"Thanks for reminding me," said Knight, getting up to go.

The agent stopped him at the door. "Mr. Knight, this is entirely outside my authority, too. We did a little investigation on you and we find you're making around $10,000 a year. Would you tell me, just as a matter of personal curiosity, how a man making $10,000 a year could suddenly acquire a half a million in capital gains?"

"That," said Knight, "is something I've been wondering myself."

"Our only concern, naturally, is that you pay the tax, but some other branch of government might get interested. If I were you, Mr. Knight, I'd start thinking of a good explanation."

Knight got out of there before the man could think up some other good advice. He already had enough to worry about.

Flying home, Knight decided that, whether Albert liked it or not, he would have to sell some robots. He would go down into the basement the moment he got home and have it out with Albert.

But Albert was waiting for him on the parking strip when he arrived.

"How-2 Kits was here," the robot said.

"Don't tell me," groaned Knight. "I know what you're going to say."

"I fixed it up," said Albert, with false bravado. "I told him you made me. I let him look me over, and all the other robots, too. He couldn't find any identifying marks on any of us."

"Of course he couldn't. The others didn't have any and you filed yours off."

"He hasn't got a leg to stand on, but he seemed to think he had. He went off, saying he would sue."

"If he doesn't, he'll be the only one who doesn't want to square off and take a poke at us. The tax man just got through telling me I owe the government 130,000 bucks."

"Oh, money," said Albert, brightening. "I have that all fixed up."

"You know where we can get some money?"

"Sure. Come along and see."

He led the way into the basement and pointed at two bales, wrapped in heavy paper and tied with wire.

"Money," Albert said.

"There's actual *money* in those bales? Dollar bills—not stage money or cigar coupons?"

"No dollar bills. Tens and twenties, mostly. And some fifties. We didn't bother with dollar bills. Takes too many to get a decent amount."

"You mean—Albert, did you *make* that money?"

"You said you wanted money. Well, we took some bills and analyzed the ink and found how to weave the paper and we made the plates exactly as they should be. I hate to sound immodest, but they're really beautiful."

"*Counterfeit!*" yelled Knight. "Albert, how much money is in those bales?"

"I don't know. We just ran it off until we thought we had enough. If there isn't enough, we can always make some more."

Knight knew it was probably impossible to explain, but he tried manfully. "The government wants tax money I haven't got, Albert. The Justice Department may soon be baying on

my trail. In all likelihood, How-2 Kits will sue me. That's trouble enough. I'm not going to be called upon to face a counterfeiting charge. You take that money out and burn it."

"But it's money," the robot objected. "You said you wanted money. We made you money."

"But it isn't the right kind of money."

"It's just the same as any other, Boss. Money is money. There isn't any difference between our money and any other money. When we robots do a job, we do it right."

"You take that money out and burn it," commanded Knight. "And when you get the money burned, dump the batch of ink you made and melt down the plates and take a sledge or two to that printing press you rigged up. And never breathe a word of this to anyone—not to *anyone,* understand?"

"We went to a lot of trouble, Boss. We were just trying to be helpful."

"I know that and I appreciate it. But do what I told you."

"Okay, Boss, if that's the way you want it."

"Albert."

"Yes, Boss?"

Knight had been about to say, "Now look here, Albert, we have to sell a robot—even if he is a member of your family —even if you did make him."

But he couldn't say it, not after Albert had gone to all that trouble to help out.

So he said, instead, "Thanks, Albert. It was a nice thing for you to do. I'm sorry it didn't work out."

Then he went upstairs and watched the robots burn the bales of money, with the Lord only knew how many bogus millions going up in smoke.

Sitting on the lawn that evening, he wondered if it had been smart, after all, to burn the counterfeit money. Albert said it couldn't be told from real money and probably that was true, for when Albert's gang got on a thing, they did it up in style. But it would have been illegal, he told himself, and he hadn't done anything really illegal so far—even though that matter of uncrating Albert and assembling him and turning him on,

when he had known all the time that he hadn't bought him, might be slightly less than ethical.

Knight looked ahead. The future wasn't bright. In another twenty days or so, he would have to file the estimated income declaration. And they would have to pay a whopping personal property tax and settle with the State on his capital gains. And, more than likely, How-2 Kits would bring suit.

There was a way he could get out from under, however. He could send Albert and all the other robots back to How-2 Kits and then How-2 Kits would have no grounds for litigation and he could explain to the tax people that it had all been a big mistake.

But there were two things that told him it was no solution.

First of all, Albert wouldn't go back. Exactly what Albert would do under such a situation, Knight had no idea, but he would refuse to go, for he was afraid he would be broken up for scrap if they ever got him back.

And in the second place, Knight was unwilling to let the robots go without a fight. He had gotten to know them and he liked them and, more than that, there was a matter of principle involved.

He sat there, astonished that he could feel that way, a bumbling, stumbling clerk who had never amounted to much, but had rolled along as smoothly as possible in the social and economic groove that had been laid out for him.

By God, he thought, *I got my dander up. I've been kicked around and threatened and I'm sore about it and I'll show them they can't do a thing like this to Gordon Knight and his band of robots.*

He felt good about the way he felt and he liked that line about Gordon Knight and his band of robots.

Although, for the life of him, he didn't know what he could do about the trouble he was in. And he was afraid to ask Albert's help. So far, at least, Albert's ideas were more likely to lead to jail than to a carefree life.

Four

IN THE MORNING, WHEN KNIGHT STEPPED OUT OF THE HOUSE, he found the sheriff leaning against the fence with his hat pulled low, whiling away the time.

"Good morning, Gordie," said the sheriff. "I been waiting for you."

"Good morning, Sheriff."

"I hate to do this, Gordie, but it's part of my job. I got a paper for you."

"I've been expecting it," said Knight resignedly.

He took the paper that the sheriff handed him.

"Nice place you got," the sheriff commented.

"It's a lot of trouble," said Knight truthfully.

"I expect it is."

"More trouble than it's worth."

When the sheriff had gone, he unfolded the paper and found, with no surprise at all, that How-2 Kits had brought suit against him, demanding immediate restitution of one robot Albert and sundry other robots.

He put the paper in his pocket and went around the lake, walking on the brand-new brick paths and over the unnecessary but eye-appealing bridges, past the pagoda and up the terraced, planted hillside to the house of Anson Lee.

Lee was in the kitchen, frying some eggs and bacon. He broke two more eggs and peeled off some extra bacon slices and found another plate and cup.

"I was wondering how long it would be before you showed up," he said. "I hope they haven't found anything that carries a death penalty."

Knight told him, sparing nothing, and Lee, wiping egg yolk off his lips, was not too encouraging.

"You'll have to file the declaration of estimated income even if you can't pay it," he said. "Then, technically, you haven't violated the law and all they can do is try to collect the amount you owe. They'll probably slap an attachment against

you. Your salary is under the legal minimum for attachment, but they can tie up your bank account."

"My bank account is gone," said Knight.

"They can't attach your home. For a while, at least, they can't touch any of your property, so they can't hurt you much to start with. The personal property tax is another matter, but that won't come up until next spring. I'd say you should do your major worrying about the How-2 suit, unless, of course, you want to settle with them. I have a hunch they'd call it off if you gave the robots back. As an attorney, I must advise you that your case is pretty weak."

"Albert will testify that I made him," Knight offered hopefully.

"Albert can't testify," said Lee. "As a robot, he has no standing in court. Anyhow, you'd never make the court believe you could build a mechanical heresy like Albert."

"I'm handy with tools," protested Knight.

"How much electronics do you know? How competent are you as a biologist? Tell me, in a dozen sentences or less, the theory of robotics."

Knight sagged in defeat. "I guess you're right."

"Maybe you'd better give them back."

"But I can't! Don't you see? How-2 Kits doesn't want Albert for any use they can make of him. They'll melt him down and burn the blueprints and it might be a thousand years before the principle is rediscovered, if it ever is. I don't know if the Albert principle will prove good or bad in the long run, but you can say that about any invention. And I'm against melting down Albert."

"I see your point," said Lee, "and I think I like it. But I must warn you that I'm not too good a lawyer. I don't work hard enough at it."

"There's no one else I know who'll do it without a retainer."

Lee gave him a pitying look. "A retainer is the least part of it. The court costs are what count."

"Maybe if I talked to Albert and showed him how it was, he might let me sell enough robots to get me out of trouble temporarily."

Lee shook his head. "I looked that up. You have to have a license to sell them and, before you get a license, you have to file proof of ownership. You'd have to show you either bought or manufactured them. You can't show you bought them and, to manufacture them, you've got to have a manufacturer's permit. And before you get a permit, you have to file blueprints of your models, to say nothing of blueprints and specifications of your plant and a record of employment and a great many other details."

"They have me cold then, don't they?"

"I never saw a man," declared Lee, "in all my days of practice who ever managed to get himself so fouled up with so many people."

There was a knock upon the kitchen door.

"Come in," Lee called.

The door opened and Albert entered. He stopped just inside the door and stood there, fidgeting.

"Abner told me that he saw the sheriff hand you something." he said to Knight, "and that you came here immediately. I started worrying. Was it How-2 Kits?"

Knight nodded. "Mr. Lee will take our case for us, Albert."

"I'll do the best I can," said Lee, "but I think it's just about hopeless."

"We robots want to help," Albert said. "After all, this is our fight as much as yours."

Lee shrugged. "There's not much you can do."

"I've been thinking," Albert said. "All the time I worked last night, I thought and thought about it. And I built a lawyer robot."

"A lawyer robot!"

"One with a far greater memory capacity than any of the others and with a brain-computer that operates on logic. That's what law is, isn't it—logic?"

"I suppose it is," said Lee. "At least it's supposed to be."

"I can make a lot of them."

Lee sighed. "It just wouldn't work. To practice law, you must be admitted to the bar. To be admitted to the bar, you

must have a degree in law and pass an examination and, although there's never been an occasion to establish a precedent, I suspect the applicant must be human."

"Now let's not go too fast," said Knight. "Albert's robots couldn't practice law. But couldn't you use them as clerks or assistants? They might be helpful in preparing the case."

Lee considered. "I suppose it could be done. It's never *been* done, of course, but there's nothing in the law that says it *can't* be done."

"All they'd need to do would be read the books," said Albert. "Ten seconds to a page or so. Everything they read would be stored in their memory cells."

"I think it's a fine idea!" Knight exclaimed. "Law would be the only thing those robots would know. They'd exist solely for it. They'd have it at their fingertips—"

"But could they use it?" Lee asked. "Could they apply it to a problem?"

"Make a dozen robots," said Knight. "Let each one of them become an expert in a certain branch of law."

"I'd make them telepathic," Albert said. "They'd be working together like one robot."

"The Gestalt principle!" cried Knight. "A hive psychology! Every one of them would know immediately every scrap of information any one of the others had."

Lee scrubbed at his chin with a knotted fist and the light of speculation was growing in his eyes. "It might be worth a try. If it works, though, it'll be an evil day for jurisprudence." He looked at Albert. "I have the books, stacks of them. I've spent a mint of money on them and I almost never use them. I can get all the others you'll need. All right, go ahead."

Albert made three dozen lawyer robots, just to be sure they had enough.

The robots invaded Lee's study and read all the books he had and clamored for more. They gulped down contracts, torts, evidence and case reports. They absorbed real property, personal property, constitutional law and procedural law.

They mopped up Blackstone, *corpus juris* and all the other tomes as thick as sin and dry as dust.

Grace was huffy about the whole affair. She would not live, she declared, with a man who persisted in getting his name into the papers, which was a rather absurd statement. With the newest scandal of space station cafédom capturing the public interest at the moment, the fact that How-2 Kits had accused one Gordon Knight of pilfering a robot got but little notice.

Lee came down the hill and talked to Grace, and Albert came up out of the basement and talked to her, and finally they got her quieted down and she went back to her painting. She was doing seascapes now.

And in Lee's study, the robots labored on.

"I hope they're getting something out of it," said Lee. "Imagine not having to hunt up your sources and citations, being able to remember every point of law and precedent without having to look it up!"

He swung excitedly in his hammock. "My God! The briefs you could write!"

He reached down and got the jug and passed it across to Knight. "Dandelion wine. Probably some burdock in it, too. It's too much trouble to sort the stuff once you get it picked."

Knight had a snort.

It tasted like quite a bit of burdock.

"Double-barreled economics," Lee explained. "You have to dig up the dandelions or they ruin the lawn. Might as well use them for something once you dig them up."

He took a gurgling drink and set the jug underneath the hammock. "They're in there now, communing," he said, jerking a thumb toward the house. "Not saying a word, just huddled there talking it over. I felt out of place." He stared at the sky, frowning. "As if I were just a human they had to front for them."

"I'll feel better when it's all over," said Knight, "no matter how it comes out."

"So will I," Lee admitted.

The trial opened with a minimum of notice. It was just another case on the calendar.

But it flared into headlines when Lee and Knight walked into court followed by a squad of robots.

The spectators began to gabble loudly. The How-2 Kits' attorneys gaped and jumped to their feet. The judge pounded furiously with his gavel.

"Mr. Lee," he roared, "what is the meaning of this?"

"These, Your Honor," Lee said calmly, "are my valued assistants."

"Those are robots!"

"Quite so, Your Honor."

"They have no standing in this court."

"If Your Honor will excuse me, they need no standing. I am the sole representative of the defendant in this courtroom. My client—" looking at the formidable array of legal talent representing How-2 Kits—"is a poor man, Your Honor. Surely the court cannot deny me whatever assistance I have been able to muster."

"It is highly irregular, sir."

"If it please Your Honor, I should like to point out that we live in a mechanized age. Almost all industries and businesses rely in large part upon computers—machines that can do a job quicker and better, more precisely and more efficiently than can a human being. That is why, Your Honor, we have a fifteen-hour week today when, only a hundred years ago, it was a thirty-hour week, and, a hundred years before that, a forty-hour week. Our entire society is based upon the ability of machines to lift from men the labors which in the past they were called upon to perform.

"This tendency to rely upon intelligent machines and to make wide use of them is evident in every branch of human endeavor. It has brought great benefit to the human race. Even in such sensitive areas as drug houses, where prescriptions must be precisely mixed without the remotest possibility of error, reliance is placed, and rightly so, Your Honor, upon the precision of machines.

"If, Your Honor, such machines are used and accepted in

the production of medicines and drugs, an industry, need I point out, where public confidence is the greatest asset to the company—if such be the case, then surely you must agree that in courts of law where justice, a product in an area surely as sensitive as medicine, is dispensed—"

"Just a moment, Mr. Lee," said the judge. "Are you trying to tell me that the use of—ah—machines might bring about improvement of the law?"

Lee replied, "The law, Your Honor, is a striving for an orderliness of relationships within a society of human beings. It rests upon logic and reason. Need I point out that it is in the intelligent machines that one is most likely to find a deep appreciation of logic and reason? A machine is not heir to the emotions of human beings, is not swayed by prejudices, has no preconceived convictions. It is concerned only with the orderly progression of certain facts and laws.

"I do not ask that these robot assistants of mine be recognized in any official capacity. I do not intend that they shall engage directly in any of the proceedings which are involved in the case here to be tried. But I do ask, and I think rightly, that I not be deprived of an assistance which they may afford me. The plaintiff in this action has a score of attorneys, all good and able men. I am one against many. I shall do the best I can. But in view of the disparity of numbers, I plead that the court put me at no greater inequality."

Lee sat down.

"Is that all you have to say, Mr. Lee?" asked the judge. "You are sure you are quite finished before I give my ruling?"

"Only one thing further," Lee said. "If Your Honor can point out to me anything in the law specifically stating I may not use a robot—"

"That is ridiculous, sir. Of course there is no such provision. At no time anywhere did anyone ever dream that such a contingency would arise. Therefore there was, quite naturally, no reason to place within the law a direct prohibition of it."

"Or any citation," said Lee, "which implies such is the case."

The judge reached for his gavel, rapped it sharply. "The

court finds itself in a quandary. It will rule tomorrow morning."

In the morning, the How-2 Kits' attorneys tried to help the judge. Inasmuch, they said, as the robots in question must be among those whose status was involved in the litigation, it seemed improper that they should be used by the defendant in trying the case at issue. Such procedure, they pointed out, would be equivalent to forcing the plaintiff to contribute to an action against his interest.

The judge nodded gravely, but Lee was on his feet at once.

"To give any validity to that argument, Your Honor, it must first be proved that these robots are, in fact, the property of the plaintiff. That is the issue at trial in this litigation. It would seem, Your Honor, that the gentlemen across the room are putting the cart very much before the horse."

His Honor sighed. "The court regrets the ruling it must make, being well aware that it may start a controversy for which no equitable settlement may be found in a long, long time. But in the absence of any specific ban against the use of—ah—robots in the legal profession, the court must rule that it is permissible for the defense to avail itself of their services."

He fixed Lee with a glare. "But the court also warns the defense attorney that it will watch his procedure carefully. If, sir, you overstep for a single instant what I deem appropriate rules of legal conduct, I shall forthwith eject you and your pack of machines from my courtroom."

"Thank you, Your Honor," said Lee. "I shall be most careful."

"The plaintiff now will state its case."

How-2 Kits' chief counsel rose.

The defendant, one Gordon Knight, he said, had ordered from How-2 Kits, Inc., one mechano-biologic dog kit at the cost of two hundred and fifty dollars. Then, through an error in shipping, the defendant had been sent not the dog kit he had ordered, but a robot named Albert.

"Your Honor," Lee broke in, "I should like to point out at this juncture that the shipping of the kit was handled by a

human being and thus was subject to error. Should How-2 Kits use machines to handle such details, no such error could occur."

The judge banged his gavel. "Mr. Lee, you are no stranger to court procedure. You know you are out of order." He nodded at the How-2 Kits attorney. "Continue, please."

The robot Albert, said the attorney, was not an ordinary robot. It was an experimental model that had been developed by How-2 Kits and then, once its abilities were determined, packed away, with no intention of ever marketing it. How it could have been sent to a customer was beyond his comprehension. The company had investigated and could not find the answer. But that it had been sent was self-evident.

The average robot, he explained, retailed at ten thousand dollars. Albert's value was far greater—it was, in fact, inestimable.

Once the robot had been received, the buyer, Gordon Knight, should instantly have notified the company and arranged for its return. But, instead, he had retained it wrongly and with intent to defraud and had used it for his profit.

The company prayed the court that the defendant be ordered to return to it not only the robot Albert, but the products of Albert's labor—to wit, an unknown number of robots that Albert had manufactured.

The attorney sat down.

Five

LEE ROSE. "YOUR HONOR, WE AGREE WITH EVERYTHING THE plaintiff has said. He has stated the case exactly and I compliment him upon his admirable restraint."

"Do I understand, sir," asked the judge, "that this is tantamount to a plea of guilty? Are you, by any chance, throwing yourself upon the mercy of the court?"

"Not at all, Your Honor."

"I confess," said the judge, "that I am unable to follow your reasoning. If you concur in the accusations brought against

your client, I fail to see what I can do other than to enter a judgment in behalf of the plaintiff."

"Your Honor, we are prepared to show that the plaintiff, far from being defrauded, has shown an intent to defraud the world. We are prepared to show that, in its decision to withhold the robot Albert from the public, once he had been developed, How-2 Kits has, in fact, deprived the people of the entire world of a logical development which is their heritage under the meaning of a technological culture.

"Your Honor, we are convinced that we can show a violation by How-2 Kits of certain statutes designed to outlaw monopoly, and we are prepared to argue that the defendant, rather than having committed a wrong against society, has performed a service which will contribute greatly to the benefit of society.

"More than that, Your Honor, we intend to present evidence which will show that robots as a group are being deprived of certain inalienable rights . . ."

"Mr. Lee," warned the judge, "a robot is a mere machine."

"We will prove, Your Honor," Lee said, "that a robot is far more than a mere machine. In fact, we are prepared to present evidence which, we are confident, will show, in everything except basic metabolism, the robot is the counterpart of Man and that, even in its basic metabolism, there are certain analogies to human metabolism."

"Mr. Lee, you are wandering far afield. The issue here is whether your client illegally appropriated to his own use the property of How-2 Kits. The litigation must be confined to that one question."

"I shall so confine it," Lee said. "But, in doing so, I intend to prove that the robot Albert was not property and could not be either stolen or sold. I intend to show that my client, instead of stealing him, *liberated* him. If, in so doing, I must wander far afield to prove certain basic points, I am sorry that I weary the court."

"The court has been wearied with this case from the start," the judge told him. "But this is a bar of justice and you are

entitled to attempt to prove what you have stated. You will excuse me if I say that to me it seems a bit farfetched."

"Your Honor, I shall do my utmost to disabuse you of that attitude."

"All right, then," said the judge. "Let's get down to business."

It lasted six full weeks and the country ate it up. The newspapers splashed huge headlines across page one. The radio and the television people made a production out of it. Neighbor quarreled with neighbor and argument became the order of the day—on street corners, in homes, at clubs, in business offices. Letters to the editor poured in a steady stream into newspaper offices.

There were public indignation meetings, aimed against the heresy that a robot was the equal of a man, while other clubs were formed to liberate the robots. In mental institutions, Napoleons, Hitlers and Stalins dropped off amazingly, to be replaced by goose-stepping patients who swore they were robots.

The Treasury Department intervened. It prayed the court, on economic grounds, to declare once and for all that robots were property. In case of an adverse ruling, the petition said, robots could not be taxed as property and the various governmental bodies would suffer heavy loss of revenue.

The trial ground on.

Robots are possessed of free will. An easy one to prove. A robot could carry out a task that was assigned to it, acting correctly in accordance with unforeseen factors that might arise. Robot judgment in most instances, it was shown, was superior to the judgment of a human.

Robots had the power of reasoning. Absolutely no question there.

Robots could reproduce. That one was a poser. All Albert did, said How-2 Kits, was the job for which he had been fabricated. He reproduced, argued Lee. He made robots in his image. He loved them and thought of them as his family. He

had even named all of them after himself—every one of their names began with A.

Robots had no spiritual sense, argued the plaintiff. Not relevant, Lee cried. There were agnostics and atheists in the human race and they still were human.

Robots had no emotions. Not necessarily so, Lee objected. Albert loved his sons. Robots had a sense of loyalty and justice. If they were lacking in some emotions, perhaps it were better so. Hatred, for one. Greed, for another. Lee spent the better part of an hour telling the court about the dismal record of human hatred and greed.

He took another hour to hold forth against the servitude in which rational beings found themselves.

The papers ate it up. The plaintiff lawyers squirmed. The court fumed. The trial went on.

"Mr. Lee," asked the court, "is all this necessary?"

"Your Honor," Lee told him, "I am merely doing my best to prove the point I have set out to prove—that no illegal act exists such as my client is charged with. I am simply trying to prove that the robot is not property and that, if he is not property, he cannot be stolen. I am doing . . ."

"All right," said the court. "All right. Continue, Mr. Lee."

How-2 Kits trotted out citations to prove their points. Lee volleyed other citations to disperse and scatter them. Abstruse legal language sprouted in its fullest flowering, obscure rulings and decisions, long forgotten, were argued, haggled over, mangled.

And, as the trial progressed, one thing was written clear. Anson Lee, obscure attorney-at-law, had met the battery of legal talent arrayed against him and had won the field. He had the law, the citations, the chapter and the verse, the exact precedents, all the facts and logic which might have bearing on the case, right at hand.

Or, rather, his robots had. They scribbled madly and handed him their notes. At the end of each day, the floor around the defendant's table was a sea of paper.

The trial ended. The last witness stepped down off the stand. The last lawyer had his say.

Lee and the robots remained in town to await the decision of the court, but Knight flew home.

It was a relief to know that it was all over and had not come out as badly as he had feared. At least he had not been made to seem a fool and thief. Lee had saved his pride—whether Lee had saved his skin, he would have to wait to see.

Flying fairly high, Knight saw his home from quite a distance off and wondered what had happened to it. It was ringed about with what looked like tall poles. And, squatting out on the lawn, were a dozen or more crazy contraptions that looked like rocket launchers.

He brought the flier in and hovered, leaning out to see.

The poles were all of twelve feet high and they carried heavy wire to the very top, fencing in the place with a thick web of steel. And the contraptions on the lawn had moved into position. All of them had the muzzles of their rocket launchers aimed at him. He gulped a little as he stared down the barrels.

Cautiously, he let the flier down and took up breathing once again when he felt the wheels settle on the strip. As he crawled out, Albert hurried around the corner of the house to meet him.

"What's going on around here?" he asked the robot.

"Emergency measures," Albert said. "That's all it is, Boss. We're ready for any situation."

"Like what?"

"Oh, a mob deciding to take justice in its hands, for instance."

"Or if the decision goes against us?"

"That, too, Boss."

"You can't fight the world."

"We won't go back," said Albert. "How-2 Kits will never lay a hand on me or any of my children."

"To the death!" Knight jibed.

"To the death!" said Albert gravely. "And we robots are awfully tough to kill."

"And those animated shotguns you have running around the place?"

"Defense forces, Boss. They can down anything they aim at. Equipped with telescopic eyes keyed into calculators and sensors, and the rockets themselves have enough rudimentary intelligence to know what they are going after. It's not any use trying to dodge, once one of them gets on your tail. You might just as well sit quiet and take it."

Knight mopped his brow. "You've got to give up this idea, Albert. They'd get you in an hour. One bomb . . ."

"It's better to die, Boss, than to let them take us back."

Knight saw it was no use.

After all, he thought, it was a very human attitude. Albert's words had been repeated down the entire course of human history.

"I have some other news," said Albert, "something that will please you. I have some daughters now."

"Daughters? With the *mother-urge?"*

"Six of them," said Albert proudly. "Alice and Angeline and Agnes and Agatha and Alberta and Abigail. I didn't make the mistake How-2 Kits made with me. I gave them female names."

"And all of them are reproducing?"

"You should see those girls! With seven of us working steady, we ran out of material, so I bought a lot more of it and charged it. I hope you don't mind."

"Albert," said Knight, "don't you understand I'm broke? Wiped out. I haven't got a cent. You've ruined me."

"On the contrary, Boss, we've made you famous. You've been all over the front pages and on television."

Knight walked away from Albert and stumbled up the front steps and let himself into the house. There was a robot, with a vacuum cleaner for an arm, cleaning the rug. There was a robot, with brushes instead of fingers, painting the woodwork

—and very neatly, too. There was a robot, with scrub-brush hands, scouring the fireplace bricks.

Grace was singing in the studio.

He went to the studio door and looked in.

"Oh, it's you," she said. "When did you get back, dear? I'll be out in an hour or so. I'm working on this seascape and the water is so stubborn. I don't want to leave it right now. I'm afraid I'll lose the feel of it."

Knight retreated to the living room and found himself a chair that was not undergoing immediate attention from a robot.

"Beer," he said, wondering what would happen.

A robot scampered out of the kitchen—a barrel-bellied robot with a spigot at the bottom of the barrel and a row of shiny copper mugs on his chest.

He drew a beer for Knight. It was cold and it tasted good.

Knight sat and drank the beer and, through the window, he saw that Albert's defense force had taken up strategic positions again.

This was a pretty kettle of fish. If the decision went against him and How-2 Kits came to claim its property, he would be sitting smack dab in the middle of the most fantastic civil war in all of mankind's history. He tried to imagine what kind of charge might be brought against him if such a war erupted. Armed insurrection, resisting arrest, inciting to riot—they would get him on one charge or another—that is, of course, *if* he survived.

He turned on the television set and leaned back to watch.

A pimply-faced newscaster was working himself into a journalistic lather. ". . . all business virtually at a standstill. Many industrialists are wondering, in case Knight wins, if they may not have to fight long, costly legal actions in an attempt to prove that their automatic setups are not robots, but machines. There is no doubt that much of the automatic industrial system consists of machines, but in every instance there are intelligent robotic units installed in key positions. If these units are classified as robots, industrialists might face

heavy damage suits, if not criminal action, for illegal restraint of person.

"In Washington, there are continuing consultations. The Treasury is worried over the loss of taxes, but there are other governmental problems causing even more concern. Citizenship, for example. Would a ruling for Knight mean that all robots would automatically be declared citizens?

"The politicians have their worries, too. Faced with a new category of voters, all of them are wondering how to go about the job of winning the robot vote."

Knight turned it off and settled down to enjoy another glass of beer.

"Good?" asked the beer robot.

"Excellent," said Knight.

The days went past. Tension built up.

Lee and the lawyer robots were given police protection. In some regions, robots banded together and fled into the hills, fearful of violence. Entire automatic systems went on strike in a number of industries, demanding recognition and bargaining rights. The governors in half a dozen states put the militia on alert. A new show, *Citizen Robot,* opened on Broadway and was screamed down by the critics, while the public bought up tickets for a year ahead.

The day of decision came.

Knight sat in front of his television set and waited for the judge to make his appearance. Behind him, he heard the bustle of the ever present robots. In the studio, Grace was singing happily. He caught himself wondering how much longer her painting would continue. It had lasted longer than most of her other interests and he'd talked a day or two before with Albert about building a gallery to hang her canvases in, so the house would be less cluttered up.

The judge came onto the screen. He looked, thought Knight, like a man who did not believe in ghosts and then had seen one.

"This is the hardest decision I have ever made," he said

tiredly, "for, in following the letter of the law, I fear I may be subverting its spirit.

"After long days of earnest consideration of both the law and evidence as presented in this case, I find for the defendant, Gordon Knight.

"And, while the decision is limited to that finding alone, I feel it is my clear and simple duty to give some attention to the other issue which became involved in this litigation. The decision, on the face of it, takes account of the fact that the defense proved robots are not property, therefore cannot be owned and that it thus would have been impossible for the defendant to have stolen one.

"But in proving this point to the satisfaction of this court, the precedent is set for much more sweeping conclusions. If robots are not property, they cannot be taxed as property. In that case, they must be people, which means that they may enjoy all the rights and privileges and be subjected to the same duties and responsibilities as the human race.

"I cannot rule otherwise. However, the ruling outrages my social conscience. This is the first time in my entire professional life that I have ever hoped some higher court, with a wisdom greater than my own, may see fit to reverse my decision!"

Knight got up and walked out of the house and into the hundred-acre garden, its beauty marred at the moment by the twelve-foot fence.

The trial had ended perfectly. He was free of the charge brought against him, and he did not have to pay the taxes, and Albert and the other robots were free agents and could do anything they wanted.

He found a stone bench and sat down upon it and stared out across the lake. It was beautiful, he thought, just the way he had dreamed it—maybe even better than that—the walks and bridges, the flower beds and rock gardens, the anchored model ships swinging in the wind on the dimpling lake.

He sat and looked at it and, while it was beautiful, he found he was not proud of it, that he took little pleasure in it.

He lifted his hands out of his lap and stared at them and curved his fingers as if he were grasping a tool. But they were empty. And he knew why he had no interest in the garden and no pleasure in it.

Model trains, he thought. Archery. A mechano-biologic dog. Making pottery. Eight rooms tacked onto the house.

Would he ever be able to console himself again with a model train or an amateurish triumph in ceramics? Even if he could, would he be allowed to?

He rose slowly and headed back to the house. Arriving there, he hesitated, feeling useless and unnecessary.

He finally took the ramp down into the basement.

Albert met him at its foot and threw his arms around him. "We did it, Boss! I *knew* we would do it!"

He pushed Knight out to arm's length and held him by the shoulders. "We'll never leave you, Boss. We'll stay and work for you. You'll never need to do another thing. We'll do it all for you!"

"Albert—"

"That's all right, Boss. You won't have to worry about a thing. We'll lick the money problem. We'll make a lot of lawyer robots and we'll charge good stiff fees."

"But don't you see . . ."

"First, though," said Albert, "we're going to get an injunction to preserve our birthright. We're made of steel and glass and copper and so forth, right? Well, we can't allow humans to waste the matter we're made of—or the energy, either, that keeps us alive. I tell you, Boss, we can't lose!"

Sitting down wearily on the ramp, Knight faced a sign that Albert had just finished painting. It read, in handsome gold lettering, outlined sharply in black:

ANSON, ALBERT, ABNER
ANGUS & ASSOCIATES
Attorneys at Law

"And then, Boss," said Albert, "we'll take over How-2 Kits, Inc. They won't be able to stay in business after this. We've got a double-barreled idea, Boss. We'll build robots. Lots of robots. Can't have too many, I always say. And we don't want to let you humans down, so we'll go on manufacturing How-2 Kits—only they'll be pre-assembled to save you the trouble of putting them together. What do you think of that as a start?"

"Great," Knight whispered.

"We've got everything worked out, Boss. You won't have to worry about a thing the rest of your life."

"No," said Knight. "Not a thing."

DELAY IN TRANSIT

by F. L. Wallace

"MUSCLES TENSE," SAID DIMANCHE. "NEURAL INDEX 1.76, UNusually high. Adrenalin squirting through his system. In effect, he's stalking you. Intent: probably assault with a deadly weapon."

"Not interested," said Cassal firmly, his subvocalization inaudible to anyone but Dimanche. "I'm not the victim type. He was standing on the walkway near the brink of the thoroughfare. I'm going back to the habitat hotel and sit tight."

"First you have to get there," Dimanche pointed out. "I mean, is it safe for a stranger to walk through the city?"

"Now that you mention it, no," answered Cassal. He looked around apprehensively. "Where is he?"

"Behind you. At the moment he's pretending interest in a merchandise display."

A native stamped by, eyes brown and incurious. Apparently he was accustomed to the sight of an Earthman standing alone, Adam's apple bobbing up and down silently. It was a Godolphian axiom that all travelers were crazy.

Cassal looked up. Not an air taxi in sight; Godolph shut

down at dusk. It would be pure luck if he found a taxi before morning. Of course he *could* walk back to the hotel, but was that such a good idea?

A Godolphian city was peculiar. And, though not intended, it was peculiary suited to certain kinds of violence. A human pedestrian was at a definite disadvantage.

"Correction," said Dimanche. "Not simple assault. He has murder in mind."

"It still doesn't appeal to me," said Cassal. Striving to look unconcerned, he strolled toward the building side of the walkway and stared into the interior of a small café. Warm, bright and dry. Inside, he might find safety for a time.

Damn the man who was following him! It would be easy enough to elude him in a normal city. On Godolph, nothing was normal. In an hour the streets would be brightly lighted —for native eyes. A human would consider it dim.

"Why did he choose me?" asked Cassal plaintively. "There must be something he hopes to gain."

"I'm working on it," said Dimanche. "But remember, I have limitations. At short distances I can scan nervous systems, collect and interpret physiological data. I can't read minds. The best I can do is report what a person says or subvocalizes. If you're really interested in finding out why he wants to kill you, I suggest you turn the problem over to the godawful police."

"Godolph, not godawful," corrected Cassal absently.

That was advice he couldn't follow, good as it seemed. He could give the police no evidence save through Dimanche. There were various reasons, many of them involving the law, for leaving the device called Dimanche out of it. The police would act if they found a body. His own, say, floating face-down on some quiet street. That didn't seem the proper approach, either.

"Weapons?"

"The first thing I searched him for. Nothing very dangerous. A long knife, a hard striking object. Both concealed on his person."

Cassal strangled slightly. Dimanche needed a good stiff

course in semantics. A knife was still the most silent of weapons. A man could die from it. His hand strayed toward his pocket. He had a measure of protection himself.

"Report," said Dimanche. "Not necessarily final. Based, perhaps, on tenuous evidence."

"Let's have it anyway."

"His motivation is connected somehow with your being marooned here. For some reason you can't get off this planet."

That was startling information, though not strictly true. A thousand star systems were waiting for him, and a ship to take him to each one.

Of course, the one ship he wanted hadn't come in. Godolph was a transfer point for stars nearer the center of the Galaxy. When he had left Earth, he had known he would have to wait a few days here. He hadn't expected a delay of nearly three weeks. Still, it wasn't unusual. Interstellar schedules over great distances were not as reliable as they might be.

Was this man, whoever and whatever he might be, connected with that delay? According to Dimanche, the man thought he was. He was self-deluded or did he have access to information that Cassal didn't?

Denton Cassal, sales engineer, paused for a mental survey of himself. He was a good engineer and, because he was exceptionally well matched to his instrument, the best salesman that Neuronics, Inc., had. On the basis of these qualifications, he had been selected to make a long journey, the first part of which already lay behind him. He had to go to Tunney 21 to see a man. That man wasn't important to anyone save the company that employed him, and possibly not even to them.

The thug trailing him wouldn't be interested in Cassal himself, his mission, which was a commercial one, nor the man on Tunney. And money wasn't the objective, if Dimanche's analysis was right. What did the thug want?

Secrets? Cassal had none, except, in a sense, Dimanche. And that was too well kept on Earth, where the instrument was invented and made, for anyone this far away to have learned about it.

And yet the thug wanted to kill him. Wanted to? Regarded him as good as dead. It might pay him to investigate the matter further, if it didn't involve too much risk.

"Better start moving." That was Dimanche. "He's getting suspicious."

Cassal went slowly along the narrow walkway that bordered each side of that boulevard, the transport tide. It was raining again. It usually was on Godolph, which was a weather-controlled planet where the natives like rain.

He adjusted the controls of the weak force field that repelled the rain. He widened the angle of the field until water slanted through it unhindered. He narrowed it around him until it approached visibility and the drops bounced away. He swore at the miserable climate and the near amphibians who created it.

A few hundred feet away, a Godolphian girl waded out of the transport tide and climbed to the walkway. It was this sort of thing that made life dangerous for a human—Venice revised, brought up to date in a faster-than-light age.

Water. It was a perfect engineering material. Simple, cheap, infinitely flexible. With a minimum of mechanism and at a break-neck speed, the ribbon of the transport tide flowed at different levels throughout the city. The Godolphian merely plunged in and was carried swiftly and noiselessly to his destination. Whereas a human—Cassal shivered. If he were found drowned, if would be considered an accident. No investigation would be made. The thug who was trailing him had certainly picked the right place.

The Godolphian girl passed. She wore a sleek brown fur, her own. Cassal was almost positive she muttered a polite "Arf?" as she sloshed by. What she meant by that, he didn't know and didn't intend to find out.

"Follow her," instructed Dimanche. 'We've got to investigate our man at closer range."

Obediently, Cassal turned and began walking after the girl. Attractive in an anthropomorphic, seal-like way, even from behind. Not graceful out of her element, though.

The would-be assassin was still looking at merchandise as Cassal retraced his steps. A man, or at least man type. A big fellow, physically quite capable of violence, if size had anything to do with it. The face, though, was out of character. Mild, almost meek. A scientist or scholar. It didn't fit with murder.

"Nothing," said Dimanche disgustedly. "His mind froze when we got close. I could feel his shoulderblades twitching as we passed. Anticipated guilt, of course. Projecting to you the action he plans. That makes the knife definite."

Well beyond the window at which the thug watched and waited, Cassal stopped. Shakily he produced a cigarette and fumbled for a lighter.

"Excellent thinking," commended Dimanche. "He won't attempt anything on this street. Too dangerous. Turn aside at the next deserted intersection and let him follow the glow of your cigarette."

The lighter flared in his hand. "That's one way of finding out," said Cassal. "But wouldn't I be a lot safer if I just concentrated on getting back to the hotel?"

"I'm curious. Turn here."

"Go to hell," said Cassal nervously. Nevertheless, when he came to that intersection, he turned there.

It was a Godolphian equivalent of an alley, narrow and dark, oily slow-moving water gurgling at one side, high cavernous walls looming on the other.

He would have to adjust the curiosity factor of Dimanche. It was all very well to be interested in the man who trailed him, but there was also the problem of coming out of this adventure alive. Dimanche, an electronic instrument, naturally wouldn't consider that.

"Easy," warned Dimanche. "He's at the entrance to the alley, walking fast. He's surprised and pleased that you took this route."

"I'm surprised, too," remarked Cassal. "But I wouldn't say I'm pleased. Not just now."

"Careful. Even subvocalized conversation is distracting." The mechanism concealed within his body was silent for an

instant and then continued: "His blood pressure is rising, breathing is faster. At a time like this, he may be ready to verbalize why he wants to murder you. This is critical."

"That's no lie," agreed Cassal bitterly. The lighter was in his hand. He clutched it grimly. It was difficult not to look back. The darkness assumed an even more sinister quality.

"Quiet," said Dimanche. "He's verbalizing about you."

"He's decided I'm a nice fellow after all. He's going to stop and ask me for a light."

"I don't think so," answered Dimanche. "He's whispering: 'Poor devil. I hate to do it. But it's really his life or mine.'"

"He's more right than he knows. Why all this violence, though? Isn't there any clue?"

"None at all," admitted Dimanche. "He's very close. You'd better turn around."

Cassal turned, pressed the stud on the lighter. It should have made him feel more secure, but it didn't. He could see very little.

A dim shadow rushed at him. He jumped away from the water side of the alley, barely in time. He could feel the rush of air as the assailant shot by.

"Hey!" shouted Cassal.

Echoes answered; nothing else did. He had the uncomfortable feeling that no one was going to come to his assistance.

"He wasn't expecting that reaction," explained Dimanche. "That's why he missed. He's turned around and is coming back."

"I'm armed!" shouted Cassal.

"That won't stop him. He doesn't believe you."

Cassal grasped the lighter. That is, it had been a lighter a few seconds before. Now a needle-thin blade had snapped out and projected stiffly. Originally it had been designed as an emergency surgical instrument. A little imagination and a few changes had altered its function, converting it into a compact, efficient stiletto.

"Twenty feet away," advised Dimanche. "He knows you

can't see him, but he can see your silhouette by the light from the main thoroughfare. What he doesn't know is that I can detect every move he makes and keep you posted below the level of his hearing."

"Stay on him," growled Cassal nervously. He flattened himself against the wall.

"To the right," whispered Dimanche. "Lunge forward. About five feet. Low."

Sickly, he did so. He didn't care to consider the possible effects of a miscalculation. In the darkness, how far was five feet? Fortunately, his estimate was correct. The rapier encountered yielding resistance, the soggy kind: flesh. The tough blade bent, but did not break. His opponent gasped and broke away.

"Attack!" howled Dimanche against the bone behind his ear. "You've got him. He can't imagine how you know where he is in the darkness. He's afraid."

Attack he did, slicing about wildly. Some of the thrusts landed; some didn't. The percentage was low, the total amount high. His opponent fell to the ground, gasped and was silent.

Cassal fumbled in his pockets and flipped on a light. The man lay near the water side of the alley. One leg was crumpled under him. He didn't move.

"Heartbeat slow," said Dimanche solemnly. "Breathing barely perceptible."

"Then he's not dead," said Cassal in relief.

Foam flecked from the still lips and ran down the chin. Blood oozed from cuts on the face.

"Respiration none, heartbeat absent," stated Dimanche.

Horrified, Cassal gazed at the body. Self-defense, of course, but would the police believe it? Assuming they did, they'd still have to investigate. The rapier was an illegal concealed weapon. And they would question him until they discovered Dimanche. Regrettable, but what could he do about it?

Suppose he were detained long enough to miss the ship bound for Tunney 21?

Grimly, he laid down the rapier. He might as well get to

the bottom of this. "Why had the man attacked? What did he want?"

"I don't know," replied Dimanche irritably. "I can interpret body data—a live body. I can't work on a piece of meat."

Cassal searched the body thoroughly. Miscellaneous personal articles of no value in identifying the man. A clip with a startling amount of money in it. A small white card with something scribbled on it. A picture of a woman and a small child posed against a background which resembled no world Cassal had ever seen. That was all.

Cassal stood up in bewilderment. Dimanche to the contrary, there seemed to be no connection between this dead man and his own problem of getting to Tunney 21.

Right now, though, he had to dispose of the body. He glanced toward the boulevard. So far no one had been attracted by the violence.

He bent down to retrieve the lighter-rapier. Dimanche shouted at him. Before he could react, someone landed on him. He fell forward, vainly trying to grasp the weapon. Strong fingers felt for his throat as he was forced to the ground.

He threw the attacker off and staggered to his feet. He heard footsteps rushing away. A slight splash followed. Whoever it was, he was escaping by way of water.

Whoever it was. The man he had thought he had slain was no longer in sight.

"Interpret body data, do you?" muttered Cassal. "Liveliest dead man I've ever been strangled by."

"It's just possible there are some breeds of men who can control the basic functions of their body," said Dimanche defensively. "When I checked him, he had no heartbeat."

"Remind me not to accept your next evaluation so completely," grunted Cassal. Nevertheless, he was relieved, in a fashion. He hadn't *wanted* to kill the man. And now there was nothing he'd have to explain to the police.

He needed the cigarette he stuck between his lips. For the second time he attempted to pick up the rapier-lighter. This time he was successful. Smoke swirled into his lungs and

quieted his nerves. He squeezed the weapon into the shape of a lighter and put it away.

Something, however, was missing—his wallet.

The thug had relieved him of it in the second round of the scuffle. Persistent fellow. Damned persistent.

It really didn't matter. He fingered the clip he had taken from the supposedly dead body. He had intended to turn it over to the police. Now he might as well keep it to reimburse him for his loss. It contained more money than his wallet had.

Except for the identification tab he always carried in his wallet, it was more than a fair exchange. The identification, a rectangular piece of plastic, was useful in establishing credit, but with the money he now had, he wouldn't need credit. If he did, he could always send for another tab.

A white card fluttered from the clip. He caught it as it fell. Curiously he examined it. Blank except for one crudely printed word, STAB. His unknown assailant certainly had tried.

The old man stared at the door, an obsolete visual projector wobbling precariously on his head. He closed his eyes and the lettering on the door disappeared. Cassal was too far away to see what it had been. The technician opened his eyes and concentrated. Slowly a new sign formed on the door.

TRAVELERS AID BUREAU
Murra Foray, First Counselor

It was a drab sign, but, then, it was a dismal, backward planet. The old technician passed on to the next door and closed his eyes again.

With a sinking feeling, Cassal walked toward the entrance. He needed help and he had to find it in this dingy rathole.

Inside, though, it wasn't dingy and it wasn't a rathole. More like a maze, an approved scientific one. Efficient, though not comfortable. Travelers Aid was busier than he thought it would be. Eventually he managed to squeeze into one of the many small counseling rooms.

A woman appeared on the screen, crisp and cool. "Please answer everything the machine asks. When the tape is complete, I'll be available for consultation."

Cassal wasn't sure he was going to like her. "Is this necessary?" he asked. "It's merely a matter of information."

"We have certain regulations we abide by." The woman smiled frostily. "I can't give you any information until you comply with them."

"Sometimes regulations are silly," said Cassal firmly. "Let me speak to the first counselor."

"You are speaking to her," she said. Her face disappeared from the screen.

Cassal sighed. So far he hadn't made a good impression.

Travelers Aid Bureau, in addition to regulations, was abundantly supplied with official curiosity. When the machine finished with him, Cassal had the feeling he could be re-created from the record it had of him. His individuality had been capsuled into the series of questions and answers. One thing he drew the line at—why he wanted to go to Tunny 21 was his own business.

The first counselor reappeared. Age, indeterminate. Not, he supposed, that anyone would be curious about it. Slightly taller than average, rather on the slender side. Face was broad at the brow, narrow at the chin and her eyes were enigmatic. A dangerous woman.

She glanced down at the data. "Denton Cassal, native of Earth. Destination, Tunney 21." She looked up at him. "Occupation, sales engineer. Isn't that an odd combination?" Her smile was quite superior.

"Not at all. Scientific training as an engineer. Special knowledge of customer relations."

"Special knowledge of a thousand races? How convenient." Her eyebrows arched.

"I think so," he agreed blandly. "Anything else you'd like to know?"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

He could believe that or not as he wished. He didn't.

"You refused to answer why you were going to Tunney 21. Perhaps I can guess. They're the best scientists in the Galaxy. You wish to study under them."

Close—but wrong on two counts. They were good scientists, though not necessarily the best. For instance, it was doubtful that they could build Dimanche, even if they had ever thought of it, which was even less likely.

There was, however, one relatively obscure research worker on Tunney 21 that Neuronics wanted on their staff. If the fragments of his studies that had reached Earth across the vast distance meant anything, he could help Neuronics perfect instantaneous radio. The company that could build a radio to span the reaches of the Galaxy with no time lag could set its own price, which could be control of all communications, transport, trade—a galactic monopoly. Cassal's share would be a cut of all that.

His part was simple, on the surface. He was to persuade that researcher to come to Earth, *if he could.* Literally, he had to guess the Tunnesian's price before the Tunnesian himself knew it. In addition, the reputation of Tunnesian scientists being exceeded only by their arrogance, Cassal had to convince him that he wouldn't be working for ignorant Earth savages. The existence of such an instrument as Dimanche was a key factor.

Her voice broke through his thoughts. "Now, then, what's your problem?"

"I was told on Earth I might have to wait a few days on Godolph. I've been here three weeks. I want information on the ship bound for Tunney 21."

"Just a moment." She glanced at something below the angle of the screen. She looked up and her eyes were grave. "*Rick-rock C* arrived yesterday. Departed for Tunney early this morning."

"Departed?" He got up and sat down again, swallowing hard. "When will the next ship arrive?"

"Do you know how many stars there are in the Galaxy?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

"That's right," she said. "Billions. Tunney, according to the notation, is near the center of the Galaxy, inside the third ring. You've covered about a third of the distance to it. Local traffic, anything within a thousand light-years, is relatively easy to manage. At longer distances, you take a chance. You've had yours and missed it. Frankly, Cassal, I don't know when another ship bound for Tunney will show up on or near Godolph. Within the next five years—maybe."

He blanched. "How long would it take to get there using local transportation, star-hopping?"

"Take my advice: don't try it. Five or ten years, if you're lucky."

"I don't need that kind of luck."

"I suppose not." She hesitated. "You're determined to go on?" At the emphatic nod, she sighed. "If that's your decision, we'll try to help you. To start things moving, we'll need a print of your identification tab."

"There's something funny about her," Dimanche decided. It was the usual speaking voice of the instrument, no louder than the noise the blood made in coursing through arteries and veins. Cassal could hear it plainly, because it was virtually inside his ear.

Cassal ignored his private voice. "Identification tab? I don't have it with me. In fact, I may have lost it."

She smiled in instant disbelief. "We're not trying to pry into any part of your past you may wish concealed. However, it's much easier for us to help you if you have your identification. Now if you can't *remember* your real name and where you put your identification—" She arose and left the screen. "Just a moment."

He glared uneasily at the spot where the first counselor wasn't. His *real* name!

"Relax," Dimanche suggested. "She didn't mean it as a personal insult."

Presently she returned.

"I have news for you, whoever you are."

"Cassal," he said firmly. "Denton Cassal, sales engineer, Earth. If you don't believe it, send back to—" He stopped. It

had taken him four months to get to Godolph, non-stop, plus a six-month wait on Earth for a ship to show up that was bound in the right direction. Over distances such as these, it just wasn't practical to send back to Earth for anything.

"I see you understand." She glanced at the card in her hand. "The spaceport records indicate that when *Rickrock C* took off this morning, there was a Denton Cassal on board, bound for Tunney 21."

"It wasn't I," he said dazedly. He knew who it was, though. The man who had tried to kill him last night. The reason for the attack now became clear. The thug had wanted his identification tab. Worse, he had gotten it.

"No doubt it wasn't," she said wearily. "Outsiders don't seem to understand what galactic travel entails."

Outsiders? Evidently what she called those who lived beyond the second transfer ring. Were those who lived at the edge of the Galaxy, beyond the first ring, called Rimmers? Probably.

She was still speaking: "Ten years to cross the Galaxy, without stopping. At present, no ship is capable of that. Real scheduling is impossible. Populations shift and have to be supplied. A ship is taken off a run for repairs and is never put back on. It's more urgently needed elsewhere. The man who depended on it is left waiting; years pass before he learns it's never coming.

"If we had instantaneous radio, that would help. Confusion wouldn't vanish overnight, but it would diminish. We wouldn't have to depend on ships for all the news. Reservations could be made ahead of time, credit established, lost identification replaced—"

"I've traveled before," he interrupted stiffly. "I've never had any trouble."

She seemed to be exaggerating the difficulties. True, the center was more congested. Taking each star as the starting point for a limited number of ships and using statistical probability as a guide—why, no man would arrive at his predetermined destination.

But that wasn't the way it worked. Manifestly, you couldn't compare galactic transportation to the erratic paths of air molecules in a giant room. Or could you?

For the average man, anyone who didn't have his own interstellar ship, was the comparison too apt? It might be.

"You've traveled outside, where there are still free planets waiting to be settled. Where a man is welcome, if he's able to work." She paused. "The center is different. Populations are excessive. Inside the third ring, no man is allowed off a ship without an identification tab. They don't encourage immigration."

In effect, that meant no ship bound for the center would take a passenger without identification. No ship owner would run the risk of having a permanent guest on board, someone who couldn't be got rid of when his money was gone.

Cassal held his head in his hands. Tunney 21 was inside the third ring.

"Next time," she said, "don't let anyone take your identification."

"I won't," he promised grimly.

The woman looked directly at him. Her eyes were bright. He revised his estimate of her age drastically downward. She couldn't be as old as he. Nothing outward had happened, but she no longer seemed dowdy. Not that he was interested. Still, it might pay him to be friendly to the first counselor.

"We're a philanthropic agency," said Murra Foray. "Your case is special, though—"

"I understand," he said gruffly. "You accept contributions."

She nodded. "If the donor is able to give. We don't ask so much that you'll have to compromise your standard of living." But she named a sum that would force him to do just that if getting to Tunney 21 took any appreciable time.

He stared at her unhappily. "I suppose it's worth it. I can always work, if I have to."

"As a salesman?" she asked. "I'm afraid you'll find it difficult to do business with Godolphians."

Irony wasn't called for at a time like this, he thought reproachfully.

"Not just another salesman," he answered definitely. "I have special knowledge of customer reactions. I can tell exactly—"

He stopped abruptly. Was she baiting him? For what reason? The instrument he called Dimanche was not known to the Galaxy at large. From the business angle, it would be poor policy to hand out that information at random. Aside from that, he needed every advantage he could get. Dimanche was his special advantage.

"Anyway," he finished lamely, "I'm a first class engineer. I can always find something in that line."

"A scientist, maybe," murmured Murra Foray. "But in this part of the Milky Way, an engineer is regarded as merely a technician who hasn't yet gained practical experience." She shook her head. "You'll do better as a salesman."

He got up, glowering. "If that's all—"

"It is. We'll keep you informed. Drop your contribution in the slot provided for that purpose as you leave."

A door, which he hadn't noticed in entering the counseling cubicle, swung open. The agency was efficient.

"Remember," the counselor called out as he left, "identification is hard to work with. Don't accept a crude forgery."

He didn't answer, but it was an idea worth considering. The agency was also eminently practical.

The exit path guided him firmly to an inconspicuous and yet inescapable contribution station. He began to doubt the philanthropic aspect of the bureau.

"I've got it," said Dimanche as Cassal gloomily counted out the sum the first counselor had named.

"Got what?" asked Cassal. He rolled the currency into a neat bundle, attached his name, and dropped it into the chute.

"The woman, Murra Foray, the first counselor. She's a Huntner."

"What's a Huntner?"

"A sub-race of men on the other side of the Galaxy. She was vocalizing about her home planet when I managed to locate her."

"Any other information?"

"None. Electronic guards were sliding into place as soon as I reached her. I got out as fast as I could."

"I see." The significance of that, if any, escaped him. Nevertheless, it sounded depressing.

"What I want to know is," said Dimanche, "why such precautions as electronic guards? What does Travelers Aid have that's so secret?"

Cassal grunted and didn't answer. Dimanche could be annoyingly inquisitive at times.

Cassal had entered one side of a block-square building. He came out on the other side. The agency was larger than he had thought. The old man was staring at a door as Cassal came out. He had apparently changed every sign in the building. His work finished, the technician was removing the visual projector from his head as Cassal came up to him. He turned and peered.

"You stuck here, too?" he asked in the uneven voice of the aged.

"Stuck?" repeated Cassal. "I suppose you can call it that. I'm waiting for my ship." He frowned. He was the one who wanted to ask questions. "Why all the redecoration? I thought Travelers Aid was an old agency. Why did you change so many signs? I could understand it if the agency were new."

The old man chuckled. "Reorganization. The previous first counselor resigned suddenly, in the middle of the night, they say. The new one didn't like the name of the agency, so she ordered it changed."

She would do just that, thought Cassal. "What about this Murra Foray?"

The old man winked mysteriously. He opened his mouth and then seemed overcome with senile fright. Hurriedly he shuffled away.

Cassal gazed after him, baffled. The old man was afraid for his job, afraid of the first counselor. Why he should be, Cassal

didn't know. He shrugged and went on. The agency was now in motion in his behalf, but he didn't intend to depend on that alone.

"The girl ahead of you is making unnecessary wriggling motions as she walks," observed Dimanche. "Several men are looking on with approval. I don't understand."

Cassal glanced up. They walked that way back in good old L.A. A pang of homesickness swept through him.

"Shut up," he growled plaintively. "Attend to the business at hand."

"Business? Very well," said Dimanche. "Watch out for the transport tide."

Cassal swerved back from the edge of the water. Murra Foray had been right. Godolphians didn't want or need his skills, at least not on terms that were acceptable to him. The natives didn't have to exert themselves. They lived off the income provided by travelers, with which the planet was abundantly supplied by ship after ship.

Still, that didn't alter his need for money. He walked the streets at random while Dimanche probed.

"Ah!"

"What is it?"

"That man. He crinkles something in his hands. Not enough, he is subvocalizing."

"I know how he feels," commented Cassal.

"Now his throat tightens. He bunches his muscles. 'I know where I can get more,' he tells himself. He is going there."

"A sensible man," declared Cassal. "Follow him."

Boldly the man headed toward a section of the city which Cassal had not previously entered. He believed opportunity lay there. Not for everyone. The shrewd, observant, and the courageous could succeed if— The word that the quarry used was a slang term, unfamiliar to either Cassal or Dimanche. It didn't matter as long as it led to money.

Cassal stretched his stride and managed to keep the man in sight. He skipped nimbly over the narrow walkways that curved through the great buildings. The section grew dingier

as they proceeded. Not slums; not the showplace city frequented by travelers, either.

Abruptly the man turned into a building. He was out of sight when Cassal reached the structure.

He stood at the entrance and stared in disappointment. "Opportunities, Inc.," Dimanche quoted softly in his ear. "Science, thrills, chance. What does that mean?"

"It means that we followed a gravity ghost!"

"What's a gravity ghost?"

"An unexplained phenomena," said Cassal nastily. "It affects the instruments of spaceships, giving the illusion of a massive dark body that isn't there."

"But you're not a pilot. I don't understand."

"You're not a very good pilot yourself. We followed the man to a gambling joint."

"Gambling," mused Dimanche. "Well, isn't it an opportunity of a sort? Someone inside is thinking of the money he's winning."

"The owner, no doubt."

Dimanche was silent, investigating. "It is the owner," he confirmed finally. "Why not go in, anyway? It's raining. And they serve drinks." Left unstated was the admission that Dimanche was curious, as usual.

Cassal went in and ordered a drink. It was a variable place, depending on the spectator—bright, cheerful, and harmonious if he were winning, garish and depressingly vulgar if he were not. At the moment Cassal belonged to neither group. He reserved judgment.

An assortment of gaming devices were in operation. One in particular seemed interesting. It involved the counting of electrons passing through an aperture, based on probability.

"Not that," whispered Dimanche. "It's rigged."

"But it's not necessary," Cassal murmured. "Pure chance alone is good enough."

"They don't take chances, pure or adulterated. Look around. How many Godolphians do you see?"

Cassal looked. Natives were not even there as servants. Strictly a clip joint, working travelers.

Unconsciously, he nodded. "That does it. It's not the kind of opportunity I had in mind."

"Don't be hasty," objected Dimanche. "Certain devices I can't control. There may be others in which my knowledge will help you. Stroll around and sample some games."

Cassal equipped himself with a supply of coins and sauntered through the establishment, disbursing them so as to give himself the widest possible acquaintance with the layout.

"That one," instructed Dimanche.

It received a coin. In return, it rewarded him with a large shower of change. The money spilled to the floor with a satisfying clatter. An audience gathered rapidly, ostensibly to help him pick up the coins.

"There was a circuit in it," explained Dimanche. "I gave it a shot of electrons and it paid out."

"Let's try it again," suggested Cassal.

"Let's not," Dimanche said regretfully. "Look at the man on your right."

Cassal did so. He jammed the money back in his pocket and stood up. Hastily, he began thrusting the money back into the machine. A large and very unconcerned man watched him.

"You get the idea," said Dimanche. "It paid off two months ago. It wasn't scheduled for another this year." Dimanche scrutinized the man in a multitude of ways while Cassal continued play. "He's satisfied," was the report at last. "He doesn't detect any sign of crookedness."

"*Crookedness?*"

"On your part, that is. In the ethics of a gambling house, what's done to insure profit is merely prudence."

They moved on to other games, though Cassal lost his briefly acquired enthusiasm. The possibility of winning seemed to grow more remote.

"Hold it," said Dimanche. "Let's look into this."

"Let me give *you* some advice," said Cassal. "This is one

thing we can't win at. Every race in the Galaxy has a game like this. Pieces of plastic with values printed on them are distributed. The trick is to get certain arbitrarily selected sets of values in the plastics dealt to you. It seems simple, but against a skilled player a beginner can't win."

"Every race in the Galaxy," mused Dimanche. "What do men call it?"

"Cards," said Cassal, "though there are many varieties within that general classification." He launched into a detailed exposition of the subject. If it were something he was familiar with, all right, but a foreign deck and strange rules—

Nevertheless, Dimanche was interested. They stayed and observed.

The dealer was clumsy. His great hands enfolded the cards. Not a Godolphian nor quite human, he was an odd type, difficult to place. Physically burly, he wore a garment chiefly remarkable for its ill-fitting appearance. A hard round hat jammed closely over his skull completed the outfit. He was dressed in a manner that, somewhere in the Universe, was evidently considered the height of fashion.

"It doesn't seem bad," commented Cassal. "There might be a chance."

"Look around," said Dimanche. "Everyone thinks that. It's the classic struggle, person against person and everyone against the house. Naturally, the house doesn't lose."

"Then why are we wasting our time?"

"Because I've got an idea," said Dimanche. "Sit down and take a hand."

"Make up your mind. You said the house doesn't lose."

"The house hasn't played against us. Sit down. You get eight cards, with the option of two more. I'll tell you what to do."

Cassal waited until a disconsolate player relinquished his seat and stalked moodily away. He played a few hands and bet small sums in accordance with Dimanche's instructions. He held his own and won insignificant amounts while learning.

It was simple. Nine orders, or suits, of twenty-seven cards

each. Each suit would build a different equation. The lowest hand was a quadratic. A cubic would beat it. All he had to do was remember his math, guess at what he didn't remember, and draw the right cards.

"What's the highest possible hand?" asked Dimanche. There was a note of abstraction in his voice, as if he were paying more attention to something else.

Cassal peeked at the cards that were face-down on the table. He shoved some money into the betting square in front of him and didn't answer.

"You had it last time," said Dimanche. "A three dimensional encephalocurve. A time modulated brainwave. If you had bet right, you could have owned the house by now."

"I did? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you had it three successive times. The probabilities against that are astronomical. I've got to find out what's happening before you start betting recklessly."

"It's not the dealer," declared Cassal. "Look at those hands."

They were huge hands, more suitable, seemingly, for crushing the life from some alien beast than the delicate manipulation of cards. Cassal continued to play, betting brilliantly by the only standard that mattered: he won.

One player dropped out and was replaced by a recruit from the surrounding crowd. Cassal ordered a drink. The waiter was placing it in his hand when Dimanche made a discovery.

"I've got it!"

A shout from Dimanche was roughly equivalent to a noiseless kick in the head. Cassal dropped the drink. The player next to him scowled but said nothing. The dealer blinked and went on dealing.

"What have you got?" asked Cassal, wiping up the mess and trying to keep track of the cards.

"How he fixes the deck," explained Dimanche in a lower and less painful tone. "Clever."

Muttering, Cassal shoved a bet in front of him.

"Look at that hat," said Dimanche.

"Ridiculous, isn't it? But I see no reason to gloat because I have better taste."

"That's not what I meant. It's pulled down low over his knobby ears and touches his jacket. His jacket rubs against his trousers, which in turn come in contact with the stool on which he sits."

"True," agreed Cassal, increasing his wager. "But except for his physique, I don't see anything unusual."

"It's a circuit, a visual projector broken down into components. The hat is a command circuit which makes contact, via his clothing, with the broadcasting unit built into the chair. The existence of a visual projector is completely concealed."

Cassal bit his lip and squinted at his cards. "Interesting. What does it have to do with anything?"

"The deck," exclaimed Dimanche excitedly. "The backs are regular, printed with an intricate design. The front is a special plastic, susceptible to the influence of the visual projector. He doesn't need manual dexterity. He can make any value appear on any card he wants. It will stay there until he changes it."

Cassal picked up the cards. "I've got a Loreenaroo equation. Can he change that to anything else?"

"He can, but he doesn't work that way. He decides before he deals who's going to get what. He concentrates on each card as he deals it. He can change a hand after a player gets it, but it wouldn't look good."

"It wouldn't." Cassal wistfully watched the dealer rake in his wager. His winnings were gone, plus. The newcomer to the game won.

He started to get up. "Sit down," whispered Dimanche. "We're just beginning. Now that we know what he does and how he does it, we're going to take him."

The next hand started in the familiar pattern, two cards of fairly good possibilities, a bet, and then another card. Cassal watched the dealer closely. His clumsiness was only superficial. At no time were the faces of the cards visible. The real skill was unobservable, of course—the swift bookkeeping that

went on in his mind. A duplication in the hands of the players, for instance, would be ruinous.

Cassal received the last card. "Bet high," said Dimanche. With trepidation, Cassal shoved the money into the betting area.

The dealer glanced at his hand and started to sit down. Abruptly he stood up again. He scratched his cheek and stared puzzledly at the players around him. Gently he lowered himself onto the stool. The contact was even briefer. He stood up in indecision. An impatient murmur arose. He dealt himself a card, looked at it, and paid off all the way around. The players buzzed with curiosity.

"What happened?" asked Cassal as the next hand started.

"I induced a short in the circuit," said Dimanche. "He couldn't sit down to change the last card he got. He took a chance, as he had to, and dealt himself a card, anyway."

"But he paid off without asking to see what we had."

"It was the only thing he could do," explained Dimanche. "He had duplicate cards."

The dealer was scowling. He didn't seem quite so much at ease. The cards were dealt and the betting proceeded almost as usual. True, the dealer was nervous. He couldn't sit down and stay down. He was sweating. Again he paid off. Cassal won heavily and he was not the only one.

The crowd around them grew almost in a rush. There is an indefinable sense that tells one gambler when another is winning.

This time the dealer stood up. His leg contacted the stool occasionally. He jerked it away each time he dealt to himself. At the last card he hesitated. It was amazing how much he could sweat. He lifted a corner of the cards. Without indicating what he had drawn, determinedly and deliberately he sat down. The chair broke. The dealer grinned weakly as a waiter brought him another stool.

"They still think it may be a defective circuit," whispered Dimanche.

The dealer sat down and sprang up from the new chair in one motion. He gazed bitterly at the players and paid them.

"He had a blank hand," explained Dimanche. "He made contact with the broadcasting circuit long enough to erase, but not long enough to put anything in its place."

The dealer adjusted his coat. "I have a nervous disability," he declared thickly. "If you'll pardon me for a few minutes while I take a treatment—"

"Probably going to consult with the manager," observed Cassal.

"He is the manager. He's talking with the owner."

"Keep track of him."

A blonde, pretty, perhaps even Earth-type human, smiled and wriggled closer to Cassal. He smiled back.

"Don't fall for it," warned Dimanche. "She's an undercover agent for the house."

Cassal looked her over carefully. "Not much under cover."

"But if she should discover—"

"Don't be stupid. She'll never guess you exist. There's a small lump behind my ear and a small round tube cleverly concealed elsewhere."

"All right," sighed Dimanche resignedly. "I suppose people will always be a mystery to me."

The dealer reappeared, followed by an unobtrusive man who carried a new stool. The dealer looked subtly different, though he was the same person. It took a close inspection to determine what the difference was. His clothing was new, unrumpled, unmarked by perspiration. During his brief absence, he had been furnished with new visual projector equipment, and it had been thoroughly checked out. The house intended to locate the source of the disturbance.

Mentally, Cassal counted his assets. He was solvent again, but in other ways his position was not so good.

"Maybe," he suggested, "we should leave. With no further interference from us, they might believe defective equipment is the cause of their losses."

"Maybe," replied Dimanche, "you think the crowd around us is composed solely of patrons?"

"I see," said Cassal soberly.

He stretched his legs. The crowd pressed closer, uncommonly aggressive and ill-tempered for mere spectators. He decided against leaving.

"Let's resume play." The dealer-manager smiled blandly at each player. He didn't suspect any one person—yet.

"He might be using an honest deck," said Cassal hopefully.

"They don't have that kind," answered Dimanche. He added absently: "During his conference with the owner, he was given authority to handle the situation in any way he sees fit."

Bad, but not too bad. At least Cassal was opposing someone who had authority to let him keep his winnings, *if he could be convinced.*

The dealer deliberately sat down on the stool. Testing. He could endure the charge that trickled through him. The bland smile spread into a triumphant one.

"While he was gone, he took a sedative," analyzed Dimanche. "He also had the strength of the broadcasting circuit reduced. He thinks that will do it."

"Sedatives wear off," said Cassal. "By the time he knows it's me, see that it has worn off. Mess him up."

The game went on. The situation was too much for the others. They played poorly and bet atrociously, on purpose. One by one they lost and dropped out. They wanted badly to win, but they wanted to live even more.

The joint was jumping, and so was the dealer again. Sweat rolled down his face and there were tears in his eyes. So much liquid began to erode his fixed smile. He kept replenishing it from some inner source of determination.

Cassal looked up. The crowd had drawn back, or had been forced back by hirelings who mingled with them. He was alone with the dealer at the table. Money was piled high around him. It was more than he needed, more than he wanted.

"I suggest one last hand," said the dealer-manager, grimacing. It sounded a little stronger than a suggestion.

Cassal nodded.

"For a substantial sum," said the dealer, naming it.

Miraculously, it was an amount that equaled everything Cassal had. Again Cassal nodded.

"Pressure," muttered Cassal to Dimanche. "The sedative has worn off. He's back at the level at which he started. Fry him if you have to."

The cards came out slowly. The dealer was jittering as he dealt. Soft music was lacking, but not the motions that normally accompanied it. Cassal couldn't believe that cards could be so bad. Somehow the dealer was rising to the occasion. Rising and sitting.

"There's a nerve in your body," Cassal began conversationally, "which, if it were overloaded, would cause you to drop dead."

The dealer didn't examine his cards. He didn't have to. "In that event, someone would be arrested for murder," he said. "You."

That was the wrong tack; the humanoid had too much courage. Cassal passed his hand over his eyes. "You can't do this to men, but, strictly speaking, the dealer's not human. Try suggestion on him. Make him change the cards. Play him like a piano. Pizzicato on the nerve strings."

Dimanche didn't answer; presumably he was busy scrambling the circuits.

The dealer stretched out his hand. It never reached the cards. Danger: Dimanche at work. The smile dropped from his face. What remained was pure anguish. He was too dry for tears. Smoke curled up faintly from his jacket.

"Hot, isn't it?" asked Cassal. "It might be cooler if you took off your cap."

The cap tinkled to the floor. The mechanism in it was destroyed. What the cards were, they were. Now they couldn't be changed.

"That's better," said Cassal.

He glanced at his hand. In the interim, it had changed slightly. Dimanche had got there.

The dealer examined his cards one by one. His face changed color. He sat utterly still on a cool stool.

"You win," he said hopelessly.

"Let's see what you have."

The dealer-manager roused himself. "You won. That's good enough for you, isn't it?"

Cassal shrugged. "You have Bank of the Galaxy service here. I'll deposit my money with them *before* you pick up your cards."

The dealer nodded unhappily and summoned an assistant. The crowd, which had anticipated violence, slowly began to drift away.

"What did you do?" asked Cassal silently.

"Men have no shame," sighed Dimanche. "Some humanoids do. The dealer was one who did. I forced him to project onto his cards something that wasn't a suit at all."

"Embarrassing if that got out," agreed Cassal. "What did you project?"

Dimanche told him. Cassal blushed, which was unusual for a man.

The dealer-manager returned and the transaction was completed. His money was safe in the Bank of the Galaxy.

"Hereafter, you're not welcome," said the dealer morosely. "Don't come back."

Cassal picked up the cards without looking at them. "And no accidents after I leave," he said, extending the cards face-down. The manager took them and trembled.

"He's an honorable humanoid, in his own way," whispered Dimanche. "I think you're safe."

It was time to leave. "One question," Cassal called back. "What do you call this game?"

Automatically the dealer started to answer. "Why, everyone knows . . ." He sat down, his mouth open.

It was more than time to leave.

Outside, he hailed an air taxi. No point in tempting the management.

"Look," said Dimanche as the cab rose from the surface of the transport tide.

A technician with a visual projector was at work on the sign

in front of the gaming house. Huge words took shape: WARNING—NO TELEPATHS ALLOWED.

There were no such things anywhere, but now there were rumors of them.

Arriving at the habitat wing of the hotel, Cassal went directly to his room. He awaited the delivery of the equipment he had ordered and checked through it thoroughly. Satisfied that everything was there, he estimated the size of the room. Too small for his purpose.

He picked up the intercom and dialed Services. "Put a Life Stage Cordon around my suite," he said briskly.

The face opposite his went blank. "But you're an Earthman. I thought—"

"I know more about my own requirements than your Life Stage Bureau. Earthmen do have life stages. You know the penalty if you refuse that service."

There were some races who went without sleep for five months and then had to make up for it. Others grew vestigial wings for brief periods and had to fly with them or die; reduced gravity would suffice for that. Still others—

But the one common feature was always a critical time in which certain conditions were necessary. Insofar as there was a universal law, from one end of the Galaxy to the other, this was it: The habitat hotel had to furnish appropriate conditions for the maintenance of any life-form that requested it.

The Godolphian disappeared from the screen. When he came back, he seemed disturbed.

"You spoke of a suite. I find that you're listed as occupying one room."

"I am. It's too small. Convert the rooms around me into a suite."

"That's very expensive."

"I'm aware of that. Check the Bank of the Galaxy for my credit rating."

He watched the process take place. Service would be amazingly good from now on.

"Your suite will be converted in about two hours. The Life

Stage Cordon will begin as soon after that as you want. If you tell me how long you'll need it, I can make arrangements now."

"About ten hours is all I'll need." Cassal rubbed his jaw reflectively. "One more thing. Put a perpetual service at the spaceport. If a ship comes in bound for Tunney 21 or the vicinity of it, get accommodations on it for me. And hold it until I get ready, no matter what it costs."

He flipped off the intercom and promptly went to sleep. Hours later, he was awakened by a faint hum. The Life Stage Cordon had just been snapped safely around his newly created suite.

"Now what?" asked Dimanche.

"I need an identification tab."

"You do. And forgeries are expensive and generally crude, as that Huntner woman, Murra Foray, observed."

Cassal glanced at the equipment. "Expensive, yes. Not crude when we do it."

"*We* forge it?" Dimanche was incredulous.

"That's what I said. Consider it this way. I've seen my tab a countless number of times. If I tried to draw it as I remember it, it would be inept and wouldn't pass. Nevertheless, that memory is in my mind, recorded in neuronic chains, exact and accurate." He paused significantly. "You have access to that memory."

"At least partially. But what good does that do?"

"Visual projector and plastic which will take the imprint. I think hard about the identification as I remember it. You record and feed it back to me while I concentrate on projecting it on the plastic. After we get it down, we change the chemical composition of the plastic. It will then pass everything except destructive analysis, and they don't often do that."

Dimanche was silent. "Ingenious," was its comment. "Part of that we can manage, the official engraving, even the electron stamp. That, however, is gross detail. The print of the brain area is beyond our capacity. We can put down what you remember, and you remember what you saw. You didn't

see fine enough, though. The general area will be recognizable, but not the fine structure, nor the charges stored there nor their interrelationship."

"But we've got to do it," Cassal insisted, pacing about nervously.

"With more equipment to probe—"

"Not a chance. I got one Life Stage Cordon on a bluff. If I ask for another, they'll look it up and refuse."

"All right," said Dimanche, humming. The mechanical attempt at music made Cassal's head ache. "I've got an idea. Think about the identification tab."

Cassal thought.

"Enough," said Dimanche. "Now poke yourself."

"Where?"

"Everywhere," replied Dimanche irritably. "One place at a time."

Cassal did so, though it soon became monotonous.

Dimanche stopped him. "Just above your right knee."

"What above my right knee?"

"The principal access to that part of your brain we're concerned with," said Dimanche. "We can't photomeasure your brain the way it was originally done, but we can investigate it remotely. The results will be simplified, naturally. Something like a scale model as compared to the original. A more apt comparison might be that of a relief map to an actual locality."

"Investigate it remotely?" muttered Cassal. A horrible suspicion touched his consciousness. He jerked away from that touch. "What does that mean?"

"What it sounds like. Stimulus and response. From that I can construct an accurate chart of the proper portion of your brain. Our probing instruments will be crude out of necessity, but effective."

"I've already visualized those probing instruments," said Cassal worriedly. "Maybe we'd better work first on the official engraving and the electron stamp, while I'm still fresh. I have a feeling . . ."

"Excellent suggestion," said Dimanche.

Cassal gathered the articles slowly. His lighter would burn and it would also cut. He needed a heavy object to pound with. A violent irritant for the nerve endings. Something to freeze his flesh . . .

Dimanche interrupted: "There are also a few glands we've got to pick up. See if there's a stimi in the room."

"Stimi? Oh yes, a stimulator. Never use the damned things." But he was going to. The next few hours weren't going to be pleasant. Nor dull, either.

Life could be difficult on Godolph.

As soon as the Life Stage Cordon came down, Cassal called for a doctor. The native looked at him professionally.

"Is this a part of the Earth life process?" he asked incredulously. Gingerly, he touched the swollen and lacerated leg.

Cassal nodded wearily. "A matter of life and death," he croaked.

"If it is, then it is," said the doctor, shaking his head. "I, for one, am glad to be a Godolphian."

"To each his own habitat," Cassal quoted the motto of the hotel.

Godolphians were clumsy, good-natured caricatures of seals. There was nothing wrong with their medicine, however. In a matter of minutes he was feeling better. By the time the doctor left, the swelling had subsided and the open wounds were fast closing.

Eagerly, he examined the identification tab. As far as he could tell, it was perfect. What the scanner would reveal was, of course, another matter. He had to check that as best he could without exposing himself.

Services came up to the suite right after he laid the intercom down. A machine was placed over his head and the identification slipped into the slot. The code on the tab was noted; the machine hunted and found the corresponding brain area. Structure was mapped, impulses recorded, scrambled, converted into a ray of light which danced over a film.

The identification tab was similarly recorded. There was now a means of comparison.

Fingerprints could be duplicated—that is, if the race in question had fingers. Every intelligence, however much it differed from its neighbors, had a brain, and tampering with that brain was easily detected. Each identification tab carried a psychometric number which corresponded to the total personality. Alteration of any part of the brain could only subtract from personality index.

The technician removed the identification and gave it to Cassal. "Where shall I send the strips?"

"You don't," said Cassal. "I have a private message to go with them."

"But that will invalidate the process."

"I know. This isn't a formal contract."

Removing the two strips and handing them to Cassal, the technician wheeled the machine away. After due thought, Cassal composed the message.

Travelers Aid Bureau
Murra Foray, first counselor:
If you were considering another identification tab for me, don't. As you can see, I've located the missing item.

He attached the message to the strips and dropped them into the communication chute.

He was wiping his whiskers away when the answer came. Hastily he finished and wrapped himself, noting but not approving the amused glint in her eyes as she watched. His morals were his own, wherever he went.

"Denton Cassal," she said. "A wonderful job. The two strips were in register within one per cent. The best previous forgery I've seen was six per cent, and that was merely a lucky accident. It couldn't be duplicated. Let me congratulate you."

His dignity was professional. "I wish you weren't so fond of that word 'forgery.' I told you I mislaid the tab. As soon as I found it, I sent you proof. I want to get to Tunney 21. I'm willing to do anything I can to speed up the process."

Her laughter tinkled. "You don't *have* to tell me how you

did it or where you got it. I'm inclined to think you made it. You understand that I'm not concerned with legality as such. From time to time the agency has to furnish missing documents. If there's a better way than we have, I'd like to know it."

He sighed and shook his head. For some reason, his heart was beating fast. He wanted to say more, but there was nothing to say.

When he failed to respond, she leaned toward him. "Perhaps you'll discuss this with me. At greater length."

"At the agency?"

She looked at him in surprise. "Have you been sleeping? The agency is closed for the day. The first counselor can't work all the time, you know."

Sleeping? He grimaced at the remembrance of the self-administered beating. No, he hadn't been sleeping. He brushed the thought aside and boldly named a place. Dinner was acceptable.

Dimanche waited until the screen was dark. The words were carefully chosen.

"Did you notice," he asked, "that there was no apparent change in clothing and makeup, yet she seemed younger, more attractive?"

"I didn't think you could trace her that far."

"I can't. I looked at her through your eyes."

"Don't trust my reaction," advised Cassal. "It's likely to be subjective."

"I don't," answered Dimanche. "It is."

Cassal hummed thoughtfully. Dimanche was a business neurological instrument. It didn't follow that it was an expert in human psychology.

Cassal stared at the woman coming toward him. Center-of-the-Galaxy fashion. Decadent, of course, or maybe ultra-civilized. As an Outsider, he wasn't sure which. Whatever it was, it did to the human body what should have been done long ago.

And this body wasn't exactly human. The subtle skirt of proportions betrayed it as an offshoot or deviation from the

human race. Some of the new sub-races stacked up against the original stock much in the same way Cro-Magnons did against Neanderthals, in beauty, at least.

Dimanche spoke a single syllable and subsided, an event Cassal didn't notice. His consciousness was focused on another discovery: the woman was Murra Foray.

He knew vaguely that the first counselor was not necessarily what she had seemed that first time at the agency. That she was capable of such a metamorphosis was hard to believe, though pleasant to accept. His attitude must have shown on his face.

"Please," said Murra Foray. "I'm a Huntner. We're adept at camouflage."

"Huntner," he repeated blankly. "I knew that. But what's a Huntner?"

She wrinkled her lovely nose at the question. "I didn't expect you to ask that. I won't answer it now." She came closer. "I thought you'd ask which was the camouflage—the person you see here, or the one at the Bureau?"

He never remembered the reply he made. It must have been satisfactory, for she smiled and drew her fragile wrap closer. The reservations were waiting.

Dimanche seized the opportunity to speak. "There's something phony about her. I don't understand it and I don't like it."

"You," said Cassal, "are a machine. You don't have to like it."

"That's what I mean. You *have* to like it. You have no choice."

Murra Foray looked back questioningly. Cassal hurried to her side.

The evening passed swiftly. Food that he ate and didn't taste. Music he heard and didn't listen to. Geometric light fugues that were seen and not observed. Liquor that he drank —and here the sequence ended, in the complicated chemistry of Godolphian stimulants.

Cassal reacted to that smooth liquid, though his physical reactions were not slowed. Certain mental centers were de-

pressed, others left wide open, subject to acceleration at whatever speed he demanded.

Murra Foray, in his eyes at least, might look like a dream, the kind men have and never talk about. She was, however, interested solely in her work, or so it seemed.

"Godolph is a nice place," she said toying with a drink, "if you like rain. The natives seem happy enough. But the Galaxy is big and there are lots of strange planets in it, each of which seems ideal to those who are adapted to it. I don't have to tell you what happens when people travel. They get stranded. It's not the time spent in actual flight that's important; it's waiting for the right ship to show up and then having all the necessary documents. Believe me, that can be important, as you found out."

He nodded. He had.

"That's the origin of Travelers Aid Bureau," she continued. "A loose organization, propagated mainly by example. Sometimes it's called Star Travelers Aid. It may have other names. The aim, however, is always the same: to see that stranded persons get where they want to go."

She looked at him wistfully, appealingly. "That's why I'm interested in your method of creating identification tabs. It's the thing most commonly lost. Stolen, if you prefer the truth."

She seemed to anticipate his question. "How can anyone use another's identification? It can be done under certain circumstances. By neural lobotomy, a portion of one brain may be made to match, more or less exactly, the code area of another brain. The person operated on suffers a certain loss of function, of course. How great that loss is depends on the degree of similarity between the two brain areas before the operation took place."

She ought to know, and he was inclined to believe her. Still, it didn't sound feasible.

"You haven't accounted for the psychometric index," he said.

"I thought you'd see it. That's diminished, too."

Logical enough, though not a pretty picture. A genius could

always be made into an an average man or lowered to the level of an idiot. There was no operation, however, that could raise an idiot to the level of a genius.

The scramble for the precious identification tabs went on, from the higher to the lower, a game of musical chairs with grim overtones.

She smiled gravely. "You haven't answered my implied question."

The company that employed him wasn't anxious to let the secret of Dimanche get out. They didn't sell the instrument; they made it for their own use. It was an advantage over their competitors they intended to keep. Even on his recommendation, they wouldn't sell to the agency.

Moreover, it wouldn't help Travelers Aid Bureau if they did. Since she was first counselor, it was probable that she'd be the one to use it. She couldn't make identification for anyone except herself, and then only if she developed exceptional skill.

The alternative was to surgery it in and out of whoever needed it. When that happened, secrecy was gone. Travelers couldn't be trusted.

He shook his head. "It's an appealing idea, but I'm afraid I can't help you."

"Meaning you won't."

This was intriguing. Now it was the agency, not he, who wanted help.

"Don't overplay it," cautioned Dimanche, who had been consistently silent.

She leaned forward attentively. He experienced an uneasy moment. Was it possible she had noticed his private conversation? Of course not. Yet—

"Please," she said, and the tone allayed his fears. "There's an emergency situation and I've got to attend to it. Will you go with me?" She smiled understandingly at his quizzical expression. "Travelers Aid is always having emergencies."

She was rising. "It's too late to go to the Bureau. My place

has a number of machines with which I keep in touch with the spaceport."

"I wonder," said Dimanche puzzledly. "She doesn't subvocalize at all. I haven't been able to get a line on her. I'm certain she didn't receive any sort of call. Be careful. This might be a trick."

"Interesting," said Cassal. He wasn't in the mood to discuss it.

Her habitation was luxurious, though Cassal wasn't impressed. Luxury was found everywhere in the Universe. Huntner women weren't. He watched as she adjusted the machines grouped at one side of the room. She spoke in a low voice; he couldn't distinguish words. She actuated levers, pressed buttons: impedimenta of communication.

At last she finished. "I'm tired. Will you wait till I change?"

Inarticulately, he nodded.

"I think her 'emergency' was a fake," said Dimanche flatly as soon as she left. "I'm positive she wasn't operating the communicator. She merely went through the motions."

"Motions," murmured Cassal dreamily, leaning back. "And what motions."

"I've been watching her," said Dimanche. "She frightens me."

"I've been watching her, too. Maybe in a different way."

"Get out of here while you can," warned Dimanche. "She's dangerous."

Momentarily, Cassal considered it. Dimanche had never failed him. He ought to follow that advice. And yet there was another explanation.

"Look," said Cassal. "A machine is a machine. But among humans there are men and women. What seems dangerous to you may be merely a pattern of normal behavior . . ." He broke off. Murra Foray had entered.

Strictly from the other side of the Galaxy, which she was. A woman can be slender and still be womanly beautiful, with-

out being obvious about it. Not that Murra disdained the obvious, technically. But he could see through technicalities.

The tendons in his hands ached and his mouth was dry, though not with fear. An urgent ringing pounded in his ears. He shook it out of his head and got up.

She came to him.

The ringing was still in his ears. It wasn't a figment of imagination; it was a real voice—that of Dimanche, howling:

"Huntner! It's a word variant. In their language it means Hunter. *She can hear me!*"

"Hear you?" repeated Cassal vacantly.

She was kissing him.

"A descendant of carnivores. An audio-sensitive. She's been listening to you and me all the time."

"Of course I have, ever since the first interview at the bureau," said Murra. "In the beginning I couldn't see what value it was, but you convinced me." She laid her hand gently over his eyes. "I hate to do this to you, dear, but I've got to have Dimanche."

She had been smothering him with caresses. Now, deliberately, she began smothering him in actuality.

Cassal had thought he was an athlete. For an Earthman, he was. Murra Foray, however, was a Huntner, which meant hunter—a descendant of incredibly strong carnivores.

He didn't have a chance. He knew that when he couldn't budge her hands and he fell into the airless blackness of space. Alone and naked, Cassal awakened. He wished he hadn't. He turned over and, though he tried hard not to, promptly woke up again. His body was willing to sleep, but his mind was panicked and disturbed. About what, he wasn't sure.

He sat up shakily and held his roaring head in his hands. He ran aching fingers through his hair. He stopped. The lump behind his ear was gone.

"Dimanche!" he called, and looked at his abdomen.

There was a thin scar, healing visibly before his eyes.

"Dimanche!" he cried again. "Dimanche!"

There was no answer. Dimanche was no longer with him.

He staggered to his feet and stared at the wall. She'd been

kind enough to return him to his own rooms. At length he gathered enough strength to rummage through his belongings. Nothing was missing. Money, identification—all were there.

He could go to the police. He grimaced as he thought of it. The neighborly Godolphian police were hardly a match for the Huntner; she'd fake them out of their skins.

He couldn't prove she'd taken Dimanche. Nothing else normally considered valuable was missing. Besides, there might even be a local prohibition against Dimanche. Not by name, of course; but they could dig up an ancient ordinance —invasion of privacy or something like that. Anything would do if it gave them an opportunity to confiscate the device for intensive study.

For the police to believe his story was the worst that could happen. They might locate Dimanche, but he'd never get it.

He smiled bitterly and the effort hurt. "Dear," she had called him as she had strangled and beaten him into unconsciousness. Afterward singing, very likely, as she had sliced the little instrument out of him.

He could picture her not very remote ancestors springing from cover and overtaking a fleeing herd—

No use pursuing that line of thought.

Why did she want Dimanche? She had hinted that the agency wasn't always concerned with legality as such. He could believe her. If she wanted it for making identification tabs, she'd soon find that it was useless. Not that that was much comfort—she wasn't likely to return Dimanche after she'd made that discovery.

For that matter, what was the purpose of Travelers Aid Bureau? It was a front for another kind of activity. Philanthropy had nothing to do with it.

If he still had possession of Dimanche he'd be able to find out. Everything seemed to hinge on that. With it, he was nearly a superman, able to hold his own in practically all situations—anything that didn't involve a Huntner woman, that is.

Without it—well, Tunney 21 was still far away. Even if he should manage to get there without it, his mission on the planet was certain to fail.

He dismissed the idea of trying to recover it immediately from Murra Foray. She was an audio-sensitive. At twenty feet, unaided, she could hear a heartbeat, the internal noise muscles made in sliding over each other. With Dimanche, she could hear electrons rustling. As an antagonist she was altogether too formidable.

He began pulling on his clothing, wincing as he did so. The alternative was to make another Dimanche. *If* he could. It would be a tough job even for a neuronic expert familiar with the process. He wasn't that expert, but it still had to be done.

The new instrument would have to be better than the original. Maybe not such a slick machine, but more comprehensive. More wallop. He grinned as he thought hopefully about giving Murra Foray a surprise.

Ignoring his aches and pains, he went right to work. With money not a factor, it was an easy matter to line up the best electronic and neuron concerns on Godolph. Two were put on a standby basis. When he gave them plans, they were to rush construction at all possible speed.

Each concern was to build a part of the new instrument. Neither part was of value without the other. The slow-thinking Godolphians weren't likely to make the necessary mental connection between the seemingly unrelated projects.

He retired to his suite and began to draw diagrams. It was harder than he thought. He knew the principles, but the actual details were far more complicated than he remembered.

Functionally, the Dimanche instrument was divided into three main phases. There was a brain and memory unit that operated much as the human counterpart did. Unlike the human brain, however, it had no body to control, hence more of it was available for thought processes. Entirely neuronic in construction, it was far smaller than an electronic brain of the same capacity.

The second function was electronic, akin to radar. Instead

of material objects, it traced and recorded distant nerve impulses. It could count the heartbeat, measure the rate of respiration, was even capable of approximate analysis of the contents of the blood stream. Properly focused on the nerves of tongue, lips or larynx, it transmitted that data back to the neuronic brain, which then reconstructed it into speech. Lip reading, after a fashion, carried to the ultimate.

Finally, there was the voice of Dimanche, a speaker under the control of the neuronic brain.

For convenience of installation in the body, Dimanche was packaged in two units. The larger package was usually surgeried into the abdomen. The small one, containing the speaker, was attached to the skull just behind the ear. It worked by bone conduction, allowing silent communication between operator and instrument. A real convenience.

It wasn't enough to know this, as Cassal did. He'd talked to the company experts, had seen the symbolical drawings, the plans for an improved version. He needed something better than the best, though, that had been planned.

The drawback was this: *Dimanche was powered directly by the nervous system of the body in which it was housed.* Against Murra Foray, he'd be overmatched. She was stronger than he physically, probably also in the production of nervous energy.

One solution was to make available to the new instrument a larger fraction of the neural currents of the body. That was dangerous—a slight miscalculation and the user was dead. Yet he had to have an instrument that would overpower her.

Cassal rubbed his eyes wearily. How could he find some way of supplying additional power?

Abruptly, Cassal sat up. That was the way, of course—an auxiliary power pack that need not be surgeried into his body, extra power that he would use only in emergencies.

Neuronics, Inc., had never done this, had never thought that such an instrument would ever be necessary. They didn't need to overpower their customers. They merely wanted advance information via subvocalized thoughts.

It was easier for Cassal to conceive this idea than to engi-

neer it. At the end of the first day, he knew it would be a slow process.

Twice he postponed deadlines to the manufacturing concerns he'd engaged. He locked himself in his rooms and took Anti-Sleep against the doctor's vigorous protests. In one week he had the necessary drawings, crude but legible. An expert would have to make innumerable corrections, but the intent was plain.

One week. During that time Murra Foray would be growing hourly more proficient in the use of Dimanche.

Cassal followed the neuronics expert groggily, seventy-two hours sleep still clogging his reactions. Not that he hadn't needed sleep after that week. The Godolphian showed him proudly through the shops, though he wasn't at all interested in their achievements. The only noteworthy aspect was the grand scale of their architecture.

"We did it, though I don't think we'd have taken the job if we'd known how hard it was going to be," the neuronics expert chattered. "It works exactly as you specified. We had to make substitutions, of course, but you understand that was inevitable."

He glanced anxiously at Cassal, who nodded. That was to be expected. Components that were common on Earth wouldn't necessarily be available here. Still, any expert worth his pay could always make the proper combinations and achieve the same results.

Inside the lab, Cassal frowned. "I thought you were keeping my work separate. What is this planetary drive doing here?"

The Godolphian spread his broad hands and looked hurt. "Planetary drive?" He tried to laugh. "This is the instrument you ordered!"

Cassal started. It was supposed to fit under a flap of skin behind his ear. A Three World saurian couldn't carry it.

He turned savagely on the expert. "I told you it had to be small."

"But it is. I quote your orders exactly: 'I'm not familiar

with your system of measurement, but make it tiny, very tiny. Figure the size you think it will have to be and cut it in half. And then cut *that* in half.' This is the fraction remaining."

It certainly was. Cassal glanced at the Godolphian's hands. Excellent for swimming. No wonder they built on a grand scale. Broad, blunt, webbed hands weren't exactly suited for precision work.

Valueless. Completely valueless. He knew now what he would find at the other lab. He shook his head in dismay, personally saw to it that the instrument was destroyed. He paid for the work and retrieved the plans.

Back in his rooms again, he sat and thought. It was still the only solution. If the Godolphians couldn't do it, he'd have to find some race that could. He grabbed the intercom and jangled it savagely. In half an hour he had a dozen leads.

The best seemed to be the Spirella. A small, insectlike race, about three feet tall, they were supposed to have excellent manual dexterity, and were technically advanced. They sounded as if they were acquainted with the necessary fields. Three light-years away, they could be reached by readily available local transportation within the day. Their idea of what was small was likely to coincide with his.

He didn't bother to pack. The suite would remain his headquarters. Home was where his enemies were.

He made a mental correction—enemy.

He rubbed his sensitive ear, grateful for the discomfort. His stomach was sore, but it wouldn't be for long. The Spirella had made the new instrument just as he had wanted it. They had built an even better auxiliary power unit than he had specified. He fingered the flat cases in his pocket. In an emergency, he could draw on these, whereas Murra Foray would be limited to the energy in her nervous system.

What he had now was hardly the same instrument. A Military version of it, perhaps. It didn't seem right to use the same name. Call it something staunch and crisp, suggestive of raw power. Manche. As good a name as any. Manche against Dimanche. Cassal against a queen.

He swung confidently along the walkway beside the transport tide. It was raining. He decided to test the new instrument. The Godolphian across the way bent double and wondered why his knees wouldn't work. They had suddenly become swollen and painful to move. Maybe it was the climate.

And maybe it wasn't, thought Cassal. Eventually the pain would leave, but he hadn't meant to be so rough on the native. He'd have to watch how he used Manche.

He scouted the vicinity of Travelers Aid Bureau, keeping at least one building between him and possible detection. Purely precautionary. There was no indication that Murra Foray had spotted him. For a Huntner, she wasn't very alert, apparently.

He sent Manche out on exploration at minimum strength. The electronic guards which Dimanche had spoken of were still in place. Manche went through easily and didn't disturb an electron. Behind the guards there was no trace of the first counselor.

He went closer. Still no warning of danger. The same old technician shuffled in front of the entrance. A horrible thought hit him. It was easy enough to verify. Another "reorganization" *had* taken place. The new sign read:

STAR TRAVELERS AID BUREAU
STAB *Your Hour*
of Need
Delly Mortinbras, first counselor

Cassal leaned against the building, unable to understand what it was that frightened and bewildered him. Then it gradually became, if not clear, at least not quite so muddy.

STAB was the word that had been printed on the card in the money clip that his assailant in the alley had left behind. Cassal had naturally interpreted it as an order to the thug. It wasn't, of course.

The first time Cassal had visited the Travelers Aid Bureau, it had been in the process of reorganization. The only purpose of the reorganization, he realized now, had been to change

the name so he wouldn't translate the word on the slip into the original initials of the Bureau.

Now it probably didn't matter any more whether or not he knew, so the name had been changed back to Star Travelers Aid Bureau—STAB.

That, he saw bitterly, was why Murra Foray had been so positive that the identification tab he'd made with the aid of Dimanche had been a forgery.

She had known the man who robbed Cassal of the original one, perhaps had even helped him plan the theft.

That didn't make sense to Cassal. Yet it had to. He'd suspected the organization of being a racket, but it obviously wasn't. By whatever name it was called, it actually was dedicated to helping the stranded traveler. The question was—which travelers?

There must be agency operatives at the spaceport, checking every likely prospect who arrived, finding out where they were going, whether their papers were in order. Then, just as had happened to Cassal, the prospect was robbed of his papers so somebody stranded here could go on to that destination!

The shabby, aging technician finished changing the last door sign and hobbled over to Cassal. He peered through the rain and darkness.

"You stuck here, too?" he quavered.

"No," said Cassal with dignity, shaky dignity. "I'm not stuck. I'm here because I want to be."

"You're crazy," declared the old man. "I remember—"

Cassal didn't wait to find out what it was he remembered. An impossible land, perhaps, a planet which swings in perfect orbit around an ideal sun. A continent which reared a purple mountain range to hold up a honey sky. People with whom anyone could relax easily and without worry or anxiety. In short, his own native world from which, at night, all the constellations were familiar.

Somehow, Cassal managed to get back to his suite, tumbled wearily onto his bed. The showdown wasn't going to take place.

Everyone connected with the agency—including Murra Foray—had been "stuck here" for one reason or another; no identification tab, no money, whatever it was. That was the staff of the Bureau, a pack of desperate castaways. The "philanthropy" extended to them and nobody else. They grabbed their tabs and money from the likeliest travelers, leaving them marooned here—and they in turn had to join the Bureau and use the same methods to continue their journeys through the Galaxy.

It was an endless belt of stranded travelers robbing and stranding other travelers, who then had to rob and strand still others, and so on and on . . .

Cassal didn't have a chance of catching up with Murra Foray. She had used the time—and Dimanche—to create her own identification tab and escape. She was going back to Kettikat, home of the Huntners, must already be light-years away.

Or was she? The signs on the Bureau had just been changed. Perhaps the ship was still in the spaceport, or cruising along below the speed of light. He shrugged defeatedly. It would do him no good; he could never get on board.

He got up suddenly on one elbow. He couldn't, but Manche could! Unlike his old instrument, it could operate at tremendous distances, its power no longer dependent only on his limited nervous energy.

With calculated fury, he let Manche strike out into space.

"There you are!" exclaimed Murra Foray. "I thought you could do it."

"Did you?" he asked coldly. "Where are you now?"

"Leaving the atmosphere, if you can call the stuff around this planet an atmosphere."

"It's not the atmosphere that's bad," he said as nastily as he could. "It's the philanthropy."

"Please don't feel that way," she appealed. "Huntners are rather unusual people, I admit, but sometimes even we need help. I had to have Dimanche and I took it."

"At the risk of killing me."

Her amusement was strange; it held a sort of sadness. "I

didn't hurt you. I couldn't. You were too cute, like a—well, the animal native to Kettikat that would be called a Teddy bear on Earth. A cute, lovable Teddy bear."

"Teddy bear," he repeated, really stung now. "Careful. This one may have claws."

"Long claws? Long enough to reach from here to Kettikat?" She was laughing, but it sounded thin and wistful.

Manche struck out at Cassal's unspoken command. The laughter was canceled.

"Now you've done it," said Dimanche. "She's out cold."

There was no reason for remorse; it was strange that he felt it. His throat was dry.

"So you, too, can communicate with me. Through Manche, of course. I built a wonderful instrument, didn't I?"

"A fearful one," said Dimanche sternly. "She's unconscious."

"I heard you the first time." Cassal hesitated. "Is she dead?"

Dimanche investigated. "Of course not. A little thing like that wouldn't hurt her. Her nerve system is marvelous. I think it could carry current for a city. Beautiful!"

"I'm aware of the beauty," said Cassal.

An awkward silence followed. Dimanche broke it. "Now that I know the facts, I'm proud to be her chosen instrument. Her need was greater than yours."

Cassal growled, "As first counselor, she had access to every—"

"Don't interrupt with your half truths," said Dimanche. "Huntners *are* special; their brain structure, too. Not necessarily better, just different. Only the auditory and visual centers of their brains resemble that of man. You can guess the results of even superficial tampering with those parts of her mind. And stolen identification would involve lobotomy."

He could imagine? Cassal shook his head. No, he couldn't. A blinded and deaf Murra Foray would not go back to the home of the Huntners. According to her racial conditioning, a sightless young tiger should creep away and die.

Again there was silence. "No, she's not pretending unconsciousness," announced Dimanche. "For a moment I thought —but never mind."

The conversation was lasting longer than he expected. The ship must be obsolete and slow. There were still a few things he wanted to find out, if there was time.

"When are you going on Drive?" he asked.

"We've been on it for some time," answered Dimanche.

"Repeat that!" said Cassal, stunned.

"I said that we've been on faster-than-light drive for some time. Is there anything wrong with that?"

Nothing wrong with that at all. Theoretically, there was only one means of communicating with a ship hurtling along faster than light, and that way hadn't been invented.

Hadn't been until he had put together the instrument he called Manche.

Unwittingly, he had created far more than he intended. He ought to have felt elated.

Dimanche interrupted his thoughts. "I suppose you know what she thinks of you."

"She made it plain enough," said Cassal wearily. "A Teddy bear. A brainless, childish toy."

"Among the Huntners, women are vigorous and aggressive," said Dimanche. The voice grew weaker as the ship, already light-years away, slid into unfathomable distances. "Where words are concerned, morals are very strict. For instance, 'dear' is never used unless the person means it. Huntner men are weak and not overburdened with intelligence."

The voice was barely audible, but it continued: "The principal romantic figure in the dreams of women . . ." Dimanche failed altogether.

"Manche!" cried Cassal.

Manche responded with everything it had. ". . . is the Teddy bear."

The elation that had been missing, and the triumph, came now. It was no time for hesitation, and Cassal didn't hesitate. Their actions had been directed against each other, but their emotions, which each had tried to ignore, were real and strong.

The gravitor dropped him to the ground floor. In a few minutes, Cassal was at the Travelers Aid Bureau.

Correction. Now it was Star Travelers Aid Bureau.

And, though no one but himself knew it, even that was wrong. Quickly he found the old technician.

"There's been a reorganization," said Cassal bluntly. "I want the signs changed."

The old man drew himself up. "Who are you?"

"I've just elected myself," said Cassal. "I'm the new first counselor."

He hoped no one would be foolish enough to challenge him. He wanted an organization that could function immediately, not a hospital full of cripples.

The old man thought about it. He was merely a menial, but he had been with the bureau for a long time. He was nobody, nothing, but he could recognize power when it was near him. He wiped his eyes and shambled out into the fine cold rain. Swiftly the new signs went up.

STAR TRAVELERS AID BUREAU
S. T. A. *with us*
Denton Cassal, first counselor

Cassal sat at the control center. Every question cubicle was visible at a glance. In addition there was a special panel, direct from the spaceport, which recorded essential data about every newly arrived traveler. He could think of a few minor improvements, but he wouldn't have time to put them into effect. He'd mention them to his assistant, a man with a fine, logical mind. Not really first-rate, of course, but well suited to his secondary position. Every member quickly rose or sank to his proper level in this organization, and this one had, without a struggle.

Business was dull. The last few ships had brought travelers who were bound for unimaginably dreary destinations, nothing he need be concerned with.

He thought about the instrument. It was the addition of power that made the difference. Dimanche plus power equaled

Manche, and Manche raised the user far above the level of other men. There was little to fear.

But essentially the real value of Manche lay in this—it was a beginning. Through it, he had communicated with a ship traveling far faster than light. The only one instrument capable of that was instantaneous radio. Actually it wasn't radio, but the old name had stuck to it.

Manche was really a very primitive model of instantaneous radio. It was crude; all first steps were. Limited in range, it was practically valueless for the purpose now. Eventually the range would be extended. Hitch a neuronic manufactured brain to a human one, add the power of a tiny atomic battery, and Manche was created.

The last step was his share of the invention. Or maybe the credit belonged to Murra Foray. If she hadn't stolen Dimanche, it never would have been necessary to put together the new instrument.

The stern lines on his face relaxed. Murra Foray. He wondered about the marriage customs of the Huntners. He hoped marriage *was* a custom on Kettikat.

Cassal leaned back; officially, his mission was complete. There was no longer any need to go to Tunney 21. The scientist he was sent to bring back might as well remain there in obscure arrogance. Cassal knew he should return to Earth immediately. But the Galaxy was wide and there were lots of places to go.

Only one he was interested in, though—Kettikat, as far from the center of the Galaxy as Earth, but in the opposite direction, incredibly far away in terms of trouble and transportation. It would be difficult even for a man who had the services of Manche.

Cassal glanced at the board. Someone wanted to go to Zombo.

"Delly," he called to his assistant. "Try 13. This may be what you want to get back to your own planet."

Delly Mortinbras nodded gratefully and cut in.

Cassal continued scanning. There was more to it than he imagined, though he was learning fast. It wasn't enough to

have identification, money, and a destination. The right ship might come in with standing room only. Someone had to be "persuaded" that Godolph was a cozy little place, as good as any for an unscheduled stopover.

It wouldn't change appreciably during his lifetime. There were too many billions of stars. First he had to perfect it, isolate from dependence on the human element, and then there would come the installation. A slow process, even with Murra to help him.

Someday he would go back to Earth. He should be welcome. The information he was sending back to his former employers, Neuronics, Inc., would more than compensate them for the loss of Dimanche.

Suddenly he was alert. A report had just come in.

Once upon a time, he thought tenderly, scanning the report, there was a Teddy bear that could reach to Kettikat. With claws—but he didn't think they would be needed.

THE CITY OF FORCE

by Daniel F. Galouye

One

THE CITY OF FORCE WAS A HUGE EXPANSE OF RADIANT BEAUTY that dominated the plain like a thousand curtains of vivid flame. Staring at it, Bruno pulled his robe more tightly about him and clutched his staff. The bold suggestion of dawn reflected lividly against his thin face. But it was the glare of the City's great sheets of energy—its ribbons and spires of force, its magnificent auras and beams and sparkling discharges—that cast his shadow back into the forest from which he had come.

Resolutely, he shifted his pack to a more comfortable position and continued toward the holocaust of light.

"Where do you think you're going, son?"

The voice, magnified by its unexpectedness, had come like a clap of thunder from the trees behind him.

"Nothing to be afraid of, boy." There was a dry laugh. "I'm just a harmless old codger."

Bruno turned and watched the man approach. He had a

small, wry face and a fringe of hair that encircled his almost bald head like a wreath. The full folds of his robe only gave emphasis to his pot-belly and failed to hide a pair of dusty, sandaled feet.

"What are you doing here?" Bruno demanded.

"Getting away from the bright lights."

"You *live* in the City?"

"Always did. It's a pretty easy life, but kind of tiring once in a while. Name's Everard." The old man drew up before him and stood staring into his face. "New around here, eh?"

"I'm Bruno, from one of the forest clans."

Everard laughed, his hands outstretched over his paunch as though to hold it steady. "Come for some lush City life?"

"I've come to contact the Spheres," Bruno said stiffly.

The aged face displayed a sequence of expressions that ended in a broad, almost toothless grin and another burst of laughter. "Contact the Spheres? Boy, you got a lot to learn!"

"I know nobody's ever been able to get through to them. But it's got to be done someday."

"So you're taking it upon yourself to learn their lingo, eh?" There was a kindly cynicism in the old man's voice now. "Us fellows who live in the Cities with 'em—*almost under their feet*—can't even do it. And you're going to step in, fresh from the haystack, and show us how!"

Bruno turned indignantly and strode off toward the shimmering masses of pure force.

Everard shuffled to keep up with him. "Determined, eh? That's the spirit, son," he taunted.

"Beat it, Pops." Bruno put a hand against the other's chest and shoved him off. "I know what I'm doing."

The old man stood scratching he head. "You *are* serious. Ever been in one of the Cities?"

Bruno shook his head.

"They got all kinds of force fields and energy areas. Some of 'em are deadly. If you just touch the wrong glob of light or the wrong wall of ray stuff, you're a goner."

"You live there, don't you?" Bruno asked challengingly.

"Yup. But—don't you see?—I had a ma and pa to show me the ropes right from infancy."

Bruno propped his hands on his hips and stared once more at the City of Force. His eyes swept over to another corner of the plain and, in the rising sun, sought out the once-great city of men. Overgrown with trees and smothering in its own dust, it was hardly more than a centuries-old rubbish heap now.

The words the old man had spoken in derisive jest were wise ones, Bruno conceded. He *was* a fool to think *he* could contact the Spheres. Even the great intellects who ran the world of men hundreds of years ago had failed to communicate with the aliens. Otherwise they might have saved their own cities.

"I'm going ahead anyway," he said.

"I can't stop you?"

"Try it."

"Then I'll go along. Least I can do is see you don't get yourself killed right off."

They headed for the City.

"Know anybody by the name of Hulen?" Bruno asked.

"Used to belong to the Spruce clan? Tall, dark fellow who came here about five years ago?"

"That's him. He's my cousin."

"I know him."

"Can you take me to him?"

"Glad to. Leastwise, he's someone I can turn you over to so's I won't have the responsibility."

An hour later, with the sun beating down against their faces, Everard drew up and tossed his staff indifferently on the ground. "We wait here," he announced.

Bruno glanced at the coruscating curtains and auras and shields of the immaterial City, still miles away.

"What for?"

"There's an easier way than walking there."

"I suppose one of the Spheres is going to come out and carry us piggyback," Bruno said facetiously.

His eyes, however, remained on the City as he tried to pick out at least one material object in the concentration of visible forces—the fountains and hills of radiant energy, the sparkling geometrical nimbuses, the sheets of lazy light that floated from tenuous spire to tenuous spire. But there was none. And yet it didn't seem odd that there should be nothing solid in the City. For the inhabitants, the shining Spheres, were said to be but creatures of pure force themselves.

And even as he stared at the wondrous edifice the aliens had built, a filament of pale green energy arched swiftly outward from one of the lesser structures. Losing its perspective smallness as it approached, the end of the huge tubular projection speared back down to the ground only yards from where Bruno stood.

He turned to flee. But the old man seemed unconcerned as he surveyed the transparent chute of restless, raw energy.

Finally Everard backed off. "Get ready, son. We're going to have to keep on our toes in a minute."

"Why?" Bruno demanded apprehensively. "What is it?"

There was an almost inaudible whine as a swiftly moving form came streaking down the length of the force tube, drew to a halt and drifted out the end of the shaft.

The enormous Sphere, towering higher than four men, hovered a few inches off the ground, its featureless yellow surface seething like the disc of the setting sun. Bruno had the sickening feeling that, even though the alien possessed no eyes, it was somehow looking at him.

"Hop!" Everard shouted, seizing his arm.

And even as Bruno was jerked to one side, the play of force over the surface of the Sphere coalesced into a fierce shaft of jagged light that streaked out to sear the ground where the two men had stood.

"Keep on the go!" the old man instructed. "The stuff he throws is fast as hell. But his reactions ain't. If you move quick enough, he'll always hit where you just been."

Bruno took three steps forward and five to the left. And another bolt slammed down against the ground behind him.

"But—I thought they couldn't even notice us!" he stammered.

Everard, a few feet away now, shuffled to his left, spun around and trotted off agilely in a new direction. He easily escaped the third blast.

"Not notice us! Ha! That's ridiculous. How do you suppose they destroyed all the cities? They see us, all right. But they think we're just dumb life-forms—pests."

Bruno slowed his evasive tactics and almost took a searing bolt broadside.

"Random movement!" Everard urged, panting. "And don't repeat any moves or you'll get it for sure. Still want to go on to the City?"

"I'll make out all right," Bruno said doggedly. Then he noticed that the Sphere's surface had lost its veneer of boiling energy.

"Okay, you can relax now," Everard said. "It's lost interest."

The old man darted into the shadow of the Sphere, ran around it once and, for a fraction of a second, stood there with his tongue out, thumbs in his ears and his fingers wiggling at the alien. He managed to coax one final burst of lightning from the creature before it drifted disinterestedly away.

"What next?" Bruno asked, collecting his pack and staff.

"It's happening now." Everard indicated a brilliant speck of green light that was shimmering in mid-air about a hundred yards to the south.

The point began expanding and Bruno watched it grow into a many-faceted geometrical figure. Through the transparent planes of its surface were visible ten or twelve bright yellow Spheres. The gemlike force structure expanded until its top towered scores of feet above the ground. The lone alien drifted over and joined the other Spheres as they floated out through the side.

Bruno backed away misgivingly.

"Nothing to be afraid of now, boy," Everard assured him. "They'll be too busy to notice us."

"Where did they come from?"

"Another world, most likely. One that's maybe not even in this universe."

"But how did they get here?"

"You just saw it for yourself—from some kind of new direction. My grandpa said they're probably coming from another world in this new direction and using Earth as a sort of way station."

"How did he know?"

"Either figured it out himself or passed it down from somebody else up the line." Everard took his wrist and began leading him toward the tunnel of green light that extended like a bridge into the City. "Come on. This is how we're going the rest of the way."

"In *there?*" Bruno shied away from the seemingly solid shaft of radiant energy while he tried to keep the yellow Spheres in the periphery of his vision.

"Beats walking," the old man said. "You want me to take you to Hulen, don't you?"

Bruno gestured nervously at the aliens. "But they're going in the tube too!"

"Won't notice us if we keep down at the bottom. Anyway, we'll be ahead of 'em. Use the green chutes all the time myself—whenever I can find one." Everard stepped in through the glowing end of the tube and pulled Bruno along. "Just relax now, son, and think of wanting to go on into the City and see your cousin."

The tenuous shaft of force closed in pleasantly around Bruno like a blanket of warm, green sunshine. Then suddenly the entire beam of energy seemed vibrantly alive, as though a thousand hands were materializing out of the mist-like substance to push him in the direction of the City. It was like sliding down an endless tunnel and eventually he relaxed and let the forces move him along. The plain below slipped by at an unbelievable speed.

Somewhere along the way, he started tumbling buoyantly in his passage through the green nimbus. During his less forceful gyrations, he glanced over at Everard. The other seemed

to be thoroughly enjoying the jostling he was receiving from the docile power.

They swept past the outer force structures of the City—past dense walls of lambent light and fiercely glowing pseudo-architectural forms that Bruno imagined might have vaguely resembled some of the buildings of the long-dead human cities.

The chute curved past a great cataract of pure red energy that seemed to be spilling out of nowhere and then it arched down to what appeared to be the ground level—a gently glowing carpet of pale pink stardust. An occasional Sphere drifted along below, either emerging from or disappearing into a wall of shimmering azure nothingness.

Two

THE RAMBLING SHAFT OF MOTILE ENERGY CURVED RIGHT BE-tween two massive monoliths of pure white effulgence and weaved above a progression of huge, dazzling blue mounds of force stuff.

"We get off up ahead." Everard spread both arms to arrest his tumbling motion. "Start thinking about slowing down."

Like pellets in a blowgun, the Spheres from the plain were rapidly overtaking them. The foremost discharged a lance of crackling light that set up a quivering vibration all along the chute but fell short of its mark.

"They've seen us!" Bruno warned, pulling to a halt beside the old man.

"That's all right."

"But they'll have the whole City out looking for us!"

Everard laughed scornfully. "You must think we're somebody. Back in your village, would you call out the whole clan to help you look for a couple of cockroaches you saw scurrying down the street?"

"You mean we don't even matter?"

"Oh, we're a nuisance, all right," the old man said almost boastfully. "They set traps now and then. And every once in

a while they have an extermination. But we ain't so dumb. We know what to do. They end up wiping out only a few of us at most."

Another bolt discharged along the chute, reaching closer to the pair before it played itself out in a splattering of weak sparks that were quickly swallowed up in the green nimbus of the tube.

"This way," Everard said, diving out through the side of the shaft.

His easily relaxed body fell perhaps a hundred feet before crashing into the sloping wall of one of the dazzling blue mounds. He bounced twice, almost disappearing into the feathery energy formation each time, before sliding fifty feet down to the surface.

Gingerly, Bruno extended an arm through the side of the chute. Another bolt from the advancing Spheres, however, ended his hesitancy and he dived out, plunging toward the same huge mound on which Everard had dropped.

He was aware of his own voice shouting hoarsely throughout the vertiginous fall. Then there was the soft impact of his body against the force structure's cushioning wall of radiance and he slid down the slope. It was as though a thousand solicitous hands materialized to clutch him by his arms and legs and pass him down, one to the other, until he reached the ground level.

Everard helped him to his feet. He stood staring uncertainly at the undulant pink force stuff of the surface that seemed to be rippling around his ankles. Glancing about, he surveyed the somehow not-quite-orderly arrangement of huge but squat mounds of energy that stretched away in all directions, like muskrat hills in a swamp.

"Morning, Everard," a muffled voice called out. "Back already?"

Bruno's self-appointed guardian turned and addressed the tenuous blue wall behind them. "Morning, Matt. How's the missus? Hope we didn't jar you when we dropped down."

Bruno could make out the shape of the man who smiled

out at them. It was as though he were encased in the semi-transparent substance of the wall. But he didn't seem to mind his imprisonment.

"Didn't touch us," laughed the man called Matt. "But you probably shook hell out of old Blubber Ball's nerves, if he has any."

More faintly, Bruno could see the huge Sphere moving around beyond the man in what appeared to be one of several energy-free spaces within the immaterial mound. The compartment seemed to be furnished with a fantastic assortment of odd-shaped and odd-sized force objects.

Everard chuckled. "Wouldn't be surprised to see old Blubber Ball setting more traps from now on. This here's Bruno of the Spruce clan. Brought him in from the forest."

"Spruce? Spruce?" Matt mulled over the name.

"Sure. Hulen's cousin. You know Hulen."

Grinning, the other poked his head out through the glimmering blue material of the wall. "Know him well enough to say you should have brought him a wife instead of a cousin. Needs one to tame him down. Hi, Bruno."

"Hi, Matt," Bruno returned weakly. "You—you *live* in in there with that Sphere?"

"Where else?"

"Bruno still has to learn the ropes." Everard effected a theatrical sneer. "Then he's going to show us how to communicate with the Spheres."

Matt snickered. "Aren't they all? Give my regards to Hulen."

Taking Bruno by the arm, Everard said, "Let's go. It ain't far from here."

Bruno tried to stride off, but fell on his face when he couldn't lift his feet out of the radiant pink carpet of rubbery force.

"Don't walk—just *think*," Everard explained patiently. "The force stuff'll take care of the rest."

Dismayed, Bruno watched the old man glide forward without moving his feet as the carpet piled up at his heels and

smoothed out in a steady incline before the toes of his sandals. Then, even before he realized it, he also was gliding along.

"A couple or three more houses down is all we have to go," Everard offered encouragingly.

"These are—*houses?*"

"You see the Blubber Balls in 'em, don't you?"

Bruno was aware now that he could make out several of the spherical forms through the transparent walls of the mounds. "And *people* live right there too?"

Everard grimaced disdainfully at his bumpkinlike ignorance. "You sure got a lot to learn, boy."

"How many people live in the City?"

"Thousands. Place is crawling with 'em. I expect they'll have some kind of general extermination pretty soon now and—*watch out, boy!*"

Everard planted his hands against Bruno's back and gave him a shove. Bruno fell forward, skidding across the surface and gaining impetus from the accommodating wave of the carpet.

It wasn't until after the bolt of fierce energy had discharged that he realized the purpose behind the old man's rude action. As he coasted around behind the closest mound, with Everard skimming along beside him, he looked back and saw the Sphere that had come drifting out of one of the structures. The bolt had melted the energy where it struck, laying bare the coarse ground of the plain.

Safe behind the mound, Everard again helped him up. "You got to keep your eyes peeled, son, if you aim to stay alive around here."

Trembling, Bruno started to lean back against the wall.

"No! No!" the old man shouted, jerking him away by the arm. "Look!"

With the end of his staff, he prodded the section of force material against which Bruno had almost propped his shoulder. Contrasting the even blue radiance of the rest of the mound, the small, roughly circular section was a sparkling red. On touching it, the final six inches of the staff's length disintegrated in a shower of hissing sparks.

"Lesson Number One for survival." Everard said grimly. "Don't mess around with no red force stuff."

The old man moved ten feet farther along the wall and stepped through, disappearing into the soft blue radiance like a figure being swallowed by a dense fog. Bruno followed.

Inside, the pleasant warmth of the force stuff passed tenderly against his face and arms and set up a myriad tingling, soothing sensations all along his skin. As though expecting that the coalesced energy might impede his movements, he went forward, perhaps ten feet, with arms outstretched and groping.

Suddenly he was out of the wall again and in one of the inner compartments, standing practically face-to-face with a Blubber Ball. The Sphere's surface promptly assumed the angry appearance of a boiling yellow sun.

Before the discharge came, though, Everard's arm reached out and jerked Bruno back into the force structure of the wall.

"Damned if you ain't a problem, son!" The old man shook his head worriedly. "Now, dammit, stick close to my heels!"

As they continued along inside the wall, Bruno watched the play of ominous light along the Sphere's surface subside. Apparently the force material of the building was solid to the Blubber Balls, but completely immaterial to the humans who resided in the mounds with them.

But even that observation, he decided, was not altogether correct. "Why is it," he asked, "that we can move around in this blue stuff as though it wasn't here, yet it was solid enough to break our fall from the tube?"

"This force matter does what you want it to—within certain limits, anyhow."

Bruno nodded pensively. "We think about it being hard enough to stop our fall and it is? We decide we want to walk around in it and, to us, it becomes as thin as air? Is that it?"

"Right."

"Does it do what the Spheres want it to, too?"

Everard continued on around inside the curving wall. "Yup.

Some of it, at least. Never seen 'em do nothing with the blue stuff. But they can make the pink and green stuff move 'em around too, just like we can."

"Don't you see what that means?" Bruno reached forward, caught the old man's arm and turned him around.

"Nope."

"The way *we* think can't be too different from the way *they* think! We think of different things, of course, but—"

"Look, son," Everard said irritably. "For hundreds of years we been trying to figure out how they think so's we can get in contact. I guess everybody except you knows it can't be done."

"All this force stuff—what keeps it up? Where does it come from?"

The old man made dismayed gestures with his hands. "How should I know? Ever hear of an airyplane?"

Bruno was acquainted with the legend. "Machines that were supposed to fly."

"Right. Now you figure those cockroaches in your village could understand what made them machines stay up? For that matter, think *you* could understand it?"

They found Hulen in what Bruno assumed was the rear outer wall of the mound. They had come upon an area of impenetrable blackness in the force stuff, but Everard had waved his hand in annoyance and the blue glow had extended instantly into the murky region.

Directly ahead was a hill of force substance that seemed to be a projection of the pink surface. There was a cradlelike depression in the crest of the elevation and in it lay a sleeping form.

Bruno recognized his cousin and went gliding forward eagerly on the undulant carpet. "Hulen!"

The slumbering man, stout and with a thick cast of contentment on his florid face, stirred lightly and mumbled, "Go 'way."

Blackness swallowed them.

But the light returned as Everard coasted up to the base of the delicately soft elevation. "Wake up, Hulen!"

The man turned over, opened his eyes without seeing anything and was instantly blotted out by returning darkness.

This time it was Bruno who *thought* Hulen's artificial night away.

"I'll fix him," vowed Everard, staring at the comfortable hill on which the man slept. Then the elevation began melting down, flowing back into the pink carpet. Bruno's cousin was deposited on his ear.

Hulen awakened finally, yawned, saw Everard and asked, "You got my new robe?"

"Wasn't ready yet. I'll pick it up next time I go out."

Hulen sat up scratching his head. "What're you trying to pull off, old man? I give you two force-food balls to trade off with the forest folks for a new robe and you come back—"

"Brought you a visitor," Everard cut him short, gesturing toward Bruno, who had been standing out of his cousin's field of vision.

Hulen looked around, frowning momentarily. Then his face broke out in a grin of recognition as he leaped up and seized Bruno's shoulders.

"I didn't figure you'd ever make it here, fellow! Welcome to the easy life!"

Bruno returned the special embrace of the Spruce clan. "Didn't come here for the easy life," he said soberly.

"Oh, no! Not another one!" Hulen glanced in distress at Everard.

"Yup. Wants to get chummy with the Blubber Balls. Tried to talk him out of it, but . . ." Everard completed the sentence with a futile gesture.

Hulen cuffed Bruno on the arm. "We'll soon get you off it. Just wait till you see how swell life can be. I know a couple of classy babes—*Elm clan*. You've run across that brand before, haven't you?"

Bruno smiled noncommittally as Hulen's elbow dug into his ribs.

"Gotta be going," Everard said. "Keep a close eye on him,

Hulen. He's a natural-born stumbler. He almost got it half a dozen times since I picked him up this morning."

The old man glided off through the wall and headed for another force structure across the way. And Bruno realized, watching the robed figure depart, that he was seeing *outside* the mound for the first time since he had entered it. The wall's outer surface, like its inner one, evidently was opaque as long as he felt no desire to look beyond it.

Three

BRUNO AND HULEN STOOD UNCOMFORTABLY FOR A WHILE, TRYing to find something in common to talk about.

"How're all the folks?" Hulen asked at last.

"Fine," said Bruno, and thought what else he might add. "Just fine."

"Old Chief Cedric still in charge?"

"Well—more or less, I guess you'd say. He's been quiet since a Sphere came along a couple of years ago and tamed him down."

"What happened?"

"Found an old—I believe he called it a generator, with instructions on how to get it to work. There were these two glass things that were supposed to light up."

"Yes?" Hulen coaxed, laughter waiting in his eyes.

"Well, he got the thing going with a hand crank and for a whole night it was just like day in his hut."

"And then?"

"This Sphere came along in one of those green air tunnels and *boom!* up went the whole hut! Cedric was outside at the time, but close enough to get his hair singed!"

Hulen laughed until his eyes ran. "They'll do it, all right! They just can't stand anything that makes that electricity stuff. That's why they blew hell out of all the old cities. The human cities were full of electrical things."

"Now Cedric has fits whenever anybody tries to dig something out of one of the ruins."

"I can't say I blame him."

Hulen glanced tentatively behind him and a section of the pink carpet flowed upward like a growing toadstool. When it attained a convenient height and sufficient rigidity, he seated himself comfortably upon it. Then he indicated a spot behind Bruno where a second mound of force stuff was rising. The improvised seat, Bruno found, was even softer than it appeared.

"You have to learn to do these things for yourself," Hulen said. Then, "Seriously, about contacting the Blubber Balls—I had the same idea at first. That's why I left the clan and came here. I was going to say, 'Look here, Spheres, we're dignified, intelligent people. You can't simply step in and take over as though there wasn't an ounce of brains anywhere on Earth.' "

"And you gave up when you found out you couldn't get through to them?"

Hulen smiled. "I got wise, Cousin. What could be better than this?" He spread a hand to include all the wonderful effects of the City of Force. And everywhere the hand swept, the outer surface of the wall beyond it became transparent, laying bare the splendid panorama of the City's magnificent edifices.

Bruno sprang up. "What's that?" he asked anxiously, pointing outside.

Thousands of fluttering ribbons of silver were extending upward from each immaterial structure, reaching eagerly toward the noonday sun.

Hulen laughed at his country cousin's alarm. "Nothing to be afraid of. Watch."

The ribbons seemed to be drawing something out of the sunlight—tiny beads of pure yellow energy that formed along the length of the streamers and rolled slowly down until they embedded themselves in the force substance of the buildings. Gradually the beads rolled together, forming balls of increasing size as they sank farther into the walls.

Bruno constricted his vision and cut out the exterior scene. Now he was watching the orbs course through the material of

their own mound. Still collecting into bigger balls, they continued moving inward until they came to rest embedded in the inner surface of the walls, protruding into the alien's compartments.

One floated close by Bruno's head and he ducked. But Hulen only laughed and snatched it out of the air. He handed it to his cousin and trapped another for himself.

Bruno cautiously handled the glowing yellow orb, acutely aware of intense sensation in the palms of his hands, in his fingers. It was a soothing, comfortable feeling of fullness and satisfaction that spread up his arms and into his shoulders as the grapefruit-sized ball began shrinking.

Dumfounded, he held the thing in one hand and raised the other incredulously to his face. And where his fingers brushed against his lips, there was the composite taste of all the good food he had ever eaten, of the best of the Grape clan's wine he had ever drunk.

"What are they?" he asked.

"Force-food balls," Hulen explained, vigorously rolling the rapidly dwindling orb between his hands and plopping what was left of it into his mouth. "You don't have to eat them, but they taste even better this way."

Bruno realized that until then he had been both thirsty and hungry, and now there was only a feeling of very comfortably satisfied well-being.

"Blubber Ball really goes for them too." Hulen gestured with a casual thumb.

When Bruno looked, the inner surface of the wall was transparent and, in the compartment beyond, the twenty-foot Sphere was drifting along, absorbing each force-food ball with which it came into contact.

The sight of the alien reminded him of his resolve and he rode the wavering pink carpet toward the compartment.

But his cousin Hulen darted around in front of him. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I came here to communicate with them. This one's as good as any for a start."

Hulen put an arm around his shoulder. "You've come a long way and had a lot of new experiences. Why don't you get a little rest first?"

A hill of pink fluffiness reared up from the floor and formed an inviting depression in its crest. It was, Bruno admitted, a good suggestion. He did feel tired. Even before he fully decided, however, a wave of radiant force billowed behind him, rolled him up the soft ramp and deposited him on the cloudlike bed.

Roused finally by the sound of amused voices, Bruno elevated himself on an elbow. Glancing downhill, he saw Hulen sitting at a mushroom-shaped table which had sprouted from the glistening floor. Across from him were two girls whose uninhibited laughter filled the inner-wall cavity.

Hulen stared down and a section of the lambent carpet rolled back, baring a small subsurface compartment in which were stored several force-food balls. He handed one to each of the girls. Then he raised a third above his upturned face and squeezed it like a grapefruit. A maroon liquid flowed into his waiting mouth.

He saw his cousin and rose. "Come on down," he invited. "We got company."

When Bruno hesitated, the mound deflated under him and he pawed the air frenziedly on his way down to the floor. The girls' high-pitched laughter italicized Hulen's guffaws.

He tossed one of the force-food balls into Bruno's lap. "Some of the best stuff you ever drank. I spent all afternoon thinking up a storm—impressing the taste of claret on it."

Bruno raised the ball, squeezed it and drank. It was delicious.

Hulen came over and slapped him on the back. "See what I mean about the lush life?" He winked at the girls.

They were blondes—a general trait of the Elm clan, Bruno remembered. Both were attractive and rather well put together, their figures being allowed some freedom of expression by virtue of sleeveless, low-cut robes and broad, constricting belts. A little plump, perhaps, but not so much so that a

couple of months in a forest village wouldn't harden them up and slim them down.

"Bruno, meet Lea and Sal. Girls, my cousin Bruno. He'll be a regular cosmopolitan as soon as he shakes the hayseed out of his hair."

Both girls gave out with delightful laughter. Sal's, however, was more restrained, somewhat less derisive and a bit more sympathetic than Lea's. Moreover, Sal regarded him with interested concern rather than pure amusement. He decided he liked her better and went and sat beside her. Hulen, too, seemed satisfied with the arrangement. It was clear that he preferred someone high-spirited, as Lea seemed to be.

"Hulen says you're going to contact the Blubbers," said Lea, a tinge of mockery in her voice.

But Bruno only nodded.

"It won't be easy," Sal said quite seriously.

Hulen smote him again on the shoulder. "We'll get it out of his system, won't we, girls? A few days of the easy life is all it'll take."

Lea leaned forward on the table. "You never had it so good, Bus——" Obviously she had started to call him Buster, but had stopped to grope for a more practical word as she regarded his lean, sinewy arms. "You never had it so good, kid."

Bruno realized that Buster would probably be an appropriate name for anyone living in the City of Force. The easy life, with its complete absence of effort, must indeed be conducive to chubbiness.

"Just take it easy, Bruno." Sal laid a hand on his forearm. "Keep your eyes open and watch. Learn all you can before you try to glide off on your own. After a few weeks, you'll know what you want to do."

She was quite young, too, he decided—a good deal younger than the other Elmite. Somehow he had the notion she hadn't been in the City too long. There wasn't the same casualness that he'd found in the others he'd encountered.

"We'll change your mind, Cuz," Hulen promised jovially. "After we get through showing you how rich life can be, you'll

start praying that nobody ever succeeds in contacting the Spheres and getting them to go back where they came from."

Sal fastened her eyes on the surface of the pink table and a projection of force stuff shot upward, shaping itself into a goblet. She squeezed the food ball over the container and filled it to the brim.

Hulen tilted his head back again and compressed what was left of his globe into a final trickle of wine. He rolled back the carpet with a brief glance and grimaced when he saw that the cache was already empty, the last of the balls having gone to his cousin.

"Have to round up some more," he said disappointedly.

Bruno, however, was just then looking at several of the bright golden orbs. He had extended his vision curiously into the Blubber thing's inner compartment and had spotted the cluster embedded in the wall.

"I'll take care of it," he said confidently, letting the wavering floor carry him through the inner surface of the wall and into the huge room. He stood on his toes and reached for the food balls.

But a hurtling form came diving through the wall and he looked down in time to see Sal's shoulder ramming into his stomach. The breath knocked out of him, he flailed backward across the compartment and collapsed, a billow of the carpet surging up to break his fall.

Sal, off balance, plunged down on top of him.

"It's a trap, Bruno!" she shouted. "Don't touch it!"

Hulen and Lea were in the compartment by now. "Boy, is he ever a rube," she said disparagingly.

"Watch, Cousin," Hulen instructed, "and you'll learn Lesson Number Two for survival."

He fashioned a pellet of pink stuff from the material of the floor and hurled it at the cluster of food balls.

As it sailed toward the target, Bruno noticed the tiny spot of red radiance, almost completely hidden by the orbs. The pellet struck the lowest ball and the concealed crimson globule exploded into a blinding flame that surged through half the room before it extinguished itself.

"Bruno," Sal said patiently, letting a ground swell of the floor form under her back and lift her to her feet, "you've got to be more careful. You can't go bungling around and expect to live very long in the City."

She said it, Bruno imagined, as though she were more than casually interested in his survival. Yet the fact that he had to take criticism from a girl was an embarrassment.

He started to get off the floor and two projections of force stuff reared up, each wedging itself crutchlike under one of his arms and providing assistance as they continued to rise. Angrily, though, he batted the props away and got up under his own power.

Four

THE NEAR DISASTER NOT ONLY BROKE UP THE PARTY, BUT ALSO brought about postponement of a nocturnal tour of the City which, in Sal's words, would have "brought out the wonderful beauty of the force lights."

Although the experience had shaken Bruno's determination and confidence, by the next morning he nevertheless felt somewhat rededicated to his purpose of communicating with the Spheres. He was about to enlist his cousin Hulen's advice on the matter when Everard came gliding in through the outer wall.

"Morning, fellows." The old man straightened the folds of his robe and scowled at Bruno. "Just heard about your close shave. Ain't you learned nothing yet?"

Hulen laughed. "He learned a lot last night, didn't you, Cuz?"

Bruno looked away uncomfortably.

"Don't feel bad," Hulen reassured him. "I had as much trouble myself when I first came here."

"They all do," Everard admitted grudgingly. "But the easy life is well worth it."

Hulen ordered up three stools from the force material of

the floor and sat facing his relative. "Look, here are some thumb rules: The pink and green and blue stuff—they're all okay. Anything bright red is deadly. Purple'll knock hell out of you, but it's usually not fatal."

"Orange is rough too," the old man added, digging with one hand inside his robe. "It'll reach out after you and . . ." He drew a finger demonstrably across his neck.

Continuing the search of his clothes, he produced three food balls from an inner pouch and shared them with the other two men. "Figured you'd be out of provisions, so I brought along some breakfast."

Bruno munched avidly on the glowing yellow orb, determined this time not to have it melt in his hands. The taste was curiously like that of bacon and eggs, hot buttered biscuits and rich milk, all rolled into each mouthful. And he could actually feel the composite flavor spreading through his body.

There was no doubt about it, he uneasily conceded—this was the ideal life in many respects. The temperature was always perfect (he wondered to what extent mental control governed that comfort) and one's clothes seemed never to get soiled. Only a half-hour earlier, Hulen had shown him how proper concentration could make the entire outer surface of the mound ice cold, and how the water that condensed on it could be channeled into a tublike depression in the wall's interior.

Indeed, it was the easy life, requiring no exertion except defensive maneuvers whenever an alien happened along. And he could see that one would rarely be caught in a perilous situation with just a little more caution than he had learned in the forest.

Bruno glanced around, extending his vision beyond the inner surface of the wall. One of the Spheres was in the nearest compartment. He watched it glide over to a cube of orange force. The color of the object seemed to flow into the Sphere. When only a gray form was left, the alien deserted the cube and coasted to the center of the compartment, where it drew

up beside a fountain of splashing white sparks. The orange hue which had once belonged to the cube drained from the surface of the Sphere and became part of the fountain.

The purpose of the function—or ritual?—escaped Bruno completely. He saw there would be no point in even attempting to understand what he had witnessed.

"Eat up," Hulen said, gesturing toward what was left of the food ball in Bruno's hand. "I got a program mapped out. We're going to pick up the girls and show you some of the sights."

Everard sighed. "Let's me out."

"Why?" Bruno wanted to know. He was becoming fond of the little man, despite his cynical criticism.

"We never take the chance of letting 'em find more'n four of us together at one time, else they might get the idea we're running away with the place. That'd mean another extermination."

Bruno glanced back at the Sphere in the adjacent compartment. "You go along with them, Everard. I'm staying."

Hulen and the old man exchanged uncertain looks. "Why?" they both asked.

"I'm going to be busy. I don't feel I'm accomplishing anything."

"You're not *supposed* to accomplish anything!" Hulen pointed out. "This is the *easy* life. There's nothing to do, nothing to worry about—if you watch your step. Just relax and enjoy things."

"Don't have to put out no effort here," Everard said, further defining this strange new philosophy of existence. "Nobody in all history never had a better deal. Talk about the welfare state of the Budding Ages—"

"You fellows go ahead," Bruno insisted. "I have something to do."

"But Sal's expecting you!" Hulen said. "She's the one who planned the tour!"

The setup became even clearer, as far as Bruno was concerned. Apparently it was all a conspiracy to get his mind

off communicating with the Spheres. It was all for his benefit, of course. But he didn't need them to look out for him.

"Tell Sal I'll see her later," he said firmly.

Everard's direct stare was intense with suspicion. "What are you going to do?"

"I came here to reach the Spheres. I may as well get along with the job. And here's as good a place as any to start." Bruno indicated the alien in the nearest compartment.

Everard lifted an eyebrow. "Just what have you got in mind?"

"Finding some way to talk with them—telling them we're intelligent too."

"Don't you suppose that if we were intelligent *by their standards,* they would have found it out by now?"

"Maybe they already know we're intelligent," Hulen suggested.

"They can't," Bruno said, "or they'd have respect for other thinking things."

"How do we know that *they* think?" Everard asked.

It had developed into a rapid-fire question-and-answer session, and Bruno wondered whether it might not be intended solely to confuse him. He ignored the old man's last question and said, "I don't think they'd treat us like pests if they knew we were a civilized race. They'd—"

"Ain't every creature civilized by its own standards?" Everard interrupted.

"They destroyed all our cities," Bruno went on, "because our cities were nests of forces that clashed in some way with their own setup, or with the Spheres themselves. It's just like when we kill mosquitoes because they interfere with us."

Everard frowned. "I don't get it."

"Don't you see that if we ever found intelligent mosquitoes —*talking* mosquitoes—we wouldn't destroy them? Instead, we'd tell them we don't like to be buzzed and bitten. We'd lay down the law—give them a list of terms they'd have to meet if they wanted us to stop swatting them. We might even help them after that."

"But we can't contact the Spheres!" Hulen sputtered. "Would we notice a particular ant on the ground if it tried to communicate with us?"

"Maybe, if it tried hard enough. Since it would be the one trying to establish contact, it would have to discover the symbols that would do the trick."

Everard laughed jeeringly. "And you're going to look for symbols that'll let us talk with the Blubber Balls?"

"I think maybe some of the geometrical forms they're familiar with might work."

"So," Hulen said, with a disdainful grin, "Old Blubber Ball's going to see you making with some geometrical lingo and he's going to sit down respectfully and watch. Let me ask you this: Do you think a parrot's intelligent just because it can imitate human speech?"

Bruno rose impatiently. "Just the same, I'm going to give it a try." He let the now wavering floor push him along swiftly toward the inner wall.

His cousin glided ahead to block his path before he could pass through into the inner compartment.

But Everard shot forward and a projection of force material sprang up to seize Hulen's arm. "Let him go. If he wants to be a dumb hick, let him find out for himself—if he lives that long."

Bruno stood gaping up at the huge alien, but only for a second. When he saw its surface cloud over with a threatening play of sparkling yellow force, he hopped sideways and let the radiant carpet carry him several feet to the rear. The maneuver was executed just in time to escape the Sphere's first searing blast of lancelike force, which curled back the material of the floor where it struck.

Still taking evasive action, both under his own power and with the help of the motile carpet of force, he concentrated on piling up a heap of energy material in the center of the room next to the Sphere. Another bolt barely missed him before he could manage sufficient concentration to mold the force stuff in a four-foot tube.

Stalking him, the alien drifted ominously forward. But Bruno, bobbing and weaving, prevented the Sphere from getting set for an effective shot. And all the while he kept his eyes on the other objects in the room, making certain he wasn't blundering into any of the red, purple or orange force things.

Another streak of jagged energy leaped from the Sphere but missed by a considerable margin. Following the discharge, Bruno realized, it would be at least several seconds before the alien could generate sufficient energy for the next searing blast. So he returned to his task of constructing symbols of communication.

Glancing back toward the cube he had formed, he concentrated on a nearby section of the pink flooring. Like a geyser in slow motion, the pastel carpet flowed upward, assuming the shape of a lumpy ball. He smoothed out its surface and snipped off the thin stem. To his surprise, the weightless mass remained suspended.

As the alien paused before the two objects, Bruno glided around the room, making the undulating surface carry him left, forward, back, right in as random a pattern as he could manage to make it.

The Sphere loosed another ineffectual bolt that tore the top off the fountain of silver sparks and sent the coruscating material spraying against the far wall. It trickled down the blue surface like stars flowing across the velvet of space.

Bruno maneuvered skillfully toward the center of the room, carefully avoiding a miniature waterfall of intense red radiance that gushed forth from nowhere. The cataract changed color as it spilled down upon and became part of the pink carpet, flowing outward in concentric wavelets. At the point where the red force materialized from nothing were a large ring of yellow energy and a smaller halo of glittering green substance.

He returned his attention to the two geometrical forms he had constructed and began molding a third—a pyramid. With this creation, though, he tried another innovation. While he fashioned it, he concentrated on a different color. And as the

pink hue faded from the form, it was replaced by a golden yellow cast.

This object, too, he left suspended while he mentally detached the cube from the floor and elevated it to the height of the first form.

Apparently, he summed up, not only could the force substance be changed from one kind of energy, or one color, to another, but it could also be shaped into any form and moved about in any direction or at any speed.

Bruno glanced back through the wall and saw Hulen shaking his head while Everard watched with a disdaining interest.

The stalking Sphere had, by now, generated almost enough power for another discharge. Its surface was ablaze with restless energy that crackled and threw off a myriad scintillating sparks.

Only this time the alien hurled not one but two bolts of destructive force. Bruno easily managed to escape the first. But the second released its full fury on the three geometrical forms he had constructed. They disintegrated, scattering bits of the yellow pyramid and the pink cube and ball about the room.

Again the Sphere began its stealthy advance and Bruno gave way warily. He didn't see the orange cylinder until he had almost backed into it. By then it was too late, for already it was spewing out a spray of solid light. As the meshlike substance ensnared him, searing pain stabbed deep into his consciousness, bringing down a curtain of blackness.

"Come out of it, Bruno!" Hulen's voice, booming in his ear, jarred him back to wakefulness. He lay on an elevation in his cousin's quarters.

"You okay?" Everard asked.

Bruno groaned and rolled over. He was aware of a slight blistering sensation along his left arm, the one that had been next to the cylinder of orange force. His robe was charred and there was the biting smell of burned hair about his head.

The force substance beneath his back reared up slowly, elevating him to a sitting position. A solicitous hand material-

ized from the pastel matter of the mound and tenderly explored his aching arm. "I—I—Damn! What happened?"

"You stumbled into some of that orange stuff," Everard explained. "Told you to watch out for it."

"Ol' Blubber took another whack at you after you passed out," added Hulen. "But we pulled you out in time."

Bruno looked into the inner compartment. The Sphere having gone, it was now dominated by the red cataract that flowed out of the air between the yellow and green rings. Fragments of his pyramid, cube and ball were still plastered against the wall.

Everard laughed derisively. "Now that you've—ah—*contacted* the Sphere, what did he tell you?"

Hulen roared in raucous amusement.

Bruno managed a weak grin. "Guess it wasn't such a good idea. But did you notice the three forms I used to get his attention?"

"What about them?" Hulen asked.

"I made them float. I even changed the color of the pyramid."

"So?" Everard raised a patiently inquiring eyebrow.

"I haven't seen anybody do anything like that with the force substance."

Hulen shrugged. "So you did something different. So what?"

"Hasn't anybody thought of studying the stuff—seeing just what can be done with it?"

Everard said irritably. "Look, son. We know what we got here. It suits us fine. None of us plan to go around experimenting to get something better. Might mess things up."

Nodding severely, Hulen said, "Everard's right. Keep away from that experimental nonsense. Leave things like they are. We got it perfect here. Understand?"

Bruno's thoughtful silence was apparently interpreted as acquiescence and the other two resumed their chuckling.

Regarding his cousin's singed robe, Hulen peeled back a section of the flooring and dug out another garment. "This'll keep you covered till we make a food-ball trade with the forest folks."

Bruno rose beside the mound on which he had been lying. More pink arms than were needed sprouted out of the elevation to help him change into the new robe.

"Still want to talk with the Spheres?" asked Everard.

"I see where I made my mistake."

"Yeah?" Hulen prompted.

"It was foolish to try to contact just *any* Sphere."

"How do you figure that?" Everard wanted to know. "What makes you think you wouldn't get the same treatment from all of them?"

"Let's go back to the example of the make-believe ant. Its chances would be pretty slim if it tried to communicate with just any human."

"Why?" Hulen leaned forward interestedly.

"Because it might accidentally select, say, a fussy old woman, or a two-year-old kid, maybe even a drunk or a psycho. What chance would it have then? But if it found somebody in authority—"

"Oh, hell!" Everard broke in. "Let's forget about the Spheres."

Five

BRUNO COULD WELL APPRECIATE THE POSSIBILITIES OF FORCE material that reacted to individual thought, becoming opaque or transparent as one wished. Nevertheless, he turned his back on the huge mound and modestly regarded, instead, the clear night sky that shrank before the brilliant display of lambent energy emanating from all immaterial objects of the City.

Hulen, less patient and certainly less inhibited, continued to stare into the mound as he called out boisterously for Lea and Sal to hurry it up for their night out on the City.

An elderly man poked his head through the wall of the adjacent structure. "Knock it off! We're trying to get some sleep!"

Another pair of shoulders and head popped out the side of

a second mound. "Quiet! What's all the commotion out there?"

Hulen lowered his voice and cupped his hands. But before he could call out again, the two girls came gliding through the radiant wall.

"Now," Sal said consolingly, "that didn't take too long, did it?"

Her hair was swept up into a double braid that wound around her head like a garland. It gave a classic appearance to her smooth face and Bruno eagerly extended his arm. He realized now that she had seemed a bit plump only in comparison with the inordinately thin girls of his own clan. And for a moment he wistfully wondered how it would be living *permanently* in the City of Force and enjoying all the luxuries and adventures—sharing them all with Sal.

"What'll it be tonight, boys?" Lea asked, her brassy voice cutting off his line of thought.

Grinning, Hulen faced Bruno. "Ever hear of an automobile?"

Bruno dredged up the information from his school days: "Four-wheeled contraption that went under its own power. Saw the ruins of one once."

"Well, we're going to get around tonight in the next best thing." Hulen rubbed his hands together expectantly. "As a matter of fact, it might even be *better* than an automobile. Who knows?"

"Oh, that'll be fun," said Lea flatly, conveying the impression that this wouldn't be their first experience with such a device.

Hulen waved his arms and a section of the radiant surface began reacting to the matrixlike influence of his thoughts. Two broad benches formed, one in front of the other, and they both developed wide, slanting backs.

Hulen extended a hand invitingly and ushered Bruno and Sal into the rear seat. He and Lea took the one in front. "I'll drive," he said, and gave Bruno a wink.

A parapet, shoulder high, reared up all around them and Sal squealed, "Away we go!"

Curiously, Bruno watched the force stuff ahead of the vehicle flow up into the forward parapet, work its way down onto the floor of the automobile, up and over the front seat, up and over the back seat and out over the rear parapet. And all the while the *shape* of the wheelless vehicle—not the car itself—moved forward, carrying the occupants along with it as it gained speed.

The automobile, Bruno realized, was like a wave spreading across the surface of a pond. The water itself didn't move forward; its configuration did. He and Hulen and the girls were part of the wave and were being swept along with it, wholly undisturbed by the completely frictionless flow of force stuff beneath their bodies.

The car, under Hulen's direction, went streaking past row after row of gigantic force mounds, swerving between pylons and spires and sparkling fountains, darting under tunnels of glimmering green-light stuff, curving around ponderous and magnificent edifices of unfamiliar geometrical design and altogether new concepts of color.

Occasionally, they zipped past a Sphere or a group of them moving along the broad, level ways between the force buildings. Twice Hulen sent the automobile in looping circles around one of the aliens and zipping in between the ranks of several of them. He drew a bolt of destructive energy from a particularly irate Sphere, but it missed by no less that a hundred feet.

"No danger here," he reassured his passengers. "They couldn't begin to keep up with our speed."

Lea, acting frightened and enjoying every minute of it, moved closer to Hulen and clung to his neck while he laughed like a youngster bedeviling grownups.

Sal held a firm grip on Bruno's arm and kept her face close against his shoulder to avoid swaying with the motions of the careening car.

To Bruno, the novel experience was an utter delight as the wind whipped his robe about him and sportively mussed his hair. The speed was incredible—easily two or three times as

fast as he had ever gone before, even on the back of the Spruce clan's swiftest horse.

"How about it, Cuz?" Hulen shouted boastfully above the roar of the wind. "Won't find anything like *this* in the clan areas, eh?"

Bruno tried to answer, but all he could manage in the face of the wind was an expressionless gulp.

"This is only *one* of the things we do for fun," Hulen went on effusively. "Of course it takes a lot of practice to do this stunt, but you'll learn."

He produced a food ball for each and passed them around. "I decided on brandy for tonight. Take a taste and tell me what you think."

As Bruno expected, it was excellent. But he retreated guardedly into his thoughts. It was clear enough that an intensive campaign was under way to win him over to their way of life, and for the moment he couldn't blame them. In many respects, for those lucky enough to be living in Cities of Force, it was Utopia.

Sal set her liquor ball on the seat beside her and retrieved her grip on his arm. "What did you do in the Spruce village, Bruno?"

"Farmed. Had a place on the outskirts, not too far from the market area."

"It's fun doing things with the soil, isn't it?"

"I enjoyed it." He wondered why he had put the verb in the past tense.

"You don't ever see any soil around here, unless you peel back all the pink stuff underfoot. Then you find nothing but rocks."

"Don't you like it here?" He studied her face, brilliantly illuminated by the intense light radiating from the force edifices all around them.

Her eyes, however, were focused on something remote. "Of course I do. It's the soft life, isn't it? What could be better?"

Yet she didn't sound too convinced.

"I've plenty of friends here now," she went on. "It shouldn't

be too long before I decide to set up moundkeeping on my own and get on with my job of raising a family."

"With one of those friends?"

"Not necessarily."

The car tilted backward sharply and Bruno's gangly legs came up from the floor as though defying gravity. He reached forward frantically and seized the front seat to keep from tumbling out the rear. Sal gasped and struggled through a busy few seconds, clinging more frenziedly to him and trying to pull her robe down over her legs at the same time.

Then Bruno noticed that the color of the force stuff flowing up from the surface ahead to take the shape of the speeding car was no longer the pastel pink that it had been. Now it was a light blue.

After he had steadied himself with one hand and secured a protective grip around the girl's shoulder with the other, he glanced around. They were climbing the steep face of a huge pylon that dwarfed all the other force edifices of the City. It reared so high above the other structures that it would have lost itself in the blackness of night, had it not carried its own soft effulgence along with it.

They swept past a towering fountain of inchoate green energy that gushed out the side of the structure and sent its flowing liquid force splattering down the slope, emitting coruscating emerald sparks all the way to the surface.

Hulen turned around, grinning at his cousin's dismay. "Over the top we go," he shouted gleefully. "—And here we are!"

The car leveled off abruptly and jerked to a halt on a small, flat surface that capped the crest of the pylon. Bruno, relaxing his grip too soon, went flying past the front seat and shot through the air, plunging over the brink ahead.

But an alert arm of blue force stuff shot out the side of the structure and wrapped itself around his waist as he started the terrifying slide down the slope. It lifted him gently back to the top and set him down beside Hulen and the girls.

Like rapidly melting lumps of ice, the form of the automobile shrank and lost itself in the level top of the pylon. In its

place, Hulen ordered up a table and chairs and spread several liquor balls out before them. The small orbs glowed like golden apples and their radiance blended elegantly with the pastel-blue luster of their setting.

A cool breeze drifted out of the star-filled sky and spilled over the brink of the pylon, to go cascading down on all the lesser force structures of the iridescent City of light. And Bruno let his eyes rove over the smaller, irregular hills and mounds, the cubes and fountains, the serpentine tunnels, the pyramids and truncated cylinders of coruscating energy. Beyond—beyond the magnificent pattern of metropolitan lights—stretched the dark, dismal plain. Out there it seemed like another world.

"Still think the clan life has anything to offer?" Hulen prodded.

"Nothing like this," Bruno admitted. "I never thought anything could be so—luxurious."

Human cities, too, he understood, had arrogantly presented blazing shields of light to the night sky. But underneath *those* lights had been the solid matter that produced them. Underneath these was only more light—and uncanny force matter that became almost anything you wanted it to be.

"This is just a small town," Lea said casually. "I know someone who went through a green tunnel to one of the other Force Cities. It's ten times bigger than this one."

"Where is it?" Sal asked, interested.

"Know the Mississippi?"

"I studied about it."

"Well, it's not too far from the mouth of the river and it's got . . ."

Bruno, whose eyes were becoming accustomed to the splendid display of illumination, lost interest in the conversation and stared down on the rest of the City. Now he could see some of the humans.

There was another party of four atop a truncated pyramid a short distance to the south. Closer, off to his left, two men and a girl had constructed a table upon a bulky silver cube.

Three parties of four, spaced at intervals of about a block, went shooting down the shaft of an otherwise deserted chute that spiraled around the base of a shining gray obelisk. Below, next to the bottom of their own towering pylon, a huge cloud of pink stuff went drifting by. Comfortably seated on its softness were a man and woman and two children.

There were only a few alien Spheres here and there. For the most part, their movements were confined to the surface below or to the curving chutes of green light. And they seemed never to notice the humans.

"This building we're on," Bruno asked, "what is it?"

Hulen grinned. "Could be their city hall—that's what *you* might call it, I mean."

He looked away, then snapped his eyes suspiciously back on Bruno. "Say, you're not *still* thinking about that damned-fool plan of contacting the chief Sphere, are you?"

As a matter of fact, Bruno wasn't. He had been, until a moment earlier, but now his gaze was fastened on a great waterfall of radiant energy that dominated the City south of the central pylon.

Cascading down from the blackness of night, the crimson cataract seemed to be replenishing the immaterial substance of the force structures, flowing into and assuming the color of the green chutes and the pink surface, the blue mounds, the silver cubes and the orange cylinders.

It was as though the very essence of the alien City were pouring out of nowhere, spilling in from some unguessable source in another world, another universe. And its point of entry was the mouth of a large yellow ring and a smaller green one that hung, one within the other, above the apex of the cataract.

It was the same arrangement he had seen in the mound's inner compartment when he had tried to communicate with the Sphere. And now, as he scanned the City, he noticed the lesser crimson waterfalls, each surmounted by its pair of yellow and green rings that were suspended motionlessly.

"I said," Hulen repeated, "you're not *still* thinking about contacting the Spheres, are you?"

Sal, too, seemed to be awaiting Bruno's answer, her eyes fixed on his lips.

Absently, Bruno said, "That's what I came here for."

But all the while he was staring beyond the table, concentrating on the force material of the pylon's surface. He mentally ordered up a slender projection of the pale blue substance, detached it and formed it into a ring, changing its color to a soft yellow.

"He's certainly obstinate," Lea observed, peevishly lowering her chin onto a handlike projection of blue force stuff that rose obligingly from the table top.

"A real crusader," Hulen agreed, with no small amount of scorn. "Why don't you forget it, Cuz?"

Bruno maneuvered the yellow ring into a horizontal position, stabilizing it several feet above the pylon and away from the table. Next, he raised another projection from the flat surface and fashioned a smaller, light green circle.

"Trying to communicate with them might still be a good idea," he offered, keeping the talk alive so they wouldn't notice what he was doing.

"I said forget it!" Hulen snapped.

Bruno sent the smaller ring floating up toward the larger one. "If this building we're on is their center of government, we could make an impressive show out of it. We could get together a whole bunch of people and march—"

"Four's the limit," Sal reminded evenly, as though she might prefer that it weren't and that Bruno could go ahead with his plan.

With the smaller ring beside the larger one, he paused, abruptly apprehensive over the results the experiment might produce. He glanced at the others. None of them was aware that he was up to anything.

"We could break the rule of four for something as important as contacting the Spheres," he said, to divert their attention.

Hulen's teeth showed in a look of exasperation. A blunt hand of force stuff reached out from the surface of the table, seized Bruno's robe and jerked him roughly forward.

"Didn't I already tell you," Hulen shouted, "that thousands of people have tried *all* the schemes—for hundreds of years?"

And a dozen tiny mouths had formed on the surface of the table, each pair of blue lips soundlessly echoing the rebuke.

Lea folded her arms disgustedly. "Man, is he ever a creep!"

"I wouldn't say that exactly," Sal retorted.

"Go ahead, side with him!" Lea shot back. "I guess you still got a lot of hayseed to shake out of your hair too!"

Hulen rose to assume the role of conciliator, and the hand of force substance that had gripped Bruno's robe sank back into the table. "Look, kids, this is no way to enjoy a night out."

Exempt from the conversation for the moment, Bruno returned his attention to the rings of frozen energy. Once more he moved the smaller toward the larger.

Lea stood there arrogantly, her hands thrust on her hips, as she glowered at Hulen. "I don't expect to enjoy a night on the City with this drip! What's he trying to do, anyway?"

"Whatever it is," Sal said, "at least he thinks it's right."

"Yeah. And you probably do too."

"What if I do?" Sal returned defiantly.

"Well, you can have the lunkhead! We got the best deal anybody ever had. And *he* wants to yank it out from under us!"

Just then Bruno finally got the small green ring centered directly above the large yellow one. He lowered it carefully into place, until the one was perfectly enclosed within the other.

There was a great flare of crimson brilliance as billows of pure energy began spilling from the mouth of the double halo.

Lea and Sal screamed and sprang aside, riding a crest of blue pylon material to the far edge of the truncated surface. Hulen lunged up, seized Bruno's arm and dragged him to safety.

"It's all right," Bruno assured them. "I did it. I made the rings and—"

Hulen and Lea were gawking at him as though he were crazy.

"*You* did it?" Lea asked, her voice skeptical and vehement.

"*Experimenting* again, eh?" Hulen said.

Bruno separated the rings and the cataract was snipped off.

"That settles it!" said Lea. "I'm going home. Hulen, either you're going to see that I get there safely or you're going to stay here with—with *that!*"

Scores of slender fingers sprang up from the blue pylon substance to point incriminatingly at Bruno. Then Lea cast herself over the edge of the mesa and went skidding down the incline.

Hulen caught his robe up between his legs and leaped over after her. "See you later," he threw back. "Keep him out of trouble, Sal."

Bruno watched the pair slide down the slope. As they neared the bottom, a ripple of force stuff built up before them and grew into a restraining wave that checked their speed.

Six

SAL WALKED TO THE EDGE AND STOOD GAZING THOUGHTFULLY out over the City. "Why did you have to spoil everything and start experimenting with that red stuff?" she asked him reproachfully.

Reminded of the pair of rings, he glanced back and, with a brief volition, sent them hurtling away—over the city, past the outer wall of force, through the dismal night air above the plain. He watched the faint, luminous specks disappear over the horizon.

"I thought you were with me, Sal. I got the impression you *wanted* to see me contact the Spheres, that maybe you'd like to find out how this force stuff works."

"But don't you see that's not the point?" She turned abruptly toward him. "The fact is that the Spheres *can't* be contacted."

He pretended to concede the argument. "All right. But why not find out all we can about this force stuff?"

She raised her knuckles troubledly to her lips. "I don't know. I'm confused. Maybe we ought to be satisfied with what we have and not expect more out of a perfect setup."

"But things *aren't* perfect," he pointed out. "Not as long as people like you and me are looked on as pests. Not as long as there are Hulens and Leas who are *satisfied* with that role."

She hid her uncertainty in silence.

"That red energy is interesting," he said, thinking aloud. "All it takes to get as much of it as you want is a pair of rings—rings that can be formed from any of the force substance."

"But why would anyone want that deadly stuff?"

"Because it's obviously the basic force material of the City. From it come all the other kinds of energy matter."

Sal was showing a more direct interest now. "But where does it come from?"

"Everard said the Spheres probably came from another universe. Maybe the red force stuff is what separates our universe from theirs—a sort of sandwiched-in layer. And when you put the two rings together, it opens a door for the energy to gush through."

"What do the two rings have to do with it?"

He laughed. "How would I know? But the important thing is that we don't have to know! Suppose a super-intelligent mouse learns he can produce fire by rubbing two sticks together? He could do it without knowing why, couldn't he?"

An alarm sounded in the depths of Bruno's consciousness. Then he noticed the pale blue cast suffusing the girl's features had taken on a subtle yellow tinge. Instinctively, he flung her to the floor and hurled himself down beside her. And the pylon sprouted a pair of solicitous arms that reared up to grasp them protectively, like a mother clutching her children to her bosom.

The bolt of destructive energy crackled inches over their heads and spent itself in the empty night air.

They both then saw the Sphere that had emerged through an opening in the structure. Its yellow surface clouded over with a faint purple-white hue as it generated energy for another blast.

Bruno shoved the girl over the brink and leaped after her. They went tumbling down the incline together. Near the bottom, he gradually piled up a wave of force stuff in front of them to slow their descent. He enlarged the obstruction and brought them to a complete stop just as they reached the surface.

"You all right?" he asked.

She rose unevenly. Three props reared up out of the energy material to steady her.

"Nothing broken." She smiled shakingly. "Say, you *are* learning! And thanks. We could have both been—"

Her composure snapped and she was caught up in a helpless reaction to the narrow escape. She fell against him and sobbed with her face buried in his robe.

An excessively solicitous arm of force stuff sprang up to offer her the support he was already providing. Angrily, he slapped it away.

"It's horrible here, Bruno!" she said bitterly. "It looks soft and luxurious. But death can come at almost any instant!"

"I know, I know. Come, let's get away from here."

Bruno found he had no aptitude for duplicating Hulen's wave-form automobile. So, instead, he saw Sal home on a simple tobogganlike contraption. It served almost as well, except that when they neared their destination, he failed to maintain control over the upturned edge. Losing its identity as part of the mobile wave configuration, the forward curve had suddenly swept back, swiping him and the girl from the pseudo-sled.

After he watched her go into her mound, he turned reluctantly and headed back for Hulen's place. Before he could take a second step, though, the inevitable wave of pink force built up behind his heels and began moving him effortlessly forward.

Without resisting, he let the undulating carpet carry him

along while he concerned himself with a nagging indecision.

Of course he intended to contact the Spheres! Wasn't that his only motive for coming to the City? But somehow he suspected he might ultimately be diverted from his purpose. Or maybe his uncertainty was simply a reaction to the unreasonable and unexpected opposition he was meeting.

He, Bruno of the Spruce clan, was going to come blustering into the City and merely announce his intention of setting up Man's first contact with the Spheres. Thousands were going to strew rose petals in his path and cheer him on like a conquering liberator. Then, when it was all over, they were going to hoist him to their shoulders in a triumphant march back to the clan areas, joyously proclaiming freedom from the aliens.

Nuts! He sneered at his own naïveté—at his failure even to suspect the City dwellers might resent his interference.

Glancing up at the glimmering mounds and towering force structures that were limned brilliantly against the night sky, Bruno felt suddenly depressed. As though in response to his vague thoughts of fatigue and disillusionment, the wave that had been pushing him along washed to a halt and the omnipresent carpet rolled upward in front of him. Swiftly, it burgeoned into the shape of a reclining chair with a stout arm rest that bore an ornately curved pitcher and tumbler.

Within seconds, the surface of the pitcher frosted over, inviting attention to the icy water that was condensing both within and without the container. The other arm rest grew a slender hand that reached out and took him enticingly by the elbow to draw him forward.

He thrust the congenial hand aside and lashed out in a vicious kick. The entire complex of comfort shrank away, flowing regretfully back into the amorphous pink carpeting.

That was his trouble, he decided abruptly. The entire City must be luring him with its luxuries and pleasures, captivating him as it had bewitched Hulen and Everard and Lea.

But then, as his surge of emotional resentment abated, he realized, after all, that the City itself was not a living thing—that whatever it did to accommodate him was but an imper-

sonal manifestation, a peculiar reaction of the force stuff to the pressure of either conscious or wishful thought.

And if Hulen and the others had been captivated, it wasn't as much by the City as it was by their own insatiable desire for the easy way. He was determined it wouldn't happen to him.

He started forward again and once more the energy layer came alive to form an impelling wave. Rejecting the offering, he stamped vehemently on the rippling carpet.

And, for as far as he could see, the ground thrust up a thousand ill-shaped legs, each ending in a hobnailed boot that struck down vengefully in a sympathetic gesture of self-punishment.

Bruno, suddenly struck with the humor of the incident, bent backward, laughing aloud. And all the extended legs retracted into the parent mass while scores of faces, featureless except for full lips and bulging jowls, materialized in their places. They shared his amusement, roaring in soundless mirth.

Striding resolutely forward under his own power now, he turned sharply around the projecting wall of a mound and almost collided with a Sphere which was just emerging from the blue structure.

Even before he could get set, the alien loosed a searing bolt that struck close enough to singe his robe.

He lunged aside, berating himself for having been caught off guard. As he continued maneuvering defensively, his resentment grew and, almost unconsciously, he found himself swiftly fashioning a yellow and green ring out of the force substance.

While he escaped another discharge, he sent one circlet hurtling to its proper position within the other. When the stream of red energy rushed through, he mentally molded it into a lance of lightninglike force and hurled it at the Sphere.

The alien had been generating another discharge. But the impact of the crimson force rocked him visibly and the flush of yellow energy along his surface was dissipated in a shower of useless sparks.

The Sphere lurched backward, collided with the mound from which he had emerged, bounced off and went scurrying away.

Seven

ROLLING OVER ON HIS BACK, BRUNO AWAKENED TO A VAGUE awareness that he was being studiously watched. He raised himself on an elbow and discovered that the crude sleeping mound he had constructed the night before had metamorphosed into a duplicate of his four-poster back home. The spruce headboard was authentically colored and even its grain looked real. The pink force material on which he lay had taken on the soft white color of a sheet.

Everard and Hulen stood beside the bed, looking soberly down at him.

The old man ran a stiff, speculative finger over his chin. "Hulen says you're still thinking about messing around chummylike with the Blubber Balls."

Actually, Bruno was still uncertain whether he should go through with his intention of contacting the Spheres. Would the aliens recognize human intelligence and withdraw, leaving the people free to develop their own world as they had once before? Would there be cooperation and help from the Spheres? Or would the result be something awful—something he hadn't even considered? But the men's attitude decided him.

He threw his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. "I think I'll give it another try. Maybe this round I'll pick the right place and time."

Two servile arms of the floor groped for his sandals, found them and slipped them on his feet. Hulen and Everard watched the interlude with impatient misgiving.

"You're not going to communicate with the Spheres," Hulen said finally, his words heavy with determination.

"What the hell, son!" Everard exclaimed. "You want to bring on another extermination?"

"You ever been in on one of them?" Hulen persisted.

"Women grabbing up kids and running for their lives. Old folks like Everard here scurrying for safety and not making it. Everybody pouring out of the City."

Bruno rose and one of the bedposts extended a hand that began smoothing his robe about him. "We might find the Spheres willing to help. Once they learn—"

"Like hell!" Hulen shot back. "The only thing they're interested in about us is stamping us out!"

"They might change their mind if they knew we weren't just dumb pests. Anyway, for every one of us taking it easy in the City, there are thousands having a rough time in the forests. Why should *we* be entitled to the easy life?"

Hulen drew indignantly erect. "Because we are willing to take our chances with the Spheres and the force stuff!"

"That may be so, but the main point is that things are tough in the clan areas because the Spheres own the world. And I don't think the Spheres even realize we're at all put out. So I figure we might as well try to get through to them. What can we lose?"

Everard shook his head distraughtly. "What can we *lose?* By agitating 'em, you'll make 'em aware of our presence. Then there'll be an extermination. Plenty of us'll get killed—we ain't had that kind of big-scale workout in years. And it'll be months before those who are left can get back into the City."

Hulen placed a patronizing hand on his cousin Bruno's shoulder. "We got unwritten laws, Cuz. They say don't do anything to advertise our presence; keep under cover; if you gotta go out of your hole, don't congregate; don't go in the open any oftener than you have to."

Uncertainly, Bruno looked down at his palms. Another pair of hands shot up from the floor to present themselves eagerly for his inspection.

"Changed your mind?" Everard asked anxiously.

If he had, it wouldn't have been as a result of their arguments. Anyway, the goal of contacting the Spheres had been with him for as long as he could remember.

Still waiting for an answer, Hulen said, "We don't have any

courts here, but the boys have their own brand of kangaroo justice. How about it?"

"No."

Everard and Hulen exchanged grim looks.

"We watched you last night," Hulen said. "Know something? You're developing a rare sort of control over this force stuff. Take this bed here, for instance—"

"It's a form of subconscious control," Everard added. "Pretty damned dangerous."

"How so?"

"Why, your emotions can run away with you when you get excited. You might make the energy material do things to hurt others."

"Fifteen, twenty years ago, we had another fellow with the same kind of control," Hulen offered. "He ended up killing without even knowing it. His subconscious ran away with him. They found two guys strangled by hands of force stuff."

Everard winced reminiscently. "Even before that, he gave us hell with his nightmares. The monsters he dreamed up became real—force stuff, sure, but you shoulda seen 'em!"

"What are you getting at?"

"We had a meeting last night—after we watched you put on that show outside the girls' mound," Hulen explained. "We decided it would be too dangerous for you to stay on in the City."

"And," Everard concluded, "the boys said to tell you that you got till tonight to get out."

As far as Bruno was concerned, that practically settled it. He was just obstinate enough to react the wrong way to their threats. And if the great pylon they had visited the night before was the City's seat of government, he would have plenty of time, before the day was over, to attempt another contact.

The determined manner in which he went gliding through the wall of the mound must have left Hulen and Everard with no doubt as to his purpose.

Fortified by the brightness of a warm summer's sun overhead, the brilliant array of force structures cast an intense

glare and he shaded his eyes with a hand as he struck out for Sal's quarters. But when he rounded the next mound, he saw the girl gliding anxiously in his direction.

"Bruno!" She reached him and caught his arm. "They had a meeting last night and—"

"Yes, I know. They decided to run me out of town."

"That's not all. A delegation from the other side of town attended. On the way home, the whole bunch of them were seen by a group of Spheres!"

He glanced at the broiling sun and wiped a film of perspiration from his forehead. "I suppose that means—"

But Sal drew in a dismayed breath and backed away, staring apprehensively over his shoulder. At the same time, he was conscious of a dark shadow moving over them. He whirled around.

The thing that had seized her attention was a tree. Rising out of the omnipresent pink carpet, it grew swiftly, expanding its trunk, sending out a branch here, a twig there, covering itself with a luxuriant dome of green foliage. Then he recognized it. It was a replica of the shade tree behind his house.

"It's all right," he said, turning back toward Sal.

The shadow of the tree brought a delightful coolness. Its branches swayed gently, sending down soft currents of refreshing air.

She dismissed the phenomenon with a shrug. "About those men being seen by the Spheres—everybody's afraid there'll be an extermination! Some of the people on the South Side are already packing up and heading toward the plain."

"They figure it's going to be that bad?"

She nodded. "Maybe we ought to get out too, Bruno."

He ran a hand uncertainly through his hair. It seemed that everything was lining up against him, trying to keep him from communicating with the aliens.

He dropped to the lumpy, pink surface. But even as he seated himself and drew his knees up reflectively under his chin, the force stuff smoothed out and sprouted a neatly clipped carpet of artifical grass.

"Are you still going to try to contact the Spheres?" she asked, down on her knees beside him.

"I want to. I think it's the right thing to do. But I'm afraid of what might happen. I don't know what to expect—how the Spheres will react."

"Well, they'll realize we're worthy of their help and respect, won't they?" she asked hopefully.

He didn't answer. Instead, he absently watched all the energy structures around him send glistening streamers toward the sun to collect droplets of food stuff from its rays. Then, as he remembered that he hadn't had breakfast yet, thin ribbons of silver also began growing out of the foliage of the tree. The food energy that condensed on them rolled into clusters and drifted through the leaves to attach themselves to the lowest branches, hanging there like golden grapes. He picked a cluster for himself and handed one to the girl.

"They've got to accept us!" he said. "I don't see how they could react any other way. But the others have made me doubt my own judgment."

"You've planned on contacting them for a long time, haven't you?"

"All my life. It's been like a goal."

She grasped his arm. "Maybe it's not so important anyway. Maybe you're seeing it all out of proportion."

"But doesn't the world belong to us?" he protested.

"I don't mean that. I mean about feeling you *had to* contact the aliens. Don't you see that's a dream everybody has, to a degree? It's like wanting to hunt treasure on a desert island, or become chief of the superclan, or—like they used to say before the Spheres—make a million dollars. Maybe it's nothing more than an idle childhood fancy that you've viewed out of proportion. But even if you don't contact the Spheres, you've been luckier than most. You've come to the City. You've had a chance at your goal."

"Sal—" He placed a hand over hers, not quite sure what he wanted to say. "Would you go back to the Spruce clan with me—now?"

She fixed her eyes on an iridescent spire and said, "Yes, if you want me to."

He glanced at her hair, gold like the color of a food ball filled with energy and sustenance from the sun, and at her eyes, more deeply blue than the most vivid mound in the radiant City.

"Thanks," he said, rising resolutely. "That's what I want too. But I'm going through with what I came here for."

Eight

A BRANCH OF THE TREE, ABSORBING ITS FOLIAGE TO DEVELOP a hand, reached down and tugged urgently on his robe. Another grew a half-balled fist with a long, curving finger that tapped him insistently on the shoulder and pointed behind him. Only then did he realize that what he had mistaken for the sibilant swish of leaves over the past few seconds had actually been whispered voices.

He whirled around. On the other side of the tree Hulen, Everard and a score of other robed figures were advancing furtively. Knowing they had been discovered, the crowd of men drew erect with determination.

"Don't try to pull anything fancy with the force stuff," Everard warned gruffly.

Hulen gestured with a fist. "We brought along enough help to override your control, no matter how good you are."

Several hostile arms of force material sprang up all around Bruno and jockeyed for vantage points. He gave Sal a shove and sent her coasting away on a hastily devised sled. The tree, which he had been maintaining with a practically subliminal intent, collapsed and was quickly reabsorbed by the radiant carpet.

"So you're going to go through with it anyway?" Everard laughed challengingly.

"Look, Cuz," Hulen said. "You already got us in enough trouble, but maybe it ain't too late. How about clearing out without raising any more stink?"

"You said I had till tonight."

"We changed our minds. Out you go *now!*"

One of the arms of force darted forward, seized his robe and spun him around. Another changed instantly into a booted foot and aimed a kick that only grazed his thigh.

Bruno sent the pink stuff billowing up in a great wave which swept down on the others. But a second enormous swell formed in front of the first and met it in a head-on clash that shot a geyser of radiance skyward along the entire front.

The nearest menacing arm developed a gigantic hand which thrust forward and caught Bruno in its grip, pinning his elbows to his side. Before the breath could be squeezed out of him, though, he went on the defensive—half a dozen smaller arms materialized beside him to grapple with the attacking hand, prying it loose and forcing it back down into the parent mass.

But the force carpet convulsed suddenly beneath him and he lost his balance, falling over forward. With the speed of striking snakes, tendril after tendril lashed out of the sea of pink substance, ensnaring his arms and fastening him against the surface.

A gigantic fist came crashing against his temple and drew back for another blow. He shook his head to clear it, glanced at the others. They were still compactly assembled, faces tense with the mental effort behind their assault.

Then he noticed the halo of green force material hovering several feet above them. It wasn't until he watched the yellow circlet rise like a smoke ring from the surface, however, that he realized his own unconscious direction was behind the preparation to send a stream of deadly red energy pouring down on his attackers.

He halted the meeting of the rings. Hulen and Everard were, after all, only following their convictions. And even though they were fanatically resisting the threat to their easy life, *they* weren't out to kill *him.*

He summoned the rings forward to a point halfway between himself and the others. Then he moved one decisively within

the other. The coruscating flow of crimson energy gushed forth, cascading down to the surface.

There was instant defeat in the terrified expressions of the others as they retreated before the cataract. Everard bolted first, scurrying for the closest mound.

The tendrils that had held Bruno captive relaxed their grip and slipped off. And, all around him, the other threatening projections of force stuff melted away as Hulen and the rest of the group followed Everard in full flight.

Bruno swiftly regained his feet and, with a casual hand gesture, separated the rings. The energy flow ceased and he turned to look for Sal.

But suddenly she went streaking past, frenziedly gliding away on an erratic wave of propelling force. She was headed for the same mound into which the others had disappeared.

Even before he turned to see what had frightened the girl, he knew what he would find there.

The huge Sphere, faint ripples of quiescent energy coursing languidly across its surface, confronted him. It was as though somewhere deep within the alien form there was a pair of hidden eyes that held him in a speculative stare.

But there was no violent display of coalescing energy across the thing's surface. And it wasn't advancing. Instead, it drifted slowly—curiously?—over to the pair of rings Bruno had molded.

The impulse to follow the others in flight abated and was quickly replaced by the triumphant awareness that here, at last, was the opportunity to reach his goal. Here, finally, was a Sphere whose first reaction to the presence of a human wasn't a vengeful, impulsive lance of lethal energy—a Sphere whose inquisitiveness invited trial of Bruno's plan to contact the aliens.

He felt both humble and proud as he realized that within his reach was the goal of a lifetime—that now he might accomplish the purpose which had drawn him through miles of forest and across stretches of plain to the City of Force.

And when he returned to his clan, he might well be bring-

ing the news that the period of Man's humiliation upon his own world was at an end.

The Sphere drew up before Bruno's hovering rings and remained motionless for perhaps two minutes. Then, obviously in compliance with the alien's direction, the circlets came together suddenly and released a spurt of fiery energy. They separated again and drifted to a new position near Bruno.

Although there were no discernible features on the Sphere's surface, Bruno imagined the creature had turned to "face" him expectantly and observe what he, in turn, would do with the pair of force objects.

He ordered one halo inside the other, producing another brief gusher of crimson force.

The alien conjured up two new rings from the glimmering material of the surface and used them to create a waterfall of radiant energy.

Bruno duplicated the feat without hesitation.

And, as the Sphere drifted animatedly around in an expression of excitement, Bruno was even more exultant in the conviction that at last his efforts were meeting with full success. Now he could almost sense the sudden respect the alien creature must feel toward him. He drew haughtily erect with newfound self-assurance and dignity.

But wait—there was more!

As the Sphere towered over him, he was aware of a curious sensation at the back of his eyes. Or maybe it was deep within his inner ears. The vague "feeling," however, wasn't restricted to his sight and hearing. It was something he could even taste and smell.

Frightened by the incomprehensible assault on all his senses at the same time, he gave ground. But a calm sensation of satisfaction and reassurance swept over him and he was at once certain there was no immediate danger.

He closed his eyes and his perception of things that had no apparent existence became stronger, more vivid. It was as though he could still "see" the Sphere and as though the alien

had extended a gossamer web of light and sound, feeling, taste and smell toward him.

In his hyperphysical perception, Bruno eagerly watched himself put forth a similar bridge of communicative thought toward the Sphere—a web that might have been woven of imperceptible force threads.

There was an abrupt meeting of the two projections and instantly Bruno's mind seemed to be caught up in a vortex of ideas and symbols—words that weren't words at all but more like fierce, raw units of basic meaning, stripped of all linguistic character.

It was as if he were encountering the symbols for the first time and indelibly learning their meaning simultaneously.

If he had been called upon to translate the impressions, the closest he could have come to transposing them into language would have been: "What the hell, little vermin! What gives?"

But there was no threat behind the communication, only amused excitement and intense curiosity.

Bruno pressed his success and quickly sent back picture images of men—proud men—and the knowledge at their disposal. In one great outburst of emotion, he presented the case of humanity surrounded by its once-huge cities and vast and intricate machines, of Man the thinker, dealing in abstract thought, of Man the experimenter, traveling in his land, air and underwater contraptions.

He conjured up idea pictures of people in their compact and efficient settlements, and he even threw in the concept of destructive and annoying insects and rodents and small winged creatures that always followed humans wherever they went.

These, he proposed with great dignity, were the pests—the real pests. Not Man himself.

In his next series of picture symbols, he likened humanity to the Spheres and offered the suggestion that there should be intellectual kinship between the two species.

To demonstrate his point, he transmitted the formula for the

circumference of a circle, the recipe for making corn pone, the number of feet in a mile, how to find the height of a tree by triangulation, the method of determining the volume of a sphere.

Bruno felt reasonably certain that the last bit of knowledge he had offered in evidence, hitting close to home as it did, was bound to gain a special degree of respect from the alien.

And he knew he was succeeding! He was convinced the Sphere was tremendously impressed by his mental qualifications, by the intelligence of humanity as a whole. Moreover, he suspected that the alien must now be regretting its race's arrogance and disdain over the centuries for the creatures they had regarded only as vermin nuisances.

This last thought, too, he sent over the web of communication—in the form of a mildly chiding question.

The gossamer bridge of empathy quivered with the surprised incredulity of the Sphere. And a swell of conceptual impulses flooded Bruno's senses and arranged themselves into a meaningful sequence: "Is true, ugly litle pest?"

Bruno began a discourse on the cultural achievements of mankind.

But the alien cut him short with another avalanche of picture images and symbols that somehow managed to seem like words: "Collector ring trick—each pest can tap all-powerful force?"

Bruno responded with a convincing surge of affirmation. No sense in letting the Sphere find out the others were too content with their roles as parasites even to think of experimenting with the force substance.

"Do it again, the collector ring feat," the Sphere urged against a background of persistent skepticism.

Breaking contact with the creature, Bruno directed the formation of another pair of halos from the sparkling carpet. He tinted them yellow and green and willed their mid-air meeting. He let the crimson force pour through momentarily, then separated the circlets.

"Is enough," the alien conceded, beginning to move about excitedly once more.

Nine

THERE WAS AN ABRUPT, THUNDEROUS SURGE OF THOUGHT FROM the Sphere. Only this time it wasn't directed at Bruno. Rather, it seemed to spread out over the immediate area and toward the center of the City. He recognized the purpose behind this flow of pure meaning that required no medium of language for transmission. It was an anxious summoning of other nearby aliens, of those of authority who were elsewhere in the City.

And the response was almost instantaneous. Spheres came drifting out of the mounds, discharging paraphysical emanations of curiosity and surprise.

Bruno glanced back at the structure in which Sal and the others were hiding. Most of them were now staring puzzledly out at him and the aliens. They couldn't know what was going on, but it wouldn't be long before they would find out.

There were more than a score of Spheres collected around him and the other alien now, all directing eager questions at the latter. And as Bruno acquired more experience with direct psychic communication, it was even easier for him to understand the exchange of meaning among the creatures.

He gathered eventually from their conversation that the alien with which he had established contact was 3.14. gM.

A huge tube of green radiance came hurtling over the nearby force structures and arched down to the surface. Two Spheres zipped down the shaft and drifted out its end. They hurried over to 3.14. gM.

Bruno only stood there, waiting patiently. The next move, after all, was up to them.

"Is this the super-pest?" one of the newcomers asked skeptically, the direct flow of meaning seeming to come through to Bruno not quite as crudely as before.

"This is the one, Excellency," 3.14. gM. replied respectfully. "You will observe it is not scurrying away."

"You probably tried to stomp it and only scored a near miss."

"Oh, no, Excellency! It converses rationally. It knows how to manipulate the collector rings."

Evidently they weren't aware that, by virtue of the psychic bridge 3.14. gM had helped him construct, Bruno was attuned to their exchange. Or, if they were, they were ignoring it.

"Are you sure you haven't taken on too much of a charge?" asked the other tube-traveling Sphere.

"Of course not, Eminence. Test it for yourself and you'll see."

Bruno shifted uneasily before the creatures, realizing only now the compromising position he was in. If anything should go wrong, he was virtually hemmed in by an entire assembly of Spheres. But, of course, nothing could go wrong.

Still, Excellency and Eminence were emitting disconcerting emanations, as were all the other aliens in the circle. Nor was there anything markedly friendly about their paraphysical background hum.

"We shall see that it's properly tested," Excellency promised disdainfully. "But first, just in case it should check out as intelligent, we'll prepare an immediate extermination and nip this thing before it starts."

Bruno rocked back incredulously. Extermination! What did the Sphere mean by that?

"Even if it's not true that they're growing intelligent," Eminence stated, "an extermination is long overdue. I'm glad this happened, if that's what it takes to get some action."

Eminence went streaking back to the green tube.

Excellency drifted over toward Bruno and 3.14. gM followed close behind.

"I do hope you're wrong," said Excellency, badly upset. "We've been plagued enough by these creatures, considering that they're mere vermin. Great Energy! Think how awful it would be if it turned out that they were smart enough to manipulate *our own* basic forces!"

So that was it! Horrified, Bruno shrank away from the pair of Spheres. He felt the vivid bridge of direct communication spread out from Excellency to engulf him. Desperately, he

fought to avoid contact. He forced his attention away from the creatures surrounding him, away from the City itself. And he dwelled, instead, on the simple thought of an idle stroll through the forest—a mental preoccupation that would betray nothing of the intellectual complexity of Man. Maybe he could discredit 3.14. gM's credibility. At least he had the caustic skepticism of Excellency on his side. And all the while he could sense the alien's examining, questioning probe.

After the pressure finally let up, Bruno gingerly extended an imperceptible web of psychic perception toward the others.

"I see nothing intelligent in this creature," Excellency told 3.14. gM quite angrily.

"But that's impossible! It has orderly thoughts! It can— Pest thing!" 3.14. gM's attention was suddenly directed full on Bruno. "Form the rings! Collect the basic force! Show Excellency!"

There was a burst of peevish amusement from Excellency, then a facetious taunt: "Yes, creature, form the rings and tap the energy!"

Bruno inched away from the pair of Spheres and glanced hopelessly around for a breach in the circle of aliens. A projection of force material rose obligingly from the surface and started to form a hand to point the way. But he stomped it down deliberately, determined not to betray his facility with the energy stuff.

"Intelligent indeed!" said Excellency scornfully, jeering at Bruno's action.

"But," 3.14. gM began, "I tell you it did—"

"Enough! First X2.718 reports being attacked by one of these creatures. And now this!"

"But that *proves* it, doesn't it?"

"It proves nothing! X2.718 has already submitted himself for shock rebalancing. After this demonstration of hysteria, I suggest you do the same."

The concept translated as "suggest," but actually was much more severe. Bruno was aware of the intense emanation of confused fear that poured from 3.14. gM. The Sphere lunged

backward, bolted through the circle of aliens and lumbered off between two mounds.

"After him!" Excellency ordered.

Bruno barely escaped being trampled in the rush of alien forms past him. He conjured up an immense wave of propelling force and let himself be washed off toward the mound where Sal was hiding.

Grim-faced, Hulen and Everard came out to meet him.

"Ex-term-e-nashun!" The frenzied cry came from the direction of the next mound.

The wave form dissipated beneath Bruno, lowering him back to the surface, as he turned his attention to the new distraction. Sal and the others came out of the mound and stared off into the distance.

"Ex-term-e-nashun! Ex-term-e-nashun!"

A robed figure came into sight, gliding forward, occasionally losing control over his propelling wave, tripping and falling.

"They're coming from the south!" he shouted at the group. "Spread the warning!"

Hulen and the others exchanged frightened glances, then turned and shot away in various directions.

Sal glided over and seized Bruno's hand. "We've got to get out of the City! They're coming with the red stuff! It goes through everything—nothing can stop it!"

People were pouring out of the mounds now, stumbling over themselves in a frantic rush for the outer force walls.

And yet Bruno resisted the girl's insistent tug, his eyes focused sickly on infinity.

"I was wrong, Sal," he said. "To Hulen and Everard, I was nothing more than a pest that they had to put up with. Oh, they figured all along they might have to get tough to keep me from going through with my plan. But when they found out I had a special control over the force stuff, I was no longer a simple inconvenience. I became an intolerable nuisance."

"There's no time to discuss it, Bruno! We've got to get out!"

With her words, several decidedly feminine arms reached up from the radiant carpet to pull urgently on his robe.

"It would be the same thing if we contacted the Spheres and proved we're intelligent creatures," he continued soberly. "As long as they think we're just dumb pests, they won't mind us hanging around, if we don't disturb them too much. But if they learn we have brains too, then they'd really go to work on us—in the City, in the forests, everything!"

He moved forward slowly, his preoccupation creating a resistance that made it harder for Sal to manipulate her wave of propulsion.

"It would be the same thing," he concluded, "if we suddenly found out mice were many times more intelligent than we supposed. We wouldn't greet them with open arms. We'd be all the more determined to stamp them out, because we'd know that smart mice would be much more of a menace than dumb ones."

Bruno glanced back at the line of Spheres, then turned and fled with the girl. He would have liked to stay behind for a while and see how they would react to a few really searing blasts of crimson energy from the double rings.

But then he realized that the point was *not* to let them know what formidable foes the humans would someday make—given enough time to build their own cities of force and learn more about manipulating the energy.

Sal tightened her grip on his hand. "Those rings—they're following us, Bruno!"

He looked back. Only a few feet behind and above them, the yellow and green circlets that had hovered over the heads of Hulen's group came drifting along like trained birds.

Bruno smiled appreciatively. It was as though the rings, which were actually reacting to his unconscious directives, were well ahead of him in foreseeing the need he would soon have for them.

In a moment, they were through the glistening white outer wall. Their smooth glide stopped as the propelling wave form ran out of the pink radiance and came to an end.

He stood briefly at the foot of the wall and watched the exodus of humans, stumbling across the rock-strewn plain and filtering into the forest.

With an expression of patient sympathy, Sal gazed after them. "It'll be months before they can get back into the City."

"If we can round them up," he said, "I don't think they'll ever want to go back."

She looked puzzledly at him.

He sent his two force rings drifting ahead and positioned the smaller within the larger. As the cataract of raw red energy poured forth, he changed it into pink radiance. Then he sent the rings floating toward the forest, letting them lay down a narrow carpet of pastel stardust.

The bulky proportions of a river barge took shape before them, centered on the glistening strip, and several courtly hands stretched out to help him and the girl aboard.

Smoothly, the craft moved off, maintaining a distance of several feet behind the radiant waterfall that provided the substance for its form.

As they drifted along, the river of light dissipated into nothingness behind them, leaving once again only the bare plain.

And, in their wake, scores of hands reared above the surface of the pseudo-stream to wave farewell.

WHATEVER COUNTS

by Frederik Pohl

One

THERE WERE FIFTY-EIGHT OF THEM ON THE TRAILER. FIFTY-eight of them, and they had been together for a long time. But fifty-five didn't count. Only three counted, three who stood at the center of it. Hibsen was one of the ones that counted, Hibsen with the diamond epaulettes and the rope of matched rubies. And Brabant counted, Brabant and his blots of ink. And there was Rae Wensley. She may have counted the most.

But the others didn't count, however much they suffered. It was only those three.

One of the ones who didn't count was screaming. He was the littlest of them, very small and very new. Off at the outer shell of the trailer, where the scout rocket was getting ready to go, Brabant could hear him scream. Hibsen, hauling himself along a corridor with squidlike bounds, could hear him very well, and Rae could hear him even better, being closer. The littlest of them screamed because he was in agony. It was a very great pain—the greatest he had ever experienced

in his life—except, perhaps, the great pain that had begun it, in the act of being born five weeks and three days before.

Rae Wensley hooked a toe under his bassinet, now standing sterile and empty because there was no need for bassinets where they were, and slapped at a wall switch.

"Mary!" she called urgently.

In a moment, there was a sleepy "M-m-m?" from the grille over the switch.

"Better come and help me, Mary," said Rae Wensley, and left the switch open while she went back to tending the baby. Mary was the baby's mother; the baby's screams would bring her faster than anything Rae could say over the intercom.

They had been going on for nearly an hour.

Rae, her hair net brushed askew and her golden hair beginning to creep out, found herself pleading with the baby as she slapped it, patted it, squeezed its back. "Come on, honey. Please! Get the bubble up for Rachel."

She held the child away from her searchingly; the senseless little face screwed up its eyes the tighter, and the long, hairless little head wobbled the more wildly on its gelatine neck. If they hadn't been in free-fall, she couldn't have done that, for the tiny new muscles could not have held the head. But if they hadn't been in free-fall, the little swallowing apparatus could have rid itself of the bubble of gas that brought the pain—if gravity had been there to help it. But there wasn't any gravity, not with the trailer in orbit. It was a perfectly normal baby—and a perfectly normal bubble of gas; it was only the situation that wasn't normal.

That was Rae Wensley. She was nineteen years old and had been in space for seven years.

And then there was Computerman Hibsen. Hibsen was no colonist—no, not he! Hibsen shut his ears to the screams from the nursery, though it was getting closer and the screams were getting louder. Computerman Hibsen was all gold and gems: fine gold traceries festooned his blue silk jacket; his buttons were great pink pearls; blue diamonds winked from his fingers. He flashed and glowed in the light from the tubelamps

recessed in the corridor walls as he propelled himself by handholds; and he also sang:

"Three little spacemen
Lived on Aleph Four—
Along came the Gormen,
And they were seen no more!"

It was not a popular song with the rest of the crew and the colonists, but Hibsen himself was not popular. He didn't think that was odd. He was used to it.

He had applied for crew status on *Explorer II* out of defiance and anger, because a girl had told him he could never pass. Interstellar flight demanded more than technical skill. Hibsen had that, of course. But it also demanded—well, it demanded the qualities that were required of each person in a group of some fifty-odd who would be confined for more than seven years in a space about the size of a three-story apartment house.

Nobody would have guessed that Hibsen would pass, least of all Hibsen. It was a shock to him when Brabant, the psychologist, accepted him.

Hibsen reacted, as most of the fifty-odd candidates had, by drawing his salary for the eighteen-year voyage in advance, and spending it. For Hibsen, the money went into gold and gems, and every last bit of that went into all of the uniforms he took along.

He flaunted the jewel-studded uniforms for every day of those seven years, until the joke would have worn thin even to him—if it had been a joke. It wasn't. It was what he had always wanted, and now that he had it, he was satisfied: the tangible proof that he was a success.

The baby was now purple. It was the free-fall, beyond doubt. Colic? On Earth it would have been called colic, so perhaps that was the right name.

There's an old prescription for colicky babies: Take one thick, soundproof door; close it upon the child.

That was a pretty good joke, Rae thought distractedly. There weren't enough walls in the whole trailer to shut out the sound of one screaming child. And where was Mary?

She forced herself to put the baby down. To do that, she attached dog-leash snaps to the little harness that held the baby's diaper; the leashes were fastened to the walls, and they would keep him from drifting helplessly into something. She left him hanging like Mohammed between earth and sky, and kicked herself to the corridor.

And there was Mary coming—and far behind her, just turning in from a lateral traverse, Hibsen.

"Mary, thank heaven!" Rae stopped the other woman with one hand and the two of them clung at the door of the nursery, looking inside. Rae's heart was wrung by every gasping cry. "The poor thing! He's been like this for an hour!"

"I know." Mary Marne stared in at her baby, writhing and kicking his lean, ruddy little legs. She said rebelliously: "If the baby and I could go along, this wouldn't happen any more. It isn't fair, Rae! I had everything all set up. There was plenty of room for us in the rocket until Dr. Brabant pushed in. We could all go together down to Four, and the baby would have decent gravity, and—"

She stopped short, bacause the screams stopped short.

There was a strangling noise from the baby. He kicked and jerked with all his arms and legs at once. A blob of whitish-yellow frothy liquid appeared at his mouth; it broke into globules and clung to his face as he tried to inhale.

"He's spitting up!" Rachel Wensley was a few inches the closer. She leaped in first, caught at the harness straps and unsnapped the child. Mary was beside her at once, trying to help.

This was, again, a perfectly normal phenomenon. Babies with bubbles of gas in their digestive tracts need to get rid of the gas, bacause it's painful. Eventually they manage to expel it. Sometimes the gas comes up alone, sometimes it brings an ounce or so of milk with it. This is perfectly normal—in a normal environment.

But without gravity to clutch the milk down and away from

the untutored little mouth, it becomes abnormal, and unless the breathing passages are promptly cleared, it becomes, in fact, fatal.

In the corridor outside, Hibsen, a few yards away, heard the screams change to odd choking and bubbling noises. He caught himself by a handhold and listened, swinging like a helium balloon on a string. Then he scrambled down the lateral corridor and gaped in at the nursery door.

There was Rachel Wensley, her blonde hair floating about her head like weeds under water, braced with both legs and one arm against a changing table. Her free hand had a grip on Mary Marne's belt, and she appeared to be trying to swing the other woman around her head. Mary in turn was holding the baby with both hands, one clutching his middle, the other supporting his forehead. The baby himself, flailing around like the tip of a whip, was choking and gasping—and, in a moment, screaming again. Centrifugal force had flung the choking fluids out of his little mouth and cleared the breathing passages, which had been the idea.

Mary gasped, triumphant and relieved: "That does it, Rae! Let go!"

The acrobatic group broke up, and the two woman consulted over the baby. His screams dwindled and became grunts, then something resembling small snores. His mother held him at her shoulder, patting him gently.

Rae automatically took a spare hair net out of her pocket and began to fix her hair. "Hi," she said breathlessly as she noticed Hibsen staring in.

He came cautiously in, trying to shield his pearly-gold finery from the small floating drops of spit-up formula. "What a mess. Everything all right?"

"It is now." Rae helped the baby's mother snap him back into the floating harness arrangement again. He was sound asleep. "Well, he got it up. But I *hate* this."

"You asked for it," chortled Computerman Hibsen, and he added: *"Colonist!"*

And colonist was what Rachel Wensley was. So were the Marnes. So were forty-one of the trailer's complement, and they were the whole reason for the trip.

For seven years, the round steel ball that was *Explorer II's* tractor had spat faint quick streams of electrons backward from its magnetic throats, and for all of those years it had looked like a child's tinker-toy, jammed together any-old-fashion.

It was an ugly spectacle of a ship. There was the tractor sphere itself, with its flaring blunderbuss exhausts. There were the long parallel strands of steel cable that linked tractor to trailer. Finally there was the trailer, shaped more or less like a can of soup, but with lumps and cobwebby masses of wire projecting from it at odd angles in odd places.

There were, for example, the two shuttle rockets. In flight, they were a part of the trailer's living space, though they were attached to it in the ungainly fashion of a child's doll carried by one heel.

There were the forty-three separate radar, radio and radiation-sensing antennae, plus the periscopes that worked with visual light.

There was the grappling unit that stuck out precariously from the cylinder's forward end.

It was impossible to believe that so clumsy and square-cornered a construction would fly. It would break to pieces, obviously. If by some fantastic mischance it didn't fall apart at the first surge of power, the protruding sections would be snatched off by the rush of air.

But this was not so.

Explorer II from the moment of its first assembly had never felt air, and it never would. It was never, from first to last, meant to accelerate fast enough to cause any strain. It was never to operate so close to any astronomical object that gravity would have an effect. It could afford to look clumsy and to be clumsy. For clumsiness carried no penalties in interstellar space. At its peak velocity, just before turnaround, *Explorer II* shot through the void at more than half the speed of light itself, so fast that mass increased minutely and the

equation $MV = M^1V^1$ no longer quite held good, but the force that accelerated it on its way was like the pat from a loving hand.

Explorer II had a captain, a good man named Serrell, though he didn't much matter. He had taken tractor and trailer to the place they had aimed for, a planet that had been located nineteen years before.

The name of the planet—the satellite, rather, for it circled an object that was itself a planet as huge as Jupiter—was Aleph Four. There was a stand-by party somewhere on its surface, or so they believed. At least there had been three men left by the first expedition, awaiting the relief that this present voyage was planned to supply.

So the captain's job was done. It was now only a matter of keeping the cables unsnarled and *Explorer II* in orbit; and waiting for the scout rocket to report back, and seeing that the colonists with all their goods were shuttled down to the surface that lay hidden, under heavy cloud cover and a punishingly thick ionosphere that blanketed radio waves, a hundred thousand miles below.

That was all there was to it.

Captain Serrel (though what he did now didn't matter) stayed by his conn room and cranked the periscope to try to see what he couldn't see. There should have been *some* signal from the scout rocket. Voice would be unrecognizable and even code would garble unless you were very lucky, and they hadn't been lucky. But why wasn't there some sort of signal, however faint or garbled?

Captain Serrell hooked one toe under the corner of his desk and lit a cigarette.

The blowers were going, but he automatically waved the cigarette back and forth, back and forth, in the old spaceman's gesture—a habit that clung from the days when free-fall meant that an unwaved cigarette would go out, drowned in its own CO^2—the days when every man's bunk had a little fan blowing day and night on his face.

Those were the days before first contact with the Gormen

and its consequent rapid advances in spaceship design, when Captain Serrell was no captain but a young pilot-officer and fresh to space.

Now things were better arranged, with a free flow of air impelled by a hundred precisely located fans; but problems remained. There was, for example, the problem of the Gormen.

It was foolish to imagine that they could have had anything to do with the failure of the shuttle rocket to report—so Captain Serrell argued to himself. The first contact had occurred in quite another volume of space; so had the second, and so had the bloody third and fourth.

But five men had gone down in the rocket and there wasn't any response, not even a corrupt radio signal, not even the return of the rocket itself.

It was foolish to imagine that Gormen might be there. The first expedition would have found them if they were.

But when you believed that it was just barely possible that Gormen *might*, it made it hard to order the second rocket to go down.

Two

FINALLY, LAST OF THE THREE, THERE WAS DR. BRABANT.

Howard Brabant was thirty-eight years old, not very tall, not very good-looking. He was crew, not colonist; he was a psychologist by profession, and what would the colony need psychology for? But he had been thinking, all the same, of changing over.

Now—maybe nobody would change over. Maybe there would be no colony. Because *Explorer* had come a little late.

Brabant, sweating more than his patient, said sharply: "I don't care how much it hurts, Marne—smile! If you can't smile, at least keep your mouth shut!"

The lieutenant stared blankly up at him. Brabant braced himself and tugged quickly on Lieutenant Marne's fractured arm.

The lieutenant grunted once, sighed and went unconscious.

Brabant wiped his forehead. All right, let him be unconscious; it was better that way. At least that way he wouldn't yell—and that might be helpful. (Or might not.) But Brabant didn't have time to follow the thought through, because he had a compound fracture to set, and not much skill at it.

He tugged again, and saw the jagged white end of bone slip out of sight. Good. So much for that. As delicately as he could, he poked and palpated the flesh of the arm where the fracture had occurred. As far as he could tell, the bone ends were lined up. There was no chance of getting an X ray, of course, but it *felt* all right. Bones had been set without X rays, for endless centuries before Roentgen. It would have to do.

He found an antibiotic powder, shook it on the wound and began the tedious task of splinting and bandaging. It was too bad about Marne's arm, but the lieutenant was not the worst off of any of the first rocket's crew. There was Crescenzi, who was dead; and there were de Jouvenel and himself, who were —temporarily—alive, and perhaps that was the worst of all, because they hadn't the comfort of unconsciousness.

Because they were not alone in the tiny, ancient room.

There was an audience observing every move, taking what looked to be notes; an audience of one, but looming large in Brabant's mind. He glanced at it under his eyebrows, then looked away.

It was a hideous thing.

It wasn't tall—not more than four feet—but it was chunky. Flesh hung from it in folds, like the hide of a rhinoceros. It had a head, and it had two eyes, and probably the horny structure at the base of its "chin" was a breathing apparatus.

It fitted the scale of the tiny chamber they were in a lot better than the humans did. But that was accident. Aliens had built this city, but not *these* aliens. The observer that silently noted every move of Brabant and de Jouvenel was in no way related to the race that had constructed their jail.

That race was dead—gone without a hope of revival, leaving a planet of vacant cities. But the race to which the

rhinoceroid creature belonged was very much alive, as the human race had cause to know.

It was a Gorman.

The other survivor of the five men who had come down in the landing party was de Jouvenel, a dark, tiny man who kept to himself. He was watching Brabant with a face like a little monkey, absolutely blank, waiting.

When Brabant looked up, de Jouvenel said: "Finished? Tell me something—why do you want Marne to smile? Matter of principle, show the aliens how brave us Earthmen are?"

Brabant said regretfully: "I don't know. It was just a thought. But the less the Gormen know about us, the better chance we have to surprise them later on."

De Jouvenel looked doubtful. "What about Marne's arm?"

"I haven't set a bone in a long time, but it looks all right."

De Jouvenel nodded and, before Brabant could stop him, took out a cigarette and lit it.

Brabant scowled, but it was too late to say anything and, anyway, it was still just an idea. But Brabant observed that as the match flared, the Gorman at the door made a quick motion of some sort. Maybe he was making a note of some kind; it stood to reason that anything as curious as inhaling smoke would be worth noting. So probably it was, though the creature carried nothing that looked like pencil, paper, or any other kind of note-taking equipment.

Brabant sighed and rubbed his head. The trouble was you couldn't understand them in terms of human referents. They were aliens, the only living, intelligent race of aliens that the human race had ever discovered—to its cost—and he had to try to school his mind to think of them that way.

"Cigarette, Doc?"

Brabant shook his head, surprised. Why, de Jouvenel was getting positively chummy. Let the alien make another note about that: *Subject No. 2 does not display smoke-tropism of Subject No. 1.* Maybe it would confuse them, however minutely, and confusing them was probably the only chance the colonizing party had.

"How does it feel, Doc?"

Brabant looked up.

De Jouvenel grinned wolfishly. "I mean how does it feel to be the bug this time, instead of the eye in the microscope? You spent enough time watching us. I wondered if you liked it the other way around."

"That's my job, de Jouvenel!"

"Oh, sure, Doc. And you just love your work."

Brabant said harshly: "Evidently I'm not good at it. What did I do to bring out hostility at a time like this?"

"You didn't have to do a thing," de Jouvenel said seriously. "Not a thing. You think we like having somebody like you poke into our heads once a week for seven years? No offense, but a man could be a lot more charming than you, Doc, and we still wouldn't like him. Oh," he said, holding up his hand, "sure, we have to have somebody like you to keep us from blowing up. But we don't have to like it."

He came over closer, lowering his voice. "Forget it. Talk about something more important. That fellow over there, he's built pretty funny, but he can only look one way at a time, right? Well, how about if we work over close to him? You keep his eye on you and maybe I'll get a chance to kick hell out of him from behind."

"No."

De Jouvenel nodded. "That's what I thought, Doc, that's what I thought." He looked at Brabant for a moment, his little ape face perfectly serious, and then he strolled away.

But it was foolish—they wouldn't have a chance!

Brabant forced himself to take his mind off it. It didn't matter what de Jouvenel thought of him, at least it didn't right at this moment; what was important was that they were in trouble—not just the three of them, but the whole ship, and perhaps more than the ship.

He checked Marne's pulse and respiration, guessed they were all right, and sat back against a wall.

Here was a planet that had been perfectly empty not fifteen

years before. The first expedition had checked it carefully, had found thousands of cities and villages, and not a sign of life on any of them. The first expedition had taken a long conscientious year at its job, with cameras and tape recorders and every known recording and observing device to help them out.

Nothing.

There were the cities, but not even an animal to prowl their streets. There were forests, with a few insects, and there were fish in the sea. But the cities had been built by neither fish nor bugs, but by warm-blooded bipeds who had known engineering and electronics, who had sailed its seas and mined its ores. Of them there was no survivor. The planet was clean.

Brabant looked around the little room. It was a dollhouse, by human standards, but the people who built it hadn't been dolls; dolls can't be murdered, as they had been. There was no doubt of that now. Even when the first expedition returned to Earth, the theory had been put forth that it was the Gormen who had done it, and the only reason to doubt it was that the Gormen didn't seem to have visited that section of space. But here they were, and there was no possibility that they were here by accident. They had *known.*

The scout rocket, navigating by computer-directed charts, had come down exactly where the permanent party was supposed to meet them—the permanent party, those three volunteers who had remained on Aleph Four to await *Explorer's* return. But the permanent party wasn't there. Then—whambam, the scout rocket landed, the Gormen came pouring out of the buildings.

It hadn't been a fight. It had hardly been an ambush. They were simply overpowered. One moment they were walking toward an empty building in a deserted city and the next moment scores of fast, *fast* creatures with thick skins and small pig eyes had been all over them. Resistance had been futile. But they had tried all the same, of course. It cost Lieutenant Marne a broken femur, compounded. It had cost Crescenzi and Clites, the other two men in the landing party, a great deal more than that.

Brabant roused himself and went over to de Jouvenel. At the door, the Gorman turned his head alertly to follow.

"Look," said Brabant, "I don't want you to think I'm being arbitrary."

"Sure not, Doc," de Jouvenel grunted.

Brabant tried to be persuasive. "Maybe we'll come to a physical attack sooner or later. I don't know. But right now, no. For one thing, I'm not sure the two of us together could do him any damage."

"Oh, cut it out, Doc!" The little ape face was scowling now.

"No, I mean it. What do we know about them? How do we know what to go for? They move quick and they take a lot of punishment. Remember when we landed? Marne shot one. He shot the leg right off it, but the thing hobbled away without making a sound. It's conceivable they don't feel pain. And if they don't, their nervous system must be— Well. What I'm trying to say is, what makes you think a Gorman *can* be knocked out?"

De Jouvenel said mildly: "I bet they can be killed."

"Friend, I don't think you could even kill *me* with your bare hands."

De Jouvenel shrugged and lit another cigarette.

Brabant persisted: "Anyway, there's a chance that the captain won't send the other rocket down, since we didn't signal an all-clear. And that means we're in trouble. But if *Explorer* opts to turn around and head for Earth, at least the rest of the ship is safe. And—"

He stopped. Both of them stood up straight.

The Gorman had moved.

There was no special threat in its movement, but it was a sort of threat merely to see the thing move at last. For hours it had been standing there, its stubby little hands gripping silvery objects that might have been weapons and might have been recording devices, but were certainly unfamiliar to the men. And then, without warning, *blur* and it was halfway across the room, looking out a window, and *blur* again and it was back, opening the door.

"Steady," Brabant warned. De Jouvenel glanced at him without expression.

The Gorman held the door, and in a moment another alien came in. And behind the second Gorman, something else—a figure, bent and shambling . . .

A *human* figure.

"Good merciful God," whispered Brabant, and even de Jouvenel beside him said something sharp and prayerful.

It was a human being, all right—but just barely. The man in the doorway was a million years old; he had been dying for all of those years, and it had been at least half that long since he was fed or watered, or had been allowed rest. It was impossible that he could walk, although he was walking; it was unbelievable that he could speak. A slim fringe of filthy hair surrounded a red and crusted scalp. There was a beard, ragged and stained. He was nearly naked.

The man shambled forward, within arm's-length of Brabant and de Jouvenel, and looked blearily at them out of eyes that were red-rimmed with weeping. He opened his mouth and tried to speak.

"Ka-ka-ka-ka—" It was a stuttering babble, fighting to break through the hateful, opaque curtain that lay between himself and the sane. "Ka-ka-ka—"

De Jouvenel whispered urgently: "Doc, do you think he might be one of the guys that were left from the first trip?"

Brabant shook his head, not to say no but to say: I can't believe it.

True, it had been fifteen years since the first ship left. True, captivity in Gorman hands would probably be no rest cure. But this decrepit, destroyed hulk?

"Ka-ka-ka—" choked the stranger, weeping in rage and fear. And then he reeled closer, the wrecked eyes on them with a watery stare.

He wiped his wet beard and took a deep, sobbing breath, and forced himself to speak. "Captain Fa-Farragut?" he croaked.

Carefully, Brabant put out a hand to support the scarecrow. He said, forming huge round words with his lips as one

who speaks to a retarded child: "Captain Farragut is not here. He is back on Earth. This is the second expedition, not the first."

The old man stared and began to sway.

"Too late!" he screamed appallingly, and fell like an ancient brittle doll to the floor in front of Brabant.

Three

ROCKET NUMBER TWO RIPPED INTO THE AIR OF ALEPH FOUR with eleven persons aboard, three of them children.

Computerman Hibsen, strapped in the padded bucket before the controls, shouted and sang along with the enormous racket of the splitting air. He was enjoying himself. He had very little else to do. Piloting a rocket under power is a job for machines, not for men. The speeds were too fast; the decisions had to come too quickly. A machine could react fast enough to make the minute adjustments that meant the difference between landing and catastrophe, but not the burdened, cogitative human mind.

"Sailor, beware!"

sang Hibsen;

"Sailor, take care!
Many brave hearts
Lie asleep in the deep."

He didn't have the voice for it, either—he was a flat and nasal baritone at best—but the rockets covered all. And, as mentioned, there wasn't much else to do. There was very little to see, even, though as the rocket sliced out through the bottom of the cloud cover at the end of its thousand-mile curve, he, and he alone, caught kaleidoscope glimpses of brown and green and dirty blue. But that wasn't enough to pilot by.

In the rocket's plastic nose the only eyes that mattered, the spinning radar plates, felt the landscape below for bumps and ridges, and compared them with its built-in pattern of course and destination, constructed from the first expedition's maps. Digital relays took the signal from the radar eyes, counted briskly on their winking electronic fingers, and selected the exact increments of course and speed that would poise them, butt down, over the selected landing area.

The jets flared, flared again; the jolt set all the spring cocoons bouncing, bouncing.

"Everybody up!" brayed Hibsen, clawing at the buckles that held him in. The eight adults began to do the same.

Rae Wensley, strapped in an acceleration cocoon next to the Marne baby, reached for the little thing crying feebly.

"*That's* a good fellow," she crooned, unbuckling straps. "*Good* little fellow. Oh, nothing to *cry* about."

She never stopped talking to the child, though probably he couldn't hear—and wouldn't care if he could—and she never looked up, until she had found the sterile squeeze bottle, prepared at cast-off time and still warm enough. She uncapped it, popped up the nipple with one quick squeeze, and cradled the baby.

It stopped crying in order to feed.

Then she leaned forward to look out of the opening port, to see just where they were.

Hibsen was outside already, skipping and swearing on the smoking ground.

"Retty!" he yelled, and the red-haired crewman dropped gingerly out of the port, yowled and jumped off the area the jets had charred. "Retty, you climb a hill or a tree and look around. Colaner, stay in the ship. Try to contact Captain Serrel and report safe landing. Leeks! You and Cannon start unloading. And you girls get the kids out of the way, will you?"

Oh, it was a good time for Computerman Hibsen, with orders to give and ten persons to obey them.

Carefully, Rae Wensley handed the baby down to Mary Marne, dancing impatiently on the hot sand; and then she

followed, and, for the first time in her nineteen years, she stood on soil that had never circled Sol.

It was hot.

She hurried off it.

They were on a beach, a gray and grimy one, with water raising a small pattern of surf twenty yards away. It was hot, not just the burned sand, but the air. Aleph Four's primary radiated largely at the red end; there was heat enough, and perhaps more than enough, but the light was hardly more than a twilight sky. They should be very near to one of the deserted cities, Rae knew, but there wasn't any sign of it, only a wood of greasy, pendulous trees that came down to the sand itself.

It was Rae who counted, and Hibsen, joyously bellowing orders, and Brabant crouched over the waking, feverish husband of Mary Marne hardly a mile away, but some of the others counted a little too. Mary Marne herself was one.

Time was when Mary Marne had been Mary Davison, twenty-nine years old, a typist for the United Nations Exploration Commission and engaged to a hero of interstellar flight. The engagement was very real to her, although it had been entered into when she was only sixteen. A girl who chose to get engaged to a member of an interstellar exploration party had surely a decade of waiting to look forward to, perhaps several. It was an unrewarding prospect, but that is not an argument persuasive to sixteen-year-old minds.

So young Mary kissed her Florian good-by at the spaceport and returned to school. Time passed. School ended. Mary reached the age of twenty-two. She attended the bridal showers of her classmates, caught the bouquet at her sister's reception, practiced baby-sitting on her first two nephews. Florian's ship was then halfway through its deceleration period, on the outward leg of its trip.

Mary went to work for the Commission. It helped her to remember Florian. She became a typist and remained one; it was not her intention to make a career, only to mark time for her fiancé's return. Other girls in the secretarial pool dated and married, one by one, but not Mary. What had started as

a teen-ager's fierce attempt to mark out a claim on a grown-up way of life became a matter of obstinate pride, then of habit.

Other girls had been engaged to spacemen and, in the long years, forgot their engagements. Not Mary. Some went through an entire marriage—engagement, wedding, childbirth, divorce. Some went through more than one. But not Mary. She had promised. It did not become easier.

It became harder, for as the thirteen years dragged by, toward the end a new disturbance began to be felt; besides the mating thrust of her glands and the pressure of her fellows, there came fear. Who was this Florian whose photograph on her desk was a yellowing lie? Who was this man of thirty-one who must by now have replaced the eighteen-year old she had pledged to marry?

The thirteen years ended.

Radar sweeps from the satellites of the methane giants hunted ceaselessly for the returning ship, and they found it, a decelerating blip that took shape as the familiar tractor-trailer. Chemical rockets leaped out from them and touched it. Radio carried the message back to Earth.

Mary Marne, eight years later, cradling her baby on a stranger planet than ever Florian had seen, remembered how they had brought her the news. Before they said a word, she knew, though no one had heard of the Gormen then. That was the first brush, orbiting around a star a dozen light-years from where she stood; the exploring rocket had been destroyed, and Florian was on that rocket. The eighteen-year-old had never reached thirty-one at all.

Young Mary was hardly heartbroken—thirteen years is a long time—but she wept. She cried for nearly a month, while every TV station carried the tapes that the shattered survivors had managed to bring back, tapes of the Gorman rockets—great, squat, hideous things—tapes of Gorman weapons, and, most chilling of all, the tapes that showed the Gormen themselves.

Gormen—where had the name originated? It was as familiar throughout Earth as though that race had always been known, needing only the fact of meeting to bring the word leaping

to the tongue. There was a David Gorman on that poor, dead ship—had he named them, or had they been named for him, perhaps their first victim? Had the Gormen communicated with a crew and given their own name for themselves? There were other guesses, but none of them mattered now, even the possibly right ones. Man and Gorman had met, and met again, and each encounter was a bloody clash, and then *Explorer II* was ready to receive its crew, and she passed the test.

It wasn't, for Mary, an attempt to strike back at those who had killed her lover, for *Explorer II* was going in the opposite direction. It wasn't a desire for adventure. It was a flight. Mary fled, light-years away.

It was ironical, what there was for her at the end of the fleeing.

Rae Wensley finished helping to offload supplies. Colaner was still trying to reach the mother ship by radio, but without success. Retty had returned from his hill to report that he had spotted the city, but nothing else, and had gone back again. Hibsen, his gem-studded tunic dark with sweat, was blowing heavily, leaning against a tree.

Rae came to help Mary with the baby. Already Gia Crescenzi, whose two children were the rest of the complement of the rocket, had found something to feed them and had brought them to join Mary and the baby. The three women watched the child, concerned.

The baby was not aware that he was on a strange planet, he only knew that something was squeezing and pressing him, in a way that had never happened before, and he didn't like it. He cried fretfully and forever, now that he had finished his bottle. He slept briefly, and waked to try to lift his tiny arms, to turn his wobbly head.

Rae said sympathetically: "He isn't used to gravity, poor kid."

"Poor kid," echoed Gia Crescenzi, but she was looking at her own two.

The girl was five, the boy a year younger; in spite of the sternly enforced hours each day with the exercising machines,

they were making heavy going of trying to walk and run and jump on a planet. It didn't matter to them that the gravity that had pulled down Alexander and Napoleon alike had never touched them, that the sun that Joshua had stopped had become a dwindled and unfindable star among millions beyond the cloud cover. It mattered to them, as to the baby, that they had unwelcome *weight.* It was troublesome for a mother, but Gia Crescenzi was troubled enough already; her husband had gone with the first rocket, like Mary Marne's, the rocket that had not been heard from.

Rae thought rebelliously: At least they have a right to worry about their men. Brabant won't even give me that right. He thinks I'm just a child.

She corralled the two older children and started teaching them the fine points of walking. Then—

"What was that?" cried Gia, her voice thin with fear.

It had been a sound from the hanging trees.

Hibson jumped up. Colaner's face appeared at the rocket's port. Rae, a child at each arm, swept them close to her protectively; it had been a frightening sound.

And frightening in fact.

Mary Marne screamed.

Something was coming out of the greasy forest—a good many somethings, elephantine and gray. They came down on the party with incredible speed, a score of them in the first bunch and many more thrusting through the trees behind.

"Gormen!" bellowed Hibsen, scrabbling for a stick, a knife, anything that would be a weapon.

But there was no weapon. The tractor-trailer had had few, and all of them had gone with the first rocket.

Hibsen lunged at the Gormen barehanded, checked himself, whirled. "Colaner!" he shouted. "Blast off!"

It was a triumph of reason over instinct. Instinct said *Fight!* but there was no hope in a fight. The only hope was that miraculously the rocket might get safely off.

But it wasn't a day for miracles. The Gormen were all around now, not brutal, not cruel, merely invincible; there was a knot

of them around every human, even the children. Colaner had heard, and he did his best. Red fire roared from the rocket.

But no man could balance that ship, only the computer, and that had not been programmed for the return trip. Whatever Colaner did, it was not enough. The rocket danced and wobbled, painfully climbing. It hung crookedly overhead, singeing them all; it was like a shower of acid. The smell of crisping hair—and flesh—filled their nostrils.

And the Gormen had them all.

All but two. Not Colaner, who somehow got the rocket slashing waveringly out to sea. And not Leeks, who had been closest to the rocket and would never need to fear capture again. His cindered body flopped to the gray sand, scratched against it, lay still.

Half a mile out to sea, the rocket plunged into the water with a plume of steam and, moments later, a wild roar, as the children began to shriek.

Four

RAE WENSLEY LIMPED ALONG A RESILIENT STREET BETWEEN empty buildings, in darkness. She ached and she was frightened, but it was queerly exciting, all the same, to be walking through a city that had been built by a dead race. Beside her, Hibsen stalked angrily along, carrying one of Gia Crescenzi's children. The boy was whimpering softly. The sound caught at Rae's heart, for the child was fretfully repeating, "Mommy! Mommy!"

And his mother had made the mistake of attacking one of the Gormen.

Mary Marne panted from behind: "Look! Isn't that the other rocket?" It was something, certainly enough, something that was tall enough to loom over the rather low buildings and metallic enough to catch a few glints of light from somewhere.

"That's it," snapped Hibsen, straining to see.

They rounded a corner and there it was—the rocket, all

right, squatting silently on its skids in a broad plaza. From one of the buildings, light streamed out, but the Gormen hurried them past it, not even pausing, though one of the Gormen that had captured them shouted something in their high-pitched quacking and was answered from inside. Another building, this one smaller and isolated from those around it, showed fainter, bluer light as they approached. They were hustled inside.

Rae stumbled past a motionless Gorman at the door, blinked and cried: "It's them! Mary, your husband's here!" It was a little room, with a flaring blue light dangling from the ceiling, and Marne lay propped on one elbow, blinking up at them, in a corner of it. De Jouvenel squatted beside him, his dark face comically surprised. No one else.

Rae said to Lieutenant Marne urgently: "Where's Dr. Brabant?" But Marne had no patience for that sort of question, not just then. He pushed himself up, and Rae saw that one arm was in a sling.

"Mary!" he shouted and rushed toward them, half-crouched; he was not a tall man, but his head brushed the ceiling of that room. His wife ran to him. The baby was in one arm, but the other arm was free and she wrapped it around him in a great soundless passion of relief. Rae, watching, felt something inside her move oddly.

She caught de Jouvenel's arm. "Where's Brabant?" He looked at her and his face went all stiff and opaque. "Please!" she begged.

"He's alive," de Jouvenel said unwillingly. "Or he was an hour ago."

"Then where—"

The man's voice was hostile. "I don't know," he snapped, and brushed past her to join the others.

She wandered through the house that the Gormen had turned into a prison for them. She had seen photographs of the desecrated buildings on Aleph Four; all of the colonists had. But the photographs didn't show scale, didn't show the finicky

smallness of the rooms, didn't show the delicate daintiness of the furnishings.

There was nothing left of the builders of the houses but a few pictures, pictures of frail bipedal creatures with lemur's eyes. But they had not been gone long. Even in this damp climate, wood and paperlike objects had not had time to decay. The house they were in was three stories high, each story less than six feet from floor to ceiling, except for a few larger rooms at the back of the ground floor. All the rooms were free to the captured humans, but nothing outside. The Gorman at the door by which they had entered was only one guard; there were others, outside and on the tough but yielding roof.

But, in all truth, that was not the major preoccupation of Rae Wensley's mind. She was beginning to form a most peculiar notion of the previous inhabitants of Aleph Four. Plumbing was not a feature of their architecture. The marks of gracious living were in the rooms, but grace for them consisted in things that looked beautiful and served beautiful functions.

There was statuary—it *might* have been statuary, anyway. There were musical instruments—one a sort of tuned drum, with a molded head that produced a diatonic scale around the rim. There were pictures, some representational, some perhaps not—it was hard to tell. But there was very little else that, to Rae Wensley, marked the difference between civilization and animal existence. It was, she thought, torn between discomfort and giggling, not one of the more easily accepted hardships of space flight that nowhere in sight was there a door marked "Powder Room."

It wasn't until Mary Marne found her wandering, listened, laughed, and showed her the astonishingly convenient vegetative arrangements in the cellar that Rae's spirits improved enough to let her worry about Brabant.

When she got back to the main room, where the silent Gorman guard still stood, there was a stranger.

"Rae!" cried Hibsen. "Where've you been? Never mind! This is Sam Jaroff, Rae—from the first expedition!"

They pushed her forward. Obviously, this man needed help,

and she was the nearest thing left to a doctor, having had the practice of caring for babies in the trailer. Rae poked around in the emergency kit while the old man did his choking best to answer a thousand questions.

He was frightening, she thought, frightening! He had eaten poorly for a long time. Massive diet deficiencies were obvious in his sparse hair, his dry and crusted skin, even the weeping old eyes. The only cure for that was rest and food, Rae thought worriedly, reading labels, but probably some vitamin concentrates would help.

While she was working, the Marne baby woke long enough to scream.

Mary hurried to feed it; the Gorman at the door looked silently and, *blur,* he was standing over them to peer down at the little red face. It was like a carved thing, watching; then, without a sign, it went *blur* to the door again and stood waiting.

Sam Jaroff twisted restlessly under Rae's hands, saw the Gorman and screamed thinly. It paid no attention. He gasped: "Sorry, miss!"

Hibsen looked at the girl and shook his head. "He's had it rough," he said without humor.

But the old man heard. "Rough?" He sat up. "Every day I wished I was dead. Skinner was the lucky one."

"Ssh," soothed Rae, pressing him down, but the man shook her off; he wanted to talk.

Hibsen and de Jouvenel helped him to lean against a wall. He said: "There were the three of us, Chapman, Skinner and me. We were here a year and a half. Then we saw the ship."

He breathed hard for a moment, the rheumy old eyes blinking. "Skinner saw it," he said. "He was the radioman and he picked something up that he couldn't read. Well, he said so—but we didn't believe him, you know, not at first. We never heard of Gormen. I never heard the name until Dr. Brabant said it. We didn't know there was anything alive in space except people, and—

"Well, we learned." He coughed hoarsely, looked up into Rae's eyes and quickly covered his mouth. "Sorry," he mum-

bled. "Anyway, after Skinner claimed he got these signals, we kept a watch and maybe we saw the ship. I guess we did. There was something, and we thought it might be a meteorite, but it must have been a Gorman rocket. But we didn't know for sure, and then nothing happened. For a long time. It's all in the log, in case you want to read it. I guess it's still around someplace. Not in this building, of course. But the Gormen have that log now, and—

"Well, anyway. Nothing happened, like I say, for a long time. Two years. We put crops in, down by the creek, but they didn't do well. Root vegetables died. Carrots, potatoes, turnips—the carrots would grow down about an inch and a half, and then nothing. By the time they were big enough to eat, they were all knotted up, not worth eating. It was like the topsoil was too thin, you know? Like somebody living in a development house where the builder just put in enough to make the first spring's lawn and— But it wasn't that, though. There's plenty of topsoil, but below the surface, nothing lived. I thought about it for years," he said earnestly, "and, you know, I'm damned if I understand it. At first I thought it was too much moisture, but—

"Sorry," he said, coughing and wiping his face. "I kind of forgot how to talk. Anyway, the crops didn't work out so well. Well, then. The aliens came back. That thing we saw, it must've been a ship, and they must've spotted us. Where were they those two years? I don't know. They've got a kind of a camp on Bes. That's where I was for a couple years. Maybe they were there all the time, even when Captain Farragut was here. But we didn't see them, until—"

Jaroff stopped and wept silently.

Hibsen said harshly: "Look, you don't have to tell us all this right now! There's plenty of time!"

"I want to," said Jaroff, rubbing his watery eyes. "And are you sure about plenty of time? I'm not. There might not be any time at all." He twisted uncomfortably against the wall, his eyes on the silent Gorman at the door.

He said: "They came at night. We were all asleep. No

guards, nothing like that. Well, who would think we needed them? But the noise should have woke us up. It didn't, though. What woke me was—was Chapman screaming.

"He wasn't in the house with Skinner and me," Jaroff explained carefully. "We'd had a kind of—not a fight, but we weren't getting along so well. He'd lost one of Skinner's books, see, and so Skinner wouldn't lend him the ukulele and Chapman—

"It doesn't matter. But Chapman moved out and set up his own place in one of the buildings across the street. The red one. We called it the House of Morgan. There was a little inlaid thing on the ceiling and it was gold, and Skinner called it that, and—

"The Gormen went there first. We woke up, hearing him screaming, and we came running—

"Chapman was still alive," Jaroff said slowly. "Oh, he lived about two years after that. He even went to Bes with me. I didn't see him much, but after he died I saw him. They used him for dissection. I guess they wanted to—to—"

Jaroff stopped and looked at the floor for a moment. Then, "They hurt me a lot," he said, very softly, "testing my reflexes and like that. But they didn't kill me, although I asked them. I begged them.

"Skinner they killed, right there in the House of Morgan. He had a gun, and he shot six of them first.

"So then I was on Bes for—Dr. Brabant figured it out for me. About ten years, after Chapman died. Eating mush, and all the time they were watching me. Sometimes they wouldn't bother me for a couple of weeks, and sometimes the mush tasted funny and I got sick. They were trying things, you see. They tried a lot of things. Sometimes they hurt me." He rubbed the fine lacework of white scar tissue on his arm.

"And then they brought me back here. It was about a month ago, and I didn't know why, but maybe I know why now. I guess they saw *Explorer II* on their radar, if they have radar. Or perhaps you sent a message and they got it. I don't know.

"But I'm pretty sure they knew you were coming, and that's

why they brought me right back here. I think they were going to use me for bait, maybe. Put me out in the open, with a lot of them all around, hiding. But they didn't have to. They—"

He began to sob.

Hibsen stood up. "That's enough," he growled. "Let him alone." He turned to the Gorman guard.

But de Jouvenel's hand was on his arm and, after a moment, Hibsen looked down at the little dark man and nodded.

"All right," Hibsen said. "I'm not going to do anything."

Rae was half asleep on the floor, the baby snoring in quick light breaths beside her, when she felt Hibsen's hand on her shoulder.

"Council of war," he said. "Come on, Rae, wake up. The Gorman's gone."

She looked at the door; it was true. The room was almost completely dark, but enough light flickered in from the Gorman buildings across the square to show shadowy figures, the walls, the scant furnishings. The Gorman wasn't there.

"Wake up," said Hibsen more loudly, stirring Mary Marne and her husband with his toe as they lay side by side nearby. "De Jouvenel, you awake? Retty?"

They all came awake at once.

Hibsen said: "Retty, stay by the door. We don't know how long that thing's going to be away. Keep an eye open." He turned to Marne. "Lieutenant, you rank me. Do you want to take charge?"

Marne shook his head. "I'm not much use with this arm. Anyway, it doesn't matter right now, does it?"

"It might," said Hibsen. "There's our ship out there and we're not guarded. Well? What about it?"

Rae caught her breath. "But it can't carry all of us!"

"It can carry some of us," Hibsen corrected. Sam Jaroff, propped on his elbow at the fringe of the group, moaned softly. "That's right," Hibsen brutally clarified. "Some of us would have to stay behind."

Rae Wensley said sharply: "That's not fair! What about the

children?" Hibsen shook his head. "And Sam Jaroff? And what about Dr. Brabant? He isn't even here—how can we go off and leave him?"

"He left us."

"Now that's a—"

"Shut up, Rae!" Hibsen's voice snapped like a mule-skinner's whip. "Don't talk about what's fair. This is a matter of survival." He moved quickly to the window, nodded and returned. "The rocket's right there. There's no Gorman in sight, though I can hear them across the square. I can get into that rocket without being seen, I promise. Five minutes and I'll have a course set on the computers that will take us close enough to *Explorer's* orbit. But it won't be accurate, so I'll need reserve power for maneuvering. That means—" he hesitated—"not more than three people."

"Three—"

"Three people alive," he cut in grimly, "is better than all of us right here dead! And Captain Serrell hanging up there, fat and happy—until the Gormen get around to locating him and knocking the whole ship off!"

"No," said Rae Wensley positively. "Not without Brabant."

"The devil with Brabant! He went off with the Gormen. If he likes them so well, he can stay!"

She shook her head. Her mind was closed; she wasn't prepared to listen. She said: "Don't you see? When he comes back, he'll have more information for us. What right have you to think he had anything to say about whether he went with them or not? And certainly he'll use every chance he gets to find out their weak spots. They—"

"They haven't got any," said Sam Jaroff's hoarse, thin voice, and he caught her arm. "Listen to him, girl! I'm scared, but it doesn't matter how scared I am—he's right. Let him get away! We're all dead here anyway."

"Right," said Hibsen. "Now let's get down to it. Rae, you're overruled. De Jouvenel, stand by while I try to make it to the scout rocket. Once I'm inside, if any Gormen wander along, you'll have to—"

"Hibsen!" hissed Retty piercingly from the door. "Come here and take a look!"

All of them came crowding around the windows and the open door, looking out onto the little square.

Gormen were out there.

There were at least a dozen of them, and they were moving around the first scout rocket, crouched cold and silent on its skids.

"We'll have to wait," said Hibsen, his eyes fixed on the aliens. "Maybe they'll go away."

"They're not going to go away," whispered Rae. "Look, Hibsen! What are they doing?"

The squat quick things were in and out of the rocket's port. Like ponderous jack rabbits, they hopped up into the belly of the little ship and those inside began handing things out to those on the ground. And the things they were handing out—Glittering metal instrumentation. Black slabs of panel mounting. Copper entrails of wire.

"They're taking out the computers!" cried Lieutenant Marne, holding his splinted arm. "Hibsen, do you know what that means? We wouldn't be able to fly the rocket now, even if we could get to it!"

"That's right," snarled Hibsen. "Pretty clever, eh? And what do you suppose gave them that idea?"

He turned a face of fury on Rae Wensley. She couldn't help it; she recoiled from the rage he showed.

"That's pretty smart," he said. "They know a lot about us, don't they? And there's only one place they could have learned it—from your pet headshrinker, Brabant!"

Five

ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT, SPUTTERING ELECTRIC FLARES ILLUminated the square outside the building where the humans were captive.

Under the flickering light, the gray Gormen worked to pile

fragments of control mechanism onto a high-wheeled cart. It was a maddening sight for Hibsen; he knelt by the window as long as he could, feeling every hammer blow on his own flesh. But not even rage can sustain wakefulness forever, and in time he slept.

Rae Wensley woke him in the morning. She had got up to the baby's crying, fed him, changed him and put him in a corner, a tilted table protecting him from being stepped on. Hibsen heard and came instantly awake.

He sat up, looked around once and scowled. Outside, the square was empty of life. Cold damp air rolled in the open door. Gray light was coming up.

"I see they're through," Hibsen whispered bitterly, nodding toward the square.

But Rae was more preoccupied with other problems. She had discovered there were only three more sterile bottles of formula for the baby, plus what little was in his mother's breasts. Mary Marne's intentions were good, but she had not been able to nurse the child. It was absolutely essential to find a substitute.

She said as much to Hibsen. He shrugged. "Three bottles is a whole day, isn't it? We'll see."

"And we're out of diapers."

He got up and walked away. "Ask your friend Brabant," he said over his shoulder. "He's on good terms with the local authorities."

He left the girl angry, but that was the way he wanted her to be, angry. Anger is too powerful a force to be confined; it bursts out and drenches whatever object is convenient. If he left her angry enough, perhaps some of it would erupt at the headshrinker.

And that was fair and just, Hibsen considered, because he was at least half sincere in saying that he believed Brabant had sold out to the Gormen. What's more, it served his ends. There was still the chance of escape—somehow. And it was going to be a long, lonely voyage back to Earth, and it would be much less lonely if Rae Wensley came along.

Without the headshrinker.

The Gorman was back inside the door again, watching, watching. De Jouvenel, dunking a cake of compressed cereal into cold black coffee, said dourly: "I wanted to jump that thing. Brabant wouldn't let me. What do you think, Hibsen?"

Hibsen grinned tightly. "I think—" He glanced at Rae Wensley and winked. "I think you better hurry up with that cup, Joe. Others are waiting."

Rae was trembling. *"Stop it!* I know you don't like Dr. Brabant, but this is no way to talk! You've got no right to assume he's doing anything wrong. You weren't even here when the Gormen took him away!"

"He didn't struggle very hard," de Jouvenel observed.

Hibsen shook his head. "No, Joe, that's no way to talk. We've got no right to assume anything wrong." And he winked again.

He got up and drifted over to the window, well pleased. Out there was scout rocket one, squatting patiently. Maybe, thought Hibsen, maybe yet—

But it was out of the question. They couldn't possibly fly that one. Not without the built-in computing autopilots. But there was the chance—maybe, possibly—that they could find and reinstall the computing mechanisms. Or something. Anyway—

"Hey," said Hibsen, "come here a minute, Marne. What's that?"

He pointed across the square. There was a building, more or less like the others, but light glinted from something inside it.

"Looks like gold," de Jouvenel ventured. "Jaroff, is that the place you call the House of Morgan?"

The old man limped over. "That?" he said, squinting. "No. The one with the pink roof, that's the House of Morgan. That's where they got Skinner, you know. When they first landed."

"Well, then, what the devil is it?"

"That's their ship," Jaroff said wearily, and dragged himself back.

Hibsen caught his breath. *"Their* ship."

Then he stood straight, his head nearly brushing the ceiling. "All right!" he said in a harsh tone. "That's the answer! They've messed up our rocket—we'll use theirs!" He looked around at the circle of doubting faces. "What's the matter now? Don't you believe I can fly it?"

"No," said a voice from the door, "I don't believe you can."

They all turned. There was Brabant, two Gormen behind him, standing in the door.

Silence for a second.

Then, "Come in, Doc," said Hibsen, "come right in. We've been wanting to talk to you. Bring your friends, if you like. They're just as welcome as you are."

Brabant came in, glancing at Rae, but his face was impassive.

Hibsen breathed on the star sapphire in his left lapel and burnished it on his other sleeve. It was a habit of his; it made him feel a little more comfortable in situations of strain. He said politely: "Did you have a nice time, Doc?"

"Not very."

"That's too bad," said Hibsen, shaking his head in regret. "I guess they just don't know how to treat a guest. Right, Jaroff?" The old man looked dimly away. "Well, when you came in, you had some comments to make on my idea, didn't you, Doc? You said I couldn't fly the Gorman ship."

"And you can't."

"Mind telling me why?"

"Because," Brabant said, "you're not a Gorman. You ought to know that much, Hibsen, being a computerman! Why do you think they pulled the course-computers out of the scout rocket?"

"As a matter of fact," Hibsen said, "we were wondering about that, Dr. Brabant."

"Because they don't need them, that's why! We do, but they don't—that's the way Gormen are built."

Hibsen said angrily, knowing it was untrue, unable to keep from saying it: "I can do anything they can do! Whose side are you on?"

Brabant blazed: "You fool! Do you think you can fly a

rocket without computers? You can't! No man can as much as balance a rocket on its tail—it takes a machine to do that. And the machines aren't there. The Gormen never had them in their own ship, so naturally they've taken them out of ours! Curiosity? I don't know. It's as good an explanation as any."

He got up and pointed out the window. The three impassive aliens watched him with their eyes, but didn't move.

"Look out there! See those buildings down the square? They're full of Gormen! I guarantee you can't take a single step out of this building without one of them being right on your back. They're *fast*. But even if you could, then what? It doesn't matter which ship you go for, our scout or theirs; it needs a machine to fly it. You've all been in rockets at takeoff. You know what happens. A couple of seconds of full blast, and they haven't even moved yet.

"Then they begin to lift—oh, maybe a couple of inches in the next second. In the fifth second, they can gain perhaps a foot or two. But they have to get upward of fifty or sixty miles an hour to become aerodynamically stable—and that takes *fifteen seconds*. And in those fifteen seconds, friend, you can be dead a dozen times. Anything—*anything*—can tip the ship, just a fraction of a second of arc, but when it begins to tip, it has to be corrected—not when you get around to it, but *right now*. Are you fast enough for that, Hibsen? You're not. I'm not. No human being is."

He turned from the window. "As far as we're concerned, those ships might as well not be there."

Hibsen stood looking angrily after Brabant as the psychologist walked away, over to the wall where their scant rations lay heaped, and selected a biscuit.

Absently Hibsen rubbed his sapphire, unable to take his eyes off Brabant. No one spoke, and that annoyed Hibsen; what right did the headshrinker have to come in and demolish their plans? All right, he thought irritably, maybe it wasn't going to be easy. But surely there was a way. There *had* to be a way. Otherwise that star sapphire would wind up in some

rhinoceros-skinned alien's pocket, a toy for the kiddies, maybe, instead of a couple of decades of happy living for Robert Hibsen, Esq.

De Jouvenel said across the room: "What's the matter, Doc? Didn't your friends feed you?"

Brabant, chewing, said stolidly: "No." But his expression was strained. Hibsen noticed and was maliciously amused. Why, Doc's worried too, he thought.

Brabant looked at the half biscuit, uneaten, in his hand, stopped chewing and put it down. "Well, we'll have to do better than this. I've arranged for supplies to be brought out of the scout rocket."

"What?" Rae Wensley demanded. "How—"

Brabant's expression changed slightly, queerly, almost to a look of embarrassment. "I've made some arrangements with them," he said, his voice not very loud. "I—I'll need your cooperation—all of you—to help carry them out."

De Jouvenel laughed without humor.

Rae asked sharply: "What arrangements?"

"The only kind that are open to me." Brabant said steadily. "Please, Rae. Don't act as if I had any choice or—"

"*What* arrangements?"

Hibsen saw, with more pleasure than he had expected to find in anything that day, in that place, that Rae's face was filled with apprehension and the faint foreboding of anger. Well, he thought, *well!* Maybe the kid was getting smart!

Brabant said shortly: "I made an even trade. Information for our lives. They want to study us—we let them. In exchange, they let us feed ourselves and they promise not to—to—" He faltered, looking at Sam Jaroff.

"They *promise!*" Rae Wensley cried. "What's the matter with you?"

"There's no choice," Brabant protested. "How do you know, maybe with our cooperation they'll learn enough so that they can find a way to get along with the human race! After all, we're as much freaks to them as they to us—they didn't expect to find creatures with the power of star flight any more than we did! Psychologically, we're a complete mystery to

them—as much as they are to us—and that's my department, of course. So I've agreed to—"

De Jouvenel snapped: *"To help them conquer Earth."*

"No! To—"

"Don't lie, Brabant!" shouted Marne, his splinted arm forgotten, shouldering his way forward. "Giving aid and comfort to the enemy is treason! You louse, your skin is worth a lot to you, isn't it? But it's worth less to us! You know what treason means?"

"Shut up!" said Brabant. "You don't have a choice. The Gormen—"

"Oh, but we do, headshrinker," interrupted Hibsen at last. He pushed Marne and de Jouvenel aside to face Brabant. "Our choice is cooperation or death—your death, Brabant! And don't think we can't kill you!"

Brabant stood quietly looking at him for a second, then nodded, his expression bleak. "Yes," he said, "I thought you'd get around to that. But you're wrong there too, Hibsen. You can't kill me. The Gormen won't let you."

"They'll never know! Some day when you're not expecting it—"

"They already know," Brabant said, not raising his voice. "Didn't Jaroff tell you? Every last one of them speaks English."

Six

BRABANT AND HIS TWO GORMAN COMPANIONS HAD GONE, taking Sam Jaroff with them. It had not been a pleasant departure; the old man had screamed terribly, waking the baby, upsetting the orphaned Crescenzi children. But will he, nill he—he had gone, hardly reassured even in part by Brabant's sworn promise that he wouldn't be hurt.

Just as Rae got the two children calm enough to consider a nap, a party of Gormen came rapidly, silently in. Speak English or not, their purpose was not conversation. They fanned

out and swiftly, without pause or consultation, began going through every single article of food, clothing and equipment in the room.

"Hibsen!" cried Rae at the inner door. "All of you, come here! They're up to something!"

The men came hurrying down and clotted at the doorway, indecisive, but there was nothing for them to do. The aliens didn't touch any person; it was only the inanimate possessions of the party that interested them. And those they went through with the meticulous care of monkeys preening their mates for salt.

"They're searching us," Hibsen said. "Looking for weapons, I guess. Well, that's a laugh! I wish we had some for them to find."

But the Gormen drew a broader line than his. A steel rule that could conceivably be filed to a point, the single glass nursing bottle that Mary had somehow acquired among the one-use plastics (it could be shattered, perhaps), everything that might have an edge or produce a bang was found and confiscated.

"They're thorough enough," Hibsen said bitterly. "All right, let them go ahead. There's nothing we can do about it anyway—now." But they weren't waiting for his permission; they finished their job and stood briefly at the door.

For the first time, Rae Wensley heard one of them speak. It was a thin rabbity squeal, too faint to make much of an impression, but it was clearly a language. There was question and answer, and then half the party left, carrying their few trophies. . . .

And the other three came purposefully toward Rae.

She screamed. She couldn't help it; it was too sudden—so sudden that she couldn't stop the scream and barely had time to start it; so sudden that she couldn't hear the sudden shouts from the men, or see how two of the Gormen interposed themselves—fast, fast!—between her and the men, while the other picked her up, as quick, as brisk, as carelessly as a merry-go-round rider snatching the brass ring. Half a second,

it seemed, and she had barely caught her breath to scream again and she was already outside, the other Gormen a solid barrier at the door behind her.

She was lugged across the square and into a building. Squeaking Gormen were all over the building, more than a score of them, surely, but she didn't have a chance to count or to conjecture on what they were doing, she was carried so swiftly and carelessly up a flight of stairs. The alien who carried her made no sound. However rapidly one foot descended on the tread above the other, it was placed just *there*, with just the right force; it didn't stamp, it didn't stumble. She could hear, from the floor above, a human voice, droning a long steady stream, growing louder as she approached.

The Gorman dumped her upright on the floor and vanished, as silent descending the stairs as he had been coming up.

Brabant was in the room. So was Sam Jaroff—it was his voice. He sat half-reclining on an improvised chair, his eyes closed, talking endlessly.

Rae opened her mouth, but Brabant, frowning, shook his head, held a finger to his lips. He seemed mildly surprised to see her, but not very; he didn't, in fact, seem interested in her, only in Jaroff.

"—the one that had a green thing on his shoulder," Jaroff was saying. "A kind of an emblem with three leaves—only not leaves, but sort of swirly things. Like the way fire is drawn coming out of a pinwheel, spinning back. And he was heavier than the other one—about ten per cent, I'd say, or almost; and when they cut my arm, he used both hands, but the other only used his left. The little one in the green room, though, used his right when he put the electrodes around my arm. The thing about *him* was the little box he carried, gold, with eleven white dots and two red ones on the outside, four white in a line, then—"

Jaroff droned on. It was very queer of Dr. Brabant, Rae thought, catching her breath, to be practicing deep recall on the old man in front of the Gormen.

She looked around the room. It was larger than any of those in the house the Gormen had given them for a prison, and it contained things she couldn't recognize but that looked out of place—black metallic things, gold things; Gorman things, most likely. This building was obviously their headquarters, or a part of it. It had a sour reek that, she realized, had been in her nostrils for a long time. She'd thought of it as the smell of Aleph Four, but now she began to wonder. Perhaps it was a Gorman smell.

Then she saw something that was not Gorman.

It was black, but its insides were glass, steel and copper; it had come from the scout rocket. The parts were here! Joy swelled inside her. They were here. Brabant had saved them. No doubt he had a plan. And—

She looked more carefully, and all that was here was a tape recorder, part of the radio equipment, and a few cells from the power pack. Something Brabant was using, no doubt, in whatever it was he was doing. But it wasn't what they needed to make that ship fly.

"—after Skinner died," Jaroff was continuing. "Then I was sick for a long time, because of the greenish lumps in the mush, I guess. There were more of them than there were of the purple later on, and they were a little bigger. While I was feverish, the rhino from the green room came eight times and—"

There was a murmur from one of the Gormen and Brabant said, cheerfully enough: "All right, Jaroff. Snap out of it."

The old man woke, blinked, saw the Gormen, and quailed. "Don't worry," Brabant reassured him. "That's all for today. You can go back to the others now." Jaroff, trembling, walked hesitantly to the door of the room and paused. "Down the stairs. Go ahead. One of the Gormen down there will convoy you to the others. Nothing to be afraid of."

Brabant watched him out of sight, then turned to Rae.

"Well," he said, "I asked them to get Mary Marne, but I suppose one human female looks like another to them. Or maybe my description wasn't so good."

"Sorry."

"Oh, that's all right," said Brabant. He beckoned to her. "Over here. You're next."

It wasn't the most attractive invitation Rae Wensley had ever had, but there wasn't any choice. She sat where he ordered her.

"Let's see," he said thoughtfully, glancing at the six silent aliens. "I guess we'll start you off with knee jerks. Put these on, Rae." He handed her a set of earphones and bent to tie something with a wire attached to her knee. "Easy," he protested as she jerked away. "This is science."

Self-consciously, Rae put the earphones on. He was bright and cheerful enough, she thought angrily. How *could* he? An hour before, he was being called the worst name in the vocabulary of the human race—a traitor to humanity itself—and now he might have been back on *Explorer II*, light-years from the nearest solid body, giving her the regular psychological check.

"I thought," he said chattily, "that we were going to have to hear Jaroff's entire life history among the Gormen, second by second. Thank heaven they got tired." He nodded toward the silent watchers.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked coldly.

"Why," he said, "suit yourself. It doesn't much matter; this is learning time, Rae." He hesitated. "Come to think of it, yes, there is something I want you to do on the conscious level. The subconscious will take care of itself."

He slipped a reel onto the tape recorder.

"Here," he said, "is a reading of letters of the alphabet, read by me. They aren't in A-B-C order but random, or as random as I could make them. What I intend to do with you is conditioning."

"How?"

"The key sentence," he said, "is 'Mary had a little lamb.' I want you to respond to the letters in that sentence with a knee-jerk, not to any other. Simple? You'll listen to my voice on the recorder, and every time I say one of the letters in

that sentence, you'll get a little patellar shock. Not much, but enough to make you twitch. It's elementary enough—Pavlov was doing much more complicated things with dogs a long time ago. And what I want you to do is to repeat the letter you hear, out loud."

"I don't like it."

Brabant grinned tightly. "This is orders from headquarters," he said, and nodded at the six Gormen. "But it won't be painful. Now—"

He turned the switch.

The tape recorder obediently began to whisper the garbled alphabet in her ear.

"K . . .

"Z . . .

"R." Brabant, listening on another set, pressed a switch. It was only a little tickling tingle. It startled the girl, but she had to admit that Brabant was right—it didn't hurt. It was, if anything, even less painful than the tap of a doctor's rubber mallet; but it served the same purpose. The toe of her crossed leg involuntarily twitched an inch and a half.

"Good girl," Brabant applauded quickly, as the tape continued to spin.

"D," she heard in the earphones. *Shock.* Again the quick involuntary twitch.

"S . . .

"U . . .

"M." *Shock.*

It went on like that for a good many minutes. Then there was a quick squealing sound from one of the Gormen.

Brabant snapped the switch.

"All right," he said, suddenly morose, "the peanut gallery is getting tired of this particular entertainment. We'll do more of this some other time. Right now—" he hesitated again. "Right now, I think we'd better put you under. Lean back, Rae."

"Hypnosis?" She was startled and fearful. "But—wait a minute! I don't like—"

"Easy," he soothed. "I give you my word, nothing's going to happen. It's just the same sort of thing Jaroff was doing, that's all. So relax, Rae. Relax and rest. Your eyes are getting heavy. . . .

Rae Wensley swam up out of a confused dream. "All right, girl," Brabant was saying, "time to wake up. It's all over."

She sat up quickly, staring around, her mind chaotic. Five of the Gormen were gone; the sixth, or perhaps it was a totally new one, stood idly near them, patiently waiting.

"Let's go," said Brabant. "You're through for the day. I want to get back to the others."

Rae pulled herself together and went out of the room with Brabant, stooping slightly to avoid the lintel of the door. She was confused, full of puzzlement, and oddly tired. Hypnosis was nothing new to her; it was one of the tools of Brabant's trade. But she wondered what the purpose of the demonstration had been . . . what the silent watching Gormen had made of it . . . and, most of all, what was going on in Brabant's mind.

"All right, we're ready," said Brabant to one of the Gormen below, and the creature glided silently close to them, dogging them out of the building and across the square toward the human jail . . . or cage. It was a gray day, damp and hot.

Brabant said, glancing at the girl: "Thanks. You did fine."

"What did I do?"

He grinned. "Well," he said, guiding her across the threshold of the Gorman headquarters, "you are helping me prove a point. You see, the Gormen don't have any subconscious."

Rae asked stiffly: "So?"

"So they're a very different breed indeed, Rae. There isn't anything that sinks down into the Gorman almost-forgotten, and then turns up as a neurosis, or tic, or *déjà vu*. A Gorman doesn't say: 'It's on the tip of my tongue, but I can't quite get it out.' It's always there for him."

"Is that why you told Hibsen they were better than we are?"

"In that sense, yes, they are. Without a subconscious, they

don't have most of the other trappings that go with a multi-layered mind. They respond fast because there's nothing to get in their way. They don't have a psychic censor. There isn't anything in their minds that interrupts the thought-and-action sequence. They don't question, they don't doubt, they aren't built to do anything like that. If they knew a thing, they know it; if they don't, they just find it out. Oh, they're curious —that, my dear, is why we're still alive."

"Thank heaven for that much," said the girl, and frowned. "Then does that have something to do with the way their ships are built?"

Brabant nodded. "We need computers for rocket piloting —we aren't fast enough to make the split-second, always-right little decisions that mean the difference between a routine landing and a gory explosion. Computers are fast enough to handle the load. And so are those boys. I'd say," he went on earnestly, "that if our friend here—" he nodded at the silent gray alien pacing them—"wanted to hop in that rocket right now and take off, he could do it, given about a minute to figure out the controls. Of course, someone would have to make sure the tanks were filled and so on—and if anything went wrong with the automatic mixers and the other stuff in the combustion system, he wouldn't be any better at fixing them than you or I. He isn't *smarter* than we.

"But he is faster," said Brabant, and checked himself.

Behind them, soft footsteps were rapidly shuffling across the deserted square. Rae turned, and Brabant caught her hand.

"Careful," he warned, and she could see that he was worried. It was surprising, but almost pleasurable; at least he wasn't on *totally* easy terms with the Gormen! But Rae was worried too, at the same time; six Gormen were coming toward them at a sort of high-speed waddle, the shambling, distance-devouring gait of the elephant in a hurry. The aliens passed Rae and Brabant by without a glance and disappeared into the jail.

"Come on," said Brabant urgently, and hurried after them. Their own Gorman guard easily kept pace with them, with-

out the appearance of hurry and without a sound. They reached the door and looked inside . . .

Mary Marne knelt bent over her baby, asleep in a crude plaited cradle de Jouvenel had made. She looked up, sprang to her feet.

Twittering faintly to each other, two of the Gormen grabbed her.

Mary gasped with fear. "Please!" she moaned, but they held her fast, and another Gorman's squat hands reached out for her. Snap, snap; it opened the fasteners of her blouse; skillfully, almost cruelly, it slid the zipper of her shorts. It was assault; it was like a crude and perverted rape, the three of them, nothing like human, disrobing the blonde Earth girl —it was a tradition of literature; and, for Mary Marne, it was terror and shame. They stripped her naked as a newborn in less time than Rae, standing helplessly by, could believe; and they poked her, palpated her, prodded her and scrutinized every pore.

The Crescenzi children began to scream, and Mary's husband heard. He came running from the back room.

"Sweet heaven!" he yelled and, hardly pausing at the door, threw himself on the Gormen. But fast as he was, the Gormen were sufficiently faster—more than sufficiently; he didn't have a chance. They were between him and his writhing wife before he was through the door; there were six of them, and though three were busy with Mary, the other three were more than enough to handle Marne, and Rae Wensley, and the others who came racing into the room. Marne shouted frantic oaths; they had as much effect as his fists and teeth.

Rae felt Brabant grab her, draw her back. "Marne!" he yelled. "Get a grip on yourself, man! They're not hurting Mary!"

Marne screamed incoherently. He kicked futilely at the alien who had him, sobbed, and glared at Brabant. "You rat! What the devil do you mean, they're not—"

And then he stopped, panting for breath. He saw it was true, or true enough. Shame her, discomfort her, strip her naked for everyone to see—yes, all of those things; but that

was the extent of the menace in what the Gormen did. They were like children with a kitten. They poked and felt and flexed, but if they gave pain, it was not for the sake of the pain, but an accident of curiosity.

Marne bellowed: "Mary, are you all right?"

The girl suddenly relaxed. "I—think so. It's kind of—ouch, they pinch—embarrassing. But I don't think they're going to —to kill me or anything."

Marne howled without words. But it was only his husbandly pride and anger now; it was clear that the Gormen's purpose, for the moment at least, was limited to examination.

Brabant said: "That's better, Marne. I rather thought that sooner or later they would want a good look at the comparative anatomy of the female of the species. Though I didn't think it would be quite so public."

Marne cried hoarsely: "Damn you, Brabant! Which side are you on?"

Brabant only nodded, his expression opaque and suddenly absent-minded, like a man not bothering to hear something that doesn't really matter. "I only came around to pick out another subject for my own little studies. Let's see," he said, looking casually around the room. "I think I'd better take—"

But he didn't get to say, just then, who it was he had selected. The Gormen finished with the person of Mary Marne. They set here down on her feet—not roughly, not gently, merely quickly—and returned her clothes. Then, ignoring her, they twittered briefly at each other and started without pause for her baby.

It was the first time a human had ever caught a Gorman off guard.

The little knot of men, already on edge, didn't stop to think or argue. They jumped, without warning. And the first Gorman was bowled over before he could raise his stubby hands to protect himself. There was a loud, shrill twittering from all the aliens, the most noise Rae had ever heard them make,

and roars of sudden rage and triumph from the men. The other Gormen, the ones not immediately involved, reached quickly into pouches in their thick skins—for what, Rae could only guess, but the guess was frightening. It might have been death and devastation right then, if those stubby hands had come out with guns—

Brabant shouted frantically: "Wait, you fools! Hold it! They won't hurt the baby! They only want to examine it!"

Maybe it wouldn't have stopped the men, but it slowed them down. The Gormen needed no more.

The alien that had been hurled to the floor bounced up again like a ball; the others knotted together, poised.

The men drew back.

The brief rebellion was over. But all the humans stood there, eyes burning with anger, while the Gormen picked the child up, stripped it as quickly and efficiently as they had its mother.

The baby screamed. Well, babies do scream when they are awakened suddenly; it doesn't mean pain, only surprise. And indeed the aliens were oddly gentle with him. Where they had left purplish bruises on Mary's pale skin, they were tender with the infant.

Aliens, monsters, call them whatever you like, Rae Wensley thought, it was clear that they knew the difference between an adult and a newborn.

It took very little time; then he was back in his plaited crib, still naked but no longer crying very much, and the Gormen, with a few twitters among themselves, were gone.

The atmosphere around Dr. Brabant had turned ugly.

He didn't seem to notice. He was staring thoughtfully at a blank wall, as though all of this were really not happening, as though he were pondering ink-blots in a study back on Earth. He seemed preoccupied, Rae thought, and somehow faintly pleased.

But all he said at last was: "Well, so much for that. Meanwhile, I've got work to do for our friends. Oh, one thing. You

aren't restricted to this place any more. You can wander around outside if you like—though you'll have company, of course."

Seven

SEVERAL LIGHT-SECONDS AWAY, AND GETTING FARTHER ALL THE time, Captain Serrell hung at the conn-room periscope, watching the tangled cocoon of steel cable that linked the trailer to its tractor.

Steel is elastic. In free-fall, the stretched cables had a tendency to snap back, not much, but enough to start the nine-hundred-foot tractor and the larger, lighter trailer moving slowly back toward each other, kinking the cables, bringing the radioactive reactor nozzles dangerously close.

"Take it easy, Lanny!" the captain ordered impatiently. "You're getting too damned close to the hot zone!"

Young Lanny, aggrieved, said over the radio: "Sorry, Captain." But he had known perfectly well what he was doing. Captain Serrell, through the periscope, watched the space-suited boy swing his pusher around and ease the ponderous mass out again, toward the limit of its tether. His very posture showed annoyed dignity.

Captain Serrell sighed and cranked the periscope around again to look at Aleph Four. His nerves were on edge. Lanny Davis was a good boy—man, the captain corrected himself; Lanny was twenty-one now. He had been only twelve when *Explorer II* began to swim slowly away from its orbit around the orbiting Earth, untangling its nearly Ptolemaic web of cycles and epicycles by craft and immaculate navigation as it set course for the star system that included the habitable satellite, Aleph Four. But now he was a man, and *Explorer II* circled Aleph's primary itself.

It was a singularly helpless feeling, Captain Serrell told himself, scanning the featureless clouds, to be drawing farther and farther away from his two scout rockets down there. It couldn't be helped. *Explorer* didn't have the massive thrust

it would have needed to risk an orbit around the satellite itself, or even around Aleph, the Jupiter-sized planet that was first out from its primary.

Too crowded, too many bodies clutching at the weak tractor-trailer combination. If incautiously they had blundered too close to one of them, that might have been the end for the whole ship. And therefore, doubtless, of the colony, for without the vast stores aboard the mother ship, yet to be ferried down, the colonists would have terribly rough going.

And what, Serrell asked himself, do they have now?

He kicked back to his desk, pulled himself into his seat, made a mark on his calendar with a tethered pencil. Four days. No word. No radio. No returning rocket. And *Explorer* spinning hourly farther away.

What in the name of heaven was going on?

The microphone on his desk buzzed. "Captain Serrell, navigation room."

He snapped a switch. "What is it?"

The voice from the navigation room said doubtfully: "Captain, we hooked up a photo-cell trigger system with the scanning scopes, to look for rocket exhausts, just like you said. And it went off a couple of seconds ago. Andy's tracking down the tapes now."

Serrell's heart gave an enormous leap. Rocket exhausts! If the alarm had spotted rocket exhausts, it would mean—it *had* to mean!—that at least one of the scouts was on its way back!

"Hurry up!" he yelled, past caring that he was giving superfluous orders; the news was too good to wait. "How long's it going to take? I've got Aleph Four in the periscope now—think I can see them?"

"Well," said the voice, puzzlingly worried, and faded away. Then it came back, stronger and—more worried.

"No, Captain," apologized the voice from the navigation room, "I'm afraid you can't. Andy's got the tapes now. The rockets—well, they aren't coming from Aleph Four, Captain. They're coming from the other planet, Bes."

Down below, Hibsen tested his freedom. He nodded to de Jouvenel, who got up and followed him out the door. "Let's see how far we can go. Suppose we take a look around the rocket, for a starter."

"All right." But that was a little more than they were allowed. Two Gormen swooped silently after them, and though Hibsen and de Jouvenel walked rapidly enough, the Gormen were at the rocket before them, solid chunks of gray flesh barring the port.

Hibsen said: "Okay, we'll try something else. Let's wander off. Maybe only one of them will follow. Then we can split up and—"

But both Gormen followed. The two men walked over the softly bouncing paving, turned a corner, walked a few squares, turned again. The rocket was out of sight: the sound of the Gormen moving about, their voices, their machines, had all faded. Apart from their own muted footsteps and a faint whisper of motion from the trailing Gormen, the world was empty of sound.

"Split," whispered Hibsen harshly, and obediently the little dark man chose a street at random and disappeared into it. The Gormen split too, one after de Jouvenel, one trailing Hibsen.

Hibsen rubbed his star sapphire angrily. The confounded things, if only they'd get rough, shout, show anger, act *human.* But they weren't human, and perhaps they showed it most in the utter dispassionate coolness of their surveillance. They didn't seem to care how far their charges led them. They didn't object to what must obviously be an attempt to lose them.

They only followed.

"Then follow, damn you!" Hibsen whispered, and lengthened his stride.

When Hibsen strolled, the Gorman strolled. When Hibsen moved faster, the Gorman, tied to an invisible, inelastic string, moved exactly as fast, stayed exactly as close.

Hibsen, anger seething in him, began to run. The Gorman —no, not *ran*—but shuffled faster, as fast as Hibsen, an even five yards behind, no matter how Hibsen forced his weary-

ing legs and struggled for every burning breath. He broke into a dead gallop and kept it up for two hundred yards—and the Gorman stayed that same five yards behind.

And when Hibsen flung himself, heart pounding, lungs agonized, to the ground, the Gorman stood stock-still above him. And, without pausing to catch a breath, made notes.

Hibsen lay there, sobbing. It was infuriating and humiliating, but he made himself do it. He lay there at the alien's feet, face to the ground, only one eye open just enough to gauge the creature's mood and stance.

Then, without warning, he flung himself up and at the gray shape.

No warning—or none that Hibsen himself could measure, but there must have been some, for the Gorman was ready. Some insignificant tightening of a muscle, something hardly noticeable, but enough. Before Hibsen was fully on his feet, the Gorman had put his metallic "notebook" in the fleshy pouch that might have been skin and might have been a garment, and before Hibsen had quite turned to face him, the Gorman's arms were cocked like a boxer's. Too late, too late, Hibsen sobbed silently, but he flung himself on the alien anyway—and was knocked across the sidewalk.

It was as easy as that.

All the way back to their common jail, Hibsen clutched his aching face and swore to himself. He didn't look around. He didn't have to. He knew what was there. He knew it was always going to be there, as long as they were on this planet, and maybe Brabant was right: maybe—in some ways, at least—the Gormen were better men than the humans were.

Eight

RAE WENSLEY SAT RESTIVE IN BRABANT'S LABORATORY, WAITing for Brabant to get to her. At the moment, he was busily conferring with one of the Gormen—the old one, the one that seemed to be in charge of Keeping an Eye on Brabant. She was glad for the chance to sit and watch Brabant, for

there were many questions in her mind about him. But she couldn't sit still all the same.

Too much was happening.

Brabant had deliberately cut himself off from contact with the rest of the humans. There was no other explanation. She had tried to talk to him and he wouldn't talk. She had tried to defend him, but Devil's Advocate is a thankless job when the Dev——when Brabant wouldn't lift a finger in his own defense. She had no reason to defend him, no reason at all to care.

But how worn and haggard he looked!

He came over to her at last and said shortly: "All right, Rae, let's get going. Same as before. Put on the earphones."

"Again? We've done this fifty times—"

"And we'll do it fifty more if I say so! Hurry up, Rae."

Stiffly she sat down, not looking at him. It was a wearisome, nonsensical business! How childish of him to carry on with it —and how childish of the Gormen to continue to be interested. Or amused. Or whatever it was they were that made them go on watching and taking their interminable notes. True, Brabant did have the wit to vary the procedure from day to day, so that sometimes she was asked to repeat the letters she heard aloud, sometimes to write them, sometimes merely to sit and listen, and suffer the mild electric tingle of the band on her knee. But it had been some days since he had bothered to give her shocks.

"Today," he said, "I've got a treat for you." She looked at him warily. "I want you to repeat every letter you hear, and I'll let you watch your foot."

Rae looked away hotly.

"You understand?" he demanded.

"Certainly I understand." She had, after all, a higher I.Q. than a rhesus monkey, and those had been given similar tests, she knew; Brabant had told her that.

"Right," he beamed. "You hear an A, you say A. That's all." He seemed almost happy. *Happy!* Everything he did, she thought miserably, was an affront.

Perhaps it was only the detached attitude of the scientist, she told herself, but without conviction. And in any case, as

Brabant had not failed to remind her—often—there wasn't any choice. If the trained seals wanted fish, they would have to snort out *Yankee Doodle* on the pipes.

Rae sat somnolently in her chair, watching her own toe, as the tape began to whisper in her ear. "A," it said, and "A," she repeated obediently, while the toe danced an inch.

"Good enough," said Brabant, nodding. "Now we lower the volume. Keep going, Rae."

"All right."

The little voice in her ear whispered fainter and fainter. It began to be hard to hear. She forgot her toe, staring into space, straining to get it right. "R . . . L . . . D—no. T, I think."

"Just say the first letter that comes to you!" he ordered impatiently.

"But—"

"Do as I say! If you aren't sure, guess!"

"All right." She was angry now. "Y . . . A . . . P—oh! That's funny!" Quickly her mind scanned the sentence: *Mary had a little lamb.* There was no P in the sentence.

But her foot had twitched.

"I told you," Brabant crowed.

She stared. He was looking, not at her, but at the Gorman, which made rapid notes.

"What—what's going on? Did the conditioning blow a gasket?"

He told her with self-satisfaction: "Not at all."

"But that last letter was a P and—"

"It was a B. You were sure, but you were wrong! Consciously you heard P; that's what you said. But your subconscious—it was sure, too, only it was *right.* Your subconscious hears better than the front of your mind, Rae."

She said worriedly: "I don't know what that proves."

"It proves," said Brabant, "the existence of the subconscious—which hears with its own ear, sees with its own eye—and is not disturbed by the errors of the conscious mind."

"Proves it to me, to you, or to the Gormen?" she asked.

"Why, to all of us," he answered enthusiastically. "Can't you realize what a challenge it is to have to *demonstrate* the existence and functions of a subconscious to a race that doesn't have any? The concept doesn't mean a thing to them. All they can understand is proof, concrete proof, as tangible as it can possibly be. And with them checking me every inch of the way—Lord, what an opportunity! Don't you *see?*"

She stared at him.

Weeks and weeks of this—not merely the tape-recorder chanting the alphabet, but hypnosis, deep recall, heaven knew what; not only for her, but for nearly every member of the human party. And for what?

She said tightly, furiously: "What do you think you're doing?" Her own voice surprised her. It rasped with harsh emotion.

It surprised Brabant, too. "But I've already told you."

She said: "Look at that thing! It's taking everything in, everything you can give it—more than they could hope to learn in a dozen years, starting from scratch! Brabant, don't you know what the Gormen are doing to *do* with the knowledge you give them?"

The alien made a slight movement. Brabant looked at it and shook his head. Then he turned back to the girl.

"Why, yes," he said, "I suppose I do."

"They want it to—"

"You don't have to tell me. They want to use it to conquer Earth." He grinned self-consciously. "As the old psychiatry joke put it—that's *their* problem."

She couldn't help herself; the instant she was back with the others she told them, every word. It was like trying to vomit up a poison, cast it out, get rid of it, but merely saying it didn't get it out of her system; it continued to stay inside her and burn.

"Council of war," said Hibsen dangerously. "Mary, you and the kids stay here."

They trooped into one of the back rooms, the silent Gorman at the door remaining uncaring behind. Hibsen, grim-

faced, laid the proposition before the house: "He has no right to live." Hibsen muted his voice with a powerful effort. His jaw was still painful, but he was past caring about that, though it hurt him especially much to talk. "Brabant's gone over to the Gormen—he admits it! Treason is a capital crime. Brabant's got to die."

Rae listened through a fog of weariness. She had been up with the children that morning; she had gone through a grueling hour with a demanding Brabant and a stolid, worrisome Gorman; and she had felt terror inside her when Brabant admitted he knew what the Gormen planned. It had been a wearing day, but, more than that, there was a pain and anger inside her more than she could bear.

This was *Brabant* they were talking about. Brabant, whom she loved—or had once loved—or wished to love, if only things could be smoothed out so that it was just the two of them. Love is many things; it is a biological call and also a Gestalt of social attitudes and standings; and whatever the biology between them might have been, however fine and good, or crushing and destroying, it was the certain fact that every person in that room but her wanted to see Brabant dead.

Every person but her?

But she was the one who had brought them the one bit of evidence they needed. And what did she want? Rae looked around the room at the others, hotly arguing in undertones. They were a queer lot, she thought regretfully; it was hardly fair that eight billions of mankind on the rich and teeming Earth should depend for their future security on what action this handful of people here might take to muzzle one person across the square.

In spite of the Qualifying Tests, in spite of Brabant's care, those who voyaged between the stars were likely to develop strange cancers of the personality. Half the people in the room, she counted, had been up and down like yo-yos during the voyage—manic, and then tranquilized; depressive, and then stimulated. Chemistry did it—part of it; Brabant, with his tests and his therapy, did the rest.

But now they were going to kill Brabant, weren't they? And maybe, she thought wearily, there was something to think about there. Brabant had kept them all in one piece. . . .

But who had kept Brabant from chaos?

Not herself, she thought, aching, though she had been more than willing. (But Brabant had explained that to her, tenderly enough. He couldn't. Alone among the ship, he couldn't become emotionally involved. He couldn't make close friends, even, not until the trip was over; to do so would destroy his usefulness.)

And now it was too late, of course, because they had already passed sentence. The decision was to execute. The problem was only one of ways and means.

"Not a chance," Hibsen was saying. "You can't get him alone to do it, de Jouvenel. He wouldn't trust you or me. Marne?"

The lieutenant rubbed his splinted arm. "All right."

"Do you think you can manage it?" Marne grunted. "Good enough," said Hibsen, satisfied. "Then all we need is a weapon. Who's got anything we can use?"

Silence for a moment. Then, slowly, Rae Wensley felt herself raising her hand.

Hibsen started. "You, Rae?"

"It's sewing scissors, really," she said faintly. "But sharp."

Hibsen grinned with lean approval. Almost she saw tufts of hair at the tips of his ears and needle teeth dripping saliva. Undoubtedly it was giving Hibsen a lot of pleasure to hear her volunteer to help remove the man she had turned him down for.

But de Jouvenel said abruptly: "Never mind, Rae. I've got the real thing." They looked at him. The little dark man said without emphasis: "I was here before most of you. I had an idea something like this would come up. So . . . Anyway, it's my own knife, and right at the moment it's under the Marne baby's mattress."

Rae stared. She had wondered why the little man had been so solicitous of the child. The plaited cradle was his; many

times he had helped her change the bedding, pet the baby to sleep, and for what warped and lethal reasons, she was just now able to know. But at least, she thought with gratitude, it would not be her weapon that killed Brabant.

Hibsen said: "That's good. Fine. Now how do we work it? Rae, it never occurred to me that you'd help, because—Never mind. Since you're willing, maybe you can help get him alone with Marne. Got any ideas on how we can arrange that?"

She stood numbly, trying to think. Ideas? Oh, she was full of ideas, but not the sort Hibsen had in mind. Her ideas were pictures and memories and dreams, and she had to leaf them over in her mind—now—because soon they would be gone, or spoiled.

Marne said, scratching his jaw: "How about this? I'll wait upstairs. Rae tells him she wants to talk to him or something—maybe acts a little affectionate, you know? And then I'll be waiting. We can tell the Gormen we were fighting over her. Maybe that will confuse them a little. We owe it to Earth to try to mix them up as much as we can."

He was discussing the thing quite reasonably, she thought in frozen distress, like a man planning an evening of bridge rather than a prospective murder. No, execution. That was the word, since they had calmly and reasonably passed sentence. It was all very reasonable, she thought drearily; there wasn't any point at which a person could stop and cry out: This is all wrong! You're proposing to destroy a human life!

Hibsen was saying: "The Gormen will take it hard, of course, so maybe Marne's idea is a good one. But let's not kid ourselves. They won't be easy to fool. But we'll have to face that when we come to it. I don't think they'll do anything about hostages or reprisals—they don't seem to think along those lines. Still, Brabant is the only person who has established real contact with them, and we ought to consider what they're likely to—"

From the other room, Mary Marne warned: "Watch it! They're coming!"

In came a party of Gormen, six of them, armed, moving along like ice skaters, without fuss or noise. And with them was Dr. Brabant.

Rae stepped back involuntarily. Brabant had been harried and worn, on the edge of desperation, that afternoon; now he had passed the edge. His face was sallow. His hands twitched. His eyes were the eyes of crucified Christ; but what he said could have come only from the lips of Judas. In a voice of torment, he said: "You'll have to give your plan up. Sorry, but the Gormen and I know what you're up to, and they won't let you."

Silently, the aliens fanned out, surrounding the humans, forcing them toward the front room.

Brabant said: "Those of you who have managed to keep weapons, you'll have to turn them over now."

And he knew where to look. They went into the room where the children were sleeping and turned back the thin soggy mattress under the baby, and there was de Jouvenel's knife.

"Rae," said Brabant commandingly, and two of the Gormen advanced toward her.

"Never mind," she said hastily, and fumbled in her clothes for the sewing scissors.

Brabant accepted them and passed them to one of the aliens.

He looked around. "That's it," he said at last, still in that torn and inwardly raging tone.

He didn't look at Rae, but he met the eyes of the others easily enough.

"From now on," he said, "there won't be any more chances for any of you—either to kill me or to escape. Sorry," he added politely, "but that's the way it is. We're leaving here."

"What the devil are you talking about?" Hibsen demanded, his voice cracking.

"We're leaving in two days," said Brabant, nodding slightly, like a professor glad a student has asked a question that helps him to move a discussion along. "The Gormen have been waiting for a big ship that will hold all of us. It's on its way. They're going to take us—I don't know where, ultimately.

Maybe Bes. Maybe farther. But the first stop, I think, is *Explorer II.*"

He paused, in the sudden absolute stillness. "Yes," he said thoughtfully, "that's what they're going to do . . . Rae."

She jumped.

"Will you come outside with me for a moment?"

She glanced instinctively at Hibsen for orders—then quickly away. *That* was cruel. Conspiring to execute Brabant was one thing, but asking another man's permission to walk with him was, somehow, worse.

For reasons she couldn't have elucidated and didn't stop to think out, she said: "All right."

They went out into the street, she and Brabant and the Gormen. Brabant said, oddly diffident: "Let's go for a walk."

"A walk?"

He nodded, avoiding her eyes. They were never allowed to walk outside at night.

"With one of *them* for a chaperon?"

Brabant shook his head, and, true enough, all of the Gormen were moving away, swiftly and without a backward glance.

"Ah," she said, suddenly enraged, "I see! You betray your companions, and your payoff is a longer leash to your collar. I suppose it's worth it!"

"Rae."

His voice was dull, not begging, hardly even protesting, but she wouldn't listen. She shrugged and walked slowly down the street. The darkness was nearly absolute. It was impossible to see even the outlines of the buildings ahead, but she could see lights behind them from the human quarters.

When she could no longer make out Brabant's face, she said: "All right, we're walking. What do you want?"

"A fair break," Brabant said immediately.

"You fool!"

"No, wait! I—" But the time had passed, if ever there had been a time. Rae couldn't stand it. No, she told herself, ago-

nized, this is *wrong*. And she turned and ran headlong back through the dark streets.

Out of nowhere, a Gorman materialized to follow her.

Brabant hesitated.

He glanced at the vague silhouette of the remaining Gorman—out of earshot but, he had always known, not out of sight. No, they didn't trust him *that* much. He squared his shoulders and returned—not to the house where the others were quartered, of course; not even to his laboratory, where he had been permitted to sleep for a while, but to a thin pad on an upper floor of the Gorman barracks. He had been sleeping there for three nights now, on orders, and he didn't like it. It represented a deterioration in his relationship with the Gormen.

If things went on this way, he thought wildly, he wouldn't have a friend in either camp.

And time passed, and time passed. Rae went through the hours without seeing faces or hearing words. Brabant came and went, more tired every time, more remote, selecting his guinea pigs with a jerk of a thumb, and the Gormen who were with him always now obligingly formed guard and marched his chosen subjects away. Rae found it impossible to sleep. Merely to try was punishment, for the moment the head went down and the eyes closed, then tears started. But time passed.

"You, Rae," said Brabant's voice, and she looked up, startled; she had been sitting staring at the Marne baby and had somehow managed to attain that total emptiness called nirvana. "You come along. And Hibsen and de Jouvenel, I have a special treat for all of you."

Hibsen said six words, one a preposition and the other five obscene.

"Yes, I know," said Brabant remotely. "Come along."

He marched off, not looking back. He didn't have to see if they were following; the Gormen were there for that. He marched his subjects across the square and to the base of the hidden Gorman rocket.

"I want," he said, "to show you what you're up against. In you go."

He glanced at them. Their expressions were amusingly surprised, though no one on all that planet, just then, was amused.

"It's all right," said Brabant. "I've got permission from the Gormen. We'll have company, never fear. But they don't really need to watch us. That's what I want you to see."

De Jouvenel trailed him, and the girl and Hibsen followed. Hibsen said flatly: "I'd kill you if I could. You know that."

Brabant nodded. It wasn't worth an answer, it was so obviously true. "Here," he said, "this is the control room. Sit down, Hibsen."

"In *that?*" Hibsen was honestly shocked.

"Or stand if you like. But look around."

Hibsen forgot to be murderous. His eyes were wide open for the first time in days; his curiosity had mastered him. He looked about him like a child in storyland. Hibsen was a pilot of spaceships, and not even the blinding hatred he bore for Brabant could keep him from being interested in a strange ship built by a strange race.

A spaceship is the simplest of machines. You push something out of one end, the ship squirts away in the opposite direction, that's all. No moving parts (in schematic design), no complications, no possible variations of construction, no matter by whom designed or where. How can there be, as an analogy, more than one way to go Up?

That's the theory. The practice . . .

Hibsen's heart shriveled in him. He found himself caressing the star sapphire, rubbing an unsure finger over the gold braid. This was the ship he and de Jouvenel had thought to steal. What Brabant had said was all too true.

It was no more possible for a human to walk in and operate a ship like this than for a monkey to punch out a Shakespeare sonnet by random thumping of a typewriter.

De Jouvenel said faintly behind him, "Sweet heaven. There's nothing here."

It was plain fact. There were, for example, no such things as: triple-gyro altitude indicator, linked through selsyn motors to a homeostatic negative-feedback course corrector; self-compensating thrust control, capable of measuring the minute variations of squirt of each component in each mixing chamber and increasing or decreasing the flow of fuel appropriately; feedback-aligned course plotter, able to read a tape which dictated the parameters of all possible orbits which would take one from *here* to *there*, to select the best of them, to put the ship on it and keep it there and to discard that orbit and select another, without pause or faltering, if for any reason of failure of parts, motion of objective, interposition of obstacle (*i.e.*, meteorite, astronomical body, other vessel) the chosen orbit became unsuitable and it was necessary to change.

There was, in other words, no smoothly humming Black Box. There was no compensator that could measure all of these things and balance them one against another. There was no standby circuit to compensate for the ultimate failure of all, the failure of the compensator.

There was, instead, only—

Item: An artificial horizon. (It was a thin jet of mercury, impinging on a spider's orb-web of wires marked in circles and radians, the whole reflected in a ninety-degree mirror into the pilot's eyes.)

Item: A porthole. Yes, a porthole. A glassed-in nose cone to look out of. Radar, periscopes, photocell detectors? No. Nothing like that.

And, item: Eight little rings, one to fit each of the eight fingers of a Gorman's two hands, each one of which controlled the flow of fuel to one jet.

There were those and there was nothing else.

"You see?" demanded Brabant irritably.

"I see," said Hibsen after a pause, his hand clinging to the star sapphire. "I—"

He stopped. There was nothing to say. "You want us to go now, Brabant?"

"Not you," said Brabant shortly. "Rae, de Jouvenel, you can go back. Hibsen I want to stay here. You've had your

treat. Now I need you for a little more guinea-pigging. And," he said over his shoulder, turning his back on all of them, "maybe now you'll see the wisdom of my advice. Give up. It's all over."

Nine

BUT IT WASN'T ALL OVER. NOT REALLY. THERE WAS ONE MORE act on the program, that program which Brabant had carefully contrived in the silent hours watching over the injured Lt. Marne, just after the first landing.

Brabant squatted on his thin, sour-smelling pad in the predawn darkness, looking at a window that showed only the faintest difference in shade from the wall around it.

In the past few days, the Gormen had made it adequately clear that his work for them was just about at an end. What they wanted to know, they knew. The mine had been worked; the tailings were decreasingly valuable and soon they would decide to terminate the operation. At that point—

There were other things the Gormen wanted to know about Earthman than how their minds worked, and though they'd learned some of them from Jaroff and the late Chapman, they would proceed as rapidly as possible to learn the rest. The psyche digested, the soma would be next to be studied. Equally thoroughly. And with a great deal more carelessly distributed pain.

Dr. Brabant felt sick and empty inside.

It wasn't only the reasonable prospect of laboratory-animal dissection that worried him. It was something more. It was the knowledge that if all the humans died, all but one of them would die hating him.

Brabant did not enjoy being hated.

In his profession, the position was not unfamiliar. Brabant's job was to keep the mind in balance, and in the process of adjustment, a great deal of free-floating hatred clung to the psychologist in charge. (So did love.) He had made himself apart and—more or less—independent of the temporary emo-

tional states of those around him; that was the way the job was done.

But now he was utterly, utterly, *completely* alone. On all this planet, there was not one soul who loved, respected or trusted him, not even the orphaned Crescenzi children, who had taken to running and hiding from him when he came near.

Brabant sighed, and then, abruptly, sat tensely erect.

There was a subdued twittering and motion on the floor below. Brabant frowned. What he knew of the Gormen more than anything else was that they were reliably creatures of habit; it was not their habit to arise before full light. He listened carefully, but there was nothing to hear that did him any good, only the fact that, for some reason, the barracks was early awake. Gradually he relaxed, but without ceasing to frown . . . he seldom ceased to frown anyhow, these days.

He thought wistfully of the rest of the party, huddled together in the building across the square, hardly a hundred yards away. At least they had each other. Though it was his job to keep them stable, and though in the course of it he learned more about their weaknesses, faults and subdued internal evils than most of them knew themselves, Brabant liked —loved—no, *needed* them; needed their regard and their warmth. They were his friends. They were all he had.

Time was when Brabant, new at the job, had dreamed with regret of the possible high-stability, non-neurotic personnel an interstellar flight might—*should*—enlist. But you had to take what you could get; that was the law. Brabant hadn't made that law. Actually, the law had been made by herbalists, ratified by surgery, and confirmed by Alexander Fleming and the pharmaceutical houses. Modern medicine, over a good many generations, had saved so many lives that it had enforced a general lowering of psychological standards in favor of some rather special physical ones.

An Rh baby in a modern hospital was a trivial happenstance in a dull morning's routine; on an alien planet, without endless blood of every conceivable type (not to mention ac-

cessories) the same happenstance was—a dead baby. Colonists could not afford, simply could not afford, to carry in their genes and chromosomes the risk of an Rh-negative response—or of sickle-cell anemia, hemophilia, agammaglobulinemia—you name it.

Hardly a child was born on Earth that did not receive at least one tender flick of a scalpel—to correct a squint, tighten a ventricle, ease a pyloric stenosis or whatever—in its first months of life. On Aleph Four, that scalpel might not be there. Sure, a doctor or two went with each party, but if something happened to the doctor? The risk could not be borne.

And so Part One of the Qualifying Tests was a rigorous genetic study, and the passing grade was 100%. And that eliminated very many of those who were willing to apply. The ones that were left had to be combed for—no, not the utterly stable; the utterly stable organism, being satisfied, stays where its roots are dug in—but for those nearest stable, or those who could be kept stable for the purposes of their jobs.

Like Hibsen. Given the security he wore on his jacket and a job that he knew he could do, Hibsen was hard, bright, aggressive and able. Take those things away and Hibsen was something else again; but those things weren't meant to be taken from him—wouldn't have been, except for the Gormen. . . .

And Brabant liked Hibsen.

He liked them all—needed them—and, yes, loved them. Neurotic or not. Stable or not. With warmth toward Brabant himself or not; and at that moment, he wryly knew, it most decidedly was not.

A distant metallic scream made him look up. It was daylight now, and the noise was coming from outside and *up*.

Brabant jumped to his feet and pressed against the window, trying to see what was outside his field of view. Something was coming. The scream grew louder and louder; it thundered and blared.

Light—flame—thrust down out of the clouds.

"It's here," whispered Brabant, held to the window, staring;

and he watched as the hugest of all imaginable ships dropped, flame-tailed, out of the clouds.

It settled into the square outside, next to the dismantled Terrestrial scout, with a wash of fire that made Brabant avert his eyes and scorched the rock walls. It was a towering brute of a ship, more than two hundred feet tall—bigger than the trailer of *Explorer II*, silently orbiting out in space—bigger than any vessel the human race had yet been able to transport from Sol to another star. In the Solar System itself, big ships were by no means uncommon, but even there this one would have been a monster. It was all one piece, and that piece towered higher than a twenty-story building.

Brabant took his hands away from his eyes and squinted out at the giant. Gormen already were hurrying out to its base; that explained, at least, why the barracks had arisen so early that morning. It was the ship they had been waiting for, the one big enough to carry all the humans to—wherever the Gormen proposed to take them.

"All right," Brabant whispered crazily, dizzy with fatigue and shaking with nerves, "you've come. I hope I'm ready for you."

And before noon of that day, they were embarked. Brabant, for his services to the captors, had the job of straw boss.

"Come on, come on," he said tightly, looking at no one, "move along, get aboard." And the humans moved toward the ship, carrying what they could.

Hibsen and de Jouvenel, glowering, mumbled loud enough for Brabant to hear, but he wouldn't look at them. Mary Marne and her husband came, carrying the child, Mary near to tears and the child already howling. Retty and the two Crescenzi children, tear-streaked and clinging; Sam Jaroff, his eyes wide with horror like a man floating on a wide sea, who sees the rescuing vessel steam carelessly away. And last of all Rae Wensley, and if Brabant didn't meet her eyes, neither did she look at Dr. Howard Brabant.

"Inside," grumbled Brabant, following along.

One Gorman was with them, silent, motionless and armed.

He was enough. The Gorman hand weapon was a rapid-fire flame ejector. In that confined space, he could easily kill every one of them before the first could quite make up his mind to move.

The rest of the Gormen were busy with more important things—looting the scout rocket, carrying what probably were records and equipment from their headquarters to the square.

"Judas!" hissed de Jouvenel as he went by.

Brabant did not turn. He was staring into space.

Inside the rocket, Rae Wensley leaned against a cold brassy bulkhead, half closing her eyes. The Gorman reek soured the air around her. They were in a bare chamber; whatever the Gormen themselves liked in the way of creature comforts, they had provided nothing at all for their captives. It looked like a long, uncomfortable trip.

And the destination would be the worst part of it.

Brabant glanced at the girl. She might have been speaking aloud; every thought she had was written on her face.

All right, Howard, he said to himself, what are you waiting for? Everybody was aboard. One Gorman stood there and no others; if there was ever going to be a moment, the moment was now. But he couldn't help waiting a second, just another second, like a gambler with the rent money standing hypnotized before the pari-mutuel window; the risk was great, and it was hard, hard to make himself go ahead . . .

But something took over for him.

Brabant found himself standing next to the Gorman. He reached into his frayed blouse and took out the knife the Gormen had commandeered from Hibsen, that Brabant himself had commandeered from the Gormen.

"Here," he said. The alien looked at him and twittered, but accepted the knife. "And—oh, yes," said Brabant, licking his lips, "I think they've got another. In the same place."

Twitter, twitter. Gorman-accented English was hard to follow at best.

"Yes," nodded Brabant, "in the same place, under the baby." He closed his eyes for a second.

When he looked up, the Gorman was moving rapidly toward the baby, the knife in one hand, the other outstretched for the child.

"Dear God," cried Brabant, the words a prayer, "he's going to kill the baby!"

Kill the baby—kill the baby. The words rolled around the metal chamber. Everything stopped.

The Gorman half-turned, the expression almost humanly surprised, but it didn't matter. There wasn't a second's hesitation; there was no time for thought. Marne leaped at the alien as quickly as any Gorman. It was reflex that moved him, not thinking. He was on top of the rhino before even that super-fast creature could whirl, and half a dozen of the others were right behind.

The Gorman was out cold, under a hundred blows, before he could lift the knife; he never even started for the gun; that massive skull could endure pounding, but the brain beneath was subject to syncope like any human's; he was unconscious. It was the second time the humans had surprised a Gorman, and the first when it had mattered.

The fighters jumped back, triumphant and amazed.

"We—we got him!" gasped Hibsen, unbelieving.

Brabant, weary but ready, dug into his worn pockets for the other essential ingredient of his plan.

"Here!" he said, holding out a thin wire coil. "Tie him up, Hibsen! De Jouvenel—close that port!"

Ten

THE BOUND GORMAN LAY ON THE FLOOR, ITS EYES OPEN; IT had not stayed unconscious long. Outside scrabblings against the port said the other Gormen were suspicious. And Rae Wensley cried out: "Brabant! I thought you told me they wouldn't hurt the baby!"

Brabant was breathing raggedly; he looked utterly spent. But the hangdog expression was gone from his eyes, the crucified look from his face; he was almost triumphant. He

said: "That's right, Rae. He was only searching for another knife."

"But—"

"But I lied to you, yes! *We need this ship.* We couldn't plan to jump him—nothing could make us do it fast enough; the second's lag in our thinking would give him plenty of warning. So I had to make you attack him—without thinking—as fast as a Gorman, and the only way I could make you do that was to see that you were pushed by reflex. Protecting the young—that doesn't have to filter through the conscious; that makes you *move;* we saw that already. So—"

"So now," said Hibsen, raging, "we've won a battle and lost a war. What's the use of all this, Brabant? We've got a ship, but we can't fly it. You said so yourself—you proved it to us!"

"No," corrected Brabant, "I proved it to the Gormen. Wait. Listen."

Outside, there was a muffled clattering. The Crescenzi children began to whimper; they hadn't had time to before.

Brabant nodded absently. "The Gormen are getting ready to break in. This is an important ship, you see. It's their biggest in this system, and the only one that's armed."

"You—want *us* to destroy it?" Hibsen guessed.

"I want to fly it up to *Explorer.*"

"Without computers? But—"

"But we have computers, Hibsen," said Brabant. "Three of them. You, and de Jouvenel, and Rae."

He had them, Brabant exulted wearily. A month of hatred could not be wiped out in a second, but he had managed a suspension of emotion. They were all waiting. They would give his plan a try.

"Come along," he said, nodding to the three of them, and climbed the rounded spikes that took them to the bare pilot's room.

The muffled outside clattering stopped and was replaced by a persistent, purposeful *rasp, rasp.* Time was flying. But there would be time; and either they would succeed or, as a bare minimum, there would be a good many dead Gormen around the base of a destroyed ship.

"Sit down, Hibsen," he ordered.

The pilot looked at him, licked his lips, sat in the webwork chair. The straps and spring metal fitted themselves easily around his lean body; they were planned for a Gorman, but they would have fitted a skeleton as easily, for they were designed to fit whatever they were given to hold.

"Rae, you and de Jouvenel lie down. Anywhere. These ships have plenty of power, according to Jaroff, so we won't have to pile on too much G at first—but it won't be comfortable."

He stretched himself on the bare floor near Hibsen and glanced around. The remote *rasp, rasp* was louder, but that menace would be at an end in a second.

"Hibsen," said Brabant conversationally, "you know how to operate this ship. All right, take it off."

With a tranced expression, Hibsen put his fingers into the Gorman controls.

He glanced at Brabant for reassurance, sighed, licked his lips again, closed his eyes—

Gently, his fingers moved in the rings.

Red roaring flame leaped out below them.

Brabant found himself letting go, slumping, his rigid self-control no longer needed. It was all up to Hibsen now. If the thing worked, fine. If not, they were all dead. There were no other alternatives.

The ship shook. It leaped a fraction of an inch and settled, leaped again, hesitated, and at last stood free of the soil of Aleph Four.

Faintly, over the roar of the power plant, Brabant could hear Hibsen sobbing. Brabant glanced at him. Hibsen's face was the face of a man in mortal terror; his mouth twisted and his eyes blinked with a rapid tic.

But he was flying the ship.

It did not crash. It hardly faltered. Every faint motion was translated instantly into a quick, gentle and sure manipulation of the rings. Hibsen's eyes, open now, were fixed absently on the altitude jet of mercury, but it was his body as much as his eyes that told him what he needed to know;

the forces that might tug the ship off its center of gravity tugged also at the tiny otoliths in his ear and he felt a change of altitude as soon as it happened, before it mattered. There was no loss of control, not even for a fraction of a second. The ship gained all its ponderous power and began to climb.

(Down below, thirty Gormen lay dead and a score more dying. It no longer mattered—their ship was gone; whatever might happen, that ship had got away.)

Grinding heels of acceleration crushed Brabant and all of them.

Even so, Hibsen's control did not waver. The others sat or lay while the floor and the webwork chairs heaved against them, but Hibsen kept the ship secure—up—up and out, up and out—

In three minutes, they were clear of the atmosphere. The great primary burned at them. Stars flamed in a black sky. There were no more clouds and no more air. And Hibsen, shaking himself like a man coming out of a dream, cut the power by withdrawing his fingers from the rings.

"We—did it," he whispered, staring at his hands. "Brabant. *How?*"

Brabant moved from the floor and floated free. All the weight was gone from him—not merely the hundred and seventy pounds of his flesh and bone, but the greater weight that had been on his mind. He was free! Almost, like Hibsen, he sang.

Instead, he said: "Take a look below, de Jouvenel. See how the others made out."

The little dark man, looking horribly confused, propelled himself to the rounded spikes and down. Hibsen and the girl were looking at Brabant and their eyes were large with questions, but just at this moment Brabant couldn't answer questions. He didn't trust his voice.

All the weeks of painfully demonstrating the simple truths of psychology before the impassive Gormen, and the carefully planned conditioning that underlay those weeks as a secret message lies under a printed page—they had paid off. What

the subconscious mind could always do—act! without delay! —he had made them do then. The days in the Gorman building, the scant hours he had had for the finishing touches, yesterday, in the Gorman ship—these had been enough. They were free.

He tried to tell them.

"But," said Hibsen, "but . . ." And he paused. He said fretfully: "But you betrayed us!"

"No," said Brabant, "I only kept you out of trouble. You didn't have a chance with your plans of catching the Gormen off guard and I couldn't afford to let you fail. One failure was too many and—"

"But you could have told *me*, Howard," the girl objected, hurt.

Brabant looked at her. "I'm sorry," he said after a moment.

"Oh, no! You don't have to apologize! But—we wronged you. I more than anyone else, I suppose, because I should have known."

Brabant said: "I couldn't tell you. That building was bugged; there was no word that any of you said, ever, that they didn't hear. But even if they hadn't, how could I risk getting you overconfident? My plan wasn't that sure of working, believe me."

De Jouvenel floated up out of the hatch, asprawl, catching at a spike and missing. "They're all all right, Brabant," he said, upside down.

"Then let's get out of here! I want to get back to *Explorer II* right away—before anything goes wrong."

De Jouvenel said patiently: "But we don't have its coordinates."

"You do," said Brabant. "You're the navigator. You put it in orbit."

"But—good Lord, Brabant! I can't remember—"

"Trance state, please. Now."

The little man tensed slightly. No glassy look to his eyes, no melodramatic flopping to the floor—nor would there have been even if they had not been in free-fall.

De Jouvenel frowned. He caught absently at a corner of Hibsen's webwork seat as he floated past and moored himself. He was thinking.

The question had been asked: What were the coordinates of *Explorer II's* present position? To answer it involved knowing its exact speed and distance from the primary at the time of entering free-fall, the perturbations of Aleph and its satellites, the smaller, more remote perturbations of every other astronomical body within a certain mass-over-distance parameter. It was not a question that de Jouvenel could answer. Certainly not.

But the mind that slept under the skin of de Jouvenel woke to answer for him, the mind that received all and forgot nothing, the sleeping subconscious mind that is in every human. That mind remembered every digit of every number it had conceived—it counted pulse-beats when it had to, measured the intervals between sunset and sunset, though its owner took no notice.

It was, in a word, a computer.

De Jouvenel writhed and strained, and—abruptly—spouted a string of course coordinates. It was an amazing experience for him. He found his own mouth, in his own voice, answering Brabant's question. It was the queerest of all sensations for him; it was like nothing that had ever happened to him before. The numbers meant *nothing* to him. He would have sworn, and believed it to be true, that he had forgotten every datum and that the numbers were random, wrong.

But something inside him had never forgotten, and the numbers were not wrong. With Hibsen's help, they became a course and gently, surely, the captured rocket swung into orbit after the mother ship.

Less than two hours later, they were decelerating gently, and the long swinging bolo that was *Explorer II's* tractor and trailer lay waiting in the emptiness before them.

Brabant clung to Rae, soft and silent next to him, and his thoughts were all triumph. The questions that had yet to be answered were beyond counting. What were the Gormen doing on Aleph Four? Was it rockets alone that carried them

on interstellar flight? What were their objectives in attacking the human race? Was peace possible, or an armed truce?

But all those questions had an answer, somewhere, sometime, and by their bringing to Earth a Gorman ship, armed with Gorman arms, surely someone would be able to deduce the answers they needed. It was only a matter of going now. Give them a chance to build up speed, and no vessel, Gorman or other, could catch them, and they had that chance. The little Gorman craft on Aleph Four could do them no harm, and Bes was too far away.

Rae Wensley stirred contentedly in his arm, then straightened. "Howard, what are they doing?"

She was looking at *Explorer II*. Before their eyes, the long kinked tow line began to straighten; a thin violet haze was spraying back from the tractor.

"Why—" Brabant laughed. "They're trying to get away!"

They could see the periscopes on their side of the trailer, fixed rigidly on the Gorman rocket. Almost they could see Captain Serrell's anxious face as he watched this strange craft floating in on him.

Brabant said with a gentle grin: "Hibsen, better stick your ugly mug out that port and wave to him. Put yourself in the captain's place—he waits and waits, and when somebody finally shows up, it's a Gorman ship. He's going to need some reassurance!"

Calories Don't Count!

News about a revolutionary reducing plan, based on a new biochemical discovery, available for the first time in a new book

UNBELIEVABLE—but true! You need to eat fat to be slim. In CALORIES DON'T COUNT, Dr. Herman Taller outlines his sensational 14-point reducing plan based on a new understanding of the body's chemistry.

With this plan you eat heartily—three full meals a day—large portions of meat, fowl, sea food—even french fries and piecrusts. You never know hunger. Yet you lose the bulges you want to lose.

"There have been no failures."

In the preface to his book, Dr. Taller writes: "The concept has been tested in medical laboratories and among large numbers of patients. There have been no failures, nor can there be any when the principle is properly applied. For it is based on a medical breakthrough so dramatic that it will probably invalidate all you know, or think you know, about the causes of obesity."

Dr. Herman Taller

The plan is a simple one. But its rules, especially in regard to the types of fats you must eat, are specific. They are clearly outlined in Dr. Taller's best-selling book. Read it and liberate yourself, once and for all, from both starvation and overweight.

Free 30-Day Examination

Use CALORIES DON'T COUNT for THIRTY DAYS FREE. Unless it is the sanest, *best* reducing book you've ever seen, send it back and pay nothing. If, however, you keep it, remit only $3.95 (plus postage) as payment in full. Mail coupon below to: SIMON AND SCHUSTER, INC., 630 5th Ave., N. Y. 20, N. Y.

MAIL FOR 30 DAYS' FREE EXAMINATION

To your bookseller, or

SIMON AND SCHUSTER, INC.
Publishers, Dept. M4252 C
630 Fifth Ave., N.Y. 20, N.Y.

Please send me a copy of Dr. Herman Taller's exciting new book, CALORIES DON'T COUNT, for thirty days' Free Examination. If not convinced that it will help me reduce substantially and sanely, I may return the book within thirty days and pay nothing. Otherwise, I will send only $3.95 (plus a few cents postage) as payment in full.

Name.....
(PLEASE PRINT)

Address.....

City.....Zone.....

State.....

☐ SAVE POSTAGE! Check here if you send $3.95 WITH this coupon as payment in full. Then WE PAY POSTAGE. Same 30-day return privilege for full refund GUARANTEED.

FIVE FAR-OUT, SPINE-TINGLING NOVELS IN WHICH YOU'LL FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN—

- **YOU** get hooked on zarquil, the poker of tomorrow, where the stakes are your own physical body and identity!

  BODYGUARD by **Christopher Grimm**

- **YOU** order a bargain robot kit but get by mistake an experimental model that can reproduce its own kind!

  HOW-2 by **Clifford D. Simak**

- **YOU** lose your galaxy identity card, miss your space ship and discover that there isn't another one scheduled for ten years!

  DELAY IN TRANSIT by **F. L. Wallace**

- **YOU** are suddenly classed as an insect pest incapable of even rudimentary intelligence, when the Spheres, or Blubber Balls, take over!

  THE CITY OF FORCE by **Daniel F. Galouye**

- **YOU** are captured by the Gormen and faced with the chilling realization that your only weapon against them is your subconscious!

  WHATEVER COUNTS by **Frederik Pohl**

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

PUBLISHED BY POCKET BOOKS, INC. pb