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# THE WAGERED WORLD

LAURENCE M. JANIFER  
and S. J. TREIBICH

The astronauts didn't know  
they were betting the  
Earth on a toss of the dice!



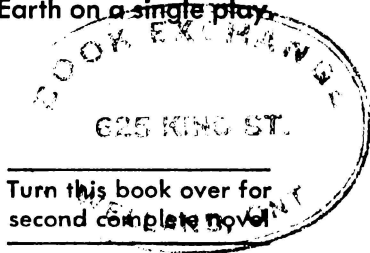




Having survived a brief invasion from unknown space aliens, the UN selected Angelo diStefano and his crewmates to pilot a newly built starcraft out into the Great Beyond. Nobody knew how the ship worked—the plans for it had been among the invaders' debris—but for some reason everyone seemed to regard Angelo as an expendable astronaut.

The ship took off and it landed too. But where it came to rest was not on a planet, not in the void of outer space, but *inside* another spaceship. What was going on there was equally unexpected—it was a cocktail party for the over six hundred races of the Galactic Agreement (whatever that was).

And though a gate crasher, Angelo was invited to join the fun and place a bet on the major attraction party game. It was only after he had put up his marker that he learned he had wagered nothing less than the whole Earth on a single play.



On publication of this, the third chronicle of Angelo diStefano and friends, the authors will be aged and weary men: Mr. Janifer will be thirty-six and Mr. Treibich thirty-three. Both remember the days of their youth, when (it seemed) there were Good Guys and Bad Guys. But those guys are gone forever, along with (for Mr. Janifer) a conglomeration of wives and a talent for the half-mile race and (for Mr. Treibich) a perfectly fantastic amount of education, sports and military activity. Mr. Treibich has had only one wife so far; Mr. Janifer, apparently to keep up the collaborative average, is thinking of relaxing in the caverns of a permanent marriage—a thought which has brought tears to the eyes of many charming women. The tears seem to be tears of laughter.

The two previous chronicles are TARGET: TERRA (68660 — 60¢) and THE HIGH HEX (72400 — 60¢). Many people have told the authors that these books are funny. This is entirely possible. In reality, of course, they embody a cryptogram proving that Mr. Janifer and Mr. Treibich are the real authors of PRIDE AND PREJUDICE. The books also contain a detailed solution to the problem of the Great Pyramid, a full course in practical mysticism for housewives, and a slightly obscene set of relativistic theory from the Velikovsky viewpoint. If thrown with great speed and strength, they will turn into unidentified flying objects until they hit a publisher, a critic, or the ground.

# **THE WAGERED WORLD**

**LAURENCE M. JANIFER  
and S. J. TREIBICH**

**AN ACE BOOK**

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**THE WAGERED WORLD**

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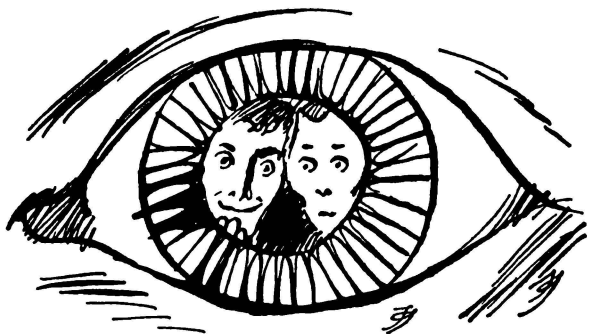
With appreciation, to  
DONALD A. WOLLHEIM  
and other fans who like to laugh;  
to JOHN W. CAMPBELL, for helpful argument;  
and to the antic shade of the Onlie Begetter,  
Mr. THORNE SMITH: the Nonpareil.

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TONIGHT WE STEAL THE STARS  
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## PART ONE

### I

BODIES SEEMED to be everywhere—great, pink or brown, naked bodies tossing themselves in every direction, including straight up. Angelo, as the terrifying, repeated bounce of final impact began to wear off and get replaced by a gentle, somewhat sea-sickening wave motion, stared out of the capsule at the land and watched the bodies go mad. In a way, the sight was interesting; he wondered momentarily what his fellow passengers were making of it.

For that matter, he asked himself, what were the naked bodies making of him, or of the ship?

Alien invasion? No, he thought, they'd had that. One alien invasion at a time was probably the motto of the human mind. And when the group of metal-collecting alien ships had been driven off—in which process Angelo di-Stefano and company had lost their foothold on the world's only space station and had gotten the station blown into fragments in the process—when all was peaceful again, if somewhat lacking in metal, in equilibrium, and in plain



## THE WAGERED WORLD

sanity, the human mind naturally turned from alien invasions to more homey and familiar topics.

Obviously, Angelo told himself, the bodies thought that he was a bomb. The African states had finally managed to build a giant bomb and had begun the attack right off by lobbing it into the artificial lake outside Brasilia. UN people were a little paranoid anyhow, since the UN, by nature, always had enemies but could never have allies; in a private nudist beach on a quiet lake, paranoia had probably come to full and magnificent flower as the capsule had come in, starting a small tidal wave and shrieking with air-passage. It was perfectly clear that Angelo diStefano and his companions were not going to be greeted with gladsome cries.

The companions were, in fact, doing very little gladsome crying. Mostly, they were moaning. An eleven-day spiraling descent, with no tracking station down below to latch on to, left both the African/Haitian complement of Space Station II, now cosmic dust, and the boarding crew—Angelo and other previous inhabitants of the long-gone Space Station I—dizzy, sick, fearful and very weak. No capsule could carry enough food to take care of a double load of passengers for eleven days; there had been times when cannibalism had floated reflectively through Angelo's mind, and somehow he did not think he was, in that respect, unique.

The landing had not been pleasant. They had skipped from land to sea to land again, while navigator Woorden prayed and very nearly cursed in his fantastic Boer bass and managed to avoid populated areas. They had jettisoned their booster and had seen it flame off like a meteor while wondering whether even Woorden, who wrestled with the ship as if it were an Angel of the Lord and his name Jacob instead of John, could do anything about avoiding the creation of meteor number two, otherwise known as the capsule. African, Haitian, American, South African Boer (Woorden), Prussian (Captain Zugzwang, either the world's most orderly human being or the world's messiest computer) and one combination platter (Geoffrey Houmes, worker for WHO, black African, computer technologist and post-graduate witch doctor) had slammed against each other; and the proximity and sharing and so forth had not really made for Brotherhood Week. Everyone, in fact, now hated everyone else.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

And the outside world didn't really seem much friendlier. It seemed to Angelo that the capsule was close enough to the now deserted beach to make a swim for it, but the decision, of course, was not his to make. Feeling dizzy, he swiveled round, turned away from the viewport, and said, "Captain?"

Three voices, naturally, answered him. The assorted complement of Space Station II was really two complements sent up at different times, one African and one Haitian—what Angelo could not help thinking of as one from column A and one from column B; naturally, each complement insisted that its captain was the captain of the whole confused mess. And then there was Captain Zugzwang, whose one-time rule over SS I had never, in his mind anyhow, been abrogated in the slightest. Acid queries from the people of columns A and B as to just what he was now captain of met with a sickeningly rapid alternation of purple rage and dignified silence.

At the risk of further damaging relations among melanin varieties, Angelo said, "I meant Captain Zugzwang." A comfortable snarl from the Prussian was his only reward. After another second or so, Angelo said, "I think we can leave the capsule now. We can swim for the beach."

"Swim?" Captain Zugzwang asked in a tone of remarkable hauteur. "This is scarcely a dignified method of attaining a final landing upon—"

"Well, yes, sir," Angelo said diffidently. "But we did have those lectures on water safety, and this might be a good time to try them out." The lectures had been included in SS I's original equipment by some fantastic mischance; and Zugzwang, for whom everything had a time and a season under the sun, had put an entire space crew through a course in what had then seemed the most distant of useful subjects.

Captain Zugzwang thought the idea over. "Mr. di-Stefano," he said at last, "you may have there a fine point. It would be good to use our hard-won knowledge in this manner. Let us go into the water."

With which decisive sentence he made a single decisive gesture, and the capsule sprang open. Everything, including a large snarl of people who had not yet prepared their

## THE WAGERED WORLD

psyches for sudden drowning, became water-logged. This process took about one-twelfth of a second.

The next ten minutes were beyond the recall of any participant. As Angelo remembered them, they were a sort of anthology of a new Olympic event—Swallowing Water While Flailing And Screaming. Juli R. Dental, ecologist and life-support expert on SS I and the only woman involved in the contest, came in dead last, being apparently unconscious as soon as the water went over her. Everyone else tied for first place.

Angelo remembered his arm around Juli as he made desperately for shore.

After that, he remembered very little, except that eventually he dreamed he was standing on comparatively dry land. This, of course, was impossible.

Even when the entire crew had collected on the sand of the nudist-camp beach, he was sure there was something unreal about the situation. The Africans and the Haitians (plus Houmes, who had apparently decided that his own standing was going to suffer if he consorted with the SS I low-melanin group any more than was strictly necessary) were involved in a complex four- or five-dimensional argument revolving around an immediate return to Africa; at one point Angelo was sure he heard somebody suggest fishing for the capsule and using it as a raft, though how the raft was going to get from the neighborhood of Brasilia to the Atlantic Ocean was not being discussed. The SS I crew—Angelo and Juli, Captain Zugzwang, Woorden and the medical officer, Dr. Emmis, whose horselike, dignified face seemed entirely unchanged by waterlogging—ambled aimlessly around on the sand, looking like an ill-fated picnic party.

And it was all, Angelo was sure, a dream.

Vaguely, distantly, Angelo began to get the idea that he was dead. He had died in the water, and now he was dreaming that he was still alive. Or something like that, anyhow.

It did not take very long for him to discover that, as far as the best brains on Earth were concerned, he was perfectly correct.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

### II

IT ALL BEGAN in an automat—the same one in which Angelo had been trying to get a bite of rhubarb pie more than a month before, when the idiotic chain of events which had taken him to SS II had begun. Now, back on Earth once again, his mind had run through its filing system and had come up with rhubarb pie, even more insistently. Happily, he discovered, the cheerful little windows of the automat still displayed rhubarb pie here and there. And this time, maybe, he could get some.

He slipped his credit card in the slot provided and waited. The slot did nothing whatever for a full second.

Then his credit card popped up in the air and began to drift down. Angelo, his reflexes slowed down by surprise, missed it and finally scrabbled it up off the smooth floor.

The automat wasn't supposed to work like that.

He put the card in again.

The slot spat it out again.

Sighing, he tried it once more.

This time the card didn't come shooting out. Instead, a lovely, violent hooting began, deafening Angelo and causing starts of alarm and slops of spilled coffee, tea, milk, and beef stew all over the place. Riveted to the spot, Angelo opened his mouth and then shut it again; against that noise he was no competition at all.

Maybe if he took out his card . . .

He fumbled for the edge that protruded. He tugged at it.

Nothing happened. The machine was now, for reasons of its own, hanging on to Angelo's credit card for dear life and hooting fit to wake the dead.

After a century or so, Angelo noticed some people in white surrounding him. One of them slapped a small mechanism against the wall near the slot. At once, the hooting stopped. Curious spectators throughout the place went sighing back to their coffee, tea, milk, and beef stew. Angelo said, "What happened? All I wanted . . ." and reached for his card.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

A very hard hand clamped down on his wrist. "Just a minute, buddy boy," a voice said. The voice sounded as if it had forced its way through several miles of small pebbles. "Just don't do nothing foolish."

"But I—"

"What're you trying to pull?" the pebbles asked him.

Angelo swallowed weakly. "Pull?" he said, in a voice that didn't sound too much like the one he'd always thought he owned.

"This card's counterfeit," the pebbles said. Angelo looked around. The man who held him was large and sag-faced, with a jaw the approximate size of an axe. The two others were a little smaller; one was male and one was female, and it took a few seconds to decide which was which. Automats didn't have much in the way of human employees, but the few this one did have more than made up for quantity in the magnificent oddness of their quality.

"It's not counterfeit," Angelo said. "It's a substitute . . . a replacement . . . I keep losing cards, so I—"

"Counterfeit," the pebbles repeated. For some reason, the female employee laughed. "You mean to tell me you're . . . what this says? Angelo di . . . di . . ."

"Stefano," Angelo said. "Sure I am," he went on after a second, watching disbelief shine out of three faces like lighthouse signals.

"Ha," the pebbles said. The other man said, "Ha, sure," and the female laughed again.

"That's me," Angelo said, wondering what there was about rhubarb pie that led to all these troubles. "I'm Angelo di-Stefano. Always have been. Even as a little boy. I—"

"You're pretty lively, buddy boy," the pebbles said. "For a corpse, that is."

A long silence descended on the group. Angelo could see customers eating, leaving, wandering, buying. Most of them more normal-looking than, he thought, he had any right to expect after the alien invasion. But then, Brasília would have had the strongest of defenses, and anyhow it was comparatively isolated.

The thing was, nobody bothered with him. The customers had their own troubles, and a group of workmen and one man in rather baggy, civilian clothing didn't concern them



## THE WAGERED WORLD

at all. Maybe, Angelo thought, if he started to scream, or

...

He faced the fact squarely: he was afraid to put the matter to a test. If he screamed, and nobody turned . . .

Well?

Of course these three had seen him, but . . .

Maybe he *was* dead, after all.

It seemed, for about eight seconds, a very difficult thing to prove, one way or the other.

Then he said, "If I'm dead, what am I doing here?"

"Now, look, buddy boy—"

"I should be in heaven. Or hell. Or purgatory," Angelo said. "And none of them are going to look like an automatic foodery. Anyhow, nobody's ever said so, and with all the theories there *have* been, I'm not going to believe one that hasn't." He faced them, defiantly and for a second or so triumphantly.

"That's right buddy boy" the pebbles said then. "You ain't dead. So who are you—and why'd you try slipping some dead guy's card into the machinery? You oughta know better than that."

Angelo shut his eyes. When he opened them nothing had changed. "But . . ." he began, and then took a deep breath.

Explanation did not look like the simplest of jobs.

For the first and last time, the alien invasion worked out in Angelo's favor. Two full hours of discussion had left him even emptier than when he'd started, and managed to confuse everyone concerned, but the final verdict was unexpectedly simple and even soothing.

"What the hell," the pebbles said. "I guess we could have this nut arrested. But everything's all screwed up with extra cases and rebuilding and nobody knows what the hell else since all those little ships came down. Why not just let him the hell out?"

Luckily, nobody had an answer for that question. Angelo was permitted, at last, to slip away through the incurious automat and, with the card he'd somehow managed to retrieve stuck in a back pocket, head for a telephone booth.

There, he knew, he could get a little solid information.

Luckily, it didn't cost him anything.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

### III

THE THREE-DIGIT information code was, of course, engraved irreparably in his head; it was engraved in everyone's. The central computer bank that ran all machinery in Brasilia except a few independent and unhappy holdouts had been buried much too deeply to be harmed by the quick alien strike; safe in a phone booth, Angelo spun the dial three times, and a line to its information banks cleared.

The banks, perhaps the most sophisticated on Earth, could receive and transmit information verbally. The computer had been programmed as a slightly remote-sounding baritone, on the theory that such a voice would distract the hearer least and let him concentrate on the information itself. It's quite possible that nobody, in the designing of this central computer, had ever imagined the sort of information Angelo was getting; a distraction, any distraction whatever, would have been a distinct relief.

"I'd like some information," he said casually, "on Angelo diStefano." He read out a set of recognition numbers from his card.

The computer paused hardly a second. "Deceased," it said.

Angelo blinked. "No," he said. "This is me. I'm talking to you. How can I be deceased?"

Computers have neat, logical minds. "In any number of ways," this one told him. "As for instance: heart attack, diabetic coma, automobile or flyer accident, old age, resistant viral strains of—"

"Wait a minute," Angelo said.

"One minute," the computer said. "Now counting. One. Two. Three. Four. . . ." It went on. Angelo listened carefully to the numbers from one to sixty, wondering if even advanced electrical engineers, or physicists, or black magicians—whichever category was appropriate—had ever figured out a way to talk sensibly to computers.

"Now," Angelo said, when the pleasant baritone had informed him that a minute had passed, "let's get back to Angelo diStefano. Where did you get the idea—no, ignore

## THE WAGERED WORLD

that. How do you know he's—I'm—what's all this about being deceased?"

"Question not clear," the computer said. Angelo sighed.

"How do you know Angelo diStefano is dead?" he asked grimly.

"Information has been filed to that effect."

No, Angelo thought; not even black magicians could get anywhere sensible with computers. "What information?"

"Angelo diStefano, Intelligence Officer, sent to Space Station II by special assignment. Space Station II now destroyed. All personnel listed as deceased, in presence of no information to the contrary."

"But *this* is information to the contrary," Angelo said. "I'm alive. I'm Angelo diStefano and I'm alive."

"False information does not affect data files," the machine said.

"But this isn't false," Angelo said. "I'm . . ." He paused. "Look, now," he said. "I—"

"Vision circuits do not exist for this connection."

Angelo sighed again. "Okay," he said. "I'm Angelo diStefano. I think, therefore I am."

"Statement of thought processes accepted. Conclusion tentatively acceptable. You think, therefore you are."

This Cartesian agreement cheered Angelo unduly. "Fine," he said with a bit more spirit. "Then I'm not dead."

"Correct," said the computer. "You are not dead."

"Then all this about Angelo diStefano being deceased is nonsense, and—"

"Angelo diStefano," the computer said, "is deceased, along with all members of the special crew added to complement of Space Station II. A funeral was held, data regarding which is in my files."

Angelo blinked. "Funeral?" he said.

"Religious services following upon death," the computer said, which didn't make much sense for a minute, even when a computer had put it together. "For further details regarding religion, services, or death my files are available if you care to ask the appropriate questions."

God only knew, Angelo told himself—and winced at the phrasing—what the appropriate questions were. And God would, he was sure, have enough sense to refrain from

## THE WAGERED WORLD

asking them. Besides, He would already know the answers. The sort of thing God might be likely to ask a computer . . .

That train of thought, Angelo saw rapidly, led into swamps and morasses whose acquaintance he distinctly did not want to make. That way, a tiny signpost in his mind informed him, madness lay. With some difficulty, therefore, he got off the train.

"Tell me about the funeral," he said. The computer, without so much as clearing its (probably ceramic) throat-liners, if any, obliged. Angelo stood, as rapt and awestruck as if he had been Huckleberry Finn or Count Dracula, back in the prespace days; it is not given to many to hear detailed accounts of their own obsequies.

There seemed, in fact, to have been two separate accounts of the death of all the SS I personnel. These coexisted in the computer and were marked *Conflicting*, but both remained, it informed him, pending the acquisition of more information. Perhaps, Angelo's mind commented before he could stop it, the computer was working on a direct pipeline to God; though for some reason the idea of St. Peter punching out an information tape while his halo kept slipping over one eye took a little something away from the dignity of faith.

Account One was very simple and had received no publicity. The SS I crew had been on SS II when it had blown up. All official reports had come from the variegated SS II crew; the SS I crew was therefore, by the computer anyhow, presumed dead. This particular theory would not, Angelo thought, have held enough water to float the average mote, let alone a whole beam like UN Personnel Information; when the computer was finished outlining it, Angelo opened his mouth to object and got hit on top of the head with Account Two—which was far from simple and had received publicity beyond the wildest dreams of even the most publicity-conscious computer. It was, in fact, known all over the world—despite the metals shortage and consequent lack of communication. Angelo began to see a new reason for the nudist panic through which he had recently lived.

In the incredibly complicated process of landing, he re-

## THE WAGERED WORLD

membered, the booster had, rather hurriedly, been jettisoned. He even remembered watching it flame like a meteor through the atmosphere as it fell.

He had not, he now discovered, been the only person watching it.

The UN had assumed that the meteor was the funeral pyre of the SS I crew; and, probably, Angelo theorized bitterly, due to a weeping chambermaid or something in UN HQ, the story of their sad demise had spread throughout the globe with the speed of an epidemic of impetigo.

The heroes of SS I—Angelo heard with some amazement—had died heroically in the defense of the Earth against alien hordes.

The flaming booster had been identified as their rocket. Its landing place, somewhere in the North Atlantic, had been more or less located; and over the spot there floated, in perpetuity, a plastic unsinkable wreath inscribed in waterproof gold print with all their names—probably, Angelo reflected, spelled wrong. More: schoolchildren all over the world had been taxed for pennies—or what amounted to pennies: metal was in short supply and though a lot of coinage still remained; it was more valuable now as metal than as money—and with the proceeds of this great and rapid sentimental movement, an enormous monument had been raised inside UN HQ.

Angelo was curious enough to search out pictures of the monument.

It provided him with an additional, and an urgent, reason for getting inside HQ. The thing had to be destroyed immediately.

Quite apart from the mild solecism involved in a monument to several people who were, after all, still alive—no matter what the computer, millions of children, and the remaining population of the planet, thought about the matter—it was, he decided calmly, the most God-awful thing he had ever seen. It made the average compost heap or manure pile into a magnificent work of shining art, entirely by comparison. Of course, like all art, the thing raised undeniable emotion in Angelo. The emotion it raised might have been identified, very mildly, as raging and unbearable disgust.



## THE WAGERED WORLD

"Oh, God," he said, and staggered off to find the rest of the crew and tell them the news.

Which turned out to be unnecessary.

Ensconced uncomfortably in a tiny cubicle, the office space of a remote colleague of Dr. Emmis's, they had all heard the news. Most had seen the monument in one picture or another; it was quite popular for reasons Angelo found himself both unable and unwilling to locate.

"We'll have to get inside," Dr. Emmis said grimly. Angelo remembered, once, having to buy a tour ticket to gain entry. This time, clearly, he couldn't even do that. The economy of Brasilia was totally mechanized. Without his card, he had no way of buying a ticket.

Or food. Or shelter. Or . . .

Anything at all.

The monument had raised the crew to a pitch of horror—except for Captain Zugzwang, whose response to artworks was, if existent, minimal. The itch to destroy it was working in, with the same exception, everyone.

Yet Captain Zugzwang, in a condition peculiar to himself, seemed the most stricken of all. "I have been officially told of my death," he said. "How can I ignore this? And yet, the fact that I can hear and remember forces me to think, even when the notification is entirely official, that I *should* forget."

In a vague sort of way, Angelo saw the point he was trying to make; but clarification didn't seem as if it would do anybody any particular good. Nor would it advance anybody so much as a single step toward solving their peculiar problem.

"The trouble is," Dr. Emmis said, with what seemed to be a rare attack of humor, "unless we can convince the computer we're alive, we'll be dead. Things are arranged pretty strictly up here—we can't even stay in this office for too long. And if we can't get food anywhere—"

"It's ridiculous," Juli said, and turned to Angelo. "Do something," she told him. "You can do something, I just know it."

Juli's cheerful confidence—which had been cropping up ever since she and Angelo, together with the rest of the

## THE WAGERED WORLD

crew, had been embroiled in strange activities—had never acquired the neglectful patina of familiarity for Angelo. It still seemed to him not only ridiculous, but downright bothersome. After all, why should *he* be the one who . . .

Well, of course, he had managed to think of a few things here and there. But that—well, that had been sheer luck.

Absolutely.

And as soon as the current mess was finished with, he promised himself, he'd find a nice Intelligence beat somewhere and never, never see Juli again. Ignoring sternly the faint insistence that told him (to his own surprise, and possibly to its) that he would miss the girl, he said, "Well, we know some officials in the UN complex. If we got hold of them tomorrow morning, before they went in—"

"It's been tried," Dr. Emmis said flatly.

"There is no procedure for such a case," Captain Zugzwang said.

"Procedure?"

"Of course," the captain said, a little less miserable as he came back to his element. "In order to perform any operation which gives vital data to the computer complex, it is necessary to have a procedure. You must understand that there is no procedure for informing the computer that the dead are alive."

"Careless," Angelo said.

"Well, Mr. diStefano," Woorden put in, using his very best baritone, "one would hardly expect such information to be of use. In the . . . ah . . . natural course of the events of the world, when the dead are again alive, it will not be needed that a computer be informed."

In the brief silence, Juli took a breath. "But we've got to do something!" she said. "Angelo?"

"As soon as I can think of anything to do," he promised her wearily.

"We have been going over possibilities," Dr. Emmis said. Angelo had been the last to arrive at the tiny cubicle, since it had taken his mind a while to realize that the computer might have information about people "alleging to be" the crew. "There doesn't seem to be anything we can do," the doctor said. "Except, perhaps, leave. Go somewhere else."

"And do what?" Angelo asked. "The world's a mess, and

## THE WAGERED WORLD

most of the world near here is plain, simple, howling wilderness. We can't spend the rest of our lives having amnesia on rafts; and what else is there?"

"In some other city—"

"Any other city would check back with its computers," Angelo said. "This is one world, or so near it makes no difference these days; either we get kicked out because we're not Africans . . . or Chinese . . ." He detected a gleam in Woorden's eye and squelched it hurriedly. "Anyhow, not black Africans . . . or Chinese, any color . . . or we get kicked out because the computer thinks we're dead. Take your choice. One from column A and one from column A."

"Then what do we do?" Juli asked tensely. "Angelo, there must be—"

"We're dead," Angelo said. "The dead have no worries anymore. Why not think of it that way? It's just as if we were never—"

"Exactly!" Dr. Emmis roared out, and every head turned. "I believe a medical friend of mine will be happy to oblige. And, after that—"

"After what?" Angelo asked. "If this medical friend is going to kill us for good, I think we ought to discuss it first. I mean, let's not give up the ship before the broth spoils. Or whatever it is."

"Kill us?" Dr. Emmis said. "By no means, no means at all. My friends, we are about to be born."

## IV

IT WAS NOT as simple as all that, of course.

Getting themselves listed with the computer as newborn infants was, Angelo winced, child's play. The discovery that newborn infants had an automatic *No Credit* attached to their names—and so couldn't use their brand-new cards to get into UN HQ, or to get anything at all—came a little bit later.

And then came the horrid realization that, in five years—assuming they lived five years, which was no cinch bet—

## THE WAGERED WORLD

Angelo was going to be slammed automatically into kindergarten along with Captain Zugzwang and the crew.

The picture of himself helping the captain to build a little house of childproof blocks was almost too much for the mind to bear. Death was definitely preferable, he decided. "If we could only get inside," he said, "there's a nontamper circuit we can use to convert us back to adults. Give us our old identities back."

"But, Angelo, you never mentioned that," Juli gasped.

"Until we had some sort of identity, until we were living beings for the computer, the circuit doesn't work. Top secret, anyhow, meant for the sort of job where a man has to have five or six different identities and all of them checking out down to the last computerized decimal when he needs them. But we have to be inside to work it."

"Can't some friend—"

"No," Angelo said flatly. "There aren't many people who even know about it. And if I were alive, I'd be breaking secrecy to tell you."

"But," Woorden objected, "you *are* alive."

Angelo nodded. "Right. I am," he said. "I keep forgetting that. Well, anyhow, I'm a newborn infant, and who expects *them* to keep security rules? The few people I know who know about the circuit don't know where it is or how to work it. As far as I can think, I'm the only one in Brasilia who does—except for the S-G."

"And the S-G—" Dr. Emmis began.

"Is as likely to help us, just now, as she is to walk into this tiny hiding place with a birthday cake and seventeen candles. Good Lord, no matter what she might want to do, she's got a world in tangles spread out on her desk. She's so busy she never leaves the complex, and anybody who tried to bring her one more problem would get his head handed back to him on a second-hand platter once used by Salome." Angelo sighed. "Nope. This one, we're going to have to work out by ourselves."

"But—" Dr. Emmis said.

"Exactly," Angelo said. "All we need to know now is: how are we going to do it?"

"Angelo," Juli breathed, "I just *know* you can."

Someday, he promised himself, when he was feeling better

## THE WAGFRED WORLD

and all this trouble was over, he was going to award himself rare treat and strangle that woman.

In the meanwhile, violence was no solution.

"Oh, isn't it?" Angelo said suddenly.

"Isn't what what?" Dr. Emmis asked, and blinked. mean—"

"What?" Captain Zugzwang asked. "What sort of what this? It is what-what, and it means nothing." He snorted a superior, logical fashion, his arms folded.

"No," Dr. Emmis said. "It's not what. It's Angelo's what. He said it wasn't, and I wanted to know what wasn't what I mean—"

"All I meant was," Angelo said, "that it is, too, the solution to our problems."

"It?" Juli asked.

Captain Zugzwang began, "I do not understand the—"

"Violence," Angelo said, so carried away that he actually interrupted the Captain without noticing the fact. "The answer to everything."

"The *what*?" Dr. Emmis said, outraged.

"Now," Angelo said calmly, "let's not start that again."

Everything was neat, simple and perfectly logical.

You can't pay your way into the UN.

You can't sneak in.

You can't gimmick the machines to let you in.

So, naturally, you take the only way left.

You get yourself dragged in.

This proved simple. The two UN police, sunken-looking goons, who were pelted with small bits of mud and pebbles reacted just as Angelo had expected. A little tossing around and a few oaths here and there, perhaps the loss of a tot of one square inch of skin among the party, and they were inside, headed for trial.

The trial became, predictably, complex; the computer-run court had nothing in its circuits to allow for the trial of five newborn infants for assault and battery, interference with officials in the performance of their duties, foul and obscene use of language, or several other things, singly or all in a lump. When matters were at their apparent height, with empurpled faces everywhere and the calm, pro-



## THE WAGERED WORLD

grammed voice of the baritone computer explaining, very patiently and simply, something nobody would quiet down long enough to listen to, Angelo shrugged and strolled out of the courtroom.

Fifteen minutes later, he returned to discover that:

A. The infants charged with all those heinous crimes did not exist.

B. The ex-crew of SS I finally did.

C. They were now, clearly, not broke. They owed, collectively, something on the order of six million dollars.

It was a joke so ancient, and so familiar, that even John Woorden had been long persuaded that it was funny. "This, then," he said, "is why it is that captains go down with their ships."

Nobody else laughed, and Woorden soon copied the silent example. In UN quarters, where the lighting was a little better and everything seemed somehow more peaceful, the five of them made a tiny island of absolute gloom.

They had, after all, destroyed SS II.

And, on the news of their death, their insurance policies had been paid out.

For all the sums involved in this mess, they owed money. Their personal accounts were long gone, of course; and the thought of earning six million dollars did not look terribly plausible.

"We were better off as babies," Angelo said. Then he thought of kindergarten with the captain and amended his statement: "Well, almost."

"Anyhow," Dr. Emmis said wearily, "we can't try that dodge again."

There was a silence.

Angelo broke it with a wistful tone in his voice. "Remember when we thought we were all going to be heroes? Saving the world and everything."

"Medals," Juli said. "Interviews. Fame. Fortune."

"And here we are," Angelo said. "Six million dollars in debt, and not even babies anymore. Frankly, I think . . ."

Even Angelo never remembered what it was he had been thinking. In their quarters, the sound of a siren split the gentle air. Juli made a sound of her own and went white;

## THE WAGERED WORLD

Woorden and Captain Zugzwang looked stern, expectant and responsible by turns; and Dr. Emmis—like, he imagined Angelo himself—just looked, after the first startled second a little more tired.

"UN security," a voice from nowhere-in-particular said. It was a harsh, deep voice; at that, Angelo was, very slightly relieved. At least, he told himself, it wasn't the computer.

"Now what?" Dr. Emmis snorted.

The voice went smoothly on. "All members of the SS I crew are directed to report at once to the offices of the Chief of UN Security. This order takes precedence over all other directives. All members of SS I crew are directed . . ."

"We heard you," Angelo said with great weariness. "We heard you." Heading toward the door with the others, he noticed that, at this disrespectful reply to official command, both the captain and stern John Woorden looked pitifully shocked.

Can't please everybody, Angelo told himself, and tried not to wonder who, besides Angelo diStefano, he was even trying to please. Somehow, he found himself in front of the little expedition as it wended its way through corridors, up and down flights of moving stairs, past open doors and directional signals that always told them in great detail how to get somewhere else (FOOD DEVELOPMENT PROCESS SUBCOMMITTEE, SECRETARIAL INFORMATION SUB-OFFICE, one sign said, and Angelo refused even to try to figure out what it meant); everyone else fell into a ragged bunch behind him, as they traversed what seemed like miles of UN HQ corridors and finally came to a single closed door.

It was blank. "Naturally," Angelo said, feeling foolish. "A security chief wouldn't have labels all over his door. Contrary to security, after all."

"Oh," Juli said in a small, awed voice.

With the feeling that, in days to come, he was going to look back on everything he had just been through as a sort of lost paradise, Angelo swallowed hard, once, took a very deep breath, and pushed open the door.

## PART TWO

### V

INSIDE, the Chief of UN Security, a graying man with small piglike eyes and a long-jawed, oddly constructed head, sat behind a polished and thoroughly cleared desk. Behind him was a blackboard which bore marks of recent, and messy, erasures. At one side there was a straight chair. A man, or a close facsimile, was sitting in the straight chair. He had chalk dust on his nose.

The chief of security had a high, piping voice. "At ease," he said when the five of them were inside and the door was closed. "You are here to listen to Professor Theophilus von Derma, who has something of importance to tell you."

The man (or c. f.) in the chair looked the crew over with a dissatisfied, sour expression. He had a great deal of dirty white hair, large ears, rimless glasses and a nose shaped like a somewhat softened carrot. He was, Angelo guessed, about seventy-two years old, and he did not look as if he had had much time for fun in all those busy years.

Behind him, Angelo could hear the crew settling into position. There were no other chairs in the room. With the premonition that his feet were going to start hurting any second, Angelo relaxed as well as he could, and gave Professor von Derma a look he hoped was attentive and respectful. If it wasn't, he felt, the man might flunk him right out of the human race—of which, the professor's pale flat eyes seemed to say, he had no very high opinion.

"Gentlemen," he began, in a voice that sounded as if leaves rustled in it. "And, of course, Miss Dental." He smiled in Juli's general direction, or performed what he clearly imagined was a smile. Somehow, it did not warm the air any. "You had, I am told, direct and detailed experience with the . . . ah . . . strange craft which have so recently . . . ah . . . plagued us."

"We did," a voice said. It took Angelo measurable time to place the strangled sound as belonging to Dr. Emmis. Per-

## THE WAGERED WORLD

haps Dr. Emmis was remembering medical school. Professor von Derma was clearly capable of flunking anybody out of anything, if irritated; and Angelo had the mysterious feeling that the professor's irritation did not take much arranging to create.

"Then you have undoubtedly . . . ah . . . thought to yourselves: why are these aliens so stupid? What is there about them which doesn't make sense?"

Angelo thought back to the invasion. As he recalled it, nothing whatever made sense. But, then, that was the usual state of things in Angelo's universe. In the universe of Dr. von Derma, who knew what might be usual?

There was quite a long silence. Apparently everybody felt just about the way Angelo did—unwilling to risk coming up with a wrong answer. The professor looked at them and shook his oddly assorted head.

"Well, then," he said, as if he had known all along he would have to take these silly little people by the hand and lead them, inch by inch, to every obvious conclusion. "The aliens," he said, "wanted metal. So far, are we all in agreement? They came here, they . . . ah . . . took metal wherever they could find it. The results have been prodigious . . . yes," he told them, glad to be able to agree with himself, "prodigious. But why should they come here for metal? No disturbance appears to have been charted with respect to the asteroid belt, for example. Or with respect to any other planet. Surely the outer planets—or, if gravity or temperature were a vital factor, then Mars or Venus, the asteroids, even the moon—but no, they came directly here. This, as you will of course agree, makes no sense."

"Alien motivations," Juli began, "might be entirely different from our own."

"This might be true," Professor von Derma said. "But it's just as well to exhaust all other possibilities . . . ah . . . first; in fact, it can be shown" (he didn't quite say, methods much too complex for your simple, little minds) "that the very fact of our being able to . . . ah . . . engage the aliens, battle with them and defeat them presupposes a motivational system which is . . . ah . . . commensurate with our own."

Someone in the misty past of Theophilus von Derma, An-

## THE WAGERED WORLD

gelo decided, had wanted a look at the von Derma throat passages, and had asked their owner to say *ah*. The request had caught on, and Angelo began to count the *ahs*. It was his only workable defense against leaping across the room and strangling the professor where he sat.

"Well, all right," Juli said, almost combatively. "But if they don't make sense—"

"Ah, but they do," Dr. von Derma said, throwing Angelo's calculations into uncertainty from the start. Had that one been the usual brand, or an actual, dictionary-defendable interjection? "Let us suppose that the invasion had nothing to do with . . . ah . . . metals at all."

"But—" Dr. Emmis began. Professor von Derma gave him a withering, and slightly withered, look.

"The effect of this . . . ah . . . loss of metals has been great," he said. "The effect of our struggle with the aliens . . . ah . . . adds to our current condition. Let's imagine that . . . ah . . . *another* invasion were to begin tomorrow."

Angelo very nearly lost count.

The notion was simple, plausible and absolutely horrible. If the first invasion, all mechanical, had been purely for softening-up purposes, then the second would destroy the world. No questions asked.

And, with not even a space station up there to watch for aliens or to toss a few 100-megaton deterrents in their path . . .

"We're dead ducks," he said, and only then realized that he had spoken aloud.

"Not," Professor von Derma said, "quite." He looked round. "We shall need . . . ah . . . volunteers." He pointed delicately at Angelo, and then at Juli. "You two, in fact."

Everything was explained, very simply and very, very carefully. Angelo (making that first doubtful sound equal to 1/2) counted ninety-four and a half *ahs* by the time they were through and on their various strange ways.

Captain Zugzwang was still in shock, since he was trying hard to persuade himself that (officials not being able to make mistakes) he had never been officially declared dead, or reborn. He was put in charge of the staffing and construction of a new space station, a single one on which all races

## THE WAGERED WORLD

would be represented. "We'll find the construction materials," the security chief assured him. "That's not your worry. When you're ready, we'll have a command for you."

The idea inflated Captain Zugzwang noticeably; he seemed almost ready to begin barking orders again, and perhaps only the baleful presence of Professor von Derma kept him from doing that. He did, however, put so much snap into his salute that Angelo wondered, vaguely, whether he'd given himself a concussion.

Dr. Emmis, of course, was in charge of a research team of medical officers. "Those alien ships show traces of virus and bacterium existence. Nothing dangerous to us, as far as it's possible to tell, but we need to know everything we can."

"I'll need time," Dr. Emmis said.

"You will have . . . ah . . . all the time necessary," Professor von Derma assured him. "Haste is, of course, of the . . . ah . . . essence."

"Certainly," Dr. Emmis said, and nodded, and then remembered to salute. "Of course." Everyone else, for no particular reason, nodded.

"And, as for the volunteers—you *do* volunteer, don't you?" the security chief asked. There was dead silence. "Of course you do," he said. "Fine. Shows the right spirit. Wonderful." There was some more silence. Angelo opened his mouth, thought the situation over, and shut it. "*Your* job," the security chief said, "is to find out whether there's a new invasion on the way."

Angelo found his voice, a little rusty and rained-on, maybe, but there at last. "How?" he asked.

"We're going to send you out. In a space ship."

The silence that fell then was positively appalling. Juli said, very timidly, "What kind of a space ship? I mean, what have we to do with—"

"Secret," Dr. von Derma said. "UN . . . ah . . . business. It has been built secretly. Alien plans; in fact; derivations from the mechanisms of the alien . . . ah . . . craft. It will work with simplicity and without trouble."

"Of course," the security chief said, "you see why you've been chosen. An Intelligence man, for . . . well, for Intelligence. And an ecologist, for expertise in the treatment of life-systems. That's clear, I hope?"

## THE WAGERED WORLD

"Absolutely," Angelo said. "But—"

"All very simple," the Chief said. "Nothing to worry about. Nothing at all."

Angelo doubted that, very strongly. But—well, he was broke. And he was still an officer in UN Intelligence.

What else was there to do?

Sternly repressing the obvious answer (jump out of a tall window), he nodded and tried to look as if he understood the explanations that followed. He had the creepy feeling that nobody else understood them, either. Somehow, the fact that he was not alone did not give him any real satisfaction.

And the way the chief kept telling him that there was nothing to worry about . . .

Angelo wondered if he looked as pale green as he felt.

Watching Juli's complexion, he was almost sure that he did.

## VI

HYPERSPACE, Angelo had thought, was a convenient notion for fantasy. Dr. von Derma's explanation did little to make matters any clearer; he kept talking about hyperspace being a mathematical analogue of a translated wave-form in terms of probability mechanics.

Nothing, to Angelo, sounded more like a nice notion for fantasy than a mathematical analogue of a translated wave-form in terms of probability mechanics.

Juli, who knew either less or a good deal more about the thing, nodded brightly and even asked a question or two. Since the questions were on the order of: "Don't the intermediate K functions vanish under any M-N-P translations?" the answers did not hand Angelo much more reassurance, or even information. Being told that, indeed, the intermediate K functions, under the conditions specified, *did* vanish—unless the wave transform involved was transformable into a finite sheaf of Markoff chains—left Angelo about where he'd started, with only the additional puzzle as to why he'd never known that Juli had so much mathematics tucked away in her curly-topped head.

But, then, it wasn't a subject that was really likely to come up. Juli was an ecologist and needed no more math

## THE WAGERED WORLD

than necessary to calculate the amount of fertilizer, say, for six plants, if one plant needed a known amount. As far as Angelo could see, that involved no intermediate K functions at all.

A hobby, he supposed. And perhaps a more useful one than what he'd come to think of as his own: finding rhubarb pie.

The ship was alien in basic construction, modified for their use and including a new and roomy life-support system. "You see," a technician mentioned, "we really don't know how long your tour will last; so we've made provisions for as long as we can." That, too, added to Angelo's sense of impending doom.

How did he get into these things? he asked himself. On reflection, he wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer.

The ship was readied quickly; Angelo and Juli were hustled aboard with barely time to think, let alone find some nice rhubarb pie. Everything was set to go. "This must be done in absolute secrecy," the security chief had said. "We need speed. If the African nations find out we're doing this, there'll be arguments in the UN as to who will go. Weeks of arguments—and we may not have weeks. We have to know. And we have to know fast."

The best available brains had been co-opted to make sure that the ship was programmed to return to the alien home base. "That way, you'll pick up the most knowledge in the shortest time," Angelo was told. "When you get back . . ."

When?

Nope, Angelo told himself.

If.

The ship's computer was automatic. Hyperspace drive required, apparently, no great slamming of G's; one simply climbed aboard, pushed a button marked *Start*, and waited.

Angelo watched his finger head for the button. It seemed to take several thousand years to get there.

It pushed the button.

Hyperspace travel began.

Movement was impossible.

Like frozen statues, Angelo and Juli watched the ship



## THE WAGERED WORLD

flicker around them. It disappeared, appeared again, crawled, melted, shone.

This ship had no outside view panels. Angelo's finger, on the button, stayed there while he wondered frantically where he was, what to do, and why in the name of any God you named he and Juli had got snarled up in this.

All very simple. Nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.

Except that the interior temperature rose. And rose.

They were going to fry. That, Angelo knew, was a certainty. They were going to fry.

Temperature approaching zero absolute.

Hot and cold, both at once. Both growing.

The ship shimmered. A voice from nowhere said: "Ho ho ho. And what do *you* want for Christmas, little boy?"

That one had a great many answers. Frozen, unable to do more than think and feel, Angelo was unable to provide them.

"Only seven hundred and forty-six years left to do your Christmas shopping in," the voice said. "All the Easter Seals on Pribilof Island did *their* shopping years and *years* ago. How would you like a nice set of reindeer for Christmas, little boy? Have you been a *good* little boy?"

The temperature rose.

And fell.

All the dials began to sing obscene madrigals. In choral arrangements.

A star appeared at the left of the (slowly disappearing) ship. Beneath it was a neat white arrow and the words, lettered in clear capitals: GO TO JAIL. GO DIRECTLY TO JAIL. DO NOT PASS OUT.

"It isn't the gift," the voice said. "It's the thought behind it. Ho ho ho."

And something smelled like meat loaf.

*Meat loaf?*

The dials hummed a single, beautiful chord, and then said, all at once: "When you hear the tone, the time will be whenever it really is."

One dial put out its tongue at Angelo. It gave him a loud raspberry.

"Join your Christmas Club," the voice said. "Give a club for Christmas this year. Ho ho ho."

## THE WAGERED WORLD

All this went on for some time.

Impossible as he would have thought it, when it stopped Angelo wished for it to start again.

They were back in normal space.

And, according to all the sensors, they were inside another ship.

A very large ship.

And not a ship from Earth.

"... has July 22 got to do with anything?" Juli was saying. She discovered, as Angelo did, that normal space-time rules were back in operation. Movement was possible. She gulped. "Sorry," she said. "Angelo, where are we?"

With a sense of great, almost classic, calm, Angelo turned, looked her straight in the eyes, and said: "Inside Moby Dick."

Angelo's reaction, when he had time to think matters over, seemed to him eminently sensible.

It was panic.

Juli, on the other hand, noticed hair-thin filaments entering their ship—right through the solid walls—and withdrawing again. She noticed a certain vague hum which did not seem to come from their ship at all. And she noticed the dials.

"The atmosphere out there is Earth-normal," she said. "Or breathable, anyhow. Whoever Moby Dick is—and I'm sorry, Angelo, but it sounds obscene—he's trying to keep us comfortable. Or, anyhow, alive."

"Sure," Angelo said. "For what?"

The question did not seem to have an answer. Juli, however, was clearly determined to do her best with it. She was beginning to when, bingo! movement again became impossible.

"Ho ho ho," a voice said. Not quite the same voice. "I'm Captain Ahab, and what do you want for Guy Fawkes Day?"

There was the bright hum of a telephone booth. A click, a bong, and a sexy female voice said, "Call me, Ishmael. Any time at all, Ishmael, honey."

This time, pinwheels seemed to be the main item of construction. Slow ones, fast ones, large ones, tiny ones, in all the colors there were and a few there weren't. Pin-

## THE WAGERED WORLD

wheels and the smell of melting tar and the cheery voice of Captain Ahab.

God alone knew, Angelo thought, what Juli was experiencing. July 22?

And then all the pinwheels turned into one giant pinwheel, which was also Angelo's head. The voice said, "John Gunther presents *Inside Moby!*" And the real world—if, Angelo told himself, that's what it was—faded back in.

For a few minutes, it seemed dull.

But only for a few minutes.

## VII

"ATMOSPHERE BREATHABLE," Juli reported.

"Let's suit up anyhow," Angelo said. "You never know."

Juli nodded emphatically. "That," she said, "is the truest thing I have ever heard you say. I mean, after all, July 22, and singing pomegranates."

Angelo knew with utter certainty that he was never going to find out any more about Juli's visions. Resolutely, he tucked Captain Ahab, John Gunther, Santa Claus, Moby Dick, pinwheels, stars, meat loaf, obscene madrigals, and tar in the back of his mind, where there was barely room for them. He and Juli helped each other with the suits, and with a positively sputnik sense of bravery, marched out of the airlock of their little ship into the big one.

Which wasn't there.

Instead, an enormous room surrounded them, a room paneled in something that looked simultaneously like platinum and very thin silk. A room with doors.

The lady, Angelo asked himself, or the tiger? Or?

Telling himself, without much success, that he was simply being cowardly, he took a step toward one of the doors. Then he stopped and looked at another door. There were five of them, all told, spaced irregularly round on the four walls of the room. There also appeared to be a door on the ceiling.

Well? Angelo asked himself.

"Angelo," Juli said, in trusting tones, "where are we?"

One sentence, at least, appeared safe. "We've arrived,"

## THE WAGERED WORLD

Angelo said.

Juli said, "Oh," and seemed, for a few seconds, perfectly satisfied. Then something else occurred to her. "But, Angelo, *where* have we arrived?"

"Obviously," Angelo said, trying to sound as if he knew what he was talking about, "we've arrived in a place. A room. Maybe we could even get out of our suits; but I don't think that's a good idea until we find out some more." Fat chance, his mind told him. "We're probably better off taking every precaution. It's only common sense. And what's more—"

A voice said "Welcome."

Angelo blinked and swallowed hard. Maybe all this Moby-Dicking and Captain-Ahabing was the wrong way to think about things. Maybe Jonah would be a better way, Jonah and the whale. And . . . God?

Anything, he realized, was possible. Spaceships didn't seem to be the best instruments with which to make theological discoveries. But then Edison had made an incandescent lamp with a bamboo filament, and bamboo certainly didn't sound like the best instrument with which to make a scientific discovery.

He was, he realized, straying slightly from the subject. In another second he added the realization that he didn't know what the subject was.

Or, in fact, much of anything useful.

"Thanks," he told the voice at last. What else was there to say?

"You are welcome," the voice said. "Both of you. If, of course, you consider yourselves separate beings from each other."

"Oh," Juli said hastily and with some passion, "*we do*. We really *do*. You can believe that, Sir.

The voice asked: "Sir?"

"Your Honor," Juli said. "Your Majesty. Your Grand Exalted—"

"One moment," the voice said.

Juli turned to Angelo. "What was *that*?" she asked, awed.

"A voice," Angelo said, trying for the casual touch. "Obvious." What was obvious about anything was entirely beyond him, but he thought the word sounded well, under the circumstances—whatever they were.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

After all, there was such a thing as morale.

"Oh," Juli said uncertainly. "Sure."

The voice returned. "My instant-translation circuits are in order," it said. "But I do not understand the last remarks."

"Well," Angelo began, "you see, we're not quite sure how to . . ." His voice trailed away. Instant-translation circuits? Instant-translation?

"Yes?" the voice asked.

"Yes," Angelo said. "Yes, indeed. Certainly and continuously yes. Look, you're a computer, aren't you?"

"I am a computer," the voice said. "At what should I look?"

"Why should I care?" Angelo said.

"I have no data on your motives. Your race is unknown to me."

"But the translations—" Angelo began.

"Deduction from stance, configuration, and so forth," the voice said. "Since you are in protective clothing—or so my sensors inform me—we are speaking telepathically."

True, Angelo told himself. He and Juli could hear each other via the intercom system. But the computer had to find another way. Nevertheless, a telepathic computer sounded a little frightening. In fact, it sounded very frightening indeed. In fact . . .

"Do not be alarmed," the voice said. "My instructions are to use telepathy only when necessary. For translation and for needed communication only. I shall use it in no other manner."

Angelo gulped. "Fine," he said. After all, this was just another computer, like the ones back in Brasilia. There wasn't anything really different. Simple. Easy. A nice, understandable computer.

After a time, he managed to persuade himself, if not to belief, at least to the idea that belief was somewhere, somehow, possible. The computer waited patiently. Juli waited, making little sounds like *moo* and *eep* once in a while. She was clearly in no shape to deal with this alien machine. The job was all Angelo's.

He took a deep breath, waited one last second, and said, "Why are we here? Have we been brought here?"

"Yes," the computer said, "and no."

## THE WAGERED WORLD

"Explain," Angelo said. Dealing with computers wasn't so hard; you just had to remember that they were logical-not-reasonable, and work from there.

Simple?

Sure.

Juli went *moo*. The computer said, "You were picked up by the local force radiant. Your ship was then directed to this installation, which you would call a—parking place? Or perhaps an anteroom. The party is beyond the door."

"Party?"

"A convocation of beings in search of mutual relaxation and enjoyment," the computer said.

"Beings?"

"The six hundred and forty-two races of the Intergalactic Agreement, plus five new members. You will be the six hundred and forty-eighth race represented at this party, which is rather a small and casual party, I am programmed to state. No clothing of state need be worn. No *fniff* is required, and there will be no occasion, during the party, its preludes or its immediate aftermath, calling for the invariant uses of *prool*; such uses are, in fact, discouraged in the interests of interbeing harmony."

Obviously, Angelo told himself, he had gone mad. "Fniff?" he said. "Prool?"

"These concepts are not within your scope," the computer said. "A translation is therefore not possible. I am programmed to make such an announcement; I am also programmed to apologize for referring to matters of which you know nothing."

"Fine," Angelo said. "Now—"

"I therefore," said the computer, "apologize."

"Thanks," Angelo said. Behind him Juli had subsided into an occasional *eep* and no more; this, while not helpful, was at least not actively distracting, and Angelo was grateful for the subsidence. "And now, if you'll tell us about the atmospheric and other vital statistics of the party—"

"Let's see," the computer said. "You live on a planet which is—ah, yes." The anteroom, if that's what it was, began to flood with water. Or what appeared to be water.

Angelo said: "Hey!" Juli's *eeps* and *moos* increased in volume, penetration and frequency.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

"Your planet is seventy per cent water, approximately," the computer said. "I am therefore providing you with a living space which is seventy per cent water."

"But— Angelo said. Computers were not reasonable. Computers were logical.

But this one was *telepathic*. Didn't that make any difference?

Apparently not. It had promised to use its telepathy only when absolutely necessary. "Yes?" it said. "What is your objection?"

"We don't live in the water," Angelo said. "We live on the land. No water."

The computer said: "Ah." The water receded into hidden sewers and was gone. The surrounding air acquired, rather slowly, a bright, hard quality. "There is now no water to disturb you. The humidity is zero."

Angelo sighed. "But—"

"Is this not what you want?"

"Can't we work out a compromise?" Angelo asked with some despair.

"A rise in humidity?" the computer said. "I think this very gracious of you, to undergo discomfort so that you can appear without special equipment in the area of our party which is capable of sustaining life for you. Very few life-forms live in zero humidity."

"But—oh, well, all right," Angelo said. "I'm just generous that way."

The air began to soften in appearance.

"Open the fourth door to your left," the computer said. "A segment of the party suitable to life-forms of your type lies immediately beyond it."

There was a small silence. Juli said, "Angelo?"

"Well," Angelo said, "I see about ten thousand reasons why not. But we may get some information. Or something. And, since we're here . . ." He paused. "Just keep your suit on," he said. "I don't trust this."

Slowly, he began to walk toward the fourth door to his left. As he approached it, it opened evenly and without fuss until it provided about eight inches of space to squeeze through. Then it appeared to crumple quietly, disappeared into the top of the lintel and was gone. Beyond it was a

## THE WAGERED WORLD

great, bright room filled with a great many things which Angelo's mind did not immediately sort out.

He had imagined for years, as everyone had, various scenes involving the first contact of man with an alien intelligence. Unless you counted the invasion of alien machines—which he supposed, weren't really countable; man, in that case, would be their ship, or perhaps an automat—that moment of contact had come.

And it was, of course, the one thing he'd never imagined. A cocktail party. In space suits.

### VIII

LATER, much later, Angelo almost managed to convince himself that he was sane and that his senses were working normally although the party seemed to him the original basis for every hallucination, every fit of *delirium tremens*, and every bit of surrealism that had ever afflicted the human race. Not to mention Dada, dope, dreams, nightmares, the works of Edward Lear, and, oddly enough, limericks of all sizes and all degrees of purity.

It began almost normally. A small, manlike being, who had three large rabbitlike ears tied in a bowknot-like arrangement at the top of his head and who was bright bright purple in color (with enormous yellow eyes, and teeth to match), came up to the two space-suited newcomers and made a fluttery motion with both long-fingered hands. "I understand you're from a new sector," he, or it, or she said. "Of course, the translator's equipped to carry conversation into the radio spectrum, but must you wear those odd devices?"

Angelo, feeling positively gigantic, looked down at the knotted ears. "Devices?"

"Your . . . ah . . . carapaces," the being said. "Wouldn't that be the word?"

"Space-suits," Angelo said after a little thought. "Well, we think it's safer that way."

One ear somehow released itself from the knot and stuck straight up, hitting its peak at a dead level with Angelo's nose. "Safer?" the being said. It had, or the translator had



## THE WAGERED WORLD

provided it with a charming, quiet voice of about Irish-tenor range. "Are you so preoccupied with safety?"

"Well?" Angelo reminded himself that he was the representative of the entire human race. At a cocktail party. Light conversation. Nothing to disgrace humanity. Keep your cool. "You see, we're strangers here, and until we are more familiar with the local customs—"

"Ah, but there aren't any!" the being said, and a rumble sounded from Angelo's right (Juli had been on his left the last time he'd looked, but she was gone now; in fact, she had said something about leaving, something he'd been too preoccupied to hear. Well, he'd— "Urm?" the rumble asked.

Angelo turned.

This one was by no means small.

Or humanoid.

Or, he thought, anything he'd ever even dreamed of before.

It was nearly six feet high and almost five feet broad. It consisted, as nearly as he could judge, of two immense spheres set one above the other and linked by a very stiff series of spindly connections that looked like a circular arrangement of vertical slats. At the top of the upper sphere was a large insect-eye-like bubble (colored in a sort of basic tan with rainbow effects breaking up the facets), and below the center of each sphere was a small hole curtained by some sort of movable membrane. The creature seemed to have been colored at random, as if it had spent some time before the cocktail party thoughtfully climbing in and out of paint pots.

Again, it said: "Urm?"

Angelo took a deep breath and realized as he did so that the thing he wanted most in the world was to get out of his suit. There was, he told himself sadly, a limited amount of good air recirculation and repurification devices could do; and he was beginning to feel as if he had been born in the suit. The air was beginning to give him the idea that if he hadn't died inside the suit, *something* rather messy had. "What?" he asked.

"Just wondering," the double sphere said. When it spoke, Angelo noticed, the membranes moved aside; its voice was not only pitched near the cellar of human hearing but was also a duet. "You mentioned local customs. These are always

## THE WAGERED WORLD

very interesting. You might be surprised at how strange beings of the League sometimes seem."

"I might," Angelo said, knowing perfectly well that his surprise was waiting, neatly stored in the back of his head, until shock wore off. "But why are we here?"

"Ah," the three-eared being said, its third ear slowly coiling back into place. The ear waved at Angelo coyly and shot back into the knot. "Philosophy. How interesting a subject."

"I didn't mean—" Angelo said.

"Mean?" asked the double sphere in an even lower voice than usual.

Angelo took a breath. Inside his suit, clearly, something had died many, many years ago. Curiously, he peered round and caught sight of Juli standing some feet away in the center of a collection of what appeared to be gigantic black capes, all swirling in the air and supported by nothing whatever. "Never mind," Angelo said.

"Never?" asked the double sphere.

"He is over-literal," the eared being said casually. "New-comer, tell us a little about your world."

"There isn't much to tell," Angelo said absently. The capes were swirling in a recognizable pattern, as if they were all turning to face him. Juli was looking at him too.

And laughing.

Angelo would have bet his very last dollar that the capes were laughing, too.

At him.

Anger shot through him like a useless flame. He had never been laughed at by big black capes before; and, clearly, there was nothing he could do about it now. The capes were obviously nonhuman beings of some sort, and who knew what powers they had, or what a joust with them would do for relations between humanity and the—what had the computer called it?—Intergalactic Agreement?

"You are forbidden to speak of your world?" the eared being asked.

"Clearly, he is forbidden," the double sphere said. "It is a common taboo. He cannot provide information about his world. This much is certain."

Angelo said: "But—"

## THE WAGERED WORLD

"Now, in our normal space-time framework," the double sphere said, "all communication is impossible; we were therefore forced to develop means of entering other frameworks. This is the normal course of evolution, from possibility to specialization."

Angelo wondered, a little dazedly, if that meant anything.

Juli and the capes were still looking at him. One of the capes was bunching itself up in the strangest manner. It was, Angelo realized slowly, *chuckling*. He had never even imagined a chuckling cape before; but if a cape could chuckle, he knew, it would look like that peculiar bunching-and-unbunching thing. How many chuckles could a bunched cape chuckle if a bunched cape was a chuckler?

Grasping wildly for the remnants of his mind, Angelo found himself saying: "But I can talk about our world."

"Ah," the eared being said. "Is it real?"

Angelo thought about that. "Well," he said at last, "*we* think so."

"You see," the double sphere began, and Angelo's wandering attention was caught by a being which was floating, more or less, at the far side of the room. It looked like a giant raccoon in violet, with a blazing green mask. It was standing, or drifting, about four inches from the floor near what seemed to be a table. On it were gobs which Angelo imagined were refreshments—the Intergalactic version of potato chips, probably.

It was picking up the gobs one by one, and stuffing them . . .

Angelo shut his eyes. He told himself he had seen nothing whatever.

He opened them.

The violet raccoon wouldn't go away. Madly, Angelo's undisciplined mind tossed up an ancient joke, as, now and then, it had the habit of doing.

Woman on telephone, talking to police about elephant in her back yard. Woman has never seen an elephant before.

"He's picking up cabbages with his tail," she was babbling frantically. "And if I told you what he was doing with them, you'd never believe me."

But violet raccoons?

## THE WAGERED WORLD

"In normal space-time," the double sphere was saying. "Ah. One moment. Newcomer. Oh, newcomer?"

"Who?" Angelo said, returning from one nightmare to converse with another. "Me?"

"Ah, yes. Urm," the double sphere said. "Are those grasping-organs?"

"Are what what?" Angelo said.

"What what?" the double sphere said.

"No," Angelo said. "What what are grasping-organs?"

"He repeats himself," the eared being said. "Or possibly he repeats another being. Or several."

"The extensions below your sensorium," the double sphere said. "Are they grasping-organs?"

Gradually, Angelo realized that the beings were talking about his arms and hands. "Oh? Yes. That's what they are, all right." Capes, and violet, obscene raccoons, and . . .

"In that case," the double sphere said, and Angelo found his hands being aided by the eared being to points opposite each other and touching the sides of the upper sphere.

"But—" he began; it seemed to have become almost a habitual word.

"Please," the double sphere said. "Please? A word of various meanings."

"Yes," Angelo said.

"Is that one?" the double sphere asked.

"One what?"

"One meaning," the double sphere said patiently.

"Meaning?" Angelo asked, feeling lost.

"Of the word *please*," the double sphere said. "These words—discrete sounds, matching one-to-a-concept, occurring in time—are so confusing."

"I'd never thought of it that way before," Angelo said, holding the upper sphere rather as if it were a basketball, and not noticing the fact very much.

"Obviously," the eared being said acidly. In the distance, there seemed to be a slight disturbance, but no one else looked alarmed or even puzzled. Angelo was trying to figure out a course of action, and nothing much had occurred to him by the time the disturbance had overtaken the entire room.

"Ah," the double sphere said.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

"The game!" the eared being. "The game!"

"Last one to enter is . . ." the double sphere began, leaving the final concept to Angelo's somewhat fevered imagination.

He left something else as well.

Angelo discovered himself standing quite alone, holding the upper sphere.

It had legs.

It did not have a lower sphere. Not any more.

He felt like screaming.

"Oh, yes," the lower sphere said, a few seconds later, returning somewhat hurriedly. "Symbiosis." The sphere scurried under its upper cousin; the upper cousin stiffened its many legs—they were the barlike neck-structure Angelo had seen first of all—then both spheres, conjoined, whirled and left again.

A blast from Juli, who'd tuned her own communications rig too high, was the next item. "Angelo! The game! Come on!"

"Game? What game?"

"Come and see. Fun. They've been telling me."

Angelo said something unprintable, unthinkable, and inaudible.

Then he did the only possible thing.

He followed the crowd.

## IX

IT WAS in the crowd, while heading for the game (whatever that was) that Angelo came up against the single most important event in the life of humanity since the invention of the amoeba.

The event was, simply, a few sentences, carelessly spoken by aliens he didn't even see . . .

"It's a shame, really."

"Earth being invaded, you mean? It *is* called Earth, isn't it?"

"Far as I know. Funny sort of name."

## THE WAGERED WORLD

"Very odd. But I agree; it is a shame."

"If we could only rescue the place!"

"Not until Earth becomes a member. Intergalactic's strict about that."

"But one of them has used an alien drive. Perhaps more than one."

"No legal value to that, I'm afraid."

"Yes, you're right."

"But if we can't help?"

"Nothing to be done, I'm afraid."

"Too bad. Might have been an interesting race, Earth-beings."

"Indeed."

"No chance now, of course."

"Of course not. They'll be wiped out."

"Totally."

"Well, that's the way it goes."

"I suppose so. Seems a shame, though."

"I agree; it does seem a shame."

And there was nothing to do.

Nothing whatever.

Besides (Angelo told himself, with the grimmest feeling of comedy he had ever experienced) the game was about to start. And one couldn't miss the game, could one?

He thought of Juli's eager voice.

Of course not.

One couldn't miss the game.

## X

ANGELO NEVER DID get the game straight.

It was played with a large cube and a small black one which hummed and clicked. It was very like the odd hole-of-nothing which Houmes had run into, many centuries ago (at least, it felt like that), on the African space station.

The small one hummed and clicked and swooped and did nothing valuable that Angelo could figure out.

The large cube grunted and changed sides.

Each surface of the cube was a different color, and each

## THE WAGERED WORLD

surface had on it a certain number of apparently painted circles. But colors and circles changed every few seconds—flick! flick!—and in no discernible pattern.

The party was gathered round this enormous cube, cheering, apparently betting with each other or with the being (a golden cape, for a change) which seemed to own, or at least to run, the cube. But the bets didn't make much sense, either.

Some being was saying nervously, for instance, "Five, and eight, and square-double both, for and against."

"Taken at percentages," another being (not the golden cape) replied. There was a stir of what Angelo assumed was interest around the cube.

The other cube, the small cube-of-black-nothing, flickered, hummed, clicked, and disappeared. Several times.

It kept going away and coming back. This was disturbing.

The large cube changed colors and spots.

"Hah!" said a group of beings. "For and against. At percentage: five, and eight, and square-double both." It seemed an unlikely thing for a group to say in chorus, but there it was.

Silence. Then, "Podlings require," an eared being said intensely, "elevators and varnish. Come six-double-one, six-double-four."

Something, or someone, said, "Hah!" and the cube began to change again. The small one disappeared, reappeared, disappeared, reappeared.

"Angelol!" Juli said, much too loudly. "Isn't this *fun*?"

That one, he told himself, went into the category of questions for which there was no answer.

Everyone else appeared to agree, though; the crowd was having a fine time. At length, Angelo decided that this imitation crap game was simply not intelligible to the human mind. He had seen wins, losses, and great excitement; but he felt like an ancient football player, say, Sammy Baugh or Joe Namath, trying to score a game of cricket.

Then, suddenly, the being next to him, a tall, thin stork-like creation with bug eyes in bright blue and seventeen or eighteen arms (or small wings), said, "Newcomer?"

"Yes?" Angelo said.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

"Thank you," the storklike creation said.

"You're welcome," Angelo said automatically. "But what am I being thanked for?"

"For confirming that you accepted my contact of you."

"But—well, you're welcome. Did you want anything?"

"Oh, my, yes," the storklike being said. "Indeed I did. And what's more, I've managed to fulfill some of my desires. Which not every being can say, as I'm sure you'll agree."

Angelo blinked and sorted that one out. "Oh, sure," he said at last. "But I meant now."

"Now?"

"Did you want anything now?" Angelo asked doggedly.

"Did . . . now . . ." the storklike being said meditatively.

"Ah, these languages with temporal structures!" There was a pause. "I would rather like to ask you something," he said.

"Go right ahead," Angelo said cheerfully. After all, why not? What could he lose? Humanity was going to be destroyed anyhow.

Unless he could get back; but that was up to the party's computer, obviously. And he pushed the subject to the crowded and irritated back of his mind. Had to. And didn't quite succeed.

"How about a little bet?" the storklike being asked. "Just for the fun of it, you understand. Say, oh, say, two, four, weighted and immediate. Next play."

"Bet?" Angelo asked. "For . . . for what?"

The storklike being waved several arms, if that's what they were, in a sort of careless shrug. "Let's say, if you lose, you're out of the game. If you win, you win the entire evening's prizes."

Angelo began to think this over. Inside the suit, his thinking processes seemed to be dulling. "Is the atmosphere—"

"Oh, quite breathable," the storklike being assured him, and went through a list of figures and elements that sounded more like Earth than Earth itself. Angelo thought for one long second and then decided to play safe.

At that second he caught sight of Juli sitting with helmet off and obviously enjoying herself.

Well?

And what else could happen?



## THE WAGERED WORLD

And something had died inside his suit.

Angelo unshipped the helmet.

All round him, creatures of various sorts moved away.

The smell was awesome. It seemed to fill all of known space. There was no escape. Angelo felt like a secret biological weapon.

A great deal of time passed, and he realized, suddenly, what Juli and those idiotic capes had been laughing about!

Then the storklike being, from a foot farther off, said chokingly: "Well?"

Angelo tried to spar for time. Near him was a pile of small carrots. He picked one up, feeling that he might as well grab a nibble or two since the atmosphere was compatible and since the computer had assured him that the place was okayed for his type of life. He brought the carrot within an inch or so of his open mouth.

"Down," the carrot said.

Angelo blinked. "Huh?"

"I," the carrot said frostily, "am a full ambassador. Fomalhaut System. I bear no grudge: barbarians cannot be expected to understand everything at once. Nevertheless, I must insist that you abandon your nefarious plans for me, whatever they may be."

Angelo had never nibbled on a full ambassador, let alone one from the Fomalhaut System. In fact, he'd never nibbled on an empty ambassador, if it came to that. He dropped the carrot hastily. The carrot said, from no discernible speaking-organ, "Ow."

"Sorry," Angelo said.

"Apologies, too," the carrot said. Its voice was grating and high. "Pure barbarian." It paused, added: "Hmf," and shut up entirely.

The storklike being asked once more: "Well?"

Confused, worried, and unable to think clearly, Angelo said the only thing he could say. "Sure."

The colors and spots began to change. The smaller cube flickered even more than usual.

The process went on and on.

Tension built up, tension even Angelo could feel. Across the group, Juli was biting on a knuckle, watching.

The small cube flickered, hummed, swooped, clicked.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

The big one changed colors, changed spots.

Slower. Faster. Slower.

Slower.

There was a great cheer.

"You've won!" something, possibly the double sphere, said in an enormous voice.

"Won!" everyone else chorused.

"Angelo, I *knew* you could do it!" Juli said with adoring tones in her voice.

"The grand prize!" the storklike being said in awed tones.

And then, Angelo was back on his ship.

And the ship was traveling.

Just Angelo, and Juli.

And a small creature with a pointed head, three eyes, and a mouth large enough to toss basketballs into—an image Angelo hurriedly erased from his mind.

Angelo tried apologies, tried volunteering to take the strange being back to his home planet—wherever that was!

"But you don't understand," the being said in a cheery croak that sounded more like that of a highly intelligent gnome than anything else.

"Probably," Angelo said. "Nevertheless, I'm sorry you got on by accident."

"No accident," the gnome said.

Angelo thought. "You have a reason for coming with us?" He thought of six instantly—all nefarious and unlikable.

"Certainly," the gnome said.

"You're a . . . fighter? An advance scout?"

The gnome chuckled. "Nothing of the sort," he said. He really did seem, Angelo told himself, a very relaxing sort of being to be with.

"An . . . an . . . ambassador?" Angelo said. "To try to get us to join the Intergalactic . . ."

The gnome chuckled again. "Perhaps," it said, "I'd better tell you."

"By all means," Angelo said.

The gnome grinned widely, relaxedly. "I," it said, "am your winnings."

"Win . . ."

"In point of strict fact," the gnome said, "I'm a party

## THE WAGERED WORLD

favor. And, if I may say so, quite a popular one at these Intergalactic shindigs.

"A . . . a . . . p-p . . ."

"Exactly," the gnome said. "A party favor. Like a paper hat, or a cigarette case, if the images from your mind are clear."

Lovely, Angelo told himself.

Earth was about to be conquered for good and for all.

The races of the galaxy were either forbidden to aid Earth or were actively involved in the conquering.

Death, final and complete, awaited humanity.

And Angelo diStefano, explorer, was coming back to Earth (at least the instruments, as far as he could read them, said that he was) with all that information, a few details on the handling of the ship.

And a talking, large-mouthed, pointy-headed party favor.

"Angelo," Juli began, from a position farther back in the ship.

"What?" he said, harshly.

Juli said, more timidly, "I only wanted to know where we were going."

*That* question, he told himself firmly, he could answer. "To hell," he said. "Directly to hell. Do not pass Go—or Ghu. Do not collect two hundred mind-bending aliens. We're on our way to hell." Then another thought struck him. "That is," he added, "if we're not in hell already. Which would not, I tell you frankly, surprise me very damned much."

1875

1876

## PART THREE

### XI

ODDLY ENOUGH, the trip back was almost uneventful.

Nobody—anyhow, neither Angelo nor Juli—could figure out why the hyperspace gimmick which had acted so very strangely on the way out simply went about its business—no Santa Claus, no pomegranates—on the way back.

If the gnomelike little party favor knew, he did a fine job of disguising the fact.

And that, Angelo thought, bothered him as much as anything.

He was returning to Earth.

With what?

A party favor?

An alien?

A scout, an advance scout, for the coming invasion?

"Quisling," he muttered to himself several times, until Juli asked him how he went about quissling, and what a quiss was like.

At that point he just shut up, feeling worse and worse, more and more gloomy, and more and more certain that there was nothing anybody at all could do about the destruction of the human race.

This gloom lasted until the ship actually landed.

Then it got worse. Rapidly, and for any number of perfectly fine reasons.

The trip had, after all, been made in secrecy. The public was definitely not to know anything about the ship, the takeoff, or the landing. That had been the wise and careful decision of UN Security.

The ship swayed slightly in its landing gantries. Angelo thought back, and could not remember the last time he had actually landed, on Earth, anywhere near where he wanted to. The aliens might very well destroy Earth, but if their little machines were any sample he had to give them some

## THE WAGERED WORLD

credit; at least they knew how to build space ships. Angelo activated the port and—after that heart-freezing first second of silence which he knew he would never, never become used to—the thing began to open.

Outside, there was a great, cheering crowd.

Angelo thought bitterly of the UN Security Chief who didn't even have his name on his door.

UN Security, it was clear, was worth about thirty cents on the open market. One more happy fact to add to a collection which, Angelo reflected, was getting to be as putrid as any he could recall. UN Security had managed to ball everything up; it was now clear that their landing was as public as any landing had been since the landing of William of Normandy on the British coast.

Well, there really wasn't anything else to do, was there?

Not anymore, there wasn't. Except possibly, Angelo promised himself, roast a UN Security man or two over the nearest open fire.

With a grim sigh, he stepped out of the port, Juli following, and climbed slowly down the ladder which had automatically extended itself to the ground. Bands were playing. Many people were waving flags, handkerchiefs, or parts of the weekly wash. Many more people were shouting things like *Hooray!* and *Whoopee!* Small children were crying or sticking pins in their elders. Police were looking dependable and holding back the crowds. All in all, Angelo told himself, it looked like the arrival of a hero. Possibly four or five heroes.

Angelo didn't feel very heroic, but he knew there was a protocol to these things. Casting a glance behind him as he hit ground, he saw that Juli was absolutely white and terrified. That was the way things went with life-support experts, he reflected; they spent so much time in the lab that they very seldom got a real look at the life they were supporting. Perhaps that was all to the good; after all, if a life-support expert had to look at crowds of maniacs like this one very often, he or she might begin having dark doubts as to whether his or her whole career was worth anybody's time. And then where would everybody be?

Home, he told himself with satisfaction. In bed. Possibly engaged in a little life-support project of their own.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

And not out screaming and bothering a couple of innocent and unprepared explorers!

Sadly, he reminded himself of protocol. A returning hero faced with a screaming crowd had to deliver a speech. It was part of the natural law of the universe, as far as Angelo had ever been able to figure it out; and all he had to do was to think of something to say.

"On the other hand," he muttered to himself, "I don't really *want* the loop of a whole lot of ears. But—"

"What?" Juli asked him.

"Nothing. Never mind." He tried to assemble a few handy platitudes. It didn't sound like nearly so hard a job as it seemed to be. Let's see, now, he thought.

The speech, whatever it was going to be, was lost to posterity, not to mention Angelo. A chorus of shrieks suddenly arose.

Angelo, stockstill, searched for the disturbance. At first he thought it was crowd reaction to his little party favor; but the party favor, showing unusual sense, hadn't left the ship. Then he thought of teenagers shrieking, but this didn't sound like teenage hysteria. It sounded like—a wild mob?

A disturbance bellied out of the dead center of the crowd. People were leaping and shrieking and cursing. Angelo stared. Juli clutched his deltoids.

"Angelo, what's going on?"

"Who knows?" Angelo muttered.

In about ten seconds, everyone did.

The disturbance shot out of the crowd like a veritable bat of ill omen. It was a scrawny, sharp-chinned, beady-eyed, little old lady in a wheelchair—a rusty, electric-powered model that had somehow escaped alien depredation. The little old lady was grinning a grim grin, and she was brandishing a wicked, pointed umbrella. The umbrella was the cause of the shrieks; even UN police were not really happy when being jabbed in the general region of the *gluteus maximus*. And the jabbing seemed to be highly effective and even efficient. The little old shrunken lady was propelling herself right out of the crowd, past the police barricade, and up to Angelo and Juli, brandishing her umbrella and grinning in a most disturbing manner. Behind her the shrieks began to die

## THE WAGERED WORLD

down. The motor of her wheelchair went putt-putt-putt in a quiet, almost modest sort of way.

Before anybody could say, or do, anything at all, the little old lady opened her mouth and screeched a complete speech.

"These people have to be arrested!" she shrieked in a cackling voice that went rather well, Angelo thought, with the wheelchair, the umbrella, and the rusty-black clothing she was wearing. "She," pointing with her dangerous bumber-shoot at Juli, "raped my son! And he," now Angelo was the subject, "helped her! These people have to be arrested! And put to death!"

Angelo said, "But—"

He did not have a chance to say anything more.

The little old lady went putt-putt-putting around the clear space the police had managed to keep open. She kept cackling and waving the pointy bumber-shoot. One UN cop stepped forward. He was an exceptionally large one. Angelo hoped, really, that he wouldn't have to *hurt* the old lady. She was obviously mad, but perhaps she could be taken away without any real fuss.

"Okay," the cop said, "you're under arrest."

He was looking straight at Angelo and Juli.

The little old lady's cackle rose to a scream of triumph.

Then the cop looked up to the port, where a pointy-headed party favor was timidly peeping out. He gulped, looked around, and returned his steely gaze to Angelo.

"All of you," he said, "you and the girl and that . . . that . . . thing, whatever it is. You're all under arrest. Come peacefully, or I'll shoot you down like dogs."

"Dogs?" Angelo said.

It was, all in all, a hell of a reception for a gentle, unsuspecting hero.

## XII

"Look," the cop said, some distance away and inside the comparative safety of a horse-drawn paddywagon, "you had to be arrested real fast; those were orders. Nothing personal, you understand."

"Oh, Angelo said, "of course not. Who'd think that being



## THE WAGERED WORLD

flung into jail—flang into jail? flinged into jail?—who'd think that being arrested was anything personal?"

The pointy-headed party favor was looking around with greedy interest at everything. Above his head something shimmered, something Angelo couldn't quite get a good look at. Juli sat all by herself, having given her thalamus a positive ball by blowing up at everybody and everything fifteen seconds after climbing into the paddywagon; now she was halfway between sulking and dependence, and all Angelo could do was wait to see which way the balance tipped.

"Very funny," the cop said. "Very funny indeed. But look, Security screwed up. The news got out, and there was that crowd. And all the fuss. And then that crazy old bat shoots up and starts sticking people and screaming. And then . . ." He jerked his head toward the party favor, who acknowledged this reference with a wide, gleaming, and moronic-looking grin. "That's all anybody needed, a good look at an alien. After the invasion, I mean."

Angelo, himself beginning to calm down, nodded slowly. "So the whole arrest was just a means of getting us out of sight in a hurry."

"Sure," the cop said. "See what I mean? Nothing personal, only it had to be done. Right?"

"Right," Angelo said. "And all this talk about Juli having raped some guy while I helped, all this stuff about a trial or something, that's nonsense, too, then. We can just forget about it, and—"

"Nonsense?" the cop said.

Angelo, who had begun to rise, sat down as if he had been shot.

"The arrest, sure, we had to make that quick," the cop said. "But the trial, buddy, don't you worry about that. Not at all." The cop looked grim. "Anybody who'd do what you two did—"

"But we didn't—" Angelo began.

"Never mind that old woman," the cop said. "But what you did, that deserves a trial. And everything that comes after it, too." He pondered for a few seconds. "Prison. Maybe even execution," he said.

"Exe . . ."

"What do you expect," the cop asked, "for high treason?"

## THE WAGERED WORLD

And then Juli went, "Eep," and Angelo gulped inaudibly, and the party favor made a low whistling sound. The shimmer over its head changed—not exactly *color*, Angelo thought. *Timbre*, maybe, or *angle*.

Treason?

The cop snorted and sat back, one hand on his holster, relaxed. The ride to the nearest jail seemed a long one. It went on, entirely in silence.

A Brasilia courtroom was no place for the trial, it was explained to Angelo by a turnkey who seemed, after the reports of treason, surprisingly friendly. Publicity, it developed, was distinctly not wanted.

"Look," the turnkey said, "you come back with this thing, and you were out there when the aliens attacked before, and—everything that went wrong, you got a hand in. So treason."

"But—" Angelo said.

"So what else?" the turnkey asked. He left no room for reply. "Who wants riots, right? And TV cameras? If there are any left. And reporters? No riots. Not even for a thing like treason. Treason to the whole human race." He seemed obscurely pleased with the whole affair, as if Angelo and Juli had broken a long-standing record. "Right?"

Angelo sighed. "Right," he said. Sitting in a small square room in a large, square jail was not Angelo's idea of how to relax after returning from mankind's first interstellar voyage. But beggars, Intelligence officers and Angelo diStefano couldn't be choosers. Anvhow, the trial would be soon, and that would provide a nice change of pace. "Where is it going to be?" he asked.

The turnkey shrugged. "All I hear is rumors," he said. "You know, in one ear and out the other side. Like that. What I hear, this Captain Zug-zing or something, he's got a new space station up, you know?"

"Captain Zugzwang?" Angelo asked, fascinated. "No, I didn't. You mean the UN actually—"

"Secretly," the turnkey said with great casualness. "Nobody's supposed to know." Angelo, busy redefining *secret* as *any fact now known to the loneliest goat shepherd in Kurdistan*, nodded absently. "They got a new station up there,

## THE WAGERED WORLD

managed to get just one built and off, and this Captain Zugger, whatever it is—"

"Zugzwang," Angelo said.

"Right," the turnkey said. "Zug-wings. Well, he got put in command. A mixed crew, and *that's* where they—"

"Mixed crew?" Angelo asked. "You mean men and women?"

"Nah," the turnkey said. "All colors. Anyhow, black and white. A gesture of friendship, they called it. But all very secret."

"Sure."

"And, like I was saying, that's where the trial's going to be."

"On the station?" Angelo asked in a sort of trance.

"It's private up there," the turnkey explained. "Word won't get out. I mean, the FBI is working to trace back all the stories, and they got all the witnesses and everything. In fact, they got everything but you and the girl—she's over in the other wing, and so's that thing-or-whatever-it-is. Mac, maybe you could do me a favor and tell me what it is. All funny-looking like that and it talks. Okay?"

Angelo shook his head slowly. "If I told you," he said, "you wouldn't believe me."

"Hah," the turnkey said. "That's a friend for you. I give you all this secret information and what do I get back?"

"Thanks?" Angelo offered.

"Thanks, sure," the turnkey said. "You know what you can do with your thanks? You can put them on that new space station and shoot them out into space. That's what you can do with them. You and that girl and that . . . that thing-whatever-it-is. To hell with you, Mac."

He turned and walked away. Sitting in his small, square cell, Angelo wondered, for perhaps the ten-thousandth time in his life, what he was doing wrong. Clearly, he just didn't live right.

And any day now he was going to be on a new space station, under Captain Zugzwang's cheerily insane command, hearing a voice ask for order in the court.

Secretly. So that nobody would know.

Except, of course, everyone Angelo could think of.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

Idly, he wondered how his party favor was making out. Even more idly, he wondered what that shimmer he'd noticed really was.

And then, with an almost complete lack of emotion, he began to wonder whether he'd have time to finish out the trial before the aliens came and destroyed humanity.

### XIII

"ORDER," a voice said, "in the court."

Angelo, sitting in a specially constructed prisoner's dock with Juli, looked around. The bridge of the space station had been turned into a mad replica of a courtroom; there were benches, lined up in neat rows and full of witnesses and spectators. Most of the mixed station crew had decided to take in the spectacle. There was a hand-picked jury from Brasilia, which included members of both high-and low-melanin countries. There were a couple of lawyers (both white, through what might have been an oversight and what might have been a feeling that the color problem was already troublesome enough without adding any grace-notes to it) and a judge, seated behind a desk on a newly built dais. The judge was also white, but the judge, Angelo noticed with a sinking feeling of anticipation, was female; this, it seemed to him, boded an absolute minimum of good.

She had a stern look on her face under the magnificent white wig. She looked, in sober fact, like an old picture Angelo remembered seeing.

Abruptly, he recalled the title. *The Hanging Judge*.

Though of course it wouldn't be hanging. Just a short walk out an airlock without his suit, and . . .

He swallowed hard and did his very best to quit thinking.

At the back of the room was a small, square enclosure about two feet high and open at the top. It had a door in it. Inside the enclosure was Angelo's party favor—present either as spectator, witness, fellow-defendant, or Exhibit A; Angelo had no notion which. Over the party favor's head was the same not-quite-identifiable shimmer.

This concluded the tally for the room. It was crowded—

## THE WAGERED WORLD

even overcrowded. But then, Angelo thought, it was an important case. Angelo and Juli had finally been accused of a whole basketful of charges, including:

- a. Consorting with alien spies (the party favor).
- b. Aiding and abetting an alien invasion of Earth.
- c. Fomenting warfare among whites and blacks (well, they *had* been on SS II with the Africans and Haitians, and matters had not been terribly friendly, but . . .) and
- d. Rape. Of an adult (more or less) male.

It was a perfectly charming list. Angelo felt sure that the case would be discussed by lawyers and historians for hundreds of years. And in the end it would probably get a statue erected to it like the one in Brasilia which nobody had yet had a chance to destroy.

Of course, the defendants would be dead by then. But what did death matter, when immortal fame . . .

Angelo consigned immortal fame to the immortal fires just as the judge banged her gavel, and the room began to settle down to an attentive—perhaps an expectant, but certainly not a friendly—quiet.

The judge looked not only stern, but faintly ill; she had, in fact, a touch of space-sickness left over from her recent lift to the station. This did not help to smooth over a temper for which, in fact, she was renowned in many different courtrooms throughout the civilized world; to be truthful, Judge Mary Etta Welkin had naturally red hair and a naturally red-haired temper. The gavel banged again and again until, at last, there was about as much sound in the place as there is in the farthest reaches of interstellar space.

With what seemed a certain grim satisfaction, she turned her head very slightly to one side and nodded. A very small man, of a delicately light brown complexion and remarkably tiny eyes, appeared to leap from behind the desk at that side. He stood just off the dais, his hands together as if he were about to imitate even further the mantis and intone a prayer or six, and he spoke in a rushed, high-pitched voice whose intonations, while distinctly songful, were nowhere identifiable as to origin.

"Ordinacortspsheshlshncortojustsniednations," he said.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

Then more slowly: "First count of this indictment, Mrs. Anna Ruth Clangermetz and Stanley Brutus Clangermetz vs. Dr. Juli Rasmussen Dental and Angelo diStefano. Judge Welkin presiding." One more pause, and then, "Please stand."

Everyone, except the hanging virago-judge, stood. From the rear-room enclosure there floated a tiny, distant giggle. Judge Welkin banged the gavel with hasty rage. The giggle was repeated.

"If there is any further disturbance . . ." the judge said in a voice which sounded to Angelo like a fair stand-in for the voice of Hecate.

The party favor spoke in a faraway, not quite controlled voice. "It's the wood—wood does that. Makes me a little . . . strange. What you might call . . . intoxicated."

Judge Welkin blinked, the gavel poised. "I would not," she said.

"Would not what?" the party favor asked instantly.

"Would not . . . call it," the judge said, "anything. Wood or not."

"Wood?" the party favor said.

"Would not," said the judge, and brought the gavel down. "Whatever is going on in this court—"

"It's a spell," the party favor said helpfully and giggled again. Judge Welkin waved the gavel threateningly. "You might call it a spell."

"I would call it nothing of the kind," the judge said sternly.

"Well, then," the party favor said, "it's a nothing of the kind."

There was a tiny silence. The giggle came once more, and Judge Welkin pretended not to hear it. At last she asked, in a slightly strangled tone (Hecate, Angelo thought, after a heavy lunch of damned souls, or whatever): "Are attorneys present for both sides?"

A dapper little man with a glossy black mustache stepped up to the desk. "Roebuck Aphrasia Milton, Your Honor, acting for the plaintiffs." Judge Welkin looked at him with distaste.

The lawyer Angelo and Juli had managed to select out of the two or three reluctantly suggested by a UN HQ, which clearly believed the defendants guilty of treason at the very

## THE WAGERED WORLD

least, was a tall, shambling man who cultivated a resemblance to Lincoln, and whose great personal tragedy was that Lincoln had never gone bald. He ambled forward. "George Wilson Pick, Y'Honor, representing the defendants."

The judge's expression did not change. "Clerk," she said in the same tone, "read the charge. The first count only; all this is slightly irregular but time presses on us all. We must be quick—though of course we must also be just," she finished, a small and terrifying smile playing like sleepy lightning about her thin lips.

The little brown man made a string of sounds. Once, long ago, they had been English, but now they were cobbled together to state, in the most complicated language possible within English grammatical rules, that Juli and Angelo had, in a horrid and unique partnership, raped Stanley Brutus Clangermetz, legally a minor, whose widowed mother was associated with him in bringing suit. Judge Welkin waited patiently for the sounds to die away.

Then she said, "Just so. Rape. Is it possible?"

"Possible, Your Honor?" the mustached Milton asked, stung. "Rape is always possible."

Judge Welkin blinked. "Mr. Milton," she said, "you live in a remarkably active world. Now I, for one, simply do not believe that rape, in the matter here mentioned, is possible at all. Rape implies the use of force; it implies—indeed, it must in this case directly involve—the lack of consent of the plaintiff; more, such a charge implies that the freedom of the female defendant is being abrogated in this case. I can quite understand—"

"But, Your Honor—" Milton gasped.

"And why not?" said the party favor unexpectedly. Judge Welkin, still game, rose to the bait.

"Why not what?"

"Him, too," the party favor said.

Judge Welkin addressed no one in particular. "I have gone mad," she said. "I am involved with insanity in its most contagious form."

"True," said the party favor. In a front row, Stanley and his sharp-featured little mother were, respectively, sniffing and glowering. "Nevertheless, the question remains; it does,

## THE WAGERED WORLD

indeed. Why not butt Your Honor—and butt Watt, too, wherever he is?”

“But what?” the judge asked.

The party favor whistled in a noncommittal fashion. “Why not?” it asked.

“Who,” said the judge patiently and slowly, “is Watt?” Then she blinked once more. “Ignore that,” she ordered. “All this butting is getting us nowhere. Whatever you are, Being, if you think you can disrupt this court—”

“Unnecessary,” the party favor said. “Like to try, though—might help matters a little. If I could explain . . . but . . .”

“No more butting,” the judge said. “Let us continue.” There was quite a long silence, and the Judge broke it, almost plaintively. “Where were we?” she asked.

After another silence, the clerk of the court said, in that high singing voice, “Is rape possible?”

“Well, now,” said the judge comfortably, and then, “Oh. Yes. Of course.”

“Your Honor,” Milton said, “I would like to call my first witness.”

“Witness? Were there witnesses to this . . . this act?” she asked.

“The boy himself,” Milton said with commendable restraint. “I have no opening speech.”

“The court,” Judge Welkin said, “is grateful.”

“Uh . . . yes. But if I may . . .”

“Very well,” the judge said in a bored, hostile tone. “Go ahead. This rape is simply silly. Treason is a different matter. Entirely different.” The horrible smile flickered, played, was sadly gone. “But rape—”

“Stanley Brutus . . .” Milton began.

In the background the party favor giggled again, and then made a sharp sound like *hwoo*. Milton jumped.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry,” the party favor chanted, to a tune Angelo didn’t recognize, then or ever. “Wood . . . strange effects . . . strange . . . butting, and why not?” The voice trailed away. A second passed.

“Clangermetz,” Milton said, and near the front of the room he arose, an enormous, somewhat lumpy young man by the look of him.



## THE WAGERED WORLD

"Clerk," Judge Welkin said, "swear in the witness."

"As a minor, Your Honor," George Pick said, coming suddenly to life, "I must state that the oath may not be valid or binding in a purely legal—"

"If you are a minor, Mr. Pick," Judge Welkin said, "you are the oldest minor I have ever seen."

"Many men work in mines to a great age," the party favor said brightly, if a bit slowly. "Miners may be any age whatever. There is a nothing-to-speak-of on this courtroom. Some might call it a spell. Some might not. And much wood."

"That," the judge said, "will be ignored. "If we are to get any information about this count of the indictment, we are going to have to get it from this . . . minor. I prefer to have him sworn. Do you object, Mr. Pick?"

George Pick, not being professionally suicidal, did not object.

And in a very few seconds Stanley Brutus Clangermetz was raising his right hand and repeating carefully something totally unintelligible.

The Trial of the Century (as it was called much, much later) had begun.

## XIV

STANLEY BRUTUS CLANGERMETZ, once he was seated in a hastily procured witness chair—something the riggers of this improvised courtroom had, oddly, forgotten—began to subside from his original stalking lumpiness into a sort of half-audible sullenness. Mr. Milton began by asking his name, his age (nineteen), and a variety of other form-filling-out bits of information. Stanley Clangermetz's single reaction to all of this was to answer in as few words as possible, to squirm slightly in his chair, and to try, apparently, to look at absolutely nobody.

"Good," George Pick whispered. "Not much sympathy for him." Angelo wondered; in his Intelligence career, he had seen some awfully unsympathetic characters walk off with the jury's blessing.

"Now, Stanley—you don't mind if I call you Stanley, do you?" Milton was saying.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

"Nope."

"Now, Stanley, suppose you tell us, in your own words, what happened during the night of September seventeenth."

The enormous boy shifted slightly in the chair. "Seventeenth. That was the night it happened."

"The night what happened?"

"What all this is about," the boy said impatiently and dully.

Judge Welkin rapped with her gavel and sent the party favor off into a new paroxysm of giggling, wheezing, and other strange noises. Waiting, with whitening skin, until this subsided, the judge said, "You'll have to tell the story to the jury. I know it embarrasses you, as a timid male—"

"Oh, that," Stanley said. "Guess so. But—"

"Yes?" Judge Welkin said.

"Everybody knows by now. I mean, that clerk or somebody read it off. That's all there was to it." It was, for Stanley, a very long speech.

"The details," Judge Welkin said. "With your permission, Mr. Milton?"

"Certainly, Judge."

"The details of what happened, Stanley."

"You doing it, too?" the boy said.

"Doing it?"

"Calling me Stanley. Very friendly place, this is."

The judge blinked. Carefully, she took out a pocket watch and laid it on the desk before her. "I just meant—"

"I know," Stanley said. "The details. Okay."

After that, there was a long silence. Milton said, "Well?" and Stanley shifted once more in his chair.

"You can see he's lying!" Juli hissed. Angelo wondered about that, too; it wasn't reasonable to expect the world to be endowed with Juli's vision.

"Well, I was coming home—that's how it started. Just coming home. Spent the afternoon in town."

"This is the town of Mercerstor, in Kentucky?" Milton asked.

"Sure," Stanley said. "Where I live, I mean. Only it got pretty tore up in all that invasion."

"And you were helping to rebuild, perhaps?" Milton asked.

"Nope," Stanley said. "Just going into town. Something

## THE WAGERED WORLD

to do. So after a time I come on home. And I wasn't more'n a mile from the house—"

"This is the house in which you live alone with your widowed mother?" Milton asked.

George Pick popped up like a stringy jack-in-the-box. "Objection, Your Honor. If he lives with his mother, he doesn't live alone."

"Always grateful for grammatical correction," Milton said smoothly, brushing his mustache with one finger of his left hand. "However, Judge Welkin—"

"Objection overruled," the judge said flatly. "This is no place for high school English courses."

George Pick swallowed hard and sat down. "Thought it might shake him up a little," he confided to Angelo. "Didn't seem to work, though." In the chair, Stanley was fidgeting.

"It's where I live," he said when silence had come down again. "Where my mother lives, too. Whatever you want to make out of it."

"I'm sure," Milton said very smoothly, "it's now clear to us all. But, a mile from the house—"

"Now, look," Stanley said. "You said to tell it my own way. My own words. You let me do that, hear?"

Faint audience laughter. Angelo looked fleetingly at the jury. Twelve hard, stone faces stared back. He looked away. In the background the party favor was going *hwoo* very softly, in an irregular, somehow compelling rhythm.

"Certainly," Milton said. "Just go ahead."

"Well . . . all right." More shifting. "So a mile or so from the house, like I said, this strange woman, she comes and leaps on me. I mean, like out of nowhere. A beast, like."

Judge Welkin, her eyes wide, leaned forward. "A beast?"

"No, this woman."

"But you said—"

"I said she was like a beast, can't you hear right?"

The judge cleared her throat. "Like—what kind of a beast?"

Stanley thought about that for a long couple of seconds. "A female one," he said at last. "Leaped on me. Terrible, that's what it was."

"But what sort of female beast?" the judge insisted, nastily.

Stanley shrugged. "A leaping one," he said. Judge Wel-

## THE WAGERED WORLD

kin mopped her forehead with a handkerchief. "I mean, it shook me. She was panting and everything."

Judge Welkin, leaning even farther forward, ("She's going to fall right out of her honorable seat," Juli whispered.) asked, "Ah . . . everything?"

"Right," Stanley said. "Everything. You wouldn't even want to hear about it, some of the things that happened."

"But—" Judge Welkin began.

"Take a very evil person to want all that," Stanley said reflectively. Judge Welkin, as if on strings, snapped back to her original position.

"Of course. Continue, Mr. Milton."

"Milton?" Stanley said. "I ain't no Mr. Milton?"

"His honor was only trying—" Milton said.

"I know what she was trying." Stanley shot a baleful glance at the judge. "Evil thought. Well, I was shook. So when this other one came out of the bushes—that's bushes by the side of the road there—I wasn't rightly ready. Got bowled over. I heard some screaming, all like that, but by then I was dizzy. Head hit a rock or something. And she did—well, she did what she wanted. Evil. Real evil."

"Can you tell us just what she did?" Milton asked.

Stanley shifted. "You, too?" he said.

Milton looked at him for a long moment. "Well," he said at last, "do you see these people anywhere here?"

"Sure," Stanley said and pointed. "There. And there."

Angelo, dizzy, wondered if he should rise and bow.

Milton nodded with a faint satisfaction and turned the witness over to George Pick who—though he tried to attack everything up and down the line (it was evening, and you were dizzy: are you sure you remember these people so clearly?)—looked very much dissatisfied when he returned to his seat, and Stanley had been sent back to the crowd. Judge Welkin sat back, her eyes half-closed, and Mr. Milton stepped forward and opened his mouth. The party favor went *hwoo* three times, and then *spung*. In the following silence, Milton's words were absolutely clear.

"I never wanted to be a lawyer," he said, in a clear child-like voice. "Only Mommy insisted. She said a lawyer was a good thing to be. What I wanted to be, I wanted to be a fireman. Or maybe a jet pilot. But Mommy put me right

## THE WAGERED WORLD

through law school, and then she died. I never really wanted . . ." The voice trailed away. Milton, an expression of total horror on his face, stared at nothing whatever.

Judge Welkin said, "Mr. Milton, are you well?"

"I'm—something happened," Milton said. "I think we'd . . . I'd . . . or . . ." He took a deep breath. "I call the next witness," he said, "Mrs. Anna Ruth Clangermetz."

"If you're sure . . ." the judge suggested in a friendly, worried tone.

Milton turned to him. A few seconds of whispers were followed by his turning back toward the courtroom and the jury. "Mrs. Clangermetz."

"Coming, coming, you don't give a body a second's time. I swear it's always that way with you lawyer folk. Never give a body a single, solitary second to . . ."

It was suddenly very clear to Angelo why Stanley Clangermetz was a laconic boy. Obviously, he'd never had a chance to use his voice—not at home, anyway.

The usual details were procured in a routine fashion—almost. When Mrs. C. gave her age as fifty-two, without any hesitation, she seemed to gulp, turn a slightly brighter color, and clench her teeth. But the moment passed, and what nobody doubted was firmly established: she was the mother of Stanley, she lived with him in a shack somewhere in Kentucky, and she just loved her little boy.

"I'd like you to tell us all," Milton said smoothly, "in your own words—and I'll try not to interrupt—what happened on the night of September seventeenth."

"That night?" Mrs. C. asked. "The night it happened?"

"Objection," George Pick said, without rising. Judge Welkin glared at him.

"Mr. Pick, you keep your big mouth shut," she said in stern, judicial tones.

"But—"

"Hah," the judge said. "Contempt of court. We'll take that up later, Mr. Pick."

"I don't think she likes us," George Pick whispered to Angelo. Angelo, beyond any reaction, only nodded funereally.

"That night," Milton said calmly to the witness.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

"Well," Mrs. C. began, gathering wind and strength for a virtuoso effort. "Well, that night I was putting up some beans—late in the season for canning, but I like to get as much in as I can. You never know when you'll have need of it. And in spite of what people do say, I put up forty-six jars of beans this year alone, which is more than I can say for most people. You take the beans, and you wash them out, and you have to do a good job with that, otherwise you'll spoil the whole batch; well, I washed them out and put them up. I have these special jars I use, ordered for me special, and I—"

"Can we get to the . . . the attack?" Milton said. George Pick opened his mouth and, with a resigned sigh, shut it.

"Attack?" Mrs. C. asked, as if she had never heard of such a thing before. "Oh, you mean what happened to Stanley."

"Yes," Milton said with commendable self-control.

Again the deep breath. "Well, Stanley was late. Only fifteen minutes or so—he's a *good* boy, don't you forget that—but I'd finished my canning for the day. I told you I was canning some beans in these special jars I get. Well, I went out toward town. And a mile or so out, I came on him." She put a hand to her eyes. "Horrible sight," she said. "Just horrible. Never saw anything to match it. And all the screaming and everything."

Milton cleared his throat. "Screaming?" Angelo noticed that Judge Welkin was leaning forward again.

"Screaming," Mrs. C. said flatly. "Terrible. The way they took on—the two of them, like banshees, jumping on my poor boy who couldn't defend himself, panting and struggling and screaming and carrying on. Oh, a shame and a caution, I can tell you. Not nice at all."

Milton waited a second. "Exactly . . . exactly what did you see and hear?"

"Oh," the witness said. "Exactly?"

"Exactly."

"By all means," the judge put in.

"Well, first thing was, that man," she pointed at Angelo, "he was screaming. He was saying things like I'll-hold-him-down, and things like that; and he was snickering a lot too. And her—she was screaming all sort of passionate screams.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

You know what *they're* like. Oh-I-want-you, and Oh-I-got-to-have-you, and Oh this, and Oh that." The judge looked discouraged. Or worse.

"Oh, I want you," Mrs. Clangermetz continued.

Milton stepped back a pace. "Mrs. Clangermetz!"

"Oh, not you," she said. "Pish. Not you. Why, I just meant, that was what that awful woman was screaming. And my poor boy was crying for help and like that. So I came a little closer, but they were big—I couldn't fight off such big people. I just figured to have the law on 'em, and I do have. So I took care to remember everything that happened, because I figured to myself, I did: some lawyer is going to ask you, Anna Clangermetz, and you'll have to have it clear and complete. So I got it clear and complete. Anything you want to know, just ask me." She sat back in her wheelchair, which had been brought up to the station at incredible cost; and, purse-lipped, her umbrella lying across her lap, she waited.

Milton seemed taken aback by all this cooperation. At last he said, "I want you to tell these fine people what happened."

"Fine people?" Mrs. C. asked. "When you got people like those two," Angelo and Juli both got the nod this time, "and a shameless man who's even willing to defend them after what they did? You call that fine people?"

"Your Honor!" George Pick was saying instantly.

Judge Welkin turned a cold eye on the Lincolnesque bald man. "To be frank," she said in an almost casual tone, "I agree with Mrs. Clangermetz. Would you like to object?"

George Pick opened his mouth, shut it, opened it again and shut it again, looking for that second like a guppy's-eye view of Abraham Lincoln. Then, wordless, he sat down.

"I think I can get a retrial on grounds of prejudice," he said. "Or insanity." Angelo reminded him that, if the trial ended in a guilty verdict, their working for a retrial would be of entirely academic interest. He and Juli would go out the airlock before the day was done, UN Space law being the efficient instrument it was.

"Even so," George Pick said, "it would straighten things out." Angelo rather imagined it would; but what good a

## THE WAGERED WORLD

straight world would be, if he and Juli were no longer in it. escaped him.

"Continue," the judge said.

"You mean about all these fine people?"

"No, Mrs. Clangermetz, not now. About the events of . . . of that night."

The woman, tight-lipped, nodded. With a single breath, off she went again. "I said they were screaming, and they were. Then this shameless woman here, she took off my boy's clothing while the other one, calls himself a man, he held the boy down and helped a little. Getting my boy's shirt off is a job, let me tell you. It's knitted special for him, do it myself, and fits him like a second skin. Oh, they sweated over *that* job, I'm here to tell you that."

"His shirt?" the judge asked. "Why his shirt? I mean, it seems to me that—"

"Oh, judge, they's perverts. You know that. And what a pervert will do, why, you just can't imagine. Took my boy's shirt off, that's what they did, like as if it was a pleasure to them."

Judge Welkin closed her eyes. "There are times," she said dreamily, "when I feel a certain sympathy for both sides in this dispute. I should like to annihilate the entire complement. Perhaps I shall." Her eyes opened. "Continue," she said in a very weary voice.

"So they took off his clothes. Now, my boy was wearing clean underwear, because that's something I always told him. You never know, you might be run down by a car or a dray; and in the hospital, say, they strip you down for medicinal purposes; and you don't want a lot of those doctors to see your dirty underwear, do you, boy? So he always wears clean—a *good* boy, judge, like I said before."

"And then?" Milton said, unnecessarily. Mrs. C. was in full flood, like (Angelo told himself, scrambling metaphors like eggs and not caring much) an avalanche. A positive avalanche of lava.

"So the underwear was a credit to him after all—because you never do know, and it was just as well he had clean on. And then they dragged him off under a tree, so as to hide everything. But they never saw me or never noticed. Too intent on being perverted, that's what I say. And this



## THE WAGERED WORLD

shameless woman, she just clutched him and she went to rape him—pardon the language but that's what it was, judge, just a plain case of rape and no mistake. While this other one, he looked on and suggested new things."

"Exactly how—" Judge Welkin began.

The party favor went *hwoo* once more and giggled. There was a green flash.

When it died away, the jury-box was packed with twelve people, all of them bone-white in complexion.

A smell of ozone was in the air. So was a great deal of noise. People began to jump up and move around and say a great many things, few of which are fit for publication.

"Oh," the party favor said. "It's all this wood. Wood. Fine stuff, wood. Sorry. Little changes. Truth. Color. Nothing important. Little changes. Here we go."

Green flash.

Controlled hysteria.

And a jury-box consisting of twelve human beings, each as black as possible.

"Whoo. Sorry. Wait. One . . . chronon? Second? Wait."

More hysteria. Over it all, Mrs. C. was saying, "Thing like that, ought to be put out. Not allowed. Changing people, disturbing everything."

Green flash.

The jury-box, returned to normal.

A hoarse cry from Stanley Clangermetz, who had developed ears of a size to compare favorably with an elephant's. The ears were a subdued and quite attractive shade of blue.

"Whoo," the party favor said. "Correct later. Too much energy. Later or earlier, makes no difference. Works both ways. All this wood. *Wood*. Ver' rich world for wood lovers. Trees, bushes, sticks, chairs, hammers, furniture, tooth-picks, coffins, carts, wheels, houses, shelves . . ." The voice which had been very uneven, died away. Judge Welkin made a sound which is not reducible to print. So did Stanley Clangermetz.

"This . . . *being* . . . is ordered to leave the courtroom," the judge said at last.

"Like it here," the party favor said obstinately. "Won't go."

## THE WAGERED WORLD

"Officers of the court, remove that thing," the judge snapped. Stanley was feeling his ears and moaning.

Two large men got up from outside seats and converged on the party favor. There was a small flash—yellow-brown—and a smell of ozone.

The party favor was now hanging head downward from the ceiling, stuck there by what might have been sheer willpower. Next to his right side, the shimmer continued to shrink and define itself. Like a hole, a hole into nothing. Like . . .

"Houmes," Angelo said.

"Houmes?" George Pick asked him. "What's a houme?"

"No," Angelo said. "Houmes. He had one of those."

"One of these . . . aliens?"

"Yes," Angelo said. "Or no. I don't know. But I don't like it, either."

The two men detailed to remove the being were now standing near the jury-box, staring upward.

"Well?" Judge Welkin said, beginning to fume.

"Well, judge, he's up there, and I guess we got to get a ladder. Can't reach him from here no way at all. Not without a ladder."

There was a loud sound like *blorp*, and three members of the audience, selected apparently at random, turned into small, almost gentle piglets. Encumbered by clothing for which they no longer had any use, the piglets began to squeal.

So did everybody else.

The party favor and his round hole into nothing remained at ceiling height. These were the only still objects in a suddenly overturned courtroom.

From Judge Welkin to the lowliest spectator, people were going frantic. So were three small piglets. Angelo, Juli, and George Pick found a sort of haven near the jury-box; chaos, bedlam, hysteria and simple madness are all pale terms to cover the succeeding ten minutes.

Then, over all the noise, came another sound, a sort of *clip*.

With no passage of time whatever, the entire courtroom was seated and still. The three changed people sat, no longer piglets, in their seats, looking uncomfortable.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

No one made a sound.

Then a voice issued from nowhere.

DEAR PEOPLE, CONTINUE WITH YOUR TRIAL. IF ANY ATTEMPT IS MADE TO REMOVE ME, I WILL TURN YOU ALL INTO SMALL ANIMALS. THE THREE I CHOSE HAVE BEEN RETURNED TO THEIR PREVIOUS, RATHER UGLY SHAPES. NO HYSTERIA WILL RESULT. YOUR EMOTIONS HAVE BEEN CONTROLLED TO THAT END.

The piglets were gone; so was the hysteria, the madness, the chaos, the bedlam.

Somehow, Mrs. Clangermetz had left the stand and returned to her seat, while Mr. Milton still stood by the chair waiting to question her.

And—Angelo noticed, with a supernal calm about which he could do nothing at all—Stanley Brutus Clangermetz still had long, violet ears.

Outside of that—and the alien hanging from the ceiling, of course—everything was perfectly normal.

## XV

A LARGE, rounded FBI agent occupied the stand. He looked, Angelo thought, almost exactly like King Henry VIII of England, in a worried, if slightly bored, mood; he looked as if he could have used a drink, six hours of sleep, and a lovely vacation in some place like Texas. But he was answering questions with a sense of duty Angelo found both admirable and inimitable.

"I checked on the Clangermetz family," he was saying. "Of course, there were others working on it, too. But you might say I did most of the checking. I was in charge of the detail."

"Of course," Milton was saying. "And you found—?"

"Nice people," he said. "Well thought of ever since they came to the neighborhood eight years ago."

"You wouldn't say that they would be capable of telling a detailed set of lies of the sort they *have* told . . . I mean, a detailed . . . a set of lies as detailed as the story we've heard here?"

## THE WAGERED WORLD

"Well, now," the FBI agent said, stroking his beard, "I can't say that. People will surprise you, now and again. I remember—"

"Yes, yes, of course," Milton said hurriedly, realizing he'd pushed his luck too far. "Your honor, I'm finished with the witness."

"Mr. Pick?" the judge said in a bored tone.

George Pick unfolded himself like a carpenter's rule. "Eight years ago," he said in a thoughtful tone. "And before that?"

"Before that," the agent said, "there isn't any trace. Not any at all."

"Is that unusual?"

"Objection," Milton said. "Plaintiffs aren't on trial here."

Judge Welkin pursed her lips. "Sustained," she said. "Why not, after all?"

"But—" Pick began.

Judge Welkin's face took on a bright, shining expression of welcome. "Yes, counselor?" she purred.

"Ah . . . nothing, your honor," Pick said hurriedly.

The judge nodded. "Nothing," she said. "As usual. Of course. Have you any other questions, Mr. Pick?"

There was a long silence.

"No, Your Honor."

The judge nodded. "This court will recess one hour for dinner." She rose, and so did everyone else; the clerk rolled out a string of syllables in which no single word was distinguishable; and the courtroom broke up into small conversational knots heading, quickly or slowly, to the back exit, and thence to the room that had been set up as a kitchen and dining room for the trial personnel and visitors.

The party favor alone remained in the room. As Angelo passed him, he felt one terrifying, irresistible desire: to tell the truth.

Suddenly, he began to understand. But it was only a beginning; the end was to come only after a good deal more experience.

The recess was full of strange matters—mostly, for some reason, aimed at Juli.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

Angelo could think of nothing whatever to do. What was happening wasn't really dangerous; it was just, well, strange. Apparently the little party favor was rigging things (unless the laws of the universe had suddenly been changed—which was not, Angelo thought, entirely improbable); if it were attached to the little hole-in-nothing, and if the hole-in-nothing had any relation to Houmes's original oddity, the concentration on Juli made sense.

The old, original nothingness had sort of stuck to her, too. Now this new one was doing the same.

Being turned bright yellow, and then bright stoplight red, was enough, he admitted, to unnerve anybody. Having all your clothing turn transparent for about ten seconds was also not the most pleasant occurrence in the world.

And then there was the food. Steaks turned into large staring eyes, looking mournfully back at their eaters-to-be. Large, cold drinks turned into small red-hot frankfurters for some reason; and when the brave George Pick touched one, it giggled.

Someone (another FBI man, Angelo thought) had made the mistake of ordering a fruit salad. The fruit salad was now singing excerpts from *THE MIKADO* in a ringing chorus.

Why, he wondered idly, *THE MIKADO*?

But then, why not?

Not much eating was done. The ball-of-nothing was sometimes visible, swooping here and there without even the party favor nearby to control it—if anything ever did control it. Angelo kept being impelled to tell the truth; then, as the thing left, the impulsion would go away.

And hour went by with all the speed of a river of molasses.

The recess was over, and the trial was running again. Angelo, suspecting what had happened, was a little more hopeful than before—but not much. Everybody's timing had to be exactly right, or . . .

Well, at least there was some chance of survival for the human race, he told himself.

Maybe, even, a chance for Angelo diStefano and Juli Dental.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

Though, of course, not very *much* of a chance.

Especially since the really important counts of the indictment were still to come.

### XVI

MR. MILTON, the mustached prosecutor, rested his case after a brief summation, and after George Pick had stipulated two more character witnesses in a bored, offhand sort of way. Milton still seemed worried, but a bit less so, as he watched George Pick unfold himself.

While Milton sat gratefully down, Pick looked for his suspenders, which were not there, to hook his thumbs into. Finally, he began. "Your Honor, I move that this entire case be thrown out of court," he said in a calm, pleasant voice.

"I agree with you," Judge Welkin said as Pick blinked. "The whole thing is repugnant and insane. However," she went on, "we'll get to other matters in a little while. And despite the sheer ugliness of everything here, I feel that Dr. Dental was perfectly within her rights in . . . ah . . . approaching Mr. Clangermetz. Women are equal to men. Even if this equality is an equality of depravity, still we . . ."

In the background, the party favor wasn't giggling anymore; now it was doing something more like a gurgle. Or maybe a bubbling sound, as if something were about to break loose.

Judge Welkin swallowed hard. "Call your first witness," she said cautiously.

"Very well, Your Honor," Pick said. "I call Eep."

"Eep?" the Judge asked. Then she turned to follow Pick's round-eyed gaze.

The jury was now colored blue with alternating white and red stripes. Angelo, in the stony calm of catalepsy or simple shock, decided that they looked very patriotic, but just a trifle unnerving.

The Clangermetzes were sitting absolutely still, stone-faced and rigid, as if they were controlling themselves, trying not to do something.

The audience, having noticed the patriotic jury-box, now began shrieking.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

A great deal, Angelo told himself, was happening all at once. At that moment a small flash from nowhere went off, and the jury became normal. A small, snakelike being with pince-nez was sitting in the jury-box with the human beings. A resounding hypnotic voice from nowhere-and-everywhere said, CALM. CALM.

People got calm and sat down. The snake went *pop* and disappeared.

"This courtroom," Judge Welkin said, suddenly, clearly, and with a cheeriness Angelo found both inappropriate and aesthetically revolting, "is disorderly."

YOU HAVE NOT SEEN NOTHING YET, said the voice. And then, after a silence that lasted about forty-five years, it went, HOOOOO.

Angelo felt himself begin to sway. Members of the jury were standing up and screaming, their hands over their ears. HOOOOO.

Juli seemed to have fainted. Judge Welkin, bolt upright, held her gavel like a sword of justice. Her eyes were wide open, and her jaw clenched. She did not appear to be breathing.

HOOOOO.

Witnesses, crew, spectators were standing, falling, screaming, trying to roll themselves into small, agonized balls.

HOOOOO.

And the Clangermetzes changed.

Grew.

Shrank.

Puffed out.

Writhed inward.

Colored, and paled, and popped, and grunted.

The noise stopped.

Somebody, shockingly, screamed.

Whatever the Clangermetzes were, they weren't human.

Not any more.

About ten seconds went by.

Then all the station alarms went off at once.

"Aha," said the party favor, miraculously audible. "The invasion."

## THE WAGERED WORLD

### XVII

THE ARMADA WHICH, it developed, was heading for Earth was bigger than anything even Angelo had ever dreamed of. He remembered having been told, somewhere in that insane cocktail party, that the Intergalactic Agreement contained six hundred and forty-seven members. It looked as if every one of those member races had drawn on its entire military stockpile for this one strike.

Leaving aside, for the moment, all questions of the trial and so forth, Angelo found himself jammed into the communications room with most of the station crew, Juli, the cheery, little party favor and a few old comrades. These last were character witnesses who'd never had a chance to tell the court what they thought of him, which Angelo counted as a small blessing. They were, briefly, Houmes, Captain Zugzwang and Dr. Emmis.

The captain, of course, commanded the station. He was doing very little commanding; he was, instead, clustered with a flock of others round the party favor, looking totally useless. The wood had, finally, gotten to the alien. He was blissfully out cold.

He had, however, said a few things before conking out—among them, that the Clangermetzes were alien spies aimed at destroying Earth by destroying public confidence in UN officials like Angelo. This did not, somehow, surprise anybody; perhaps the station crowd was beyond surprise, after the events of the preceding few hours.

The armada came nearer. Somebody said, "We wouldn't have the power to fight that off even if we still had a full metals complement and no troubles whatever." The tone was one of awe.

"We can't fight them off," Angelo said. Everyone turned to look at him. Now that the party favor's true role was explained, Angelo had become the nearest thing Earth had to a sort of Intergalactic Ambassador; when he talked, people listened.

He hoped he could go on thinking of things to say.

"You mean that we must . . . simply surrender?" Dr. Emmis asked slowly.



## THE WAGERED WORLD

"We can't surrender," Houmes said flatly. "We have to win out. We have to come out on top. And we can. I know it." He looked around. "I don't know *how* I know it, but I do."

Angelo nodded. "It's a test," he said. "So there has to be a way of passing it. Only it's obvious that we can't fight them."

Somebody said, "But . . ." and somebody else began to curse in Swahili.

"We have to find another way," Angelo said.

"But what?" Dr. Emmis asked him.

"Everybody," Angelo said, "think. Somebody has to come up with an idea. Maybe if we all think—"

"We don't have much time," a communications technician muttered, staring at the radar panels. But an uncomfortable silence filled the room. In it, Angelo could just hear Captain Zugzwang reciting, at the alien observer, a hissed list of random numbers. It was his version of profanity. The alien, unconscious, neither said nor did a thing.

Juli broke out: "Angelo, you've got to—"

"What?" Angelo asked savagely. "Go out there and get myself killed first of all? Volunteer for a suicide mission? I'm trying to think. Just going out there without any ideas won't . . ." He stopped.

"Yes?" Dr. Emmis breathed.

"Going out there," Angelo said. "It's the answer. I'll need a ship. A ship as odd as you can make it."

"Odd?" Juli asked.

"It has to look like something nobody has ever seen before," Angelo said. "And we have—how much time?"

The communications technician didn't look away from the panels. "Maybe ninety minutes," he said.

"Half of that," Angelo said. "Paint out everything you can. Add fins or some such stuff—they won't have to last long. And I've got to be ready in forty-five minutes."

"Angelo," Juli said. "What are you going to do?"

"Do? I'm going to go out there," he said, "and tell them to go home."

For just a second, there was silence.

Then activity, frantic, directed, and noisy, began.

## THE WAGERED WORLD

### XVIII

#### A ROOM WITHOUT WOOD.

On Earth.

"I am empowered to grant you membership in the Inter-galactic Agreement," the ex-party favor said. "You are the six hundred and forty-eighth race to join us. We are highly civilized, even according to your limited definition of the word."

And the secretary general of the UN inclined her massive head slightly. "We are honored to join an association of worlds which . . ."

It was worse, Angelo thought, than attending that damned cocktail party—the whole, faked, mocked-up job. Standing at attention among a small horde of diplomats, he wondered just how long the speeches were going to last.

Frankly, he thought, he preferred his aliens drunk.

Juli, next to him, whispered, "But how did you—"

Angelo tried his best to explain. "I told them I represented a race from the Andromeda Galaxy, and that Earth was already conquered."

"But they wouldn't believe—"

"Well," Angelo said, "I described myself. It seemed to help."

"Described?"

"As Stanley Brutus Clangermetz," Angelo added.

"But still—"

"And I think," Angelo said, "that our little party favor—galactic observer, he calls himself these days—helped out just a little. They were getting some very strange effects aboard their ships."

Remembering the parade of odd events in the courtroom, Juli shuddered and shut her eyes. Then, opening them, she whispered, "Angelo, you're wonderful."

"Wonderful?"

"Saving the Earth."

"Oh, that," he said. "Sure. I guess. You see, the invasion fleet figured they might be next on the Clangermetz sched-

## THE WAGERED WORLD

dule—I made it sound that way. So they sheered off. In fact . . .”

“Yes?”

“There are only two things that worry me.”

“What two?” Juli asked, worshipfully.

“Well, why did they believe me, even with help. Just maybe, the idea was a little more plausible than I thought it was.”

“But—”

“Just suppose,” he went on, “that a *new* invasion . . .”

And he stopped. Enough, he told himself firmly, was enough. Two invasions, an entire galactic league or something, the slow rebuilding of Earth—wasn’t that enough for a while?

He told himself, firmly and without much conviction, that it was. Sure it was.

Certainly.

“And?” Juli asked.

Angelo blinked. “And what?”

“The second thing?”

He nodded, slowly and a bit sadly. “At the moment,” he said, “we’re heroes. Or heroines. Or both. But . . .”

“Yes, Angelo?” she whispered.

“The other counts of that indictment are still waiting,” he said. “Someday, we might have to face a new trial.” Again his voice trailed off. “No,” he said with decision. “There are *three* things.”

“Three?”

“That damned memorial,” Angelo said. “It *still* has to be destroyed. If possible, reduced to the original atoms. And that,” he said with satisfaction and, to Juli, some obscurity, “is my next goal—even ahead of rhubarb pie.”

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