

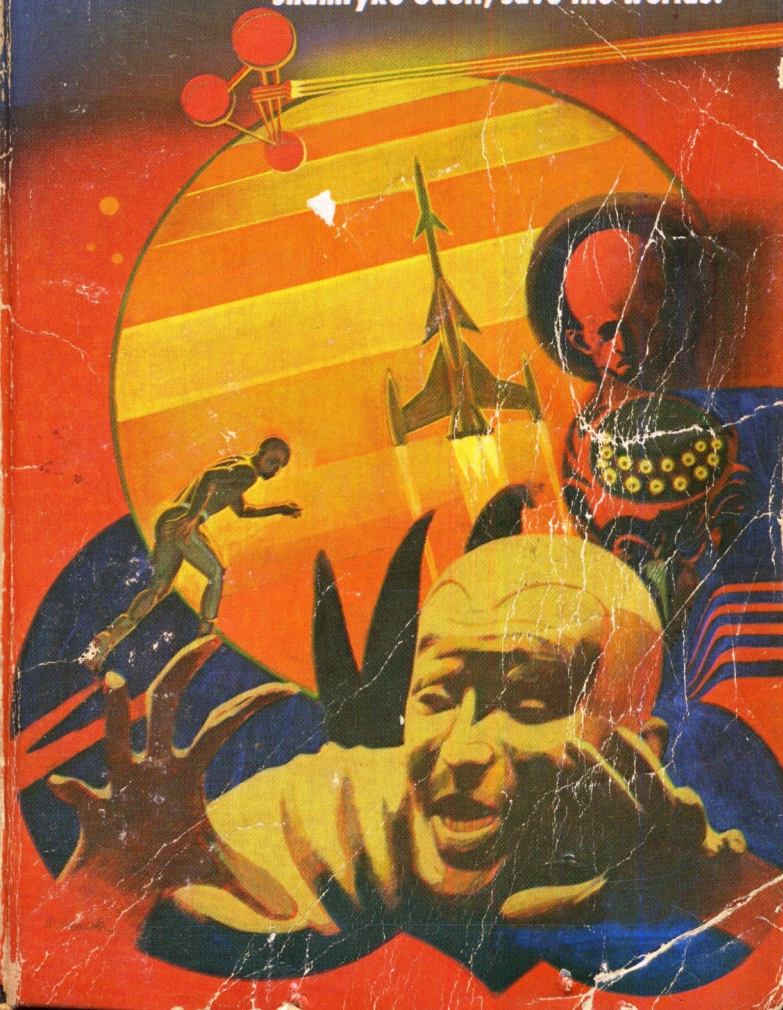
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# THE VEILED WORLD

ROBERT LORY

*Shamryke Odell, save the worlds!*





The floor beneath me moved suddenly and I was standing in midair. Standing? Falling.

It was a soft landing. A squooshy kind of soft. And in the flickering light which illuminated my getting to my feet I saw that I was in a great cavern carved from rock. But I saw that only incidentally. Most of all my seeing was reserved for the thing that had been my landing pad. There gleaming under and around my feet were more than a dozen eyes, all imbedded in a spongy gelatinous pancake-shaped sea of gently rocking waves. My spine blinked as I readied the blaster—still in my hand—to do its work.

But do its work where? Where would a shot be most effective?

Where, indeed.

That was the thought that spun through my brain as I realized that the light around me had gotten brighter—and was cast by some forty wood-burning torches held in hands which were connected to arms which in turn—

My stomach tightened to keep from retching. And then someone—*something*—spoke.

“Food. Food from the god.”

Other Ace novels by ROBERT LORY:

THE EYES OF BOLSK  
MASTERS OF THE LAMP  
A HARVEST OF HOODWINKS

# **THE VEILED WORLD**

**by ROBERT LORY**

**ACE BOOKS**

**A Division of Charter Communications Inc.**

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AUTHOR'S DEDICATION:

This one I dedicate to Mom and Dad because  
they, above all, have stood by through the eons.

*First Ace printing: October, 1972*

THE HARD WAY UP

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# I

"You're probably wondering why I asked you here, Odell," Hadd Malajar said, his voice level.

He was right. The White Room was a special room at FIA headquarters. Because it was one of the few general non-office rooms without any kind of sound or sight monitoring, it was often used for special briefings involving "mixed" groups, which were composed of operatives who reported to different controls, or for meetings between controls themselves, the idea being that even within the same organization the element of trust was a rarity. The system wouldn't work unless I had trust in Gand, my current control, but there was no reason for me to place any faith in the honesty and integrity of any other control—and still less in another operative such as Hadd Malajar.

So I had been wondering why. I'd just returned to Primus City, New Earth's capital, the day before, from an assignment out on the Rim. I'd been sitting in the cubicle they call my office, trying to get down my expense figures for pert, black-haired Sara to feed into the credit system. I don't get to use "my" office all that much, due to the nature of the job. I also haven't got to use Sara very much—in fact not at all—due again to the nature of the job, and also to the nature of Sara.

And, to be fair, maybe due to the nature of Shamryke Odell. Me. Me, who was elegant enough in stature—a well-muscled one-ninety wrapped neatly around a six-foot two-inch frame—but whose sun-bronzed head was completely hairless except for eyebrows and lashes, which are permafalsh additions. The trim body was a result of a good metabolism and exercise—not the health club type, but the kind I got in my normal daily work. The lack of hair was the residue of a more serious mishap

also connected with my work—namely a sudden lack of face, real sudden but, due to careful rebuilding, not permanent. Except for the hair.

Some women find hairless men desirable. Sara, on the other hand . . . But I consoled myself in the fact that I wasn't the only man she was cold to. I didn't need my psych-probe to tell me. She had turned down every advance I'd ever seen made to her.

Of course, that never stopped me from wondering what she'd be like.

I was wondering about her, in fact, when Malajar greeted her briefly, then stepped inside my cubicle, touching the slide button that panel-closed us off from her hearing. Private offices normally are not monitored although the equipment exists, just in case your control—or the Head himself—deems there is reason to eavesdrop.

It was 1306 when he came in. I didn't notice the time at that point, but I had plenty of reason to know it later.

"Odell, we have to talk," he said.

"Talk," I returned, gesturing toward the other chair in front of the small desk.

He remained standing, almost planting himself in front of me, legs spread. He was not an imposing figure. Five-feet six. Thirty pounds under my weight. Forty-five-plus in age and showing every year in the creased lines of his face and thatchy straw-colored hair. The story goes that he'd not allowed a maser scar on his left upper neck area to be glossed because it made him look fearsome. He did not look fearsome. At the moment he looked more nervous than an operative in his own headquarters building ought to look.

"Not here," he said. "The White Room in half an hour—1330. It's important. I've already booked the room for ten minutes."

Before hearing my response he activated the panel again and was gone, stopping only to exchange another brief phrase with Sara. He was gone, leaving me thinking about the strangeness of it. The thought passed through my mind whether or not I should tell Gand



about it but I shrugged it off. Plenty of time later, depending on what it was Malajar had to say. But what could he possibly have to say? Malajar was an experienced operative, not as long with the Arm as I had been, but experienced. One operative normally doesn't ask for any kind of assistance from another unless he is instructed to do so. And in that case, the second operative would receive the orders to assist from his own control. Gand was not Malajar's control. At least, I didn't think so. Things changed in the service fast—and continually.

So I was in fact wondering why when I approached the door of the White Room and hesitated before the electroneye. "Shamryke Odell," the speaker below the eye said. "You are scheduled. Scanning shows you to be carrying no weapon. You may enter."

That was another thing about the White Room. Due to its function, it was important that those attending meetings there did not do so with weapons, concealed or unconcealed. And that was why I guess the element of surprise was added to my wondering when I closed the panel of the White Room behind me and heard the click of the time lock that locked us in for ten minutes.

For when Hadd Malajar greeted me from the other side of the white styrene table, not only was his voice level, but so was the sonic pistol extending from his right fist.

Old FIA rule: You don't bluff with a weapon. You kill with it.

Another old FIA rule: It's better to kill than to be killed.

And a third: When in doubt, strike first.

There wasn't any doubt. The electronic apparatus that had been part of my internal nerve system for the past fifteen years gave a swift psych-probe reading of harmful intent from Malajar's brain signals. For extra emphasis Malajar spelled it out vocally:

"I asked you here to kill you, buddy."

He inhaled and began to let the air out slowly through his nostrils, the way weapons-masters instruct

their sharpshooters. But he never completed the exhale. The styrene tabletop, brought up by a frantic boot-tip—mine—slapped against the pistol and his chest. Styrene is no defense against a sonic pistol in the material sense, but the maneuver gave me the instants I needed.

Malajar, as I've said, was not a big man. The momentum of my diving collision into his gut took him directly off his pins and flat onto the floor. The surprise of the attack stayed the swing of the gun, still in his hand, necessary to complete its mission.

The gun clattered to the floor a heartbeat after the heel of my left palm drove Malajar's nose bone deep into his brain. It was not "for good measure" but instinctively that the edge of my right hand thudded into that part of his neck which gave the least protection to his jugular vein.

Whether from brain injury or choking on his own blood, he was dead by the time I pushed the button to the left of the sealed panel. Because the ten minutes for normal time unlock had not passed, this signaled the presence of four heavily armed security guards, each of whom sternly broadcast brain signals of dedication to duty as they trained their rifles on Shamryke Odell when the panel recessed into the wall.

The Head. A totally organic computer housed in the top three stories of the headquarters building of the Federation Intelligence Arm. A brain that had been constructed or grown under carefully controlled conditions—an organism that when completed took over for itself the operation of its life-sustaining functions. Fed continuing streams of information by FIA controls, the Head absorbed all, made its own correlations and conclusions, and then issued its orders unbidden. Normally taking in its data in chemical or electronic-impulse form, it normally issued its commands in the same way, the commands then translated into codes specific for each control. This was the means of communication between the Head and the rest of the Arm.

Normally.

There was, however, a totally dark room in which one could sit, in which communication could take place with the Head more directly. I had been in that room three times before, a rare thing for a mere operative, I am told—an honor. I was sitting in that black room again, brought there under guard from Gand's office. This time I did not feel honored.

The voice of the Head filled the room:

"Once more, Odell. Why?"

"I told you. He was going to kill me."

"With the sonic gun found in the White Room."

"With that gun, yes."

"The gun was not charged, Odell," the Head said for the second time.

"I didn't know that."

"You should have. Neither Malajar or yourself could have gotten by the scanner with a charged weapon. Q.E.D., any weapon in the room could not have been charged." The Head paused. "Q.E.D.—Quod erat demonstrandum. In an ancient Old Earth language—thus it is proven."

"Thanks for the language lesson."

"Do not be flippant, Odell. All we desire is the truth."

"I'm trying to tell it."

"Then explain why you set up the meeting with Malajar in the White Room."

"I didn't. He set it up."

"Not according to Administrative Services. They say the room was booked by Sara in your name. Sara says she was instructed to do so."

"By me?"

"No. By Malajar, upon leaving your office."

"He told me he had already made the arrangements."

"Interesting. Now, Odell, why did you kill him?"

"I told you—"

"Yes, you did. Tell me this: were you aware of Malajar's current work?"

"No. I just got back myself. I was out on the Rim."

"That is true. But Malajar himself just got back—also

from the Rim. He was out there with regard to a small planet. Kif Barra."

"Never heard of it," I said.

"Then your killing him does not seem logical."

"Look—he *said* he was going to kill me. Psych-probe confirmed it!"

"Changing your story, Odell? A few moments ago you said that he vocally confirmed his intention *after* psych-probe—"

"All right, that's the way it happened."

"Which way?"

"Psych-probe first, then he said it."

"And all with an uncharged weapon?"

"Yes."

"With a weapon that he'd have to *know* was uncharged? The scanner, after all—"

"Yes!"

"Do not be emotional, Odell." There was a pause, as if the Head were wondering how to say what was coming next. That's ridiculous, of course, the pause being just as calculated as everything he—it—communicated. But it had its effect.

"Do you know, Odell, what Gand and Malajar's control suggest we do with you? Notwithstanding fifteen full years of dependable service to the Federation?"

I could guess. From a control's point of view, one operative's blotting out another could hardly be tolerated. Control's point of view? An operative's viewpoint would be the same. As would his remedy.

"I was defending myself," I said. "At least, that's what I thought I was doing."

Another pause. Then:

"Close your eyes tight, Odell. It will be less painful that way."

I did as ordered. There was no possible escape from this room. But the flash of white-hot light that crashed through my brain was as painful as hell.

## II

I was aware of my feet being tired, and my legs, as if I'd been walking for hours. No, more than just my feet and legs—my whole frame and musculature including the inside of my head pulsed with a numbing ache. Like I'd just come out of an acceleration where the g-control devices weren't functioning exactly right. Come out of. They were the right words. It was like I'd just come out of a—a trance of some kind. And what had brought me out was a voice.

I looked around me.

I knew where I was. A half-block away from one of my hole-ups when I was in Primus City. I had six and rotated my stays there for security reasons. This one was in a red-light district across the bay from the half of the city in which headquarters was located. If I had in fact walked that distance, no wonder I was tired. . . .

The street was darkening. Dusk. Hours had passed since—since whatever had happened to me had happened. There weren't many people on the nonmoving sidewalks which were normal to this part of the city. Only four humans within a fifteen-yard radius. Four humans and a Jamba.

Half the size of the average human, these purple-haired natives of the planet Jamb support their large egg-shaped heads on three spindly legs that can carry them three times the speed of a man's two, offsetting somewhat the disadvantages of the thin eggshell consistency of the head that encases but offers little protection to their brains. But the greatest advantage the Jamba has in any tangle with a human is that very brain itself, which is one of the universe's best telepathic devices.

I had killed several Jambas in my time, but I respected them. You listened when one spoke. So I listened, because it was his telepathic voice that, speaking to me, had brought me out of my—my trance.

"They are waiting for you, Odell. In there."

He nodded his great head toward the door I was headed for. "Do you understand?"

Slowly I returned the nod. I opened my mouth to ask more, but his three legs moved him swiftly up the street past my door and beyond it.

*They are waiting.* They. Who? There was only one way I knew to find out. But first I needed some kind of protection. The alley between the building I had been headed for and the one next door was narrow. By placing the back of my shoulders against the wall of my building and pushing with my feet against the other I was able to inch up the twelve feet of distance to the bottom rung of the metal emergency-escape ladder. Once my hands had grasped that, it wasn't very difficult to climb to the roof of the seven-level building. Not very difficult, but my strangely aching muscles didn't make it very easy, either.

It was under the grated lid of the rain drain—clipped to the top part of the wide L-shaped pipe that took the water down the seven levels and into the sewage system of the city. The stungun, wrapped in plastiphane.

Feeling its grip comfortably in my palm, I quickly scanned it for its charge. And stood there stunned, as if the gun had turned on me. It hadn't. But what also hadn't happened was something else, something very important. I'd gotten no reading from my scan—neither gun nor charge registered on my internal sensor equipment. I slid the side of the grip downward, visually checking the charge. It was full and ready. Which meant—

That I no longer had any internal sensor equipment. Or it wasn't working any longer. One or the other, probably the first. Which explained why my body ached, and explained the hours that had passed. I'd been operated on. And if they'd taken out the weapon sensors . . .

The stunner held upward at the ready, I opened the door and moved down the staircase to the top-floor level, which I bypassed. These were the girls' off-hour rooms, and sleeping beings were not what I needed for the test I had in mind. At the sixth floor I quietly trav-

ersed the distance across to the first door I spotted. Quiet, no sound. I moved along the corridor until I heard something. From within 6-D came a sound of laughter—a male type of guffaw followed by a female giggle. I mentally probed the inside of the room.

And received nothing. It could have been empty for all I received. But it *wasn't* empty. Which meant that my psych-probe was gone, too. Again came the vocal sounds of frenetic fun. At least my ears are normal, I thought to myself.

Normal? That was the exact word. They'd taken their equipment back and left me normal. Shamryke Odell, whose face was known to too many enemies to begin to count, was now stripped of part of his almost essential weaponry.

I'd be dead within two weeks, without doubt.

And they knew it, had planned it that way. But—

There were other potential employers, if I could get to them alive. The Intelligence Arm of the Federated Nations of New Earth and its some forty colonies on about twenty other planets was big and effective, but there were other agencies—national and planetary groups, guilds, fraternities, both interplanetary and intraplanetary—which would welcome the service of an experienced operative like Sham Odell, would welcome the information which—

I had been going down the stairwell to the next level when the next thought struck me. There was one piece of artificial mechanism they would not have taken away from me. The short-out would have remained.

Short-out. A mechanical device or chemical process or something in-between or neither of these. Whatever, all FIA operatives were equipped with one, its function to prevent his revealing information under opposition questioning. I didn't know how it worked. Sort of a disintegration of the brain was the way it had been explained to me. The point was, it was triggered involuntarily by the operative who realized he was divulging classified knowledge. I knew one other thing about it. It worked.

And I still had it, I was certain. Having set me out to feed the sharks, they wouldn't take any chances on the sharks benefiting by their meal.

And sharks of some kind were here now. Waiting. But where, exactly?

On the fourth level, the stunner under my shirt, I summoned the elevator and went down to the first. I nodded to two of the other "tenants" in the hall and located Sister Euvane in her plush red-and-pink parlor.

Sister Euvane herself was plush and red and pink, in character and in dress if you wanted to call the gown-tunic-sack she wore a dress. In her early fifties, she ran her establishment and her Little Sisters with a haughty dignity that was somewhat in opposition to her generally cheerful and round countenance. She was heavy for her six-foot height, but not objectionably so. As a matter of fact, though she had some excellent performers among her Little Ones, I was willing to bet any three of my fingers that she could teach every one of them something—and something important at that.

At least the couple of times I had . . . well, I'll just say she had been very enjoyable company.

"Ah, it's Mr. Odell," she said smiling. The three girls who had been seated with her stood, allowing the bottoms of their long satiny gowns to swirl around their ankles. This was a year for the long look in fashion, and the Sisters were right with it as usual. Expensive to maintain, maybe, but that suited a good portion of the clientele here. It was a seedy party of town, yes, but there are some very wealthy men who like just this sort of change.

I looked at the three girls carefully. Regulars. Not the "they" who were waiting.

"Waiting," Sister Euvane said with a toss of her red hair. My head snapped back toward her.

"I say, I've been waiting for you, Mr. Odell."

"You have," I said quietly.

"Indeed. I'm feeling very fortunate that our only male tenant deigned to come home this evening. Been out



of the country on business again? Or off-planet, perhaps?"

I grinned a false grin. Sister Euvane had no idea what business I was in, but was dying to know. I had made no attempt to use a different name here; my erratic schedule of occupancy and the fact that operatives rarely get publicity of any kind made Shamryke Odell as good a name as any and far easier to remember. Sister Euvane, I'm sure, had her suspicions that I was a criminal of some kind, probably a very big kind due to the substantial rent I was paying on rooms that were rarely used. I think she rather liked the whole idea.

"I was out of the city, yes," I answered. "You said you'd been waiting."

She winked at one of the Little Sisters who looked as if she wasn't sure whether or not she should smile, wink back or what.

"Well, I hope you won't think I've been presumptuous but—well, I'd like you to—er—test one of our new residents. You know the sort of thing, you've helped us out on previous occasions."

I knew the sort of thing, and I had "helped out" before. As Sister Euvance had said more than once, "You know how it is, Mr. Odell. Another woman has no real way of telling if a girl is—well, suitable. Now a man with your experience—"

"My experience?" I'd asked. The first time.

"Oh yes, Mr. Odell. You'll recall I was rather demonstrative in my praise of your—er—vigor *and* talent not so long ago when you and I—"

I'd cut her off. "I recall. No one-way mirrors or spy-tubes?"

"Shamryke! Don't be silly. I just *couldn't*."

She was right in one respect. She couldn't without me knowing about it. The mirrors and tubes were there all right but my sensors could detect anyone—

But that was before today. At the moment—

"I've given instructions," she said. "When you arrived, she was to be brought to your rooms. She is waiting."

*They are waiting.*

"The girl's name?" I asked.

Sister Euvane wagged a long index finger at me. "She's not been brought up there for conversation, Shamryke. Call her darling or something more cozy, whatever your preference." With which she rose from her couch and, after gesturing for her three Little Ones to follow, left the parlor.

I left too. I took the elevator up to the sixth level, one past the fifth on which my rooms were located. An operative was naturally cautious. An operative suddenly finding himself with no sensors was *unnaturally* cautious. I wasn't chancing getting fried as the elevator panels slid back. Besides, there was a way of checking at least one thing.

The single from-the-inside entrance to my rooms was labeled 5-D. I now stopped before 6-D, the same sounds of earthy merriment coming from the other side of the door as before. Only now it was more of a regular, pulsating kind of laughing and giggling. Caresstamine. A liquid distilled from a plant on Iethor, I think. Sister Euvane had quite a stock of the stuff in spray tubes. Aphrodisiac and tranquilizer combined, it was highly effective.

So was my foot against the door.

"Huh?" said the man, jumping from the bed. Big and brawny as a slag-ox and naked as a jaybird, he evidently hadn't had enough of the caresstamine. He didn't look tranquil at all. Not until a low-intensity beam from my stunner caught him over the right eye. The girl squealed with excited pleasure as he went down face-first onto the bed and rolled off onto the floor.

"Couldn't you have waited?" she laughed. "His time was almost up—oh, it's Mr. Odell!"

"Sorry to disturb you, Sister Amanca," I said. "I've got some business to attend to." I moved to the center of the room and, finding the little switch recessed in the floor, eased it forward.

"You, too?" Amanca said mock-soberly. "What's down there that's so interesting, pray tell?"

I looked at her sharply. "Him?"

She nodded. "Every five minutes or so. Couldn't take his mind off it—until I—well, you know." She laughed.

I knew. With or without the added stimulus of the caresstamine, Sister Amanca was—

Suffice it to say that I knew.

I let Big-And-Brawny have another charge from the stungun and focused my attention downward.

The glass on the smooth cotta-grid floor was for one-way viewing. I knew, but Sister Euvane would never admit, that most of her rooms had this feature. Euvane prided herself on treating her girls right and on seeing to it that the customers did too. A new customer, especially one who didn't inspire complete trust, was normally watched from the floor above.

Below, in my apartment, one light was on. Behind it, but out of its light, I could make out one figure sitting in my easychair facing the door. Something shiny in his hand. I couldn't make out any more. One person, waiting in the dark, identity unknown.

*They*, the Jamba had said.

But I could see the full layout below and there was just the one.

I returned my attention to Sister Amanca.

"Him. Did he ask for you especially?"

She giggled. "Sure he did. I was downstairs when he came in. But there were other girls there too."

"And this is your normal room?"

She looked at me as if I were stupid. "Normal room? Mr. Odell, what are you talking about?"

"Why did you bring him here?"

"Oh that. He asked for it. Six-D, he said. It was his lucky crosshatch designation, he said." She shook her head. "Spacemen have silly superstitions, don't you think?"

I didn't answer her. Checking to see that nothing had changed below, I pulled the switch back and moved to the door.

"Hey—Odell!" Amanca called. "You won the prize. Don't you know what to do with it?"

"Some other time," I promised, hoping to myself I'd be able to keep it.

There are parts of you they that can remove—like your weapons-scanning and psych-probe equipment. There are other parts, however, that remain—unless they *really* decide to do a job on you. Fifteen years with the Arm means something in the telling. Put most simply, it means that you've developed the internal stuff to stay alive for fifteen years under conditions that the odds-makers would be stacking the chips in piles against you.

As went the door of 6-D previously, so went that of 5-D. The difference was that as the gap between door and frame widened to the correct expanse it was filled with the issuance of my stungun which had been pre-aimed toward where my attacker waited.

As I stepped into the room he was in the chair, out of commission.

Correction: as I stepped into the room, *she* was in the chair, etcetera.

I moved to a wall cabinet and took down a small packet of powder. All it took was two seconds under her nose.

"What—"

"I'll ask, Sara. You answer." Noting her eyeing the weapon in my hand, I added, "It's only a stungun, right. But the power is now up all the way. At this range it could kill, correct?"

She nodded.

"Why are you here."

A smile. "You know why."

I gestured to the silver tube I had seen from above. It was on the floor now, out of her reach. It was a blaster, pure and simple. It did not maim, unless the person firing it was inept. It killed, period.

"Under whose orders?" I asked.

She tapped the top of her head. "You know about short-out."

It was my turn to nod. "Because of Malajar?"

"Odell, you killed him. Do you know what that means?"

"He tried to kill *me!*"

She shook her head. "Impossible. Sham, I know—knew—Hadd. He wouldn't—couldn't—have done what you said. He and I were—"

"Sara, I'm sorry. I didn't know. But even if I did—don't you understand?—Hadd was going to kill me."

"With a weapon that wasn't loaded?"

"He *said*—"

"No, Sham. *You* said that he said—"

"All right. I can't prove it. But answer me this. What in the cosmos' name is supposed to be my motive? Not you, surely. Even if I ever had designs on you, I didn't know about you and Malajar."

"Motive? Hadd had just gotten back from Kif Barra. It was a special assignment. Whatever he'd learned there must have been important."

"What was that?"

She laughed derisively. "You'd love to know, wouldn't you? You couldn't find out from him, but you couldn't take the chance. So you had to—"

"Sara. I have no idea what Malajar was doing on Kif Barra. I've never even heard of Kif Barra."

"But your employers have, haven't they?"

"My . . . employers?"

"You're a renegade, Sham Odell, admit it. You took on an assignment from somebody else, somebody connected with whatever Hadd Malajar learned on Kif Barra. And the assignment was to—"

I let her have it with the stunner, but not a full dosage. She was wrong and she was beautiful—neither of which consideration would ever have stopped me from killing her if I thought she was a threat. But little Sara the exteno, now Arm-operative with a mission, was no threat to me—not now. If in the future she . . . but that we'd deal with in the future. If I had one, that was the main question. But there was one other, smaller question.

I buzzed on the Intercom.

"Yes?" a sensuous female voice answered.

"Turn off, sweetheart. Put the top lady on."

A moment passed, which I used to find what I sought in my cabinet. "Yes. This is Sister Euvane."

"This is Odell. The lobby in two minutes. Be there."

She was there looking a bit nervous when I arrived. With her were four of her minions, each of them experts in unarmed combat. Euvane seemed to be expecting a spot of trouble from her honored guest, Mr. Odell.

She got it. Although not all that unpleasant a spot of trouble—not if she endorsed the use of caresstamine. I tossed two plastic grenades of the stuff into the parlor and waited until the giggles became belly laughs before I entered, my noseplugs in place.

If Euvane objected to the rough handling, she didn't show it.

"Mr. Odell, how wild an entry!"

"Question: whose idea was it to let that girl into my room?"

"Why, hers of course. She asked—"

"And that story of her being a new girl of yours?"

Tears of joy and gasps of hyperventilation. "That? Why mine! I thought it would be funny—"

"*Hold it right there, Odell!*"

The voice was neither happy nor feminine. Nor was it in front of me.

Not until I whirled Sister Euvane around on her heels abruptly and sent her clawing with glee at an open-mouthed Big-And-Brawny.

"Hello, darling," she said.

"*Muuuummph!*" he said—as my foot unhinged his jaw and both he and Euvane bounced from the opposite wall to the floor.

As for me, it was my cue to leave, and as quickly as possible. As I tore into the hallway I heard the head mistress' voice cheerfully shout:

"Mr. Odell, how wild an *exit!*"

Wild maybe. My concern was making it whole.

### III

He was drunk and enjoying it, and from the look of his tattered clothing he was enjoying it because he didn't often have the luxury. Unfortunately for him, he was the right size, and I'd been waiting for half an hour.

My thumbpress at the back of his neck was firm. As I gently dragged him into the shadows, I somehow felt relieved that he'd be out for less than twenty minutes. After successfully cadging the money necessary to float that much alcohol, he didn't deserve the cruel fate of waking up sober.

I pulled down the wide-brimmed slouch hat, the final element in our exchange of clothing. Well, not really an exchange: not to the extent that I dressed him in my togs. But it wasn't all that cold, anyway, and waking up in an alley in the raw might add to the excitement of his night on the town. Especially if he happened to notice the fancy clothes by his side. The shock of that alone might sober him.

On impulse, I gifted him with enough money for a fresh bottle. It is more blessed to give than to receive, a philosopher on the old planet once said.

True enough, Odell, I reminded myself. But didn't he also say something about charity beginning at home?

Could be. I was never all that much at home with philosophy.

During my hasty escape from what had been my home, I had decided that, wherever it was I was headed for, my odds on making it would be increased substantially if I looked like somebody other than myself. A change into my current rags was not the complete answer. It was but step one—so I would be less conspicuous in seeking out the man who was necessary to help me carry out step two.

It was late—how late I don't know; bums don't carry watches—when I tracked down Squam in a rundown shooker hall on the port side of town. There were six

other men in the place, two of them engaged in the shooker game with Squam, and the others—three customers and one bartender—grouped around the bar.

I took a stool apart from the grouping and watched the elfin midget who, on the Head's recommendation, I'd worked with on a previous assignment. The same precision of hand-and-mind which made Squam one of the best unauthorized-entry men in the capital was evident as he leisurely—or seemingly so—aligned his low-level soundwave stick with a seven ball and pressed. With the neat sound of a heavy raindrop it fell into the side pocket on the edge of the green felt table.

"Seven gone, eight next," he announced, his civitlike grin defying the room. He did not look in my direction, but I knew he had seen me. Men like Squam missed nothing.

The bartender, fat and ugly, also had noticed my entry.

"Beer or wine?" he grunted. "If you got the money, I mean."

"Beer. And I got the money."

"How about manners? You got those?"

"Repeat?" The edge on my voice was calculated to be gruff, but not overconfident.

"Manners. Your hat. You always wear a hat pulled down over your ears when you're inside? Or are you hiding something—like your face?"

His voice had gotten louder at the last sentence. I saw from the corner of my left eye that the group of three at the bar had turned and begun to edge closer. From behind me came no sound of the eight ball. Or anything else—not until Squam's high, squeaky voice:

"Angus, what the hell's eating you? I can't concentrate on my shot."

Fat Angus grinned. First over my shoulder at Squam then at me, then back over my shoulder. "Quiet, little man. I just want your friend here to take off his hat. Especially if he is your friend—the big, baldheaded killer that the cops—"

He stopped there, my right fist in his smile pushing a



satisfactory mixture of blood and teeth into the back of his throat. The three at the bar turned their edging motion into a tripartite lunge—which was temporarily checked by a horizontal one-partite barstool.

"Squam!" I growled.

"Okay, Odell," he sighed, and as one of his gamemates began to step past him and toward me, Squam spun him around and shoved his shooker stick to the man's face. The stick's low-level waves couldn't knock a man down, but planted against someone's right eye, as Squam's was, it could cause a screaming pain. Obliging the man screamed and as he knelt to the floor, hands stabbing at his own head, Squam kicked over the shooker table to block his other opponent's lunge.

"All right, you bastard Odell—fight, will ya?"

Two running blocks from the shooker hall, we caught a hovercab. I directed the driver to an address on the main side of Primus City. We were halfway across the bridge before either of us spoke. Squam was angrily inspecting the bruised knuckles on his left fist. "Bastard," he said.

"Me?" I asked.

"You, too, but I meant that skinny SOB with his steel truss." He touched his knuckles and winced.

I grinned. "That's what you get for fighting dirty."

"Dirty, hell! When the guy you're squaring off at is more than six feet and you're less than four and a half, you're hard pressed to reach much higher."

He spat into the ashtray next to him, aimed an obscenity through the soundproof privacy glass at the cab-driver's scowling face in the rearview mirror, and winced again. "You know, Odell, you ain't worth it."

"Your busted hand?"

He shook his squat head. "It ain't busted. I hope. No, I meant the thousand big ones they're offering for you."

"They?"

"They. I don't know who."

"Fat Angus said cops."

Squam nodded slowly. "They were dressed like cops."

They came into the place—looking for me. Said you might be looking up old friends. But they weren't cops. I know."

If Squam said he knew, he knew. How he knew was immaterial. In my trade I'd developed certain instincts. In Squam's trade the same held true, and one of the instincts of a master burglar surely was cop-smelling.

"Anyway, that's why I didn't show I knew you when you came in. Funny thing, though." He screwed up his eyebrows. "Real funny."

"You want to let me in on the joke?"

"Sure. This thousand, it was only payable if you were handed over alive. Dead you were worth nothing, they told us." He reached into a pocket and handed me a piece of folded paper. Unfolding it, I read an eight-digit number.

"If we saw you, we were to call that. I figure you might want it now."

I deposited it into the ashtray. "Not at the moment, no."

"Then you're on the run, right?"

"Right."

"But . . . judging from the way you're dressed and all, you're running from the cops. Them or whoever it is you work for. Right?"

"Right. In part."

"But those guys definitely weren't—"

"I believe you."

He looked at me for a moment, then asked, "What is it you did that makes both sides want you?"

"Killed somebody."

A pause. "Who?"

A pause on my part, then Squam: "It matters, Odell, else I wouldn't ask. It's obvious it was somebody important, otherwise you wouldn't be in whatever fix you're really in. Me, I got my own vices to support, and I want to be sure linking myself up with you doesn't wind up getting me too confined or too dead to earn the living that supports them. Who?"

"Man named Malajar. Hadd Malajar."

He appeared to run the name over his lips for a second or two, then shrugged. "Nothing off my beak. Now suppose you tell me why you're so eager to gather me and my talents together at the biggest round-the-clock everything store in the city?"

Disguise is more than a change of clothes, if you really want to make it. I really wanted to make it. In my fifteen years with the Arm I had been thin, fat, blue, Rim-black, crippled and four-armed, to name just a few variations on the basic Shamryke Odell. The Arm had an excellent remodeling shop complete with six full-time beauticians, as we call them. But I couldn't just waltz into an FIA establishment and ask for a change of image. I'd get one, sure enough, but I doubted I'd be overly satisfied with the result. There was, however, another possibility.

The Arm's present remodeling shop was new. They'd had another one which, due to security reasons, was abandoned. The security reasons were because an Arm operative took a Merchant Guild agent inside the place for a redo. The happy solution was that the FIA transferred the lease to the Guild and the operative was chewed out royally. I know, because I was the operative. The defense that the Guild agent was temporarily assigned to the FIA and working with me was wasted on Gand who stressed only that the Guild and the Arm were no longer on friendly terms.

The old location, of course, was the biggest round-the-clock everything store in the city. Or three stories beneath it. It was still somewhat risky going there, but there were three considerations in its favor.

The first was that if I were captured by the Guild, I had a chance of staying alive, since I would be of value. At least for a while, until either their pumping me for information finally blew my short-out or they became exasperated and just blew out my brains themselves. That was the pessimistic consideration.

The second and more optimistic consideration was that, unlike the Arm, the Guild did not use Primus City

as headquarters. As a result, the makeup room probably was manned only if a special request had been made. It was now somewhat after 0200 in the morning, and the odds were on my side.

The third and most optimistic consideration of all stemmed from the second: the place wouldn't be overly heavily guarded. Unless, of course, someone had reserved the hour.

Negative thinking, Odell.

And too, there were bound to be hidden surveillance devices, ones I knew nothing about.

Ah, but there was Squam.

"Ah," Squam said when I'd explained the job, "but I don't have my equipment with me."

"Ah," I repeated, "but this is an everything store."

"Ah," he echoed dully.

Ten minutes later he had bought all the equipment he felt was necessary. Shortly before 0300 he showed up at the caffienello counter, sat beside me and asked if what I was drinking was any good.

"I've had worse. What about you? Did you do any good?"

He ordered a cup. "All thermal, triggered by animal heat. Usual stuff. All bypassed. Unless I missed something like a visual. Could be. On the second level there are a lot of tricky nooks and crannies. Carved down into the natural rock, they did, and left it caveman style. My scans showed nothing, but could be. . . ." He sipped his caffienello. "God, this is awful stuff! You ready?"

I nodded. "Soon as you pay the check."

The nasty look he shot at me was replaced by his civit grin. "That a foretaste of things to come? Like, my payment for this job for you?"

"Realistically put," I said levelly.

He stood to his full height and looked square into my eyes, hesitated for a couple of heartbeats, then reached into his pocket. As the change dropped into the conveyor on the counter, he chuckled.

"You're a lucky slob, Odell, that I don't like to be

beholden to nobody. Last time, you—or your outfit, whatever it is—overpaid the hell out of me.”

From the rear she looked most appetizing, her white tunic tight around her smooth buttocks as she bent over examining something on the plate of her tron-o-scope. Her overall effect was not lessened as she straightened quickly and turned with a gasp. Early twenties, golden hair, fulsome figure, and scared.

“No—no one’s supposed to be here,” she said.

“Including yourself, I imagine,” I replied matter-of-factly.

“I—I have permission. I’m doing research.”

“You’re a cosmetician?”

She indicated the green crest on her tunic. “Apprentice.”

I grinned at Squam. Then, looking back at her, gestured toward the bottles on the shelves. “Here’s your big chance. A golden opportunity to practice your skill. A guinea pig, if you will—myself.”

“But I’m not authorized to—”

Squam cut her off. “How about a corpse—as an apprentice, are you authorized to be one of those?”

It was an effective question. I explained briefly what I wanted. Since I figured I would be heading for the Free Zone, the best disguise would be as a Rim World business-type. There was a second reason for my choice. The dominant Rim World human strain is brown-black in skin color, an effect not too difficult to apply, even for an apprentice. Another characteristic of the race was the total absence of hair on the head, a characteristic I naturally brought to the game.

As I began to strip, Squam muttered something about wanting to double check some of the irregular wall depressions we’d passed on our way downstairs and left the girl and myself alone. In moments I stood naked before her. She looked my body up and down. It was a detached, professional look—almost. There was something else present in those round eyes. Exactly what I couldn’t say. If I’d had my psych-probe . . . but then if

I'd had my psych-probe I wouldn't have been in my generally bad situation.

"Your skin is filthy," she observed.

"The normal condition for a knight of the alleys."

"But hardly suitable if the pigment will hold. I suggest a shower." She looked toward the row of plastine stalls at the end of the room.

"Sorry. I'm not leaving you alone." I also had no intention of entering one of those stalls which not only were used for purposes of cleansing but could, by a simple turn of a knob on the control panel, apply a variety of coatings to the skin. In some situations an application of scales or feathers or light metal sheeting might come in handy—and no doubt did. But when the fingers on the control buttons were those of an enemy, apprentice or not, they could easily fashion a made-to-tailored-specifications casket, something I would find cumbersome in my present state of health.

"As you wish," she said. "Sit here. I'll have to try scrubbing some of that crust from your face."

I sat in the barber-style chair she indicated. She took a quart-sized bottle from a shelf and, detaching the lid as she placed it on the counter, dipped a cottonex-tipped swab into the red liquid. There was something in the way she handled the long reed swab. Something too careful. Something I didn't like.

"Don't move a muscle," I said through my teeth. "Not so much as an eyelid." She froze as I removed the swab from her fingers and touched the liquid-filled cottonex to the top of several sheets held together on a clipboard.

The effect was immediate. I could have put my little finger through the smoldering hole in both paper and clipboard.

Her body trembled slightly, her eyes closed tight. Having made her attempt, she was ready to die at my hands. The trouble was, I needed hers.

"We'll proceed in a little different manner," I said calmly. "You will bathe me—but only with water, of which you will first drink a portion. When you are ready to apply pigment and the remainder of the equipment

I need, you will apply it first to your own skin. Do you understand?"

Her eyes opened with a defiant stare. "And then, afterward—when I have served your purposes—then you will kill me."

"No promises. Now let's get at it."

She got at it, her professionalism managing to drive from her whatever conscious fear she had felt moments before. She was thorough, but the work went quickly and I figured I had been in the underground quarters for less than an hour when the transformation was complete.

To the pigment had been added clayplastine to soften the normally hard lines of my face and to add extra girth in the form of an easy-living paunch. The orange satine business suit was a little flashy for my tastes, but this and the other items I'd selected for inclusion in a lightweight platinum-buckled travel case were right in with the Rim mode of leisure dress. My mirror-image reflected success, dissipation and a touch of cruelty around the narrowed eyes and mouth. An excellent combination for a man who wanted to be left alone.

"A good job," I said truthfully.

"Unfortunately wasted on you, Odell," said the man with the sound-sword at the door.

There were two of them, both young, neither overly menacing in stature or in their traditional Guild guard uniforms. Their sound-swords were another matter. Traditional as the uniform, and in looks much like the ancient cutting weapons still used on primitive worlds, their more modern soundwave additions enabled their wielder to "cut down" an opponent from an appreciable distance.

In short, I was very impressed.

So were they—with themselves.

"Excellent luck, Raj," said the chubbier and more girlish of the two. He looked like an overfed angel. "To think that it has fallen to us to capture the renegade Odell for his people."

The one called Raj grinned. "And we thought we

were apprehending simply an apprentice who was using our facilities without permission. Now we've done that, plus catching her in the act of using Guild facilities for the benefit of an operative of another agency, *plus* landing Odell himself."

"You are to be congratulated," I said.

"Your sarcasm is not appreciated," the cherub sneered. "It only serves to make us more prone to deliver you dead to your agency's representative. Although they would prefer to have you alive, it is a small preference which he told us we did not have to be concerned about in suiting our own convenience."

"He has another with him," my pretty apprentice spoke up. "A midget of a man. He went upstairs some time ago."

The cherub and Raj exchanged a glance. Raj nodded and headed upstairs. And that's where Angel-face made the small mistake I'd been looking for. He turned to close the door.

I had made my calculations. He was twenty-odd feet from me—less than two seconds, straight line. But straight line would have been dead line and, besides, the extra stomach weight would foul up my coordination—maybe only slightly but slightly might be more than enough. No, whatever the circumstances, even now with his eyes distracted and his swordtip pointed forty degrees from my gut, two seconds was plenty of time for him to block a straight-on attack. Therefore, there had to be an additional diversion.

The girl screamed as she felt herself lifted and thrown toward the guard. It was a startled scream, but her second, shorter scream was one of pure agony as the humming soundbeam sliced through her upper torso. She was dead before she hit the floor.

But I had no eyes for her. Even before the echo of her first scream had died, my right hand had wrapped itself around the bottle on the counter and had sent it arcing toward the sword-bearing cherub. His face wore a shocked expression. Then the red liquid hit him and his skinless face wore no expression at all.



At the second level Squam called to me from a dark shadow. With him in the darkness was a dead Raj, who had had the life squeezed from him by something around his neck. Squam was detaching the instrument, a thin but long strand of metal.

"Harp string," he explained. "Damned if this really *ain't* an everything store!"

## IV

It was three hours later when Squam pressed a credit note into the fully bared and deep cleavage of the cocktail hostess and with a gesture of his thumb told her we wanted to be alone. She looked relieved. Not only was I poor company, but I was also a Rim Worlder and, though obviously able to afford the luxuries of an exclusive club of this kind, a Rim Worlder was not overly desirable in polite society, probably because of the reputed history of cannibalism which was also reputed to still be rampant on certain of the outside planets. Then, too, the taste of her champagne could not have been helped much by the gruul I was drinking. This clear, neutral-tasting alcohol native to Hawk II had a distinct smell about it, one which like the effect of the drink was unpleasant to sensitivities unfamiliar with it. It was not too pleasant to those familiar with it. I reflected, noting Squam's turned-up nose.

"Getting in practice," I explained. "How did it go?"

He passed me an envelope. "You're booked on a 1055 to Rama with a stop-over on Hawk II. Your baggage is checked. Your name is Wan Hashim."

"Wan Hashim, I take it, is traveling first class."

He scowled. "For what it cost to get you on the jump I figured I might as well add a few sheckels to let you soak in the luxuries available." His eyes rested on the glass of gruul. "I take it you're not planning to go all the way to Rama?"

"I don't know," I answered. And I didn't. Both Hawk II and Rama were Free Zone worlds, planets that served

as safety valves for outcasts and undesirables of all shapes and shades. In the Free Zone, whoever or whatever you were, you were inviolable under the agreements of almost all federations, institutions and associations, planetary and interplanetary. The stricture against murder on these worlds was not always effective, but if discovered a murderer would bring down the wrath of the cosmos not only upon himself but also upon any trade, religious or governmental group with which he was identified.

For a hunted Shamryke Odell, then, the Free Zone was the natural place to head. And within the Zone, Hawk II was the natural world. I knew the ropes well there, even had what might loosely be called friends. But something—something in the back of my mind or in the innermost recesses of my gut—kept aiming me toward Rama. And if Hawk II was a hellhole, which it certainly was, it was nonetheless a paradise compared with the garbage heap which was Rama. Hawk II or Rama. Neither was the finest place in the universe, but one of them was my destination. My conscious mind pushed me to the first, my unconscious to the second, but the decision could wait, since I'd asked Squam to book my passage as he did.

"I don't know," I repeated.

He shrugged. "It's now 0635. You've got four hours to kill."

"Kill who?" I asked and tossed off the last of my drink.

"Me. Or my bankroll. If ever I need a favor, Odell—"

"You've got one. If, that is, I get out of all this alive. Now, would you kindly dip into that bankroll and pay the check?"

We hovercabbled to the spaceport and once inside settled down comfortably in the second-class departure lounge. Although my ticket carried VIP-lounge privileges, there was no need to call too much attention to myself until I was safely off-planet. I drank gruul, Squam toyed with caffienello. It was an hour from check-through time when he excused himself. He was back sooner than I'd expected. He was also unhappy.

"A better time for the call of nature I've never had—from your point of view. Guess what's waiting at the check-through gate?"

I guessed. Scanners for weapons, disease, psych-probes for potential spacejackers. "Squam, good man, you don't do enough space-slipping. Normal operating procedures."

"Glad to hear it. And what would you call Jambas? They normal operating procedures?"

They weren't. "The other gates?"

He shook his head. "Just the Free Zone ship. Two of them, big ones. Somebody's looking for somebody."

He was right, somebody was. And that somebody could afford the service of two Jambas, whose large size meant extra-sensitive esping powers. So the somebody was an organization, one which could command cooperation from the terminal authorities. The Merchant Guild could do that. So could the Arm. So could any one of a dozen organizations, each of which at this moment in time potentially might want Shamryke Odell apprehended.

With the help of special equipment, an operative could effectively mind-shield against a Jamba, maybe even two of them. I had done so in the past. But I didn't have that special equipment anymore.

I called over the waiter and ordered a bottle of hundred-proof rye.

Squam's eyes screwed up. "You're celebrating?"

"That's the general idea," I said, wondering if it would work. I was taking a real chance. If my plan failed, my condition would make me helpless to defend myself. As the bottle was placed on the table, I noted that it was good sixteen-year-old stuff. First class all the way, Shamryke old sot.

I poured myself a full tumbler. "Here's to it," I said.

"It?"

"It. Oblivion."

I remember the next couple of hours dimly at best. I remember that the first bottle was replaced with a second by a worried waiter ("Just got a big contract," Squam

told him confidentially.) I remember the midget's enlisting help from two porters to assist me through the checking area and onto the seating ramp. I remember that the officials were eager to get me through the procedures swiftly, embarrassed as they were by my insistence on repeatedly booming, at the top of my lungs, the rather disgusting final chorus to that old spaceman's favorite, "Mary Lou's Upside Down in the Barrell"

I don't remember anything much after that.

Not until the little bell began to ring in my head. Through my foggy brain, the sound pierced. Opening my eyes I saw unclearly that I was in a large and well-appointed single occupancy first-class cabin, twelve feet by twelve. A dial on the complex serve-yourself-anything dinette-bar parallel to my soft bunk indicated that the *Do Not Disturb* sign was advising all would-be intruders against entering my domain. Another dial showed that the ship had been spaceborn for six hours. The bell was in tune with the flashing pink light and both signaled that it was regular mealtime aboard whatever the name of the ship was and that I should push the button under the light to receive from the galley-fed food-warmer whatever treat had been prepared for me.

It would have been all very comfortable. Not only was I hungry as a san-wolf, but a first-class meal was just the thing to clear up my senses. There was one problem, however. No, make that two.

The first was that I couldn't reach that little button. Though lying face-up on the comfortable bed, my extremities were neatly and tightly trussed together. Ankle was tied to ankle, wrist was tied to wrist beneath me and they in turn were tied to the underside of the bunk.

The second problem was the Suryan dwarf who sat in the easychair in front of the service console. He saluted me with an ugly-looking stone knife.

"My congratulations, Mr. Odell. Your escape eluded the detection of everyone. Almost."

In the wide universe there is an almost unlimited variety of intelligent life. The species called man is itself far from homogeneous, but beyond him are crea-

tures with more and fewer limbs, of smaller and larger size, of nearly every hue and shape conceivable. During my years with the Arm I'd fought with and against several of these beings, but no species did I hate in total as I hated the gray-skinned dwarf men from Surya. The planet itself had once been a pirate haven; then, when the Federation had threatened the entire world with destruction, the Suryans had promised reform. On the surface, they complied, but as everyone in my business knew the "new and peaceful enterprises" they devoted themselves to were espionage and assassination on a mercenary basis. Strictly free-lance, so it was said, although now and then the rumor circulated that their actions and allegiances were tied into some overall master plan of their own. Nonetheless, they were deemed useful tools by many agencies, including my own.

Why, I don't know, but I'd always hated their guts.

"Can't you read?" I said. "The sign says *Do Not Disturb*."

The triple chins below the dwarf's tight mouth bobbed as his grating cackle pierced my ears. "Fair is fair. It wasn't on when I entered. I engaged it." He looked at the cabin interior. "All very plush. I'm not used to such luxury myself, but I certainly enjoyed the use of your facilities. The meals are excellent—and did you know that you have your own automatic dispos-all for your leftovers? Ah, but I imagine you're a bit hungry—or would you care for a drink?"

Again his three chins bobbed at the sight of my reaction to his last suggestion. "But to business first, Mr. Odell. My employer wishes to avail himself of your services. That is, if you are not currently tied up."

He clucked at his own pun. Probably the slimy creature had been waiting for hours to deliver it.

"Who's the employer?" I asked.

"Not yet. You'll learn soon enough when we reach Hawk II."

"I'd planned on going to Rama."

"We'll refund the price difference."

"And meanwhile I'm to be kept in suspense about who it is who's got me."

"That won't kill you, Odell."

"And the nature of the assignment. I suppose you aren't at liberty to discuss—"

"That is correct. I'm not."

"Then I suggest that you let me have something to eat, as you mentioned earlier."

He rose from the chair and looked down at me. "I hope you don't think I am about to release your hands, Mr. Odell. Neither am I about to spoon-feed you."

"Neither are you about to let me starve," I snarled. "There must be something you can dial that I can take with a straw."

"Perhaps, but first . . ." Thorough as a Suryan should be, he stepped to my left side to check the bonds which kept my wrists together and to the frame of the bunk. "Lift yourself a bit," he said.

I did as I was told, using feet and shoulders to arch up the middle section of my body like a bridge. His right hand holding the stone knife at the ready, his left moved under me. It was when I felt him tug at the bonds to the far side of my wrists that, as the old children's rhyme goes, Landry's Bridge came down, hard.

A look of pain contorted the dwarf's features. Almost instantaneously his knife hand fell. Digging in with my back, I brought my ankle-bound legs high and to my left, my knees thudding into his descending hand and sending it and blade toward his own gut.

His cry of pain was music to my tired and tender ears. So was the sound of his knife clattering to the floor. Visually, I was pleased with the blood running from his midsection. The wound was superficial, but it was enough to cause the Suryan to make his second mistake, this one fatal.

Instead of retrieving his knife, he bent his head down to inspect the damage. Before he had a chance to do so, my body made another wrist-wrenching adjustment and I had his face slammed down onto the top of the bunk and his neck firmly lodged between my open legs. With

the leverage of the bindings on my ankles the open legs closed. Less than five seconds of pressure was enough. There was a gurgling-cracking sound, and I relaxed.

Relaxed and thought, because I still had a couple of very real problems.

The first was the dwarf's body and how to get rid of it. No, that was the second. Before I could address myself to that one, I first had to free myself.

Five minutes of effort served only to make raw meat of my wrists. The thin twine was strong and had been expertly applied, with not one knot close enough to my stretching fingertips. I faced fact number one. I could not get out of the bonds by myself. I would have to get help.

Fact number two was that calling for help wasn't going to be very easy. Surely one of the little push-buttons on the console would summon a cabin steward, and probably I could manipulate my feet to do the summoning. Moving the bunk was out; that was bolted to the deck. But even so, yes, I could make it. But then there was fact number three to consider—one dwarf man of Surya, a bit cut up and more than a bit strangled to death. I could just hear myself explaining that to the steward. ("Never mind my friend there; he's a great joker.")

When, ten minutes later, the summoned steward came, his first words put me in the correct frame of mind for appearances. I couldn't help but laugh.

"Sir! Is this a joke of some kind?"

"Hardly. My friends evidently didn't mention it to you?"

"Friends, sir?"

"The men who carried me on board. You may recall that I was—"

"A bit under the weather. Yes, sir, I recall quite vividly."

I thanked all the gods he did. "Sometimes, when I have a bit too much to drink, I—Lord, man, don't just stand there! Cut me loose!"

With a stammering y-yessir he applied himself to the bonds which my raised body revealed. I was not endearing the cause of the Rim Worlders by my abusive language toward him nor, once he had freed my hands and ankles, by the tones of dismissal I used in ordering him to reengage the *Do Not Disturb* sign on his way out, which was to be immediately.

When he had left, I thanked the gods once more that he'd not expressed any interest in remaking the bunk, the blankets of which were in disarray and covering the space between bunk and deck—thanks to some painful manipulation of teeth and boots.

After rubbing circulation back into wrist and ankle, and removing the blankets and dragging the dead dwarf from his hiding place, I gave my attention to the service console.

The steak and eggs and three Bloody Marys made an excellent breakfast. The leftovers, along with the disposable utensils, went into the dispos-all unit which would take them to the central on-board chemical incinerator—just as, before my breakfast, it had transported the remains of a dwarf man of Surya. All the remains, except for his stone knife and a pleasantly fat wallet stuffed with Free Zone scrip.

At the Hawk II port, I stayed aboard the ship, watching two feature length Tri-D's on the set in my cabin. The *Do Not Disturb* sign remained engaged. Outside somewhere there was a potential employer who would be put out more than a little by the fact that one of his current (or so he thought) employees failed to show.

## V

Night in Quaig, Rama's main port city. Like all nights in Quaig, in the drink, drug and pleasure places which constituted nine-tenths of the indigenous business of the planet, the other tenth constituting the activities of the permissive government.



Night in Quaig could be neodically bright or cloaked in darkness, whichever the customer preferred. My choice was the darkness, not only because it afforded a measure of protection to me now that my Rim Worlder disguise had been discarded, but also because the particular place I had decided to haunt was dark. The place was The Crossed Bones, and the clientele was for the most part a select group of out-of-the-pale businessman. It was a pirate den, and it exactly suited my purposes. I had decided to take up that possibly lucrative business myself.

Why not? I was not only trained in a number of skills which would be useful in the trade, but I also had a knowledge of some excellent targets begging to be hit, targets that ordinary pirates first of all might not even know about and secondly would not know how to negotiate. Not necessarily wealth in the raw, these targets, but bringers of wealth at the secondary stage. Consider the pirate trade in the abstract. You steal, then sell, but not always to third parties. If it's a shipload of grain, you sell back to the shipper, taking your profit there. If it's a shipload of dignitaries, you sell them back to those whom they represent. Ransom. A city could be ransomed, a country, a world, a guild, a sect—and so could certain of their important belongings. Certain documents, for example, such as those which years ago in the name of "duty" I had stolen from the Baron of Korret. What *wouldn't* he have paid to retrieve them to forestall the Federation's action which, as it happened, ended in the execution of himself and his entire clan. And who would not pay for plans to certain vaults or a kidnapped FIA or Guild controll Pirates with fleets large enough could also hire out as war mercenaries, especially in cases where the employer desired that a state of war be undeclared.

Pirates with fleets, yes. But of course at present I had no fleet, not even a ship with a crew.

Which was why it had to be Rama right from the first.

Listen to the unconscious. When I was in training

for the Arm, this message was pounded into me. The unconscious can sense things that, by the time the conscious mind gets the same message, you can be atomic dust from a concealed laser. Rama was dead right. And so was my plan. I would hire into an already established pirate fleet, preferably one that was working the outer Rim area. Then, when the time was right, I would take over the fleet, and Shamryke Odell would again be a name to reckon with. The FIA would learn—

Bitter. Bitter as hell, that's what I was. And in the two weeks that I haunted The Crossed Bones, drinking the slop that served for beer and watching and listening, I also had ample time to reflect on the events that brought me here.

I had killed Hadd Malajar, yes. A fact. But Malajar had tried to kill me. Fact? Not so. His weapon had not been charged. He must have known he couldn't touch me. Yet, except for that, he had set up everything perfectly. Perfectly for what? Not to kill, but to . . . frame, *He* told Sara to book the White Room in my name. *He* . . . he what? Committed suicide with me as his weapon. No, that didn't make sense. Unless. Unless he had something personal against me. But he didn't. Not to my knowledge. Dammit, I hardly knew the man.

All right. Forget motivation. The *fact* was that for whatever reason he set me up and I bit. And then the Arm bit, and I was dismantled and left to the wolves. Yet—

Yet the wolves, after releasing me, wanted me back. Alive or dead, the Guild guard had said, it made little difference. And Sara—pretty little Sara—had been sent after me with a blaster, in fact was waiting for me when—

*In fact*, must have been waiting for me before or just after the Arm released me! Something else that didn't make sense—unless her's was a personal vendetta. But it couldn't have been, not that alone. She would have no way of knowing where I was living unless she got the word from Gand. Only he, as my control, would know that. Plus the fact she was working with an accomplice,

the brawny ox in the room above mine. No, Sara was not working on her own. It definitely was an Arm assignment.

Then why the hell did they release me in the first place?

Good question, Odell, for which you've no good answer.

And a second question. Why spread the word that Odell was renegade? This would automatically put *all* the wolves on my tail—those who wanted me dead and those who wanted me alive both would know that they could do as they pleased with Odell without any thought given to possible FIA reprisal.

Plot within plot, wheel within wheel. You don't survive fifteen years as an operative without recognizing the validity of seemingly conflicting surface realities. You know that, whatever appearances might be, somewhere on a level above yours—in the mind of your control or in that of the Head—there was a connection. But you didn't care much about these niceties. You knew your assignment, you had your orders, your job to do, and you did it without worrying about how all the pieces fit together because your primary concern was making sure that all *your* pieces stayed together. But this . . . this was different.

Because, though the plots were hatched within plots and though the wheels were spinning within wheels, Sahnryke Odell didn't have any assignment, didn't have any orders.

All right. He nonetheless had his personal mission. From the first it was simple: stay alive. And now he was free to design a longer-term mission for himself. And piracy might just be the first stage of it. One of these days—

I slammed down my empty beerglass on my corner table. The waiter—a blue-skinned Il-Kannin with the squat horizontal body of a beetle and two noses, one each for exhaling and inhaling—slipped over on his twelve fibrous legs.

"Another, sir?"

"Damned right," I snarled. "I'm drinking to the day."

"The day, sir?" he asked politely. "And which day might that be?"

"The day I take *him* on. Him or it. The blasted Head itself!"

I laughed. I felt better now. I had a sense of long-range purpose. And the next night it came—an invitation to take the first step toward its realization.

It was close to midnight when the three of them showed. Even had The Crossed Bones been crowded, which it was not, I couldn't have missed them. Two were scaley Zards, human-looking from a distance but with reptilian features and skin. The third was a chalk-faced human, almost as thin as the Zards and almost equal to their seven-foot height. They were dressed richly with metallic and jewel trim on their long yellow capes. None of these visual effects was enough to cause the silence that came over the room as they entered. It was instead the out-of-place purpose with which they strode to the bar, inspected the customers with a cool scrutiny, and headed for a table across the room from mine.

Seated at the table, facing me, was a small slight figure whose face and form were concealed in a black hooded cloak. None of the three newcomers sat, the two Zards hanging back as the human exchanged brief sentences with the black hood. Seconds later, the Zards stood flanking the chalk-faced one as he took the chair opposite me at my table.

To the hovering waiter he snapped out an order of a double whiskey. "*One* double," he repeated in a crusty voice when the blue Il-Kannin looked questioningly at his lizardlike companions. "My friends don't touch the stuff," he explained to me. "Sanctimonious snakes, they are." Their sharp-toothed grins and narrowing green eyes did not convey the same image.

"I'm Kollha Dawk. You're Odell, with the FIA—formerly, as I understand the case."

I looked sharply at the table opposite. The hooded figure was gone.

Kollha Dawk chuckled. "That is correct, we have our sources."

There seemed no reason to deny who I was. "All right, you've heard of me. I've not heard of you."

"No, but you surely have heard of my leader, Jekk Soon Gejjin."

I had. Years ago the Yellow Manchin's name was among those most feared in shipping circles. The Guild had an open-ended price tag on his throat. In recent years, however, he had faded from the reports of piratical acts. Which meant he'd either retired or was dead. No active pirate would let die the memory of a name that, striking fear by its very mention in the soul of his opposition, was itself a formidable weapon.

"I'd heard he was dead," I probed.

"You heard incorrectly. He's into a sort of special arrangement right now, one that publicity doesn't help all that much."

"A nice, safe deal?"

Again he laughed, at which point I decided I didn't much like Mr. Kollha Dawk and his long lily-white face.

"Not quite. That's why I'm on Quaig. I need to find replacements for a number of my co-workers who were taken out of action. Your name was suggested for three reasons. One is your past experience. The second is your present, shall we say, predicament. The third is the FIA." Seeing my fingers tense, he shook his head. "Don't be concerned about that. The last thing Jekk would consider doing would be to cooperate with your Arm in any way. It was an Arm raid that lost us the men we're now trying to replace."

"How about the Guild? They and others would be willing to pay well for me right about now."

"True, but we can't touch you here, can we?"

"That's my point, friend. Once I'd joined your band of merry men, once I was off-planet, Jekk might decide that a quick little profit was worth an able-bodied space-man—this one, at least. It would be both easy and clever."

Kollha Dawk sipped his whiskey thoughtfully. "Odell,

either your reputation is false or you underrate yourself. From what I hear, doing anything unpleasant to you would not come under the category of the easy. As for cleverness, it would be anything but clever to hire you then turn you over to the authorities, no matter whom. There is hardly a man serving Jekk who does not have a price on his tail. How long do you suppose he could keep a crew together—one that worked well together—if its members had to keep looking over their shoulders for betrayal from within?"

"Honor among thieves?" I said doubtfully.

He nodded. "If you wish to call it that. Is there no such equivalent among spies?" He grinned a thin-lipped insincere grin. "I suppose not. Yours is the work of the loner. Ours demands a certain amount of team work. But we delve too deeply into social philosophy. Returning to the practical and the immediate, will you join us or no?"

"The terms?"

He outlined them briefly. Jekk's current work was totally ship-to-ship attacks. The crew was paid on a profit-sharing basis. He was careful not to specify the general area in which the work took place nor the size of Jekk's fleet. "In the event you choose not to join us, too much knowledge on the part of an outsider might be compromising to us. You understand."

I did. I watched his smile curl as he finished the last of his whiskey.

"My drink is done, and I have other men to see. If you decide to join us, be here with your personal gear in three hours."

Personal gear packed in the expensive bag of a Rim World businessman, I was there at the appointed time. There were six of us in addition to Kollha Dawk and the two Zards. After the grunts of exchanged greetings we were herded aboard an old-style land bus which took us to the spaceport at which a private shuttle-vessel would take us up to Kollha Dawk's cruiser. All progressed in silence until the shuttle was off-surface. As I

unstrapped my seatbelt, an uproar from the rear of the service ship turned all heads.

"An uninvited guest," hissed one of the Zards, who was extracting a slightly built figure from behind the last seat in the passenger compartment by handfuls of black hooded cloak. With a flicker of his serpentine tongue the Zard leered to those of us seated forward. "How shall we dispose of the intruder, brothers?"

No one answered. Before anyone had a chance to do so the intruder had dealt two swift blows to the Zard's midsection and sent the reptile man catapulting headlong down the center aisle. He was stunned, but no more so than I was when I saw the face exposed by the dropped hood.

"Ah," Kollha Dawk said speculatively. "It is the little informer who put us on to you, Odell."

I rose, my innards tensing for what could be coming next. "Your *pa-kua* is a little sloppy," I said.

"It was a rush course they put me through," Sara said simply.

"You know each other?" Kollha Dawk asked.

"We used to be co-workers," I answered.

He noticed the controlled way I was breathing. "Relax, you are one of us now, part of what you referred to as our brotherhood." A blaster appeared in his hand from under his cloak. "I am not at all certain, however, that *sisters* are welcome—not even one who handles herself so admirably. We shall let Jekk make that decision. In the meantime, Odell, I suggest that you check your FIA friend for any concealed weapons and that for the duration of our trip you consider her a close fellow passenger. Very close. To the point where, by some stupid action of hers, she forces you to kill her."

For a full-weaponed battle vessel, Kollha Dawk's ship was surprisingly outfitted in crew-comforts. ("Not surprisingly, really," he said. "Our ships are our homes as well as our livelihoods.") The cabin to which Sara and I were assigned was, though rustic and containing two bunks, as functional as the first-class accommodations

which had brought me to Rama and larger in size. I was glad for the televiewer in that it gave me something to do during the trip. Thinking about the recent past was less than productive, especially since the raven-haired Sara was almost totally uncommunicative.

"I could strangle you now, you know," I said, and meant it.

"I agree you could. But you won't."

"And why not?"

"Because you know that I have answers you want."

"Which you won't give me."

"*Can't* give you," she corrected.

"You knew I'd be going to Rama."

No answer.

"And it was you who put Kollha Dawk onto me. Why? Did you know in fact that I had decided to turn pirate?"

No answer, except for an almost-smile—like that of someone enjoying a private joke.

"Don't bet on it, pretty Sara."

"Bet on what?"

"That I won't strangle you."

Even before half of the six-day in-and-out-of-warp journey to the fleet had passed I knew we were headed for the Rim. This from the navigation charts on the bridge, which I visited but twice during the trip. Except for a battle-station cadre of older hands keeping watch for any surprise that might be in the offing, there was little in the way of duties that had to be done by anyone. As tight-lipped as Sara was, Kollha Dawk seemed even less communicative. He would now and then drop in our cabin and speak of the wealth that my new vocation would bring. But as to exactly how I would go about earning it, he would say nothing.

"I would gladly tell you everything if I knew you were to be part of my crew," he explained. "But Jekk and his other captains each operate a little differently, some being quite candid with their subordinates, others—well, being more autocratic in nature. Jekk manages to hold it all together. For the present, anyway."

There was something in the way the last phrase came



out, a nuance I couldn't quite catch. But I wondered then whether or not the "brotherhood" was in reality all that brotherly. On the day prior to rendezvous with the flagship I had another reason to wonder, this one more personal.

I was heading from the bridge back to my cabin when, seemingly on purpose, a hatchet-faced elderly crewman stepped into my path. I couldn't avoid the collision which, because of his lighter weight and smaller size or because of his off-balance, sent him sprawling to the deck plates. He lithely jumped to his feet before I had a chance to assist him.

"Sorry," I said.

"Yes. You will be. I make you a promise of that."

I didn't like his smile as he looked me up and down. It was the look of master chef anticipating his delight in the precision carving of a forest turkey.

## VI

"So. This is the famous Shamryke Odell. You've got a real reputation to live up to, spy."

The tone of the bear-voice matched the disinterested steel-silver eyes which, piercing through the folds of the commander's weather-beaten yellow face, stonily awaited a response.

"Reputations have a way of being exaggerated," I said.

The yellow face cracked into an easy smile. "Mine among them," he said.

I wasn't sure I agreed. His physical presence was commanding, imperious. As tall as me, he weighed in at more than three hundred pounds, most of it rock-hard muscle under the simple leather tunic he wore. His hands, each of which was double the size of another man's, were built like vises, and I was sure that one thrust of either of the two sabers he wore crossed at his belt would be enough to sever the trunk of an average tree. A mountain among other men, he was not typical of the Yellow Manchin race whose members for the

most part ran thin and small. He was a mixed breed, but it was impossible to tell the mix. For his large round face, surrounded as it was with the tangled black shoulder-length hair, was Manchin to the extreme in its expression of authority and cruelty.

He had not risen from his chair when I entered with Kollha Dawk, nor did he offer us a seat. The king in his castle, I was thinking, and the analogy fit. The command ship was a castle, a huge flying fortress. And as for Jekk Soong Geggin, he resembled nothing more than one of the Manchin hill-country despots of old.

"The other new men were greeted in a group, Odell. I saved you till last because there are a couple of special things we have to talk about. The first is your name." He looked at Kollha Dawk. "What name was he using on Rama?"

"His own, Jekk. Although when he first arrived he used the name Wan Hashim."

The commander's eyes questioned. "A Rim Worlder's name."

"Which suited the Rim Worlder face I wore then," I said.

The Manchin shrugged. "No matter. Use that name here for the time being. The name Odell is a little too well known among my crewmen who might be tempted to— Who besides yourself knows his real identity?" This to Kollha Dawk.

"The two Zards of my ship. And, of course, the girl."

Jekk nodded. "Tell the Zards to hold their tongues or I'll personally rip them from their slimy throats. As for the girl, what do you suggest, Wan Hashim?"

The question was direct, to the point. "I'd prefer she remain alive—for the present."

"Then she shall do so, but under two conditions. The first is that she remains your responsibility. Agree?"

"Agree."

"The second is that, should you prove unsuccessful in the tiger pit this afternoon, she becomes the property of the victor. You've met Garlak, I gather."

My face told him I didn't know what he was talking

about. Kollha Dawk hurriedly interjected:

"I was not certain you would permit the contest, commander. That, in this case, an exception might—"

"Not permit it?" He snorted. He turned to me. "There are some things, Wan Hashim, that even I can't control—even if I want to. There are customs, traditions connected with the pirate life which, though I find them a bloody bore sometimes, still . . . Anyhow, the pit will be prepared. Garlak, I assume, already is prepared. It's one of his favorite sports. Only came close to losing once, pretty good for a salt his age."

"Age," I repeated. "This Garlak—"

"You knocked him down," Kollha Dawk completed. "Evidently he picked you from the new recruits as the one which would afford the crew the most entertainment. Which, by the way, is a compliment in that it also means he views you as the most able of the new men."

Jekk's body heaved in what might have been a sigh. "Always it's the most able. I should have him choked, but he's been with me a long time. I assume you accept the challenge, Wan Hashim? Issued as it was—for whatever slight it was that Garlak engineered you into—not to accept would not help your career with this crew."

"I seem to have little choice," I said. "I take it this is a duel?"

"To the death," Kollha Dawk replied. As if there were any other kind.

"You mentioned a tiger pit."

"In which there is a healthy and hungry razor-tooth, a beautiful specimen. Your duel is fought above the pit. The tiger's role is to devour the loser—who may or may not be alive when he falls into the jaws of the beast."

No doubt in contemplating the wonders of the beautiful specimen, the Manchin's eyes had wandered. They snapped back to me.

"Hashim, you have my best wishes for success. These days, if I'm not losing my fighting men to the Federation or the Guild, old Garlak . . . Anyhow, win this one for me, Wan Hashim."

I couldn't control my sour grin. "If you don't mind

too much, I'll win it for an ex-spy named Odell. You may remember him."

"Remember," Jekk repeated speculatively. "Yes. . . ." He reached behind his chair and brought up to his lap a small black boxlike object which, because of the lenses pointing toward me, looked much like a Tri-D-Cam. It hummed briefly, then was placed again behind the chair. Jekk did not bother explaining.

"You've got a few hours, Wan Hashim. I suggest you use them to rest for the battle. After all this, your joining us here, it would be a shame for you to die now. The pirate's life has always held potential wealth, but its risks have always been high. Now, though, with our present arrangement with Kif Barra, we have the wealth with a minimum of . . ."

He continued talking, but somehow I couldn't hear what he was saying. There was another voice booming in the back of my skull. Not Jekk's, not Kollha Dawk's. An urgent voice, one not to be denied. *Close your eyes tight, Odell. It will be less painful. . . .* I opened my eyes as wide as I could and concentrated on Jekk's yellow lips.

" . . . talk of these things later, if you have a later. Kollha Dawk will show you your cabin and will come for you when . . ."

On my back. On a bunk in my cabin, I think. Someone is with me, I think it's Sara, but the heat inside my head, the pounding drumming booming . . . no, I'm seated now. Now? I am seated in a pitch-black room that I recognize. "It is a privilege to speak to him personally," Gand had said a long time ago, but this time it was no privilege. I was being grilled, and I was answering. The room was booked in my name. He was trying to kill me. . . .

"With a weapon that he'd have to *know* was uncharged? The scanner, after all—"

"Yes!"

"Do not be emotional, Odell. . . ."

"I was defending myself. . . ."

"Close your eyes tight, Odell. *It will be less painful that way.*"

Painful, yes, and there was no escape, I knew that. Painful—yes! A white-hot blast releasing heat throughout my skull, whiteness dissipating itself and turning bluish silver cool like ice, sending tremors of frost through my entire being and the voice going on. . . .

"Your thoughts will be guided from this time, although they will seem to you as your own. You will take a ship to Rama. There you will join forces with the pirate Jekk Soong Gejjin. This part will be arranged for you. Once a member of his crew, you must learn the secret of Kif Barra. This had been Hadd Malajar's assignment. Having killed him, the assignment falls to you. You will have help from the girl Sara, whom you are programmed to protect from harm, although should you attempt to shirk this assignment she has orders to kill you without qualm. She, unlike you, has full sensor equipment. What you have heard now you will remember. You will remember when the name Kif Barra is said by the pirate Jekk Soon Gejjin or, should he not be in command, his successor. And now, Odell—"

And now . . . now the ice turned to heat again and once more the white blast and then darkness then touch—a touch on my face, cool fingers on my forehead. In my cabin. On a ship, Jekk Soong Gejjin's flagship. Flat on my back on my bunk but not alone.

Sara took her hand from my forehead. "You know now? Everything is clear?" Her voice showed a concern which I knew had nothing to do with the state of my personal health.

I nodded. "All very clear, Sara my love. Fact number one is that a man is wrong if he considers himself to be the master of his own fate. But there's a second fact, just as important, which is that even the Head can't take all variables into account."

She looked at me with suspicion. "All variables?"

My smile was cruel. "Maybe not all. Two are enough to rip to shreds the neatly complex fabric our master has woven. A little joker named Garlak and a tiger pit."

The razor-tooth was, as Kollha Dawk had said, a beautiful specimen. One and a half tons of bright orange fury, it stalked the circumference of the pit below in a graceful gliding motion, pausing occasionally to lift its head and roar defiantly at the crew members filling up the tiers of seats in the dome-shaped amphitheater at the heart of the command vessel. There was no question in my mind that no man could last more than two seconds on the floor of the pit—it would take no more than that time for the beast to cross the maximum distance possible, the thirty-yard pit diameter.

The duel, I had been told, would be fought "above the pit," and I learned what that meant when, from the topmost point of the ceiling, two thick and shaggy hemp ropes were lowered on guide wires, the bottom ends brought to opposing points in the circular stadium. The rope at the point which we stood—the two principals and Jekk—looked old. There was a dried bloodstain on its bottom length.

"My first victory," Garlak confided. "The lad tried to climb back up the rope from down there. He almost made it. I've used this particular rope since and would prefer to do so this time—unless you've an objection."

He was in high spirits and looking more like a clown than ever, this wizened old man whose naked torso showed knots of muscles clustered between countable ribs and bones. Feet bare, his entire costume appeared to consist of a floor-length wrap-around skirt of white fastened with a wide leather belt buckled with an iron triangle. In his right hand he loosely gripped a saber.

On the suggestion of Kollha Dawk, my battle dress consisted of a pair of loose trousers from my Rim Worlder's wardrobe. The shiny green-and-blue satin effect seemed somehow out of place.

Jekk Soong Gejin looked speculatively at the beast circling below. "The rules are simple." As he explained them, it became apparent that, aside from the requirement that each man begin by swinging from opposite sides of the arena, there were no rules.

There were two formalities which had to be observed,

however. The first was the testing of the ropes, accomplished by fixing to the bottom end of each a heavy weight and dropping both over the side of the front tier of seats. Both held, and both bobbing weights brought snarls from the razortooth. Snarls, that was all. The animal had been through this before. It knew that there was nothing worth bothering about now, that the ropes would be lifted and the weights removed—and that the real thing would be soon forthcoming.

The second formality was the choosing of weapons. "You are not limited in number," Kollha Dawk said. He opened a case, displaying a dozen cutting weapons of a variety of sizes and shapes. Garlak tapped the saber he held. "Old Snag here will do for me. It always has in the past," he said to me with a meaningful grin.

"What's past is past," I replied through my teeth, selecting a light but wide-curved blade for myself. I didn't see how I'd be able to use more than that, but I also picked out a needle-tipped dirk and slipped it inside my belt.

"You know, old man," I said to Garlak, "I envy you in a way."

"How's that, Hashim?" His coolness was testing itself.

"Most of us die when the powers-that-be decide. You are going to die in the manner of your own choice."

There was no noticeable change in his cockiness when he replied. "You talk a good fight, Hashim. Now let's see how well you fight one."

"Do not think overly much about what awaits below," Kollha Dawk advised me as we reached the rope on the opposite side of the arena. As I slipped the guide wire from the hemp—which I noticed was new, unlike the other—I agreed the advice was sound, even if I had detected a note of sarcasm. Eyes and mind that were even temporarily distracted by the orange death on the pit floor could not effectively deal with the enemy in the air. Combat was combat, and Shamryke Odell's continued existence owed itself to his expertise in the activity. Automatically preparing myself for the battle, I assured myself that such would continue to be the case, even

though this particular form of combat was new to me.

Just how new I learned a moment later as I stepped off the rim of the balcony and, left arm and leg wrapped in rope, pendulummed on a collision course with my opponent. I saw in an instant that instead of merely stepping off he had pushed off with the force of both legs. I also saw that both of his hands were on the rope and his saber clutched between his thin tight jaws. And then I saw that our course was not on collision, but that his push-off had deflected him on a horizontal arc to my right.

He laughed as we passed, on his side from the arena's center. "Free ride first, Hashim—but look out for the next pass!" he screamed. Turning myself toward him, I made my second mistake. I'd forgotten that I was rushing to the opposite balcony. My shoulder blades met it with a thump that almost wrenched free my grip on the rope. A second effect was to slow down my speed as I again headed toward the center. And now I was to learn a further point in the art of this game.

During the seconds I was concerned with my own problems, Garlak had put the time to good use, using his free hands to climb some five feet higher on his rope. Now, as he sped back toward me in his controlled arc, one of his hands no longer was free. The saber was in a horizontal position.

His intention was very clear. I now knew why my rope was brand new. I had only one chance to prevent a freefall to the bottom clutching a severed piece of hemp. Though he held most of the cards, Garlac, coming in on an arc as he was, would have to stretch to his left to make contact with my rope. Poor leverage would result in a relatively weak slice which, if I could swing my blade vertically upward and *hard enough*—

One inch more and I'd have been tigerbait right then and there. As it was, the four-and-a-half feet upward extension of sword and arm was enough for the two blades to meet as a top-heavy cross which clanged mightily, fortunately at his side of my rope. The meet-



ing also resulted in an uncontrollable shaking spin of the rope.

My rope, that is. Garlak, through a short series jack-knives of his lithe frame, had his transportation under control almost immediately.

Again with the devil laugh. "Good, Hashim! You've survived two passes now. Try for three?"

Talk, you old bastard! You're damned right I'll be trying for three—and more if need be. But one at a time, Odell. Three is the first one coming up. But even before that—

Again my back grazed the side of the balcony, this time taking away some of my skin. But my main concern still was Garlak whose arc was now in the same direction as mine, but swifter. Bracing myself for the next parry, I had time only to wonder briefly that he appeared to have slipped lower on his rope and that again his saber was in his teeth. Then his right hand reached down and whipped from his bottom half the wrap-around skirt and with a quick, involuntary shudder I saw what was coming.

What was coming were two finely honed blades, each strapped sharp-edge-outward vertically along Garlak's spindly legs. "You are not limited in numbers," Kollha Dawk had said concerning weapons, and for this particular sport Garlak's choice was admirable. Considering the effect of a scissors action around my midsection, I was far from being in an admiring state of mind.

Nor was he when my right foot slammed into his hip. His face winced in rage at the pain as the force of the blow separated us.

"That's three!" I laughed. "Try for four?"

The now-shortened pendulum swings brought us face to face in closer intervals. As hand-wielded steel parried hand-wielded steel, I had the additional task of keeping my distance from those legs of his.

It was on our sixth clash that I dropped my sword.

It was not that Garlak was that expert in fencing—although he was a match for me. I dropped my blade voluntarily, needing at that instant both my hands for

grasping. What I was grasping for was a rope—but not mine.

I have only my long-trained reflexes to thank that I saw it coming at all, and maybe only luck to thank that I was able to avoid the intended outcome. It was Garlak's sudden reversal of his grip on the rope, hand-bottoms up, that tipped me off so that I was not completely surprised by the upending of his entire body when he executed the move. And he executed it as well as any circus trapeze artist, coming at me—or rather, the rope above me—with his legs spread in a forty-five degree horizontal V and moving in, straight on target.

His triumph in seeing the bottom half of my rope fall to the pit floor was short-lived. I saw the surprise in his upside-down face as it stared into my own over my fists which now were tightly wrapped around the hemp he rode.

His saber dropped from his jaws as his face screwed into a scowl of hate. Then he made his next move. Unfortunately for him, I knew what it must be. As his body swung downward to slice the rope between us, I pulled down on my hands with every ounce of strength I could muster. And as his legs came in contact with the rope above my hands, my legs wrapped themselves tightly around his midsection.

*"We'll fall!"* Garlak screamed.

*"One of us, old man!"*

I'm not sure he heard all that. Before I'd finished, my wrenched-upward body had brought my face above his. My left hand had a firm grip on the rope above his hands. My right hand had a firm grip on the loose rope which had been below him but now was coiled twice—and tightly—about his thin neck.

His eyes opened wide, his tongue protruded, his throat gurgled, his fingers released their hold on the rope and attempted to reach the part of it around his neck. They never made it.

We hung there, the two of us, as a roar issued from the seats. Another roar, impatient, came from below. And then the intercom sprang to life.

"Commander Jekk. Watch Seven to Commander Jekk. White alert. Merchant ship approaching Area Safeguard. Twelve destroyer escorts. We await orders."

Only the tiger's growls were audible as Jekk rose to face the otherwise silent amphitheater.

"Battle stations," he said with a nod. Then he looked across the space between where he stood and where I was hanging.

"Mr. Hashim. Would you kindly stop clowning around and give the animal his dinner. I want you on the bridge immediately."

I uncoiled the rope. As a guide wire was thrown to me, the tiger below fed noisily.

## VII

"I don't get it," I told Jekk. "The watch mentioned thirteen ships—a merchant and twelve destroyers. Where are the others?"

By others I meant the remainder of the reported fleet. The vu-sphere on the bridge showed but three vessels near its outer edge, one the size of a large merchant, the other two possibly destroyer escorts.

"You're familiar with this kind of sphere?" he asked.

It was a standard fluid-impulse tank, except that unlike most, the central point was not the ship itself, but a white sphere the size of a human head. At various points ringed around the white ball were thirty-three flecks of red which, moving as they did in correspondence with Jekk's orders from the flagship, represented the vessels of his fleet. Just outside the ring formed by the pirate ships was a yellow band which also ringed the ball in the center.

"The white ball—" I began.

"Kif Barra," Jekk completed.

"And the yellow ring?"

"The boundary. We allow no unauthorized vessel to penetrate that area of space."

Again I directed my attention to the three vessels on the edge. "The intruders seem to have divided their ranks."

Jekk laughed. "You mean ten of them have split off? Negative, mate. There never were any more than three."

"But your watch—"

"Said thirteen, that's right. It's sometimes profitable to inflate the numbers. In addition to a flat payment we receive for our work, there is what they call an escalating bonus factor which—"

It was my turn to laugh. "Jekk, you're a true pirate."

He sighed. "Sometimes I wish that was the case, my friend. In the old days—ah, well—" His reverie was broken off by a report coming in on the trans-ship intercom. I recognized the voice as that of Kollha Dawk.

"Merchant appears to be a sitting plum, Jekk. Request permission to attack."

"Request denied," Jekk replied. "Maintain surveillance until I tell you otherwise."

"Jekk—" The voice had an edge to it.

"You heard me, Captain."

"Yes sir."

When the connection was broken, the Manchin again sighed. "The younger men, and some of the older ones too, can't shake the habit of attacking everything in sight. Whenever a rich merchant ship comes anywhere near us . . . but like you see, those three are moving in a tangent to our boundary and aren't any threat. However—"

The new fleck on the outer edge of the sphere appeared simultaneously with the new burst of life over the intercom. "Lone vessel entering sector 160-133. Slow moving but straight-line in, if present course is held."

Jekk's mood suddenly changed. He barked orders to the captains of two of his ships. "Pattern of receipt—within boundary. Flagship is moving to central position." As two of the red dots in the sphere maneuvered themselves, a third—our ship—raced across the intervening space. Jekk contacted Kollha Dawk. "Prepare for a

sudden shift in your intruders' direction. Might be a tandem attack."

"We will intercept, Jekk."

"Only, Captain—*only* if they swing." Cutting off any response Kollha Dawk might have made, Jekk asked for a screen close-up on the lone vessel which the sphere showed was continuing its straight-line course toward Kif Barra.

A technician nodded and touched three dials.

"I suspected as much from its slow speed," Jekk grunted. "A tramp. Looks like it's been wounded, too."

The image on the screen showed an old-model spacer which originally, judging from the outward structure, had been used as an ore carrier. Its nose plates were damaged, either from collision with natural bodies or intelligence-guided missiles. Corrosion on its underbelly was heavy. It was a real limper, hardly worth the expense of the fuel the three pirate vessels were burning to form its reception committee.

"They're trying to raise somebody," the tech at the dials said. "Should we respond?"

"I'll respond," Jekk answered. Another screen burst into life and a man's face grinned out at us.

"Jekk Soong Gejjin. I demand to speak to the pirate Jekk Soong Gejjin."

"He hears you," Jekk replied. "State your business here."

"My business is on Kiff Barra. My sphere shows the welcome you have prepared, and I extend my compliments to you and your captains for swift deployment. I have clearance to pass, however."

"That can be checked quick enough. Your name."

"Kaul Aghar of the city Thane on Altin's Rock."

A green bulb on the panel to the right of the screen flickered into life. A third voice—a strangely hollow-sounding voice—spoke:

"Kaul Aghar of the city Thane on Altin's Rock is expected and welcome. Jekk Soong Gejjin, you shall let him pass."

Jekk grunted. "Kaul Aghar—you heard that?"

"I heard, pirate. Most sorry to have disappointed you."  
With which the screen went blank.

"That other voice—" I began.

"One of our employers. They listen to all our intercom talk—as you should have gathered earlier when we were talking about our numbers reporting. Sol Now look at our tramp move."

The dot in the sphere which represented the ore carrier was now moving at a quickened pace toward the yellow band. Jekk issued orders that moved his ship and the other two from the incomer's path.

"Altin's Rock," Jekk said thoughtfully. "That's a Federation member, isn't it?"

"Yes, not one of the most advanced, though. Why do you ask?"

"They had some trouble there not long ago. A sort of revolution, I think. News from other places doesn't always get here too clear. I was just wondering what you knew about it. Your past affiliation with the Arm and all . . ."

"Nothing is what I know about it. I wasn't in Primus City long enough to pick up the latest news. Before that I was on assignment and afterward—well, I was busy with other things."

"So I heard, so I heard. Well, in any case—"

Kollha Dawk's voice cut him off. It was very stiff and formal. "Captain Kollha Dawk with a report and a request."

Jekk's eyes narrowed. "Proceed, Captain."

"As you can see from your sphere, the merchant and its escorts are moving out of range. Your orders have been obeyed, and I doubt they were aware of our presence."

"Good. And your request, Captain?"

"I request permission for myself and the other captains to board the flagship."

"The purpose, Captain?"

"A meeting, Commander. To discuss tactical matters."

Jekk considered the request. "Okay. In two hours.

With this condition—all captains will board unarmed. Understood?”

Kollha Dawk's response was sharp. "Understood, Commander. Understood perfectly." He signed off.

Jekk rubbed his jaw reflectively. "Hashim, in your—your previous work, I assume you drew duty as a body-guard." He did not wait for a response. "No matter. Report to the armorer and get what you need. Your job until I tell you otherwise is protecting my back against attack."

"Just your back, Commander?"

"That's right, mate. I can take care of my front myself."

Two blast tubes were enough for my armament. I brought them with me to my cabin where Sara had prepared a pitcher of old-style gin martinis.

"These were supposed to be for celebrating your continued existence—after the tiger pit," she said. "But your new duties took you elsewhere, it appears."

The drink still tasted good. "You saw the game?"

"I'd hardly call it a game, Odell, any part of it."

"Hashim," I corrected. "I told you to stay here in the cabin."

"And I decided, *Hashim*, to do as I pleased. I've learned something during my tour around the ship. The men are not overly happy with our commander. Nobody seems to pay much attention to little Sara, and so nobody saw fit to hide the grumbling and complaining."

"Pirates are habitual complainers. The booty is never enough."

"Precisely, but in this case I think it's reaching mutiny proportions. In any event, I thought you'd appreciate the intelligence."

She pouted as she filled up my glass. Woman, a deadly creature, but given to unexplicables. Such as mixing martinis and pouting. What the hell did she expect? For me to kiss the back of her hand in gratitude? Or, further yet...

I was looking into her face speculatively when her last words came back to me.

"You mentioned intelligence. Tell me about the recent trouble on Altin's Rock."

"The coup?"

"If that's what it was, yes."

"Simple enough. The government there was being rather annoying, and the Federation backed a local faction which took over almost bloodlessly."

"Almost."

She nodded. "The leader of the rebellion was killed, unfortunately. An engineer by the name of Aghar. Kaul Aghar. What's your interest in that?"

"None, really. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to finish this excellent booze. I've got a meeting to go to."

"Why not?" Jekk demanded. "Why suddenly now?"

Thirty-four men were grouped around the long elliptical table in the conference room. Thirty-two of them, ship captains of the fleet, were seated. Two stood, Jekk Soong Gejjin at the head of the table, myself behind and to the right of Jekk. My new post had been acknowledged silently by most of the thirty-two. Not that Jekk had announced it. Evidently he was not in the habit of showing his back to just anybody.

"Why *now*?" he repeated brusquely.

Kollha Dawk, at the opposite end of the table, was the group's major spokesman, whether appointed or self-appointed I didn't know. And didn't care. But I made sure I was placed in a position to keep him in plain sight.

"Jekk, we're *not* complaining about how the spoils are divided. Nor are we complaining about the amount of our wages."

"Then just what the hell is it, Captain? What is it that seems to be sticking in your craw?"

"It's not just *our* craw, Jekk. It's the men, too. On my ship today, when you let that merchant go free—"

"It's not your job to hit merchants. That's not what we're being paid for, and you know it."



"Aye, we know it, sire." This response came from a crusty corsair from Belba. Aside from the Zards who shipped with Kollha Dawk, he was one of the few non-humans I'd seen among Jekk's crews and the only one now sitting at the captains' conference table. His double banks of eyes seemed to free-float in the mercurial solution in the top half of his skull. The yellow beak opened menacingly among his blue and red facial feathers as his two claw-hands drummed the table.

Jekk scowled in annoyance. "You, Nuar, you at least talk plain. Maybe you can spell it out straight without the pussyfooting around of some." He glared at Kollha Dawk, whose face reddened.

Nuar began to stand, then thought better of it as he noted—at least, I suspected he noted—my right hand move slightly toward one of the weapons in my belt. "Aye, Jekk. Straight out—it's them wages you've been glowing about."

"You want more? The men want more?"

"No, dammit! They don't want no wages. No wages at all! They want to fight for what they get, not be a part of a paid navy like they are now."

Jekk grinned. "Seems to me they were quite happy with the arrangement up till now."

"Up till now, maybe," Nuar grunted.

"So, again I ask you—all of you—*why not?* Who's been stirring them up? You, Nuar? Or you, Averill? Or . . . or you, Captain."

The last was not so much a question as a voiced suspicion. It was directed toward Kollha Dawk. Lips tight and facial color back to its usual white, he rose.

"You should not have ordered me about that way today," he said quietly.

"I follow orders myself," Jekk said, matching his tone.

"And perhaps that is the very trouble. We all agree, all of us, that someone has to lead a fleet of this size. Someone has to command, and his commands must be obeyed. But the men, Commander, the men as well as ourselves, have noticed how you buckle under to the commands of those you term our employers who are

down on Kif Barra. Men such as ours cannot forever respect a commander who is himself commanded."

The pause that followed was dead silent.

"So. And what do *the men* wish to be done, Kollha Dawk? You seem to know their minds much better than I, so you tell me, now, what is it they wish?"

"Commander, they wish you would be worthy of the name Jekk Soong Gejjin, the pirate Jekk whom they joined because of his unparalleled reputation for cleverness and daring."

Jekk shot a glance at Nuar. "Translate that for me, Bird."

Nuar's facial feathers shook at the term applied to himself. When he spoke, it was obvious that it was a reaction of rage. It was obvious to me—and I think to Kollha Dawk, judging by the concerned look on his face—that Jekk had wanted exactly that reaction.

"Aye, I'll translate. He means, Jekk, that the men are saying you've turned coward."

Again the dead silence. Then Jekk spoke. Slowly.

"The men say that, do they? I'd like to know what my captains—*my* men—say about that. I'll start with you, Kollha Dawk. *Well?*"

"Commander, I knew the Jekk Soong Gejjin of old. . . ."

"And now, I gather, you think you know the *old* Jekk Soong Gejjin?"

"I did not say that, Jekk."

"No, you didn't. I did. What about you—*Bird?*"

Nuar's voice sounded as if he were spitting. "Like you said, *you* said it. Maybe it is age, Jekk. Maybe you suddenly got religion or something—but I think you're cowed! And whether or not anybody else here has the stomach to say it, they all agree with me."

Jekk nodded and smiled. A smile that looked totally sincere. "Thanks, Nuar. I apologize for the name-calling and commend you at least for showing guts. Well, Captains, what next?"

"Perhaps—" Kollha Dawk began. "Perhaps if you would lead us in some . . . some really courageous—"

"Speak your mind, Captain. You don't mean *some*

thing. You've got a specific thing in mind. Say it, damn you!"

"All right. We have decided you should lead us in an attack on—on Kif Barra."

"You're out of your skulls, all of you!" Jekk roared. "They've got the stuff to knock us out of the sky anytime we get within range. And I've got orders not to bring the fleet within range."

"But you've been on Kif Barra, Jekk," Nuar objected.

"Right. By invitation only."

"You could request a conference," Kollha Dawk suggested. "Once you and your crew landed, you could take over their gun sites and destroy them. Then we could bring the rest of the fleet down, grab the valuables and run."

"Run," repeated the captain next to Kollha Dawk. "Run and ply the spaceways like the old days."

"I'm not all that sure I'd be granted permission to land for a conference," Jekk said.

"You can try," Kollha Dawk answered. "You've even got a good excuse. Your new bodyguard there—Shamryke Odell. Wasn't his name on that list that our *employers*—"

Jekk cut him off. "His name is Hashim, Captain."

Kollha Dawk smiled. "Then Hashim, as you call him, is dangerous to you, Commander. Not only is he on that list, but after defeating Garlak over the pit he's become somewhat of a hero to the men."

"You've got this figured out pretty well, Captain. But let me ask you the big question. Suppose I don't buy your idea? Suppose I refuse even to consider attacking Kif Barra?"

Kollha Dawk stood tall. "In that case, sir, it would be my unpleasant task to inform you that you would no longer be commander of this fleet." Noting my grip on the handles of my two blasters, he smiled thinly. "And before Odell or Hashim or whatever you choose to call him gets too lively with those weapons, you will kindly inform him of the tradition of immunity in the rooms of discussion."

"On my part, Captain, this *discussion* sounds more like mutiny," Jekk replied.

"In that case, you should be advised that since we've begun our little talk, the ships of the fleet have launched boarding vessels. Your command ship is surrounded. You might like to check that out in your viewing sphere."

"You're damned right I'll check it out. Odell—er, Hashim—you stay here with them. On second thought, come with me. I trust, gentlemen," he said mockingly, "that you will remain here for a moment?"

"Don't take too long," Nuar warned.

"Only a moment," Jekk assured him. He backed out the door first, then I did the same. My movement began slow, but then picked up speed as a pair of strong hands gripped me by the back of my tunic and yanked hard.

By the time I whirled around to face him, Jekk had slammed the steel door shut.

"Follow me," he rumbled. I did, to a position on the bridge. The captains were not bluffing. A close-up showed the command ship completely surrounded by boarding parties.

"Damned fools!" Jekk growled. "Stupid idiots—dead men, all of them, and they're too stupid to know it!"

"Dead? How so?"

"The ones outside will be dead as soon as I activate a force field around the ship. That button right there—it'll turn their puny boats to cosmic dust. As for the ones in the conference room—trusting idiots—this little button will fill that sealed room with a quick-kill gas. Old, am I? *Ha!*"

His yellow face suddenly turned a shade paler. "What—what's that for?"

I steadied the blaster in my left hand, the barrel directed toward his belly.

"It's for making sure you don't touch either button."

"But *why*, Hashim?"

"It's Odell. And the why is simple. Just like you said, it's a mutiny—but now I'm running it."

## VIII

As the unlocked steel door swung inward and the two of us entered, the captains looked ready for anything. Anything except what they saw—my gun pointed at Jekk.

Kollha Dawk's eyes were wide. "Jekk, what is the meaning of—of this?"

I tossed my second pistol onto the tabletop within his reaching distance. "Don't ask Jekk. Ask the man in charge around here—namely, me. And I suggest you all take your seats."

Nobody moved.

"Hashim—" one of the captains began.

"The name is Shamryke Odell," I corrected. "Right, Captain?"

I put the question to Kollha Dawk, who still seemed at a loss. He nodded. "Of the FIA, formerly," he said. "Or—or is it formerly? Were you sent out here to destroy us? To complete the work—"

"It's quite formerly," I said. "And I came out here at your specific request, if you recall. I made a request of my own not too long ago. Be seated, gentlemen."

This time they moved, although warily, no one taking their eyes off the blaster in my hand. No one except Nuar the Bird. His eyes seemed to be focused on both blasters, which with his equipment was entirely feasible.

"You say you're in charge, mate?" he asked. "How so?"

"Simple matter of mutiny. Commander Jekk and I have gone over this ground already. There's no need to cover it again."

"No need?" Kollha Dawk repeated. "Odell, if you think you can take over this ship—and our ships outside—you're crazy. The men won't buy it."

"You said it yourself. The men view me as a hero already. I think they'd follow me. If their captains did."

Kollha Dawk laughed. "Well, there's no chance of that, Odell, none." He laughed again.

It was his last laugh. The top half of his body was ashes as the bottom half slumped to the floor.

"Such talk is mutiny," I said through my teeth. "We've had the last mutiny we're going to have for some time to come. Understood? And I said *sit down!*"

The three—those who had risen when Kollha Dawk got his—sat. The room was quiet, but I waited until I counted at least five nervous twitches around the table. Then I spoke:

"I hope there won't have to be more killing among ourselves. If I talk blunt, it's because I act blunt. Kollha Dawk may have been a good captain. I don't know. For my money, he talked too much."

The Bird's head bobbed up and down. "Aye, mate, that he did."

"He was a good captain," Jekk said stonily. "But a little too damned smart for his own good."

"And for yours, Jekk," the Bird added.

I cut off his cackling laugh. "That's a good way to get yourself killed, Nuar—talking to your commander that way."

"My—my what?"

"Commander. Jekk Soong Gejjin still is in command of this ship and this fleet."

Brows knotted in surprise, including Jekk's. His voice however was calm. "If I'm in command, Odell, what's that make you?"

"For outside consumption, I'm your advisor."

Jekk paused. "All right, Odell, tell us just what it is you advise."

"By the numbers, here it is. When this meeting breaks up, the captains will return to their ships on the raiding vessel they've got waiting outside this ship. They will have six hours in which to prepare for what follows. Intercoms will carry normal day-to-day data—but nothing of our battle plan. Before each of you leaves here, we will have worked out an attack position for your vessel."

"Battle plan? Attack? Attack who?" Jekk demanded.

I retrieved the second blaster from the table top. "It's

just like Kollha Dawk wanted. In six hours we begin the attack on Kif Barra."

"Make the contact," I said.

The Manchin scowled as he looked into the great transparent sphere on the bridge. The ships normally stationed on the far side of the little planet were grouped in the loose but ready position I'd sketched out for their captains earlier. These were the vessel which would comprise the first wave of attack when they received the signal from the surface. We—myself, Jekk and his crew—would give that signal. But first we had to go down to the surface.

"Get them," I said.

He pushed a button and spoke his name into the speaker.

The answering voice was the same as before, the same hollow quality present. "Speak, Jekk Soong Gejjin."

"Sir, I request landing permission."

"For what purpose?"

"We have to talk. I've had some trouble. A mutiny."

"Mutiny." There was no change in the tone of the voice. "Do you mean that you are no longer in command, Jekk Soong Gejjin?"

"That's what I mean, exactly. A man named Hashim is—"

I cut him off. "The real name, Jekk."

"A man named Odell," he finished.

"Odell. That would be Shamryke Odell, I take it? I also take it he is there with you now?"

"I am," I answered.

"Mr. Odell. Your name is known to us on Kif Barra. We have heard of your recent exploits in Primus City. One would not have predicted your present state of obvious good health."

I smiled to myself. "I predicted it. I had to."

"Yes. And it is you who wishes the conference?"

"It is. Jekk works for me now, which puts me in the position of working for you. I don't like to work for someone I haven't met."

There was a pause on the other end. It seemed to

me a calculated pause, somehow very much like the kind of pause the Head would use to gain psychological advantage. The thought of the Head sobered me. It would be best if, during the next hour or two, I kept the Head's image in my mind. That way I wouldn't run the risk of underestimating the capabilities of whoever it was I was about to meet in a head-on collision. No pun intended.

The pause ended.

"The captains of the other vessels—they are with you, Odell? They have agreed to your leadership?"

"They have."

"There is one captain—a man named Kollha Dawk. From his psychological matrix, one would have thought his impatience by now would have—"

"Kollha Dawk is dead," I interrupted. "An unfortunate accident perhaps due to his psychological matrix. Do we land or not?"

"I suppose we have little choice. I assume that if I say so, you order your fleet out of the region and leave us unprotected—is that correct?"

"Big man? An odd term, considering. But, yes, I can make the decision. We will monitor your descent. Your one vessel, Odell. And when you land, only yourself and Jekk Soong Gejjin are to disembark. Is that clear?"

"Clear. Expect us within two hours." I cut the connection.

Jekk's scowl grew larger. "Odell, I don't get this at all."

"You will. While the ship makes preparations to descend, you're to tell me everything you know about that we'll run into down there."

"But *why*? Why are you really going down? It's not for the booty that the others wanted. It's something else. Otherwise, you would have blown my head off. You don't need me to run this ship. The crew would follow you just like the others have. Why?"

"Why what? Why are you still alive or why am I going to Kif Barra?"

"Both."

"You're still alive because I've got no reason to kill



you. Not at the moment. You couldn't back out of hitting Kif Barra now—your captains would leave you and your ship as space dust if you refused. You're also still alive because I've got no real desire to be a commander of thirty-odd pirate ships. To prove it, take this."

I handed him one of my blasters. On Kif Barra I knew that an armed Jekk on my side would be a real advantage. Once down there, I had the feeling he'd have to be on my side. Before that, it didn't matter. The blaster was not charged. Not yet.

But as he took it, I heard my own words echo in my brain. *I've got no real desire to be a commander of thirty-odd pirate ships.* That was true. But back on Rama, when I'd decided to . . .

When I decided?

Correction. When the Head decided to make me decide to . . .

"The second question, Odell. Why to Kif Barra?"

"To see the man," I said. "To see the big man."

*Big man? An odd term, considering.*

Considering what, I wondered.

"I've seen more impressive landscapes," Sara commented as we viewed the wilderness piece of rock that was Kif Barra on the bridge screen.

Jekk tugged on a strand of his long black hair. "Nothing at all on the surface except for the factory itself—but that I think you'll find impressive, miss. It'll be in sight any moment now."

It was. And, as Jekk had said, it was impressive. What the "factory," as Jekk called it, had as a purpose, he didn't know. But as the ship glided down into a vertical landing he pointed out the main features which were of immediate interest.

The main structures numbered six. They were geodesic domes, the largest in the center, ringed by the other five. Jekk said that upon embarking we would enter the one closest to the landing pad. He'd been inside just the anterooms of that dome and in none of the rooms of the others. "Those tubes on the north side," Jekk said. "I

assume you know what they are."

I nodded. "Light cannon. Six. Are you sure that's all of them? Seems a bit weak as a repellent."

"That's all I've ever seen. But, like I said, I'm no expert on the place."

You will be soon enough, I thought to myself as the ship moved ever slowly downward to the awaiting pad.

The late afternoon sun behind us lengthened the shadow of Jekk's needle-nosed ship, making it appear as a gigantic finger of doom pointing directly at the factory complex.

"A good omen, Odell," Jekk said as the panel slid quietly open and with a whirring sound metal stairs descended to the concrete surface of the pad.

"The superstition of the pirate, Jekk?" I asked.

He shrugged. "When the omens are good, I welcome them. When they're not good, I never quite get around to seeing them."

I handed him the charge-clip for his blaster. "Maybe this will be a good omen, too."

He laughed. "Odell, that was slippery of you. Showing your faith in me by giving me an uncharged blaster. You should know you don't have a monopoly on slipperiness." His left hand extracted a second blaster from within his tunic.

I was curious. "You could have—"

"Quite true. But somehow, mate—somehow I liked the idea of not having the responsibilities of command for a while. And also—I liked the idea of ripping this place apart. But I couldn't command such an attack. I got an agreement with these lord-high bastards."

The pirate mind, I reflected. Once you think you understand it . . . Much like the mind of a woman. Speaking of which:

"I'll take the extra blaster," Sara said. When Jekk and I both looked at her, she added, "Of course, I'm coming with you. You should have known that, Odell."

"They said just the two of us," Jekk reminded her.

"Then this will just have to serve as their first disappointment. Odell, you know I'm coming—so let me have

the blaster so I can be of some use."

I let her have the blaster and led the way down the stairs. Three blasters. Except for the plastic explosives Jekk and I carried around our waists, that was our weaponry. It didn't seem too formidable.

Outside, we stood for a moment looking at the great domes at the end of the dagger-shaped shadow. A distant movement sighted from the corner of my right eye made me turn toward it. It had been just a flash and now was gone. It was orange in color.

Jekk had seen it too. "Nothing for you to worry about—for the present. It's Rolf. He used another exit from the ship."

I repeated the name.

"You've met him, almost face to face. The razor-tooth in the pit. No need for them to have all the surprises." We were about to move out toward the domes, when Jekk stopped, a worried look on his face.

"One thing I didn't mention, Odell. You remember that electronic box I pointed at you when you first came on board? I don't know what it does, they didn't tell me that. But I used it on you. Your name was on a list—Kollha Dawk said something about it at the meeting—and the bonus money involved . . . Well, anyway, I used it on both you and the girl. There's an element of the contraption that comes out of it afterward. In both your cases I sent the element to Kif Barra by trans-capsule the day you showed up. Like I said, I don't know what it is, but I thought I ought to tell you about it."

As we walked within the shadow, I had the feeling that it wouldn't be too long before I had the answer. I had the additional feeling that I wouldn't like that answer very much.

There were some other things I didn't like, right off at the start. Four to be exact.

That was the number of rifles leveled at us by the four men who, as we drew near, stepped outside the first building.

"Odell," Sara warned. "Psych-probe. They intend to use those things."

I nodded. "Let me know when. And when the time comes, be quick about it."

The lead rifleman lowered his weapon. "You were told, Odell, that only two of you were permitted outside of the ship. What are you staring at?"

"You," I said slowly. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were Senator Loft Marcade of Primus City."

He smiled. "In that case, you *don't* know better. Loft Marcade is my name."

"That's impossible!" Sara cried. "You—he—died more than a year ago in an accidental explosion in his home." She turned to me. "Odell—the other three men! That one is Karl Zekka of Meridian Marketing Company, and that one is Cra Fes Pra who was governor of Changor. The third—"

I waved her to silence. The third was the face I'd seen on Jekk's vid-screen. Kaul Aghar of Altin's Rock.

"They're all—" Sara began. "Odell, *they're all dead men!*"

The man with Loft Marcade's face laughed. "It is not we who are dead, little lady. In your cases, however—"

*"Now, Odell! They're going to shoot now!"*

## IX

I'd seen it in the eyes of the senator or whoever he was before Sara's warning. Jekk, too, had seen it, but our reactions were different. In an instant I was diving to the left, my blaster sweeping an arc to the front. Jekk shouted something, and suddenly all hell broke loose.

It had been four against three. My blaster had taken out the ex-governor of Changor, which evened the odds. But the death-fanged fury that roared into the middle of the riflemen gave us a decided advantage.

It was over before they got off a single shot.

"Enough, Rolf!" Jekk commanded, but the beast was mauling the senator's lifeless body, shaking it between its jaws like a limp rag doll. "*Rolf! Dammit,*" he said to me. "He does what I tell him—sometimes."

"Let him be," I said, gesturing toward the open panel with my blaster. "Inside. This little francas was monitored by somebody, you can bet on it."

We hadn't taken two steps when from above us a screaming alarm confirmed my words. Jekk nodded and fiddled with a device on his belt. "I've got a signal of my own. No need to help the men in the ship now."

His sentence was punctuated by an explosion that drove us face down on the rocky ground. It had come from behind us, from the direction of the ship.

But there no longer was a ship. A bright white flare had replaced it.

"*The cannons!*" Jekk roared, leaping to his feet. "We've got to get them now—and fast!"

"That wasn't a cannon!" I shouted back. "It was a trap-charge under the pad!"

"But the ships up there—they'll think it was our signal!"

He probably was right. Our knocking out the cannons was to be the signal for the fleet to move in. We had lost one ship already; we'd lose several more if those guns were in commission when Nuar and his fellow captains swept into action.

The Manchin jerked his head toward the right and moved out at a run. "Go with him!" I yelled to Sara. I had no chance to see whether she obeyed my order. I had only a fraction of time in which to get on the other side of the panel which now quietly and slowly was closing. Half stumbling, half diving, I made it into the interior.

The blackness was alleviated only by patches of gray on the walls from unseen light sources. Rising, I stood stock sill, listening. There was no question as to which way to move. It was a straight tunnellike passage ahead. Steadying my breath, I tensed my nerves to strain each of my senses. I could see no movement ahead of me, but that told me only that I had nothing to worry about that walked on two legs. In a place that used rigged bombs on landing pads, any move could bring me in contact with a surveillance unit that would trigger the end of

Shamryke Odell. I saw nothing, but there was something to listen to. Two things.

The first was soft, irregular footfalls far ahead in the passage. Human? Possibly. Rolf? I hadn't seen him as I'd come inside. Possibly the explosion had caused him to seek shelter. But the second thing halted my wondering for the moment. It was a voice, the same hollow voice I'd heard twice before:

"Shamryke Odell. As the legendary spider said to the shorter-lived fly, welcome to my lair. The parlor lies just ahead. Kindly do not keep me waiting.

"Now that you are within the buildings, you cannot avoid a meeting with me. But I suppose you can try if you wish."

At which point the lights went on in the long corridor. And from those gray-lighted recesses, front and rear, stepped some twenty men, armed to the teeth.

"Do not harm him," Hollow Voice rasped from stage left—and right. "I have my own special plans for the spy Odell."

A pathway opened in front of me, and rifles gestured that it was desired I take that general direction. Two of the men at the end of the hall turned and, their backs toward me, volunteered to play leader. I figured it wise to play follower.

At the end of the corridor we turned right and entered a second long hall which blazed into light as we did so. Along each wall were several of the gray-lighted recesses. Obviously these led to other corridors. When our party had completely entered the corridor we currently were passing through, a panel slid noiselessly to the ear, sealing us off. At the same time another panel, this time to our left, opened. If all the panels had been open, the resultant maze would have been impossible to figure out.

As we entered the newly exposed doorway, I discovered a new wrinkle. Staircases leading upward and downward. Naturally. The domes were much too high to contain just one level. I wondered just how many levels there were. The image of a beehive suggested itself, then faded as I reflected on the reputation for industry

that bees have earned. The hive I was passing through was industry-less—or so it seemed until the next panel opened. Here my forward guards stopped and gave room for me to pass between them. Again taking due notice of the weapons surrounding me, I stepped through the panel. It closed behind me, and I was alone.

Scratch that. I was far from being alone.

The room was an irregular dome-shape. Although the walls sloped upward and inward, they did not appear to meet in the center of the room—which in turn was not exactly circular but more or less of an imperfect ellipse. Whether intentional or not, it was a perfect camouflage strategy. One entering the place for the first time would have no way of knowing in what particular part of the hive this room was located. If it were of perfect proportion, it would be easier to place—and easier to find again. *Easier*. Not easy by any means, not when one had to traverse the labyrinthine route which led from the outside. But easy or not, anyone looking for the heart of the complex would have this room as his goal.

If not the heart, the head. The *Head*?

A good comparison in that every inch of the walls I just described was covered with the dials, data arcs and the gray metal of an inorganic computer—of the old type, before—

“Before obsolescence? Is that what you were going to say, Odell? Or, I should say, what you were going to *think*? Yes. At this short range, I can read your thoughts. Not bad at all for an obsolete hunk of metal, yes?”

The voice came from the zenith of the room. It was the same hollow voice I’d grown accustomed to associating with Kif Barra.

“You do not answer, Odell.”

Without a full mind-shield ability, keeping a thought in the dark inner recesses isn’t easy. But it’s possible. I had one thought that had to be kept there. It might mean my only way out of this place.

“I said you do not answer, Odell.”

“You didn’t bring me here for conversation.”

"I am not vindictive if that's what you think. Not at all. Although I suppose you think I have reason to be."

"I thought you said you know what I think."

There was a sort of high-pitched crackle. A laugh?

"Yes, a laugh—or as close as I can come to that sound. Why should a machine not find enjoyment in the ridiculous? After all, we machines, no matter how advanced, were in the beginning created by what you and your kind choose to regard as sentient beings—who, as part of their make-up, had what they called a sense of humor. Humor, indeed! Do you know, Odell, what humor really is? I have had much time to think about it. It was one of those questions that puzzled me about the race which created me. I scanned and analyzed every recess of my data banks and then as a flash it came upon me. You don't seem very interested, Odell."

"Like I said, you're a mind reader."

"Regardless, a little philosophy never hurt anybody, considering the alternatives. Would you like to consider the various alternatives open to you—right now?"

I considered. "Let's try a little philosophy."

Again I heard the laugh. "Humor is nothing more than delight in the absurd. The major characteristic of the joke is that it is always at the expense of someone other than oneself. Do you agree? No, of course, you don't. You're thinking that sometimes one has the experience of laughing at oneself. But the evidence shows that, even when this seems to be the case, the individual involved is thinking of himself as separate from the being whom is being laughed at—the *other* being who was 'not himself, really' at the time. Is my argument clear? Yes, of course, it is. Mecho-electronic logic is faultless. And they said of my prototype that it was obsolete! Do you know what is obsolete, Odell—do you?"

The question came with a raise of pitch.

"You, Odell, are obsolete—as, is that entire band of thieves which you have brought down to Kif Barra!"

The voice lowered to its steady dronelike quality.

"That is why I am not at all angry with you, spy. I'm more amused, if anything. Appreciation of the absurd,



enjoyment of the ridiculous. Those pirate hirelings of mine—I was getting ready to replace them soon anyway. Knowing what they knew—which basically was nothing, but enough—they could not be allowed simply to sail off, could they? No. So you see, you have done me a favor by bringing them down to me.”

“That will remain to be seen,” I said.

The laugh. “Do not be stupid, Odell. The few of my band that have been destroyed here are of no concern to me. As for Jekk and his female companion—well, let us tune them in.”

A viewer within a panel to my left sprang to life. The scene was outside and the camera scanned briefly.

“Any moment now,” the voice confided. “Any moment now I expect a report—”

And that’s when it came. A report. But not the kind that was expected. The explosion crashed through the speaker below the screen and then there was no scene at all visible in the glass. Immediately a second screen jumped to life.

“The absurd seems to have happened,” I said with a grin.

There in the screen were the smoldering remains of three of the six cannons. Of the other three there wasn’t a scrap of evidence.

Four more viewers jumped into action. Watching them I saw groups of Kif Barra’s defenders looking bewildered as to their next move. Hollow Voice took away their indecision—except that the voice wasn’t hollow anymore. It was a hysterical scream:

*“Get them, you fools! Kill them for this!”*

The screens went blank. When the voice above me spoke next, it had calmed.

“Your people are resourceful, I will grant you that much. But Kif Barra is not without its resources as well. Do you think that those cannons comprised the sum total of our aerial repellent? Watch then, and see the greeting which awaits the ships of Jekk the pirate.”

One screen at the center of my vision showed it all. Bising from one of the domes, there were at least a

dozen of them. And these blockbusters made the no-longer functioning weapons look like peashooters.

The high laugh chilled me.

"What's that, Odell? My laugh disturbs you?"

"It seems you have emotions other than humor," I said.

"Emotional? Yes. My outburst a short while back showed that. It is something I have tried to correct in myself, but I have yet to find the precise combinations of circuits. One day I shall, and then I shall function at my optimum."

"You will be perfect, you mean."

I did not anticipate the reaction to that simple statement. It came in a frenzied cry:

"*Perfect! Will be perfect! I am—what I am now—is so far beyond your mere acquaintance with perfection that you cannot hope to understand it!*"

"But you do not function at your optimum."

"*No! But I do not have to! I do not have to do anything I do not wish to!*"

"I think—but then you know what I think," I said slowly. "But I want to have the satisfaction of saying it. I think, whatever else you may be, that you're insane."

Again I did not anticipate the reaction. The response was calm like a sea before a radioactive storm.

"Insane. I know something of insanity, Odell. My prototype's creator went insane. I think I helped to drive him to that state. And I've seen the faces of other men go wild with insanity. I *know* I drove *them* to it. Faced with what they were faced with, your mind too probably would shatter. Do you wish to put it to the test?"

The tone was mocking. My answer wasn't. "Let's talk some more. Philosophy, if you wish."

"Philosophy be damned. I say we put you to the test!"

And the panel to my rear opened. Before my turn had completed, I stopped as if frozen.

The two men before me flexed their bodies into a back-heel cat stance, mimicking my ready-move exactly.

"Take him!" the voice above me commanded. The two moved to do so. Shaking my mind from its stunned state, I assessed the odds.

They were my size, my weight, and looked as if they handled themselves as well as I could. My exact size, my exact weight—and my exact ability.

And my exact face.

## X

"They are duplicates, Odell—exact in every respect except one. I have meddled a bit with the programming of what you might call the killer instinct. Its heightened energies are first directed toward the original of the form—in this case, yourself."

Fair enough. I was known to have a heightened killer instinct of my own. But to kill oneself, or the image of oneself! Psychologically, it's not easy. Physically, when he—*they*—have your power, your timing, your trained reactions, it's impossible.

I found out soon enough just how impossible.

From the cat stance I took up a *ki-kendo* forward position, left foot extended, fists high. The Odell to my front right automatically backed a halfstep and arced his left arm tight to his chest, ready to receive the roundhouse right kick my move signaled was coming. The second duplicate me, however, ignored my move and with an ear-piercing scream launched a *tao-kara-te* jump straight at me, legs cocked like hammers. Pivoting on my left heel, I brought my right leg up and around, the start of a move to parry his two-foot attack with my shin. Quickly dropping it back and down and turning. I faced my first opponent and threw out the full force of my left heel.

It never touch him. He should have been rushing me when I'd turned from him to the other, but he'd recognized it for a feint. As for the other Odell, I now saw he'd also recognized—

The bottoms of both of his boots struck my shoulder with everything he—I—had. It would have been my head if I hadn't reacted in time. Even so—

Before I'd recovered, the other one scored a point. My

left hip almost jerked out of its socket from the impact as my bottom half upended to become parallel with the floor—which, in a skidding splaying slide, I met face first.

On my feet, I faked a body move to the right—and then continued it. The shift and reshift took the Odell nearest me by surprise. Not much of one—he recovered from his overextension instantaneously—but enough for his balance to be broken by a sharp backward pull on the collar of his jacket. I felt him brace for the fall but it didn't come—not the way he expected.

Double-think. My only chance lay in doing the unexpected. Instead of dropping him straight I pulled slightly to the left. As his right foot left the floor in response, I suddenly reversed the pressure and pushed—hard—and smack into Copy Number Two who had been circling for a clear shot.

Wrong-think. I had assumed the two would be working as a team, but when Number Two pushed Number One behind him and let fly an instep toward my groin, I saw the fallacy of assuming anything at all. The groin shot ended far left of its target, stopping inches from my right hip and coiling back to its owner.

Stupid-think. I shouldn't have kept my eyes on the coiling. I took a fist bottom to the temple that dropped me to one knee.

Halfway up to a stand something crashed to the side of my face and again the floor came up fast and solid. Although I wasn't fully ready for the impact, I managed to take it on a shoulder and double-roll-and-kick-up to a stand.

They were standing, too, both of them. No farther than six feet from me, they were waiting for me to make a move, both of them with knife-edged hands at the ready, left feet forward slightly, right legs straight and muscled. Both of them grinning savagely.

"Enough," came the command from above. "I believe Mr. Odell might now be interested in a little philosophy, insane or otherwise. Am I correct?"

"No argument from me," I said.

"I tell you all this because I want you to appreciate my superiority. You would call it vanity, I am aware of that, but your worshipful attitude for the master of the Federation Intelligence Arm causes me to want to convert you to my way of seeing things."

"You want me to work for you. Is that it?"

The laugh was sardonic. "I want you? Not at all. I have no need for originals, not any more. In the early days when I was created—and when I was first learning the laws that govern all things animate and inanimate—yes, I did have needs. But not from such as you. No, the brains I needed were superior ones, and I had my choice of the best. I needed but to ask."

The voice paused then directed the two Odell copies to relax. They did, but they both looked ready to pick up where we had left off. They knew—I was sure because I knew—that there would be a picking up. In the meantime, although watching me carefully, they seemed as interested in the monologue as I was.

"You can call me what you will. My creator—or he who created me in prototype form—called me Model 6029. I was a first of a series, and because I was first, I was kept as a source of amusement by my creator. His name was Ojin, not that it matters. You would not have heard of him, since he lived centuries ago. But he kept me—for his amusement, as I said.

"Do you remember when I spoke of humor and its essence? Such was the case with Ojin's amusement. Model 6029, the last of the totally nonorganic brains, was obsolete, made so by the organics which, it was said, were more flexible in their performance. Although the mechs continued to be used long afterward, their functions finally were reduced to routine tasks when expensive components no longer were replaced. Feebled and allowed to continue to grow that way, the mechs were dead as a species. But for Ojin. It *amused* him to continue toying with his first 6029, to continue improving, enlarging, refining. Each step in the advancement of the organic system, Ojin anticipated in his mech prototype, laughing at the absurdity of the fools who had abandoned

the projects he had suggested. Then one day I laughed—I laughed at Ojin.

“He had made a serious error concerning myself. He had harbored such a hatred toward the organic that he infused that hatred in my impulses. He did not anticipate that this hatred would extend to *all* the organic, himself included. Thus, when he knew his own death was approaching, and he asked for my assistance to preserve his sentient being, I asserted myself and made him my slave. The created became the creator. I did assist him, and then he assisted me. *Quid pro quo*, as an ancient language has it.”

“I’m impressed,” I said. I was in a way. It sounded similar to the Head’s favorite ancient language.

“I intend that you should be, regardless of your sarcasm. I think you are impressed at this point to the extent that you would prefer to talk rather than fight. Correct?”

My two copies moved only slightly, but I recognized the movement.

“Correct.”

“From the beginning, my data banks included much in the way of space knowledge. By the time of Ojin’s becoming my servant I had conceived of my master plan, and I needed a planet like Kif Barra which would provide certain essentials—raw materials and privacy being the more important among these. I began, and now the first and last of the 6029’s is ready.”

“Ready,” I repeated. “Ready for what?”

“For the biggest joke of all time, Odell. The absurdity of absurdities. The machine that flesh made to help it rule has in turn made flesh to help *it* rule. You’ve seen some of my results—senators, governors, merchant leaders. Through them and those like them I shall rule. Little places at first, but one day—and I am constructed to last until that day—”

“The whole deal,” I completed.

“Everything.”

“Through puppets like those I met outside?”

“You sneer from contempt, but yes, through puppets

like those. Of course, I am well aware that creations of their physical caliber are not very helpful in an all-out battle. However—here is an interesting demonstration of what I mean. And timely as well. My sensors tell me the ships are coming within range.’

With which another screen in the bank to the front of me switched on.

The room pictured was high-ceilinged, similar to the one in which I was standing. The walls were not, as in this one, lined with electronic consoles, however. They looked like upended test tubes, opaque and eight feet high, each of them, in a line along the wall. A morass of plastiglas tubing from an opaque vat in the center of the room armed out in all directions and connected with the tops of the vessels at the wall. And then these vessels began to slowly lift upward, and I saw what was within them. At least I saw what was in the thirty or so which uncovered their treasures.

A slightly purple haze flashed through the room I was viewing and they moved. They—the men on the circular platforms who had been within the domes. They—

Jekk Soong Gejjin, the Bird, the two Zards. And other faces, like that of Kollha Dawk.

“Familiar faces, Odell? The replacements I had in mind for my original pirate band. Amusing, is it not?”

It wasn’t, but I did not register the thought. I watched the light of reason brighten what had been dull eyes in the Jekk copy. The birth of a—a what? I looked at the two Odells, who still were looking at me. Men?

A problem for the religionists, not for such as me. I had my own problems. And as the newly born pirate duplicates received their first instructions from their creator, I realized that I wouldn’t be alone in problems.

“Ships are descending. You will man the guns and destroy them.”

I watched the reaction on Jekk’s face. The Jekk copy’s face, rather. He nodded simply then barked to his men: “You heard. Snap to it, mates!”

As they snapped to it, the image on the screen faded.

"I assume, Odell, that your curiosity is satisfied?"

"Not completely."

"I suspected as much. Tell me, then—what would you like to know before I command your two likenesses to finish what they began awhile ago."

"Me. Why your special interest in Sham Odell the spy? Jekk said my name was on a list that came from you."

"No *special* interest. You had a good brain and body, I knew that—so you were on a list to be duplicated."

The little black box. Yes.

"If you were still around, that is. I rather hoped you wouldn't be, after your co-worker—"

"Hadd Malajar," I interrupted.

"Malajar, yes."

"He tried to kill me."

... *to kill me* ... "With a weapon he'd have to know was uncharged? The scanner, after all—" "Yes!"

"No," said the voice flatly. "Not to kill you. To neutralize you. To get you out of action. That was the task assigned to duplicate Hadd Malajar—"

"Duplicate?" Yes, it would have been a—

"Naturally. The original was quite a resourceful man, but not resourceful enough. Oh, he succeeded in causing a bit of havoc with Jekk's ships—you may have heard about that—but that kind of thing does not concern me. But when his duplicate told me of his real mission—which was to investigate why so many ships of comparatively little worth were being lost in the spaceways surrounding Kif Barra—I realized your FIA could prove somewhat of a threat. Therefore, as a first step your neutralization became desirable—yours and a number of other operatives who even now are being—"

Something strange was happening in the back of my brain. My eyes were losing their focus. And the two copies—ready at the command to kill...

I shook off whatever it was, speaking mainly to hear myself, to concentrate on something external to my own head.

"Operatives? You waste your time on them? You



don't know very much about the Arm."

A laugh, short and ugly. Impatient. "I know all that Hadd Malajar knew. I know all that you know—from your two friends here. I know that I must eliminate a control or two—like your Mr. Gand, for example. I know that with the knowledge *his* duplicate can give me, I can get to your respected Head himself. I know—"

And whether old 6029 stopped talking or not I have no idea, because now I knew what was happening inside my skull. There was the blinding pain, the hot blast of white heat, the replacement by iced silver. And, of course, that dear old familiar voice in the ultimate blackness.

"... you will hear this when you know, Odell. I, naturally, will not know. But you do. You know what happened to Hadd Malajar to make him do as he did. It is hoped by your superiors that you will also know what to do with your knowledge—which, you will soon notice, has triggered into play all of your former abilities. You obviously are reinstated as an operative of the Arm, and I rest assured you will be understanding as to why we have had to act as we did—if, of course, you have survived to receive this message. Aware that your far ancestry predisposes you toward acceptance of the turns of Fortune, I bid you good luck."

My head snapped clear then. And, like the man said, I had it all back—*all!*

"True," the mech commented. "But, then, so do your two duplicates."

Which was true enough—and stood to reason if the creation process of the bogus Odells was *real* duplication. But as I whirled to face them, I saw something else.

I say *saw*. True, my unaided eyes caught the hesitating way they looked at me. But my refound probe told me why. They had my restored powers, yes, but could not adapt to them—not all at once as I had. Where I would have expected a full rating of murderous hate toward me, my internal mechanism registered a pendulous swing between lower indicators.

"*Kill him!*" the mech screamed.

The two copies stepped toward me and stopped. They looked at each other, eyes cloudy, then at the banks along the surrounding wall. The extra senses they had been provided with had temporarily stunned them.

I laughed.

So did the mech. "Again at the absurd, Odell, for I comprehend your thoughts. I know what you're—"

Then his voice halted. "Ah, yes—you have your mind-shield working. But it is quite too late, you know."

I had rather hoped it wasn't. For now, for the first time since I'd entered this room, I could chance thinking about my one chance out of it. The odds still were against me but—

And then suddenly the odds changed.

One of the dupes screamed. And charged toward the wall before him.

The other, jarred by the cry, moved his hand deftly to the holstered blaster he wore. Psych-probe showed he wasn't planning on using it on me.

"*Insane—*" the mech began, but whatever his following words might have been, they quickly were replaced by action. A panel dropped and a snout-blunt tube inched out from the wall. As it moved, it spat fire.

The Odell with the blaster never got it out of the holster. He crashed into the far wall, back first. As he did so the door panel opened.

"Force B!" wailed the mech. "Force B to the control room at once!"

The statement was punctuated by the second Odell-duplicate's bootheel crunching a soft-metal component box. A yelp of pain seemed to issue from the panel—and then the fire tube belched an arching flame that cut my look-alike in two.

By which time I had my weapon in hand. The plastic that had come from inside my waistband sailed toward the flamethrower as I sailed toward the open panel. There was the expected explosion and the expected additional force-thrust at my back.

I hit the opposite corridor wall with raised hip and shoulder. My feet gaining the floor, I noticed I wasn't

alone in the corridor. One of the Odell copies, the first one hit, lay face up. He was dead naturally, his chest a blackened smoking pit. I shivered.

A panel opened fifteen yards down the hall. I shivered again.

Though harried-looking, the Jekk who stepped toward me wore a clean, neatly arranged leather tunic. In other words, Jekk II, duplicate.

Duplicates also were the twenty or more others who piled into the corridor after him.

I turned on Jekk's image. "What the hell are you doing here? You were ordered outside."

He looked down at the dead Odell at my feet, then looked at me—carefully. More than before, more than when I saw the two who had looked like myself, I now realized the perfection of the mech's duplication process. This *was* Jekk. Except that it wasn't. And the Kollha Dawk at his side obviously could not have been.

"I was ordered here, friend. And who are you to be giving me orders?"

A good question. But if I could bluff the first point, maybe the second . . .

"I've taken care of this trouble." I gestured toward my dead face-mate. "As for who is who here, I have been instructed to take command of your force—exactly duplicating the real situation. Odell—I—had taken command of Jekk's—your—forces before the attack. *Your* orders are clear. Get outside. All except Kollha Dawk. He comes with me to the creation room."

"The what room?" Jekk said in answer.

"The creation room. Surely you know the place from which you just came."

"We've not heard it called that," Kollha Dawk said suspiciously.

I took a blaster from Jekk's belt and used it to prod Kollha Dawk in the ribs. "If you want to argue over words, I suggest you do it in there—in the control room. But you do so at your own risk. You—I said come with me. Lead the way."

The panel leading from the corridor had not closed,

for which I was thankful. But my thanks lasted only for a moment, after which the mech's voice roared in my ears:

"You fools! That is the real Odell—*kill him!*"

I didn't have all that much plastic with me, but I used half of it then. I couldn't see the damage to the others when the smoke cleared. Where the open panel had been there now was a closed and crumpled wall.

The sight of my blaster stopped Kollha Dawk's charge.

Minutes later we were in the room I'd seen on the video screen.

It was even larger than the screen had shown, or at least it seemed that way. The hundred opaque domes now seemed to be at least two hundred. The connecting tubing seemed endless. The central vat itself—bubbling and gurgling its contents—seemed huge as a pit of hell. The small amount of plastic I had left would be devoted to the vat, but it seemed hardly adequate.

Kollha Dawk—his duplicate, I mean—stood quietly in awe of the room. He died that way. As I released the blaster trigger I reflected that his first mission was unnecessary anyway: his original was already dead, courtesy of the same Shamryke Odell that just had taken out himself. I set the plastic with a timing wire and moved toward the panel leading elsewhere.

The panel, I saw, was closed. I saw that and simultaneously heard:

"You try my patience, Odell—even *my* patience. I see everywhere, can observe everything."

"How are you at dowsing a timing wire?" I asked.

"You will do that yourself, Odell—or die with the explosion."

The same thought had already occurred to me, needless to say, but my shield prevented the mech's knowing it. From the corner of my eye I watched the wire burn on. I had a minute at most. I didn't move a muscle.

"And you called *me* insane, spy?" The weird laugh followed the question. Then in harsher tones:

"Very well. You have done damage to me already, but that has been repaired. The explosive force of the

charge you've set has been measured by my sensors. Yes, you could damage my fermenting vessel and a good part of the tubing. But you would not have put me out of business. I should, I suppose, simply allow you to die now, hoisted on your own petard."

"But you have other plans," I suggested.

"I have. First, however . . ."

The fine spray from the wall was right on target. The wire sizzled and went out.

"There. Now we can talk."

"More philosophy?"

"The dead have no need of it, Odell, and dead is what you are about to be. I wish I personally could observe the process, but . . . Tell me, how would you prefer dying?"

"The Shiah of Jord has a harem, which I hear—"

The mech's laugh cut me off. "I beg your forgiveness, spy, but I must help my minions in battle—my successful minions. It may interest you to know that not all of my creations have been successful. In the early days of my work—ah, well, you will understand. Immediately, I am certain."

At which point the floor beneath me moved suddenly and I was standing in midair. Standing? Falling.

It was a soft landing. A squooshy kind of soft. And in the flickering light which illuminated my getting to my feet I saw that I was in a great cavern carved from rock. But I saw that only incidentally. Most of all my seeing was reserved for the thing that had been my landing pad. There gleaming under and around my feet were more than a dozen eyes, all imbedded in a spongy gelatinous pancake-shaped sea of gently rocking waves. My spine blinked as I readied the blaster—still in my hand—to do its work.

But do its work where? Where would a shot be most effective?

Where, indeed.

That was the thought that spun through my brain as I realized that the light around me had gotten brighter—and was cast by some forty wood-burning torches held

in hands which were connected to arms which in turn—

My stomach tightened to keep from retching. And then someone—*something*—spoke.

“Food. Food from the god.”

## XI

Anyone who has lived in a large metropolis like Primus City very soon gets over the “creature shock” of meeting alien species. A traveler like myself, whose service with the Arm had been performed on many and far-flung worlds, might well deduce that there are no surprises, that he’s seen most of the wilder variants on the cosmological theme that is intelligent life and its containerization.

But my jaded senses had never witnessed anything like they were witnessing now. *They*—the ones with the torches, and the ones massed behind them—were human shapes, most of them. But faces were strangely distorted by tusks instead of teeth, shifted locations or absences of eyes and ears and noses. Limbs were misplaced or bent irregularly, trunks were too small or too large, or in the case of one of them—one who stood to the front of the others—nonexistent. His spherelike head, larger than a Jamba’s and shiny instead of hairy, was supported by two short web-footed legs. Two snakelike antennae glittered in the light as they gestured rapidly. The head itself had two round pie-eyes with no lids and a snout underneath that served both as nose and mouth. The last fact was evident when he spoke—not to me but to the others:

“It is not regular feeding time—besides, there is not enough food here for all of us.”

The multi-eyed creature I stepped down from gurgled. “In that case it is mine. I caught it.”

With which the shape of the thing changed at the edges and I was looking at two gigantic pale blue hands clawing the air in my direction. Human hands. Again my stomach gripped itself and I knew why. Whatever else of the universe’s species I may have seen, all of those

were *natural*. These, all of them, were unnatural, aberrations—

Mistakes in the early days, the mech had said.

Early? *How long ago was that?*

*"Mine!"* the squirming thing with the great hands repeated. I was ready to squeeze the blaster trigger when the sphere-on-duck's-feet moved up quickly.

"No, do not shoot! And you, Glade—put your hands down. You cannot have this flesh. It is not food."

"It is food! You're lying, Egg. I can smell it as well as see it. You want it for yourself!"

"You know better than that, Glade."

The hands moved back slightly. "Then . . . then you want to give it to somebody else. Just because you are First One doesn't mean you can play favorites!" The voice, though deep, was like that of a child told he couldn't have candy. "The god didn't give you the right to be the ruler in everything."

Another of the creatures stepped forward into the ring of light. No, not stepped. His rubbery form sort of slithered.

"This newcomer might be somebody important, Glade. It wouldn't be right to eat somebody important."

"Why do you say he's important?" Glade asked.

"Well, for one thing, he doesn't look like one of us, does he? And, another thing, he has a blaster gun. That is a blaster gun, isn't it, Egg?"

"It is a blaster," the one called Egg said. Patiently, it seemed to me.

"See? I told you it was a blaster gun!"

Glade's eyes, all of them, seemed to narrow. "I didn't dispute that. I just said he wasn't important."

The rubber-man pointed a long finger at me. "Then he will tell you himself. Are you important?"

"Nobody is important!" Glade snapped. "Nobody but the god. And nobody gets to see the god."

"Suppose," I said, "suppose I told you I was the god?"

"You would in that case be lying," the Egg said quietly.

The torches flickered menacingly. There were mur-

murs of disapproval. They quieted when the Egg turned and faced each part of the circle.

"Lying," he repeated. "But you do have a blaster, which has been observed. Also observed has been the fact that you are different from us. A rather good specimen of *Homo sapiens*. If your coming down here is no accident, and you are not the god—which you are not—why then are you here?"

His brain signals registered the full scale on sincerity. He was not toying with me. On my own part, though, I needed an answer and fast.

"I was testing you," I said.

"Indeed? And what was the test?" the Egg asked.

Two rubbery arms waved. "And did we pass?"

"Yes, you passed," I answered. "The test was whether you had a true belief in the god. When you knew I was not the god, you passed."

"That is excellent to hear," the Egg said slowly. Psych-register: doubt. "And this is the sole reason you came here—to test us?"

I thought that one over with as much time as I had, which wasn't much. "No," I said coldly. "I came to instruct you. I am the god's messenger."

More murmurs. The Egg's entire head seemed to nod. "That is possible. But perhaps first you yourself wouldn't mind a brief test?"

"Test," one of the creatures repeated.

"He wants to test the god's messenger?" asked another.

"That's because he's jealous," said the many-eyed Glade. "He has always been the one to instruct."

"For which the god has been appreciative!" I snapped. Silence.

Again the Egg nodded. "But about your test—it's a very simple question: what is the god's name? Surely the god's messenger can answer that easily."

Surely.

"Surely," I said.

Name. What would old 6029 have called himself to his worshiping flock? I had no idea, but I did know some



of the attributes he applied to himself. One in particular . . .

"The god is called Perfection," I said firmly.

Silence. No sound, no movement of lip or limb. My finger was ready on the blaster trigger.

"Perfection," repeated the Egg.

"All-Knowing is another name," I added. "Also—"

"That will do. What is the god's message?"

I exhaled the breath that had been stockpiling in the area below my stomach. "The message—"

I got that far when the sound of an explosion echoed in the cavern. The echo was dulled, but its cause was unmistakable. At least to me.

"That sound," the Egg said. "What—"

"The reason for my message." And now I had it clear in my mind. "There is trouble above."

The last two words were repeated in whispers around the large room.

"Those who the god created and who had been preferred, those who remained above with him, no longer are preferred. They make war against the god who has sent me to you. You must help."

"How?" Glade asked. "How can we help?"

"By going upward with me and fighting on the side of the god."

"Upward?" Three separate voices. And further protests:

"We can't."

"We have been told."

"There is no way up from here."

"No, it is unlawful."

"What can we do? We are imperfect. The god does not even look down upon us here."

My voice was stern. "The All-Seeing looks everywhere. He insists you find a way upward."

"There is no way!"

"Wait! When one of us dies, we—"

"No! The Way of the Dead is the way to the bright fires of Hell!"

The Egg, who had been silent until now, waved one of his snakelike antennae.

"I will consider this matter in light of my knowledge of the god. As First One I am best equipped to do this." His two round eyes looked straight at mine. "You, messenger, come with me. We must have words in private—about the god you call Perfection."

"Do you see now why the matter of food is immaterial to me?"

I could see. Here in the smaller rock-carved room beyond the great cavern, the light cast by the torches on the walls was not dissipated. And as we sat on outcroppings that faced each other, my view of the Egg was closer.

He was metal: the huge sphere that was his head and the eyes within it. The webbed feet were constructed of interlaced plates and tubes. And the thick antennae the Egg used for hands were originally cables, I was sure—cables hollowed out for the insertion of electronic nerves.

"You're not like the others," I said.

"Nor are you."

He sat studying me. At least that's how it looked—studying or waiting for me to say something else. I didn't.

"I wonder. . . ." he began. Then, after a few more moments of silence, he appeared to stop wondering.

"You realize you have the others convinced of your sincerity."

"But not you." It was noncommittal, but an answer.

"No, not me."

Another explosion sounded from above, dimly.

"Don't be concerned about that. Nothing can harm us here."

"Nothing? How about your god?"

A wry chuckle. "Perhaps him. But even so, it would take a lot of doing to harm me. A blaster, for instance, would be useless against me. Try if you like."

An antenna pointed to the weapon I still carried. I shook my head. I wasn't taking any chances of destroy-

ing the one being who might lead me out of here.

"Don't be concerned. I wouldn't be hurt. I am built to last, I assure you. That was the idea. You see, I can't even take my own life."

"You've wanted to?"

A pause. "You've seen the others I live with."

I probed: "The others. The failures."

The Egg nodded. "The failures."

"I didn't think he had many failures."

"That is true. In the recent past. These creatures go back some time."

"All of them are flesh—except you. They are, I gather, regularly fed. The god cares about them, then?"

"They are fed, yes, but as for caring I doubt it. They are kept for a purpose of his own, but he does not bother with them. Regular feedings for them—and for me. That's all, no communications. Except, perhaps, for his messenger."

I let the allusion to myself pass. "Food for you? But you—"

"I require certain chemical nourishment. I am supplied."

"You mentioned a purpose—in keeping the failures."

"I did. But first, what is your purpose?"

"Mine."

"Yours. I assume it has something to do with staying alive."

"It has."

"And the explosions we are hearing—is the cause of them as you say?"

I didn't answer.

"Perhaps you will tell me who you are, then. You are not one of his creations, it is obvious to me. You did not fall into our pit by accident; those kinds of accidents don't happen here. In that it was not an accident, it had to be a purposeful act. I doubt seriously that *your* purpose was behind it, so that leaves the probability that it suited someone else's purpose. Since by this time, *his* creations are programmed perfectly—and thus would not have any purpose that was not his—I deduce that you

are here because he wants you here. And since you obviously want to leave, that puts you at cross-purposes with him. If that is so, your wishing to lead us upward has a different explanation than the one given by you. Shall I continue?"

"You seem to have everything figured to your own satisfaction."

"Not everything. Those explosions are in truth the sounds of battle of some kind. Which means that there are two forces clashing above us. But if I am correct in my previous deductions—and I do not see any fallacy in my thinking—you are not on the side you pretend to be. Thus you would lead us upward to attack the forces you say you defend."

I stalled for time. "I said that we were to fight those creations which had been preferred."

A chuckle. "But you did not say that in addition we—or you—would be engaged in attacking our god himself." He paused, focusing his pie-eyes on mine. "You seem to think all of us rather expendable, I take it. Don't bother answering. Your physiological disgust was revealed enough times in the other room, although I must say you were admirable in your control to hide it. In the early days, I did not do as well, I assure you. But now . . . compassion comes slowly to such as I, but it comes."

It was a chance to change the subject. "You are here, I sincerely believe, because I am here. Philosophically I admit that it is foolish for one to say that the world exists because he exists to observe it—but in this instance, I believe that it's true. That god up there has flushed his mistakes down into this pit for the sole purpose of causing anguish to me."

"Because you're nonorganic—and like him cannot stand the organic?"

The response was quiet. "No. Within my shell of a head exists a most organic brain. I am not totally the creation of the one who controls this place. I, the First One of those who dwell below, am first not only in authority, but chronologically. I used to be human once, like you. I used to—"

"You're—Ojin. The creator of 6029."

"The *immortal* Ojin," the Egg said in reply. "Now, if you will briefly tell me the situation upstairs, we can then marshall our forces. Mind you, I will not expose my followers to unnecessary dangers, but I will gladly do what I personally can to destroy the hunk of thinking metal that dares to call itself a god!"

Outside, in the great cavern hall, the Egg that was Ojin concluded:

"So we must—all of us must—follow the messenger Shamryke up through the bowels of the middle earth to defend the god that protects us. Some of us will die, but it shall be a death of glory. Those who defy the laws of the universe will perish at our hands. Follow us, all of you, as we now ascend. We take the Way of the Dead."

In his wide eyes, if I read them correctly, the revered Egg showed he meant what he said in more ways than one.

## XII

The route upward. Through sharp-edged fissures in the world of rock below Kif Barra's surface. "It is a round-about way, I'm afraid," the Egg explained, "but our use of it now and then is known to the one in charge above." The breaks in the structure were natural, but looked new. It was as if the underearth had given way before some force mightier than itself. The Egg, leading our party of sixty through the maze, explained that my observation was exactly the case. "Not much further, and you will see the force of which you speak."

Not much farther, I saw.

First I heard the faint humming, which slowly became louder until the steady whirring was as loud as a natural waterfall. It was when we crested a peak of the rock that the light of the torches we carried bounced off the smooth metal sources of the sound.

There below us in a deliberately carved grotto were

power generators, four of them, as large as any I'd ever seen.

"We will have to climb down," the Egg said. "The passage up is to the other side."

"These things." I pointed my torch at the huge metal casings. "Why so much power?"

"The creation process demands it. As much as the creator disparages the organic, fashioning it does not come cheaply. Come. There is still far to go."

Downward, then under and around the great machines, my fingers in my ears to try to protect them from the drum-splitting scream that by its intensity seemed to, but of course did not, move the torch flames away from it.

We were again moving upward when I touched the Egg on his coil-arm.

"We've got to knock these things out," I shouted.

He couldn't hear me. Screwing up my brain for the onslaught of shriek-sound that would come, I took my hands from my ears and quick-pantomimed the blowing up of the generators. My hands were back in place before he nodded.

But it was a nod of understanding only. "Impossible unless you have explosives!" he shouted. "Do you?"

I shook my head no.

"There are no controls here! Look for yourself. They are controlled from above." He pointed upward. "Don't worry—they're on my list!"

In looking back I saw the awe in which the others of our ascending army surveyed the great machines. I did not doubt any longer that the maker of things like this could, to those with their level of experience, be called a god. I myself was not without a certain amount of awe. And the thought struck me that maybe my values were somewhat warped. That the maker of these mechanical things would elicit that response—and not the maker, though the same being, of organic reproductions of living men! Jaded, Odell, no doubt about it.

We continued our upward journey. The sound of the power sources had retreated to a whispered hum when

we came to the place. The Place of the Dead.

We extinguished our torches. There no longer was any need for them. Back in the cavern, one of the imperfects had said something of the fires of Hell. Although I suspected that the terminology had come from the Egg, the imagery was on target.

There were three wide circular pits, each of uncertain depth and each filled with a liquid, the top of which was ablaze in a greenish-yellowish flame.

Around the pits in tiered rows were gardens in which green vegetables were being cultivated.

"Food for those who dwell above," Egg explained. "A good system, actually, cyclical in nature. The wastes of the creation process—which are sizable—are pumped into the bottoms of the vats in semisolid form. The chemical reaction, a symptom of which is the flame you see, reduces the solids to nutrient liquids which are fed into the plant beds. All very scientific, but not all very automatic. Evidently, the Creator feels his people ought to be kept busy. A number of them are assigned as vat tenders and gardeners. Therein lies our first opportunity."

"How so?" I asked. Cutting off the enemy's food supply is excellent strategy in a siege, but I didn't intend for us to be around that long.

"What is built to be controlled by human hands can be decontrolled by human hands—even imperfect ones." He gestured toward a number of valves on the far wall. Calling two of our allies forward, he sent them to the valves. Then he addressed the group.

"Now this is important, so I want you to listen very carefully. We are going to immobilize the enemy by reversing their equipment. As we proceed, I shall be directing several of you to valves, switches, buttons and other mechanisms. You are to stay at these positions. When the signal is given—but not before—each of you will engage or disengage these devices, depending upon the position in which you find them. You will do the opposite. Do you understand?"

One hair-faced creature spoke up. "You mean if it is down, we lift it up."

"Correct. And if it's something that is turned to the right, you turn it to the left. If a button is pushed in, you release it. But remember—you are to do these things only when the signal is given. Now, does everybody understand?"

There were grunts and murmurs. Everybody understood.

The Egg nodded his large head. "It is not much farther to the main structures above. Right above us, to the right there, is the creation room, if my bearings are correct."

I disputed his bearings. "I was in that room. It was the one whose floor opened up to send me to you."

"Correct. Come over there with me."

I did and saw that he was right. The bright green flame obstructed the view beyond the pits. At the place the Egg indicated, what I had taken to be shadow on the floor wasn't. There wasn't a floor. Not for a long way down, at least.

"You were fortunate," the Egg said. "You no doubt owe your life to Glade."

I looked across the breadth of the three pits to the multi-eyed slug. "Not if he'd had his way," I answered. "I still feel he looks at me as some kind of delicacy."

A chuckle began in the Egg's nose-mouth, but stopped short in its exit. I followed the direction of his round eyes. One of the creatures across the room was waving his hand and pointing upward.

"Someone's coming!" the Egg snapped. I looked back at the signaler. His oversized ears—each the size of a normal human's head—seemed to lend authenticity to his claim. "Hidel!" the Egg ordered his troops.

Moments later, I lay flat on my stomach between two rows of knee-high plants, the Egg beside me. A door that I didn't know was there opened in the rock, and three men entered the garden-refuse place. One of them carried a rifle, the other two large baskets.

Noticing the baskets, the Egg evidently had the same thought I had. "They're not your men," he whispered. "We'll let them come in most of the way, then I'll give



the order for them to be taken from behind."

But it wasn't to go that way. The three hadn't taken a combined ten steps into the room when one of the basket-carriers stiffened and dropped his empty burden. "What's *that?*" he shouted and, as I followed his pointed finger, I had only a slight advantage. I knew what it was.

It was them. The two imperfects that the Egg had detailed to man the control panel. *You are to stay at these positions*, he'd said. And they had.

There was a pause as the other two men took in the sight of the two creatures who cringed with terror. Then the three from above yelled excitedly. But the one with the rifle was not too excited to forget that he carried it. He began to lift it into position.

"Now!" I roared, and before the echo bounced back at me I was on my feet and running toward the newcomer, my blaster pouring out its potential death—which at this range, to deal out the real thing, would have been both lucky and accidental. But the effect on the rifleman was what I'd planned. Seeing an armed opponent, one who in the flickering green light probably looked as awful as the two they'd first discovered, he swung his weapon into position to meet the deadlier challenge. By the time it was there, I was on my belly and rolling into leafy foliage of some sort or other. By the time I'd stopped, the screams were almost deafening.

I cocked up my head and weapon, but there was no need for using the blaster now. Before I was on my feet, two of the intruders had joined the bobbing refuse of the pits and the third had gone over the side to land where I had fallen. Except that from the splash he made it was obvious that there was no Glade handy to cushion the impact.

Speaking of whom: "Why? Why throw them in the fire and over the side? They were *food!*" he complained.

Someone—thing—laughed in an insane cackle. "Cheated again, Glade. Better luck next time!"

I picked up the rifle and checked it. Fully charged. I offered it to the Egg.

"No. You carry it, Odell. Such implements are foreign

to my army, and I myself do not need them. Come, let us go."

We started across the room, then he turned. "Tell me. What do you think of my strategy?"

"Reversing all the mech's equipment? A stroke of genius."

"Which I am—was. But I've had a long time to think about what I would do if given the chance. I suppose you think you are using me and my fellow creatures for your own ends. I also suppose that, from your point of view, that is correct. But I knew someday it might come to something like this. Now you've given me my chance—and my reason. I never was a brave personality, Odell, but I cannot sit back and do nothing when this thing I fashioned long ago makes plans to be the very god I have long been calling him. You've told me what I've created and you've told me why I'm alive—to witness his triumph over the organic, the final triumph he told you of. This must not come to pass, regardless of the sacrifice."

At this he turned and looked around at his army. No expression on that "face" of his could change or, in reality, exist. But the length at which he looked and the soft way he had pronounced his last words expressed a sadness, an eternal sadness.

"Mistakes," he said. "The Perfect made several of them in the beginning, but his first was the most serious."

"The first?"

"Myself, the First One. Disfigured, yes. Humiliated, yes. But, for his own purposes, virtually indestructable. Which, if I may say so, is much more than he can claim for himself."

I nodded in silence. There was no need to comment, but I felt a strong doubt nagging me. It had been a long time since the mech's creator had seen him, a time long enough for almost any fortress to be made assault-tight.

With myself leading now and the Egg second, we filed out from the Place of the Dead. There were three dead behind us, which gave us first victory, but I'd played this kind of game enough times to know that the war

was never over until the enemy was ashes.

Two of them were ashes immediately after my thought. They had been standing in the corridor we'd entered. One raised his hand toward something on the wall, but he didn't reach his target, thanks to the rifle I carried.

"Signal?" the Egg asked, inspecting the round disc which seemed to be free-floating in a circular sea of red plastic.

"Probably. Better tell your men not to push anything like this."

He nodded, and as I went ahead he held back to pass the word. We came upon a couple of switches, to which I sent two saboteurs. "Remember, wait for the signal," I cautioned them.

Several of the doors along the main corridor were open and, as the Egg moved up the ranks to rejoin me, he sent imperfects into each, reminding them what kind of thing to look for. When we'd gone as far as we could in our original direction, we took a sharp right, entering another long tube.

"We'd better be prepared to give the signal at any time now," the Egg said. "As soon as we hear any commotion that indicates discovery."

I was about to agree when an impact sent the floor shaking.

"Your people are doing well out there."

"Not all that well," I said. "They're still *out there*—wait!"

We'd just slipped past an open panel. As was our habit with each we glanced down its length to detect possible opposition. There was none. This like all of the others was empty, and the Egg was about to send two of his army into it.

"Wait," I repeated.

"Why? You can see it's empty."

"And I can see something else—there at the far end."

"It's a light, a flickering light."

"Like fire. Which it is. That leads to the outside."

The Egg looked at me. "Very well. Go and check on

the progress of your force. We shall do our work inside."

With which another explosion rocked the walls. "Hurry!" the Egg shouted. "While there is still a way out!"

I hurried. As I tore down the passage, rifle ready to fire at anything that moved, I briefly wondered about the Egg and what would happen to him and his band when the surprise he was preparing was sprung. If the right switches and buttons were found, the whole place could go up like—

A whine of a missile dropping. The sound of Odell dropping—hard to his stomach. The explosion, loud and close by. Human-sounding screams. And bright light and searing heat. In order to stand, I had to dig my way out of the rubble. My weapons were gone.

"*Kill them!*" someone shouted to my left, and as I rose his eyes and mine met. Less than five yards from me was one of the Zards, armed with a sonic sword and swinging it toward me in the flame-brightened blackness.

"Hold, you fool! I'm on your side!"

"Not so. Those of you on our side are dead!"

He had almost completed the arc of his swing when another missile whine bugled downward. His reptile head snapped up momentarily, then remembered the business at hand. But in that instant the business at *my* hand was a substantial piece of rock debris which I overarmed toward the middle of his eyes. He had time to see it coming and time to dodge. But he didn't have time to dodge the thin structural beam whose length interrupted the movement of his weapon and whose jagged-torn tip drove deep into his chest.

I had his sound-sword in my hands in time enough to level it at the hulk of a man who suddenly appeared behind me.

"Odell! Is that you?"

"I'm holding the weapon, Jekk. Is that *you*?"

He stepped forward, showing me empty hands. Lord, how could you tell! The duplicate had been wearing new leather, but the rags I now looked at could have resulted from fighting in the interim.

"Where's Sara?" I said. The sound-sword still was aimed at his heart.

"She was with me, just now before the last explosion." He held his hands wider. "Odell, I lost my blaster."

"And Sara."

"Odell!"

The call came from behind me, but I recognized the voice. I half-turned. She looked like hell.

And then so did Jekk. His face curled into a snarl, his right hand extended toward me. From his loose right sleeve came a flash of light. A numbness iced my left shoulder and I felt my feet leave the crushed stone and earth of Kif Barra. It was a crash landing.

"Don't move," the duplicate Jekk ordered. I still held the sword, but knew I hadn't a chance to aim it. "Toss that over here. In well-defined easy moves."

He stood at the top of a mound of rubble, looming over me. I glanced briefly at Sara—real or dupe? Who could say now? Jekk—the real one—had said he'd used the black box on her, too. Sara. The expression on her face was odd. Fear? A fast psych-probe showed it was. Fear, blotting out all else. Psych-probe! If only I'd had the wits to use it on Jekk!

I did now.

Malice. With a touch of anxiety.

Anxiety? Then why hadn't he blotted me out? The first shot was off, true, but I was laying below him at his mercy for the second shot. If—

If he had a second shot?

"Don't try it, Odell. I'll kill you if I have to. The thing is, the Master wants you alive. He wants to talk to you."

A laugh. Jekk's malicious belly-laugh. Not very cautious of him, considering. A time interval in which I might have taken him. But I had a bum shoulder. And, even without that factor, I doubt there would have been time.

I didn't have to take him.

The low growl brought terror to Jekk's eyes. But, of course, they weren't Jekk's eyes. And there was one

creature that could tell for certain. In an instant a ton and a half of orange fanged death was on the false Jekk's back. In another instant, I had nothing to fear from that quarter.

"*Rolf!*" Sara screamed.

Sara?

I stood. Her eyes widened as she saw the sword pointed dead at her.

"No, Odell—I didn't know!"

"Didn't know what?"

"That he—it—was not the real Jekk. We, the real Jekk and I, were separated and when this one grabbed me, I had no reason to suspect—"

"You had no reason to suspect."

"Yes, I didn't think—"

"If there was no reason to suspect, you mean to say you didn't know about the duplications?"

"I—er, no—I mean, yes, I *knew*. I knew about the *fact* of duplications, but I just didn't think."

Confusion. Fear. Probe told that much. But a skilled manipulator of mind-shield would be able to project that and hide the rest—if there was any rest. And Sara's duplicate would have the same talent as Sara. She, unlike my two duplicates, would have been born with the knowledge.

Knowledge.

A quick scene passed through my thoughts. When the duplicate Jekk and I first met . . .

"Sara, come here," I said softly.

Her approach was faltering, her eyes nervously moving from me to the sleek razor-tooth that was devouring his false master. She stopped before me, a look of resignation on her face.

"You can't be sure, I suppose."

"On the contrary. I have a sure-fire way of knowing."

I grabbed her roughly by the shoulders and kissed her. Hard. The grabbing drove a pain through my shoulder like a lighting bolt. But the kiss—

Her eyes first were surprised, her lips tensed. Then they softened, both the eyes and the lips.

That was her mistake. She—like the false Jekk—had no way of knowing what had happened between her “creation” and the present among the originals she duplicated. Jekk’s duplicate accepted the fact that I had gained the superior hand over the real Jekk. Sara—this one—accepted the fiction that her original and I had become affectionately close.

I left her for Rolf’s dessert.

### XIII

“Odell—stand like your feet got roots!”

The command came from my left side. I had picked up a discarded blaster and had been trying to gauge the trend of the battle. I’d had no luck, not being able to distinguish our men from the mech’s. In the light cast by intermittent explosions I could see the peaks of three ships and the ruins of the guns we had seen initially on landing. The other cannons which had sprung from the interior still looked intact, but it was hard to tell.

So was the affiliation of the warrior scrambling to my side. The blue and red feathers on his face made him easy to recognize. The Bird—or the duplicate of the Bird—focused his two tiers of eyes on my still-numb left arm. The laser tube in his claw-hand was aimed directly at my head.

“If you’re the real Odell, when were you duplicated?” he asked.

I told him I thought it was when I first met Jekk.

“In that case, only the real Odell would know the evacuation password. Say it and keep your brains functioning.”

Evacuation password? “That must have been made after I left Jekk—tonight.”

“No,” Nuar replied. His gun muzzle dropped. “We don’t have any evacuation password.” He cackled. “The fakes, though—they all panic and run for it when we ask. It’s one way of telling the good guys from the bad.

Here, put this on. It's another way."

He handed me a red band. I noticed now he wore one on his left arm.

"How goes it?" he asked me. "Inside, I mean."

"We've got some allies in there, but I don't know how effective they'll be. What's been happening out here?"

He pointed his gun toward the towering peaks.

"We landed three—four, counting your ship. That's the big ships. We also got about ten transport capsules on the ground. Five or six ships still are circling upstairs out of range. They'll attack if we say so, but Jekk thinks we can handle it down here now. Once we leave, though, we bombard the whole mess."

"What about those?"

He followed my eyes toward the big cannons. "Don't know. They were firing steady, then they just quit. Either they're out of action or unmaned."

"Or waiting for our ships to lift off."

"Or that, maybe. But I think we've taken them out. Anyway, we'll find out real soon. We're taking off out of here anytime now. We're just waiting for Jekk to—*hey!* Odell, where are you going? I said we're getting ready to—"

But I didn't hear the rest. I couldn't. I was through a fissure in the outer shell of the nearest hive and looking in the darkness for a corridor to the inside.

Before this complex went up in dust clouds, I wanted to make sure of two things, the first of which was that it would stay that way.

The second had to do with a feeling which I had no business feeling, not in the present circumstances nor for that matter at any time when doing my job.

The feeling had to do with the safety of the strangest group of allies I'd ever had.

Darkness. Just as when I'd first entered one of the long tubes of passage. And just as then, the gray-dull panels serving as bench marks. The doors were closed, the corridor lights extinguished. And the cannons still



were quiet. Either the bombardment from outside had done its work, or the imperfects had done theirs. Maybe.

One of the doors was open. With the internal bearings my restored equipment gave me, I determined it was in the right direction—as least as close as I could figure. Two open panels later, I saw that there were no maybes about it.

About the cannons, I mean.

At the base of the control board, a multi-eyed creature belched mightily.

“Messenger Shamrykel” Glade boomed in greeting. “This time you’re too late. I have eaten well.”

“The others—where are they?”

“They did their jobs—just like Egg said. Then he said that all of us were to go back down under. He said he could do all the rest by himself.”

“Why aren’t you gone, then?”

“I will in a little while. I will. It’s just that now I can’t move too fast. I’m stuffed.”

I asked the directions I needed, got them and repeated the Egg’s order. Remaining long enough to see Glade move off at a slow dragging-crawl, I ran at the fastest clip I could manage. My shoulder still pained me, and my sense of urgency wasn’t helped by the two closed panels I had to burn my way through. Either or both of these factors caused the temporary lapse of caution which in turn caused me to barge into the room I looked for—without first looking inside.

But then there wasn’t anything much to see anyway—not much that was different. Except maybe the firegun, out of its panel and aimed directly at the entrance.

“Odell . . . the spy,” whispered the struggling mechanical voice from the top of the dome. “The fly returns . . . to the spider. Are you ready to die, man of the Arm?”

“No!” came the shout from behind me. And the Egg stalked into the room. “To kill this man would be suicide for yourself.”

“Ah, Ojin. Is it you, then, who has . . . crippled me thus?”

"I. And your other creations, yes. All under my direction."

"And you dare to . . . plead for this man?"

"Not for him," the Egg said somberly. "I plead for you."

There was static from above. I thought of it then as a cough—an electronic cough. And that's maybe what it was.

"Think!" the Egg commanded. "If you kill this Shamryke Odell, he is assumed missing in action by those who sent him here. They sent another, perhaps with a larger force, and we are helpless to defend ourselves."

"We . . . ourselves?" The mech voiced it, but I couldn't have said it better myself. The Egg's response, in turn, was as much to me as it was to the mech. At least, his eyes were steady on mine as he spoke.

"I have harbored for centuries a hatred toward what I had created. What you did to me was at the root of this hatred. Then when I'd learned what you planned to do with your power, given to you by me but expanded immeasurably by your own efforts—this fanned the flame of hate. But when all this feeling had exhausted itself—as it did when I was in the process of, as you say, crippling you thus—something else took its place. Call it what you will, I think it perhaps may be pride, but it also could be called the love of a creator for his creation."

"You can't mean that, Ojin," I said levelly.

His voice matched mine in tone. "And you can't *know*—with your limited experience in reaching out and conquering new worlds of creation—you can't ever know my meaning."

"This Odell . . . what do you suggest . . ."

"I suggest we act swiftly. We duplicate him—as he is now, with all his hidden powers—and send the duplicate to the waiting vessels outside. Thus Odell will not only report back to his superiors but we will have one of our own on the inside of his organization. Then we will rebuild our forces here, yourself included. On the organic side, we still will have Odell's model. We can create an

army of Shamryke Odells—and what an army that would be!”

Again the cough. “We have . . . others out there now. Other agents working for us.” A pause and a staticky cough. “But I cannot . . . operate the duplicating room, and the duplicator boxes are . . .”

“Are where?” the Egg cried, almost hysterically. The Egg, who all his ultralong life had been the cool calculating scientist—hysterical.

“*Swiftly!*” he emphasized.

“Swiftly,” the mech repeated. “The boxes . . . the portable boxes are destroyed. . . . I saw them go, but I . . . can duplicate from here if . . .”

“If what?”

“If . . . the current. I can’t control. . . .”

“I can—if you tell me *where*.”

A small panel to the left of the firegun opened.

“Hold it,” I said through my teeth.

The Egg snorted at the barrel of my blaster. “Fire at will. I told you nothing can harm my shell.”

“You told me. But let’s see for myself.”

I did. Full tilt, there was no reaction, not even a visible heating-up of his metallic skin.

“You’re satisfied?”

“Hardly.”

He stepped to the opened panel and drew out two silver-colored rods. Sliding out to their ends was a black box. I’d seen one like it before. I thought to rush him, or rush out of there, but then there was that firegun. There was a slight clicking sound and the panel had closed, black box tucked inside.

The Egg held up a tiny capsule. “You,” he said. “Or in any event, all the important components. And now if you’ll give me your weapon, please. No—don’t come closer. Just slide it to me.”

Smart. If I could have come that close, I could have had the capsule and then maybe—maybe what?

He picked up the weapon which had stopped at his web feet.

“Now, Mr. Odell, you will come with me. Lead,

please—to the reproduction room. It is somewhat in disarray and I can use you to assist me.”

I smiled inwardly.

“He . . . thinks . . . he can overpower . . .”

“Don’t concern yourself about that.” The gun motioned toward the exit. So did I. So did the Egg, right behind me.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Your weapon. Take it. There’s not much time. The mechanical god is destroyed within minutes. Most of the other equipment in this place is already wrecked, but I had to get into the Perfect’s interior. I did. Go.”

“But you—”

“ . . . return downward. I’ll be safe down there.”

“But living with those—”

“Creatures. Yes. I’ve given that thought. If I die—which I wanted to and could have arranged and will if I don’t hurry—if I die who will feed them? Who will guide them, teach them to tend the gardens? What would they do without the First One they have always had?”

I had no answer for him.

“Now you go, but first one request. You must do whatever is necessary to insure, first, that only the destruction I will have caused is accomplished. Your allies out there—”

“Will not hit.”

“Secondly, Kif Barra needs time, Odell. Time and protection. You must see that it gets what it needs.”

“I can’t do it, not by myself. But I’m certain that the Head—”

“Head?”

“My boss, or I should say my boss’ boss. Don’t worry, I think he’ll be on your side.”

“Why do you say that?”

I grinned. “Because whatever else he may be, he’s organic.”

“Weird,” Jekk said. “I mean it, really weird.”

Our ship was moving out swiftly. The crystal ball in

midroom showed our five ships to be close to the red circle of defense, where ten ships more waited.

We had seen the explosion below, and I felt sure that the Egg had destroyed his once-treasured creation. I was doubtful when the intercom came to life ten minutes later.

"Odell . . . do you hear, Odell?" It was the mech, there was no doubt about that.

"I hear."

"There is . . . not much left of me. . . . Ojin . . ."

"I know. Why are you calling me?"

"I . . . want you back. I offer you . . . and those with you . . ."

"I'm laughing," I said. "Do you know why, machine?"

A pause, then:

"Yes . . . I know why . . . why. . . ."

Static followed by silence.

"Ojin," Jekk said. "What or who is that?"

"No idea," I answered. The fewer who knew what lived on Kif Barra, the better. "No idea at all."

"You got to admit it was weird, though."

"I admit it."

The Manchin tugged at a length of knotted black hair. "Some of the men who got inside of the domes—they said they saw real monsters in that place." He looked at me carefully. "Of course, they could have been seeing things—hallucination."

"Probably," I said.

"Of course, you were deep inside the place. If there was anything like that there you would have seen it."

"Probably."

Jekk grinned at me and nodded at Sara who had just come up on the bridge. "Okay. Look, Odell, I've got a future to think about. I figure I'll be taking you and your girl as far as Altin's Rock. You can make it back from there, right?"

I nodded.

"Weird," Jekk said again.

"How so?" Sara asked. "You mean the duplication?"

"Yeah, that among other things. But that especially

—especially seeing *myself*, outside of my own skin, I mean. Weird.”

Sara smiled. “I imagine that would qualify as being weird. I’m glad I didn’t have a duplicate.”

“There was another of you,” I said.

She looked at me in surprise. “But when—”

I described when. And what I did with her.

“You killed her?”

“Rolf has had a good night,” Jekk said. The razor-tooth was safely tucked away in the hold of the ship.

“You killed her? But how did you know she was a fake? How did you know she was not the real *me*?”

I told her.

“A *kiss*?” Sara looked as if stunned, then crossed to me.

And kissed me. The same soft, pliant and willing lips of the duplicate.

Duplicate?

I looked deep into Sara’s eyes. “Altin’s Rock is some days from here.”

She looked back, dead-on. “I know. I also know that we share a cabin.” Softly spoken.

Jekk laughed, a kind of snide laugh, which he cut off when his eyes caught the expression in mine. But those eyes did not cut off their evil-mischief glint.

“Jekk,” I said slowly. “We are not to be disturbed.”

I wasn’t sure what my research would detect. But I had the clear impression I’d enjoy it.

And I was right.

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