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THE ARSENAL OUT OF TIME

David McDaniel

**Somewheres among the
farthest stars was hidden
the power to control the
universe!**

First Book Publication



XXX MARKS THE SPACE HOARD

Lawrence Edwards, astro-archaeologist, was studying a manuscript recently discovered in a derelict spaceship, when he found in its pages a reference to a fantastic cache of weapons that had been the glory of that forgotten race symbolically named XXX.

The XXX had been the masters of space and their inter-galactic civilization had pre-dated even Earth's prehistory. And yet, still safely locked away in the refrigerator of eternity, somewheres in infinite space, their arsenal remained and within it the secrets of life and death, survival and destruction.

It was up to Edwards to convince Earth's leaders that without this technological treasure trove their Terra would be wiped off the face of the cosmos by her bitter enemies. THE ARSENAL OUT OF TIME might well be Earth's last chance.

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THE RAINBOW AFFAIR (G-670)

THE ARSENAL OUT OF TIME

DAVID McDANIEL



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I

LAURENCE EDWARDS WAS reading a manuscript no member of a living race had ever read before, and he was bored. The cryptic characters on the metalloy sheet on his worktable were falling into sensible patterns as so many similar sets of symbols had done before, and he was beginning to feel more like a second-rank cipher clerk than a leading archaeological linguist. The XXX language/script had yielded to years of painstaking study by whole universities of his colleagues, among whom he was far from the least known, and his reward for participation was the ability to read the few surviving fragmentary manuscripts of the most ancient civilization known to man.

The XXX had vanished from the galaxy about the time the Earth had begun to solidify—so long ago the number of years lost their meaning to anyone but a mathematician or an astronomer. But deep space is the refrigerator of eternity, and while stars were born and died some of the works of the XXX remained. A few artifacts, some carvings on airless frozen interstellar wandering bodies, here and there some scraps of inscription. And at last, about the time Lawrence Edwards entered the University ten years before, the prize

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came. By one of those incredible accidents which progress depends on, a whole ship had been found, floating in space two light-years from the nearest star, with a relative velocity of only a few hundred feet per second. There was a field of some kind protecting the ship—a self-sustaining stasis which took fifty technicians three years to crack. No corpses were found; the ship appeared complete in every respect save that the communicators had been efficiently wrecked and the drive was fused. But there was a small library. And seven years later, the XXX script could be read fluently by half a dozen men in the galaxy.

As a direct result, Lawrence was bored. He was the youngest of the men who shared this ability and he was impatient with the labor it brought him. He ached for a chance to get out into the field and find something new, to tackle another indecipherable script. Instead, he sat in a cheerful little room in the upper levels of the archaeology complex of Terra University at Scott City in Antarctica, copying bills of lading.

A civilization runs on paperwork, and most of it is business forms. Lawrence's interest in business might have been measured with a particularly sensitive micrometer, but it was lessening steadily as he worked his way through a list of equipment the captain of the *Star-Walker* (as he translated the name of the ship) had crumpled and thrown in his equivalent of a wastebasket. The original piece of material had the look of a mass-produced form-letter—more like one of the bound volumes than the holography or the printer script they'd found—and it advised the recipient, as an interstellar ship operator, that the following items should be catalogued for reference, and the attached pages added to such-and-such a volume.

The second section advised the operators of such vessels as referred to above to keep clear of Interstellar Body ref. no. 7348-F which had been designated the location of a heavy weapons cache.

Lawrence paused and re-read that paragraph. He sighed. What a wonderful thing it would have been if a man could have seen that storehouse. But it had been laid down two or three billion years ago, after all. He wondered idly if that wandering planet still existed somewhere in the universe.

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He looked at the far wall and put his pencil down. The planet had probably left the galaxy entirely, or fallen into some star. Of course. But just suppose it hadn't? Or for that matter, suppose he could convince the head of the Archaeology Department to mount an expedition to the frozen wanderer and put Lawrence Edwards at the head of it. . . . It would mean months of discomfort and deprivation, with no chance of ever finding the planet. Even if the planet still sailed between the stars the weapons would undoubtedly have vanished long ago. But the ship still existed, so it *was* possible, at least in theory. Of course, in fact . . . Still, facing the hardships of an expedition would be better than sitting in a soft chair in a warm room checking the account books of merchants dead two billion years.

Impossible to find the planet anyway, and probably no more likely that he could inspire an expedition. But he had nothing to lose by trying—and nothing to gain but temporary freedom from his labors. For that matter, even the hour he could spend failing to convince the Head of Archaeology would be an hour off from the maddeningly dull work. He looked at his translation and the original, smiled, and shrugged.

He spent the next fifteen minutes planning his presentation, working himself into a mood of genuine excitement and enthusiasm, and then he telephoned the main office.

The secretary answered and Lawrence told her guardedly that he must see Dr. Skinner as soon as possible. A secretary in an Archaeology Department is rarely faced with urgency and is not psychologically equipped to handle it efficiently. Flustered, she offered to put Dr. Skinner on the screen. Lawrence said, "Never mind. I'll be right down. Tell him I've found something he should know about."

He disconnected, patted the original and translation notes into a neat bundle, and moved to the door. It zipped open, and closed behind him.

Up the shaft he went, all the way to the top level, through the outer office to the inner, paused and looked intently at the secretary. "Is he alone?"

She nodded and touched a button. The door to the sanctum slid back silently and Lawrence entered.

Dr. Skinner was a slender and nervous man, secretly un-

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sure of his own abilities and qualifications for the post he filled. He was always open to any idea for which he could claim credit, especially if it was one he didn't fully understand himself.

Lawrence set the papers firmly on the desk before his superior, placed a hand on either side of them, and leaned forward.

"I've just come across something of the utmost importance," he said intently. "Look."

Dr. Skinner's eyes obediently tracked the paragraph indicated by the moving forefinger. He finished and looked up blankly.

"Of course you see what a find this is, sir!" said Lawrence. "A direct lead to a whole store of carefully preserved artifacts, probably including communications and power sources, and surely including clues to the XXX planet of origin. This could be an even greater discovery than the ship—and the credit would all come to Terra U.S.C." He paused, waiting for Dr. Skinner to generate a comment.

The man behind the desk looked intelligent and interested, but somewhat skeptical. It was an expression he excelled in. "But do you seriously believe you could identify the body referred to here?"

"I think it can be found, sir. We have the charts from the ship and their translations are readily available. If we could get access to the Master Computer, we could have an orbit calculation run and know where it is within a light-year sphere."

"Excellent. I'm pleased to see you thought it out before coming to me with the idea. Yes, this could be quite a feather in our caps—and you know, young man, with allotment time approaching, something like this could impress the trustees with the quality of our department." He thought for a moment. "Time on the Master Computer is difficult to get. I wonder if I could get through to the President. His authorization would surely give us higher priority; we might even be able to fit in some time this month." He reached for the telephone.

They were ushered into the office of the President of the University with the quiet ceremony of two minor ministers being granted an audience with a consciously democratic

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king. The secretary did not quite bow as she walked backwards out of the room, but somehow she gave the impression of worshipful deference.

The royal throne was behind a polished natural-wood desk that was not quite large enough for a game of tennis. As the two archaeologists stood in The Presence, the small gray-haired man looked up with a remarkably human smile. "Good afternoon, Tom—Lawrence. I hear you have something of massive importance you want me to sign. Can you describe it in thirty seconds?"

Dr. Skinner spoke. "Edwards, here, has been translating some of the *Star-Walker* papers. He has found definite evidence of the existence of a large store of heavy weapons of the XXX civilization. We need time on the Master Computer to locate the cache. I have examined his materials and am personally convinced of the validity of his data. I would like to mount an expedition to retrieve any of the artifacts left at this site."

"Heavy weapons? What do we know of their methods of warfare?"

"Very little, sir," said Lawrence. "But their technological level was well beyond ours."

The President looked at Dr. Skinner. "Do you think we could learn from these weapons? Could we use them?"

"Probably, sir. Apparently the XXX were not completely alien to us; we have been able to operate some of the equipment found on the ship."

The President frowned, and spoke slowly. "The political situation is worsening. In another year Terra and her immediate colonies may be involved in a war. These weapons could do far more than expand our knowledge of a vanished race—they could help save our own. Tell me, Dr. Skinner, do you read the newssheets?"

"On occasion, sir."

"Then I needn't explain the basic problem between Terra and the Old Colonies. But even the news the public gets is better than what I hear. The O.C.s appear to have a very real military capacity and they may have licked the logistics of support with some new warp drive—an improvement on our own. If that information was let out on the

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wires there could be panic. Suppose we found these weapons—or suppose we let such be known, regardless of the facts. The Old Colonies might be deterred long enough for the statesmen to patch up our differences. Dr. Skinner, you may have found more than an historical prize; you may have found yourself a footnote in history.”

Lawrence sat in silence. He really seemed to have started something; he wasn't entirely sure he liked it. An hour or so off from work was fine, but he didn't crave public attention, especially a footnote as an historical character. But he was gradually, against his own will, starting to believe in this lost trove of power—and worse; he had moments in which he almost accepted that Dr. Skinner was responsible for the discovery. And that bothered him.

The President was on the phone now, calling Geneva. He was one of a few hundred people in the world who could place a direct call to the Chairman of Terra Security Council. There was a minute's wait.

“Hello, Piotr? Clark here. Are we on a shielded line?”

The Chairman's reply was inaudible.

“Good. I have something of the utmost importance that my archaeology department came up with. I think you should see it.”

Lawrence leaned back and rested his eyes on the view-mural on the side wall. It showed a delicate Martian city as viewed from the top of the tallest tower; he wondered idly what other scenes it had on file.

“Yes, I realize it will probably be impossible to find the body, but I intend to give it a try. At the very least, it could be of tremendous propaganda value. Of course we must maintain maximum security on this whole matter. . . . Yes, of course. . . . Absolutely. I agree completely. . . . Good. Thank you, I will. . . . Of course. Be glad to. Very well. Thank you, Piotr.” He broke the connection and turned to his visitors.

“The Chairman is interested. He wants a report with all expediency on the estimated location of I.B. 7348-F. You are cleared with priority Red/One for the Master Computer. You may have access to it as soon as your program is prepared. Send two copies to me and I will see that the Chair-

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man gets one. He has placed me temporarily in charge of the project. Good day, gentlemen; this service will be referred to—obliquely—in your next summaries. I scarcely need remind you that our entire conversation must be considered most secret. Now, to work.”

They returned to Dr. Skinner's office and summoned a programming assistant who was simply told they wanted to find a certain I.B. that had appeared in the XXX charts. “How long will it take?”

The girl sniffed. “I can program that in two minutes. Those charts were all fed into the astronomical bank over a year ago.”

“Fine,” said Dr. Skinner. “Do so.”

While she did the head of the archaeology department contacted the computer section. “This is Dr. Skinner. I have a Red/One priority for an astronomical prediction. When can I get the machine?”

“The big one's tied up right now; she should come free in about two hours. Can you wait?”

“Yes.”

“Have your program ready on the wire by 1730—we've got a lot of people waiting. By the way . . . what's so important about an a.p.?”

Dr. Skinner disconnected without answering as the girl handed him a sheet of paper and said, “There it is. Shall I put it on tape for you?”

“Yes, thank you.” And she was gone.

Lawrence glanced at his watch. Three hours since he had left his comfortable cubicle. Well, he'd hoped for something to alleviate his boredom, and he certainly had it. But he felt he had lost control of things somewhere along the line, the way things were snowballing. It couldn't be possible that there might actually *be* an expedition in search of this planet—it couldn't be possible that *he* might be expected to take part in it. It just couldn't. . . .

The program tape and 1730 came and the computer started on the question on which everything hung. *Where is I.B. # 7348-F?*

The program was still running when Lawrence went to his

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quarters for the night. It was still running when he came in the next morning.

He was unable to work. What if they *could* find the thing? What if *he* had to go there? Oh Lord! What if Skinner was put in charge?

His phone signaled. He acknowledged and Dr. Skinner looked out of the plate. "The program will be coming off in a couple of minutes. Start up here and we'll discuss the results."

Lawrence slid into the chair a moment after the line from the computer came to life. "Calculations from given orbital characteristics indicate that the body in question will have a free orbit life of approximately 638 million years. At the end of that period it will come under influence of star ref. no. G₀ 35688 and either fall into closed orbit or merge with star. End."

He felt a surge of hope. It must have fallen into the sun. Dr. Skinner was flipping rapidly through a star catalogue on his desk reference screen. He stopped and read. "G₀ 35688—seven planets in the ecliptic." There was something strangely like emotion in his voice as he finished, ". . . and one in a roughly circular orbit inclined at 43.2° to the ecliptic."

Lawrence distinctly felt his stomach collapse in upon itself and heard his heart stop.

Dr. Skinner's voice went on: "Planet three, called Marmion; orbital radius averages 100 million miles, about two-thirds Earth diameter, atmosphere breathable, inhabited. Inhabited? Well, it's been there about a billion and a half years. That's long enough. Oh, here we are. Life forms—oh my! A group of Old Colonists, dropped there about 2250, rediscovered in 3223." He stopped the scan. "Well. You and I are the only men in the universe who know the secret of that planet."

Lawrence privately wished there were only half as many, but he grinned foolishly and nodded.

"Now to inform the President. He'll be quite pleased to let the Chairman worry about what to do with the Old Colonists on the planet. We may not be able to mount a full expedition. I suppose it's just as well; I have far too many things to take care of here. Lawrence," he said, suddenly on a first-name informality, "I know how much you've

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wanted to lead an expedition. I'm sure that with my recommendation the President will give you the assignment. After all, the XXX is your field."

Lawrence smiled eagerly, and felt like crying.

II

LAWRENCE DID NOT sleep well that night. He spent the first hour lying still and consciously relaxing, then he gave up. He spent the next three hours trying to convince himself there would be no expedition. Even if there was, they wouldn't want him. The two hours after that he planned an escape from the University. He spent the last two hours considering suicide.

And then it was time to get up and report to the President's office where they would participate in full solidograph hook-up with a meeting of the Terran Security Council. He dressed formally, ate lightly, and arrived early. The secretary ushered him into the office with a moderately awed air. He watched the technicians checking out their equipment until the President and Dr. Skinner arrived.

The view-mural had been temporarily converted to act as the display for the solido signal and the pickups were set to either side of the screen. The three men sat facing it as it lit up; suddenly they were looking out at the Council Chamber from seats on the speaker's platform.

They were introduced and the President rose to address the assembly. He described the translation of the notice, including some background information on the XXX for those present who weren't up on archaeology, concluding with the

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statement that the University had located the planet and desired official permission and backing to mount an expedition.

Dr. Skinner was introduced. He spoke vaguely on the technological level of the XXX, and pointed to Lawrence Edwards as "our expert on the race."

The representative from Klopstokia rose. "What did you call them?"

"XXX," said Dr. Skinner.

"Why?"

Dr. Skinner beckoned to Lawrence, who rose and came forward. He found the microphone and spoke. "Well, when we started translating the books we had very little to go on. What saved us was a big reference book, sort of a Handbook of Physical Science. We found a periodic table and lists of lots of compounds, all of which were described. And we found an equivalent of an unabridged dictionary and enough other material that we got a good start on the language. Places where the context indicated they were referring to themselves as a race, they used three small symbols, simple and identical. These symbols so far have appeared nowhere else in the literature. One of the transcribers copied them as XXX. Until we find relics of their spoken language and can link it with their script, this has come into general usage." He stepped backward and found his chair.

Debate began. The council had already been made aware of the situation on Marmion, but individuals reacted to it differently. Several of the members felt it would be in poor taste to try to get the weapons away from the Old Colonists who had a legal right to them; many more felt it would be in worse taste to risk the O.C.s discovering them and using them against Terra. There were grave doubts all around as to the welcome an expedition would receive. The final decision in the matter was to request the government of Marmion to allow a party to land and explore. If refused, the Chairman should make his own decision and take what steps he saw fit.

The Chairman thanked the Council for their expression of confidence, thanked the others for their presence, and assured them they would be informed, "As soon as a decision

has been reached." The men acknowledged and the connection was terminated. Suddenly they were back in the President's office.

There was a man standing just inside the door, behind them and to their left. He uncoiled himself from the door-frame and stepped lightly toward them. The President rose as he spoke.

"Good morning, young man. I was told to expect you. If you know the proper greeting . . ."

"I was sent to inform you that a decision has been reached."

"Very good. Now would you explain to my startled colleagues?"

"I'm Alexander Alodian, from Council Security Command. The Chairman made his decision last night and sent me to inform you of it. He predicted every step of what would happen today in the Council—and I must say it was interesting to watch it unfold just as he described it to me. But his decision—do you mind if I sit down? I was standing through most of the debate, and I'm not a politician. Thanks. His decision, based on this prediction, was to go ahead and mount a very small and highly secret expedition. He knows of it, my boss and I, and now you three. Unless this room is wired or my cover has failed, no one else knows. And if you two gentlemen don't mind, I would prefer to place a block on your knowledge of it before we leave."

Lawrence gaped. Alexander Alodian was a little taller than he was, a little thinner, but not much. He had innocent brown eyes and a boyish grin, but he had a very efficient air about him. The friendly eyes turned his way, and Alexander stuck out a hand. "Hi. You're Lawrence Edwards. You and I'll be doing an awful lot of traveling together in the next little while. You're an expert on the XXX and I'm an expert on coming out of awkward situations with a whole skin. We'll both be learning a lot from each other."

"You . . . sort of imply we'll be joint leaders of the expedition."

"I do? I haven't made myself clear, I guess. Sorry. See, *we* are the expedition. And *you* are the leader. I'm just the gun-bearer. We'll be shipped onto Marmion as harmless tourists and then take off for our goal."

"Oh," said Lawrence, faintly.

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Dr. Skinner asked, "How will the two of you smuggle the weapons *out* again? They could be concealed anywhere on—or in—the planet. How will you find them in the first place?"

Alexander grinned modestly and waved a restraining hand. "Sorry, I'm kind of superstitious. Large numbers of people make me nervous, especially when they know my secrets. Let's just say it's being taken care of. My boss and I know; Mr. Edwards will know when he needs to. That's already two more than I'm really comfortable about."

Lawrence decided he liked this casual, friendly man, and would hate to see anything happen to him—especially since anything that happened to Alexander Alodian from now on would probably also happen to Lawrence Edwards.

Alexander was apparently interested in terminating the conversation. He rose to his feet and said, "If you will pardon us, there are a number of things I'll have to discuss with my partner. Lawrence—er, do you have a nickname?"

"No."

"Ever done much traveling—not as a tourist, but just moving around seeing places?"

"No."

"Mmm-hmm. You may have a nickname before this is over. There's nothing like doing things to earn a nickname. But look—we have a lot of learning to do. If you gentlemen will excuse us . . ."

Lawrence automatically rose and followed him to the door, turning to nod to Dr. Skinner and the President as he left.

They passed through the outer office together and Lawrence found himself in the lead as they reached the down-shaft. He looked back. Alexander said, "I'm a stranger here. Where can we go that's quiet and reasonably private?"

"My quarters, I guess."

"Lead the way."

They took the shaft down thirty levels, past ground level into the residential area, then mounted a public rail car, deserted here in the middle of the morning. Alexander kept up an idle chatter about Scott City—he claimed Antarctica was the only country on Terra he didn't know well; Lawrence saw no reason to disbelieve him.

When they arrived, Alexander asked to use the telescreen.

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He called the baggage section at the landing field and asked to have his bags sent. "What's this location?" Lawrence told him, he relayed it to the clerk, managed to thank both of them simultaneously, and disconnected.

"While we're waiting," he began, sitting down, "let me give you a little background, then you do the same for me. In the couple days we have before everything is ready, I'll need to learn a little about the XXX, while you'll need to learn some of the tricks of my trade. Have you ever handled a beamer? I didn't think so. You'll learn. Do you know any forms of self-defense?"

"I know a little karitsu, but I haven't been practicing. . . ."

Alexander suddenly launched himself at Lawrence, elbows tight to his sides and hands extended. Lawrence found himself instinctively falling sideways and kicking out, then found his foot caught. There were a pair of hands at his throat. He broke the grip, twisting one wrist so his attacker flopped over. But the other somehow faded from his grasp and was suddenly standing about six feet away, arms out in a gesture of peace.

Lawrence rose from the floor and glared at him suspiciously. Alexander laughed.

"I may not have so much to teach you after all. You had a good instructor and your reflexes are all there. One thing I noticed—don't have this fear reaction I noticed when somebody attacks you. It slowed you down just a fraction. When you've been in a few serious fights, it won't worry you any more. You can take care of yourself—you just aren't aware of it yet."

"Serious fights? But . . . I thought we were just going to sneak in and take a quick look for some clues to where the weapons might be hidden and then sneak out again. I'm not a fighter."

"Yes, you are—or would be if you had to." Alexander's eye had a sort of twinkle hidden in it. Lawrence couldn't tell whether he was serious or not as he added, "And you may get to like it, too."

This was appalling. What kind of madman had he fallen in with? Or—the possibility seemed even worse—might he be correct?

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"What other things do you know? Any weapons you can handle?"

"I'm a pretty fair pistol shot, and I used to fence. . . ." Lawrence eyed him cautiously, half-expecting him to draw a revolver or produce an *épée* from some concealed pocket. But Alexander had resumed his seat.

"Better and better," he said. "If you can handle a pistol you can use a beamer. Fencing is a very good thing to know—sharpens the eye, strengthens the body; best thing in the world for reflexes. It builds nerve, too, when you play it without protection. Or so I'm told. Never had time to take it up, myself. Say, maybe you could show me how to hold the thing, teach me a few basic moves."

"Gladly," Lawrence said, somewhat to his own surprise, "if you'll show me how you got out of that wrist-hold I had on you."

"Done!" said his partner, as the door announced the arrival of a set of luggage.

Alexander brought an assortment of bags into the room, set them out, and began opening them. One actually had clothing in it. The others looked like a careful sampling of the best parts of a sporting goods store, an electronics shop and a medical supply house, plus some items Lawrence could not positively identify as to nature or possible use.

For the next few hours they went through each case. Alexander would take each item, name it, explain its purpose, demonstrate if possible, and hand it to Lawrence, who would look it over carefully, fiddle with it, name it, and repeat its purpose and method of employment in different words. They would stay on each item as long as he wished. It was four hours before they finished the last case and Alexander said, "Any questions?"

Lawrence thought carefully. He couldn't remember every item he'd handled, but he knew what was there. He knew that he would recognize and be able to operate everything. "No questions."

"Good. End of instruction. What do you think?"

"Frankly, I'm amazed. You could blow up half a city or stand off a small army while tending to your own wounds. You could live for a year in the woods or on an ice cap, meanwhile radioing across the galaxy for help and knocking

off the search planes sent by the enemy. All you lack is a portable girl, else you could probably establish a permanent colony wherever you ended up."

Alexander laughed. "We learn to live off the country for a few items. If they supplied us with *everything*, we'd lose our resourcefulness."

They finished packing the luggage and then, remembering lunch, adjourned to the cafeteria two levels up. Here their conversation was mostly restricted to "Salt, please," and similar phrases of immediate necessity.

When they returned to the apartment, the teacher-student roles were reversed as Lawrence gave Alexander a basic instruction in the XXX. He distilled the content of his upper division lectures on the subject to a high concentration of essentials and put it across as fast as he thought his pupil could handle it. Alexander took it all in, passing a quick quiz afterwards. By then it was time for supper.

In the next two days they alternated between repeated studies of the equipment in the suitcases, lectures on the XXX, physical workouts, karitsu practice, roadwork up and down the corridors of the lower levels, and fencing lessons. Lawrence collapsed exhausted each night, finding no trouble at all sleeping. His basic unhappiness with the situation was slowly being replaced with a strange sort of reckless bravado that was quite new to him—and he liked it.

Well, he said to himself in the few seconds between the time his head touched the pillow and the time sleep came, you wanted something more exciting than translating business accounts. . . .

Then Alexander was called to the President's phone for a highly secret call. When he returned, he trotted in the door with his eyes shining.

"Pack!" he ordered. "We catch the midnight special for Mariana Spaceport and the Herculon Cluster, where we change for Marmion! You'll have a set of bags like mine waiting in your name at the Spaceport, so bring only one suitcase. You can transfer the contents. They've found what they think is probably our cache."

"Huh? How?"

"Supposed to be a trade secret, but a robot scout with a mass detector you wouldn't believe found it from orbit. It's

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a huge mass, buried under a range of mountains in some kind of protective shield. The tape from the scout was translated by three men—one read the latitude, one read the longitude, and one read the depth. Each told me his information, and the tape has been erased. How's *that* for security?"

"Beautiful," said Lawrence doubtfully. "But what if something happens to you?"

Alexander shrugged. "Nothing will. I'm bulletproof. Of course, in case we meet somebody who doesn't know that, my boss has the same information available. You could contact him and carry on. Now let's get moving. Have any pretty lab assistants you want to say goodbye to? No? A shame."

They hustled around picking things up and locking the suitcases. Lawrence went through his closet, sweeping out the two suits, ten shirts, four pairs of pants and traveling cloak, and folding them in his dusty trunk. On top of them he threw all his socks and linens and his second pair of boots. He looked at his small library and made a few quick choices—half a dozen spools went into the side pockets. He returned to the living room to hear Alexander on the phone.

"Thank you so much, Dr. Skinner. We do appreciate it," he said, and disconnected.

"What was that?"

"Skinny has agreed to hold your apartment for you and keep the place clean while you're gone. He'll also handle your classes."

"Those poor kids," said Lawrence involuntarily.

Alexander shrugged. "Got everything?"

"Nowhere near, but most of what I can carry. Oh! Camera okay?"

"You're a tourist, aren't you?"

He ducked back into his room, found a few more things he couldn't get along without, slung on his camera, closed the small trunk and carried it into the living room.

There was a small transport car at the door for the luggage. They rode it down corridors, up shafts, around corners, and suddenly found themselves in the lower levels of the

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Scott City rocket port. The time was 2330. They checked the luggage and walked up to the passenger level.

It seemed like such a prosaic beginning for a real adventure, Lawrence thought. They were catching a regular intercontinental rocket along with crowds of businessmen, tourists and vacationers. They could make the round trip and be back in eight hours. But they weren't going to. They would be on a warp-ship in eight hours; possibly, by that time, in warp, bound for Herculon. It was perfectly simple to accept, Lawrence decided. But he might have more trouble accepting it if he really *believed* it. . . . Everything had just happened too fast. He needed a chance to go off for a few days and think it all over, and then . . .

Their boarding number was called. Alexander handed him a ticket and said, "We're off. Look around carefully, because I can promise you that you will not be the same person when you come back."

Lawrence stared at him in horror.

"Sorry, friend. But it's a necessary thing about danger—it changes a person. Usually for the better, though; take encouragement from that. Make the look quick, now—but remember, you wouldn't recognize yourself coming back."

"But I don't want . . ."

"No choice. That's another thing about danger. Now, into that lift or they'll leave without us."

Then they were in their padded couches; the rocket was lifting. As they cleared the city Lawrence got a glimpse of the ice cap gleaming below and falling, falling away.

And then they were gone.

III

FOUR HOURS LATER they grounded at Mariana Spaceport. It was about noon and Lawrence's time sense vanished entirely. He had slept on the rocket and was still groggy, but

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the sight of people bright, alert, and working on lunches inspired his appetite. He left Alexander to take care of the luggage and went to keep an appointment with a food ration. His partner joined him a few minutes later.

"Your set of luggage is now on board. No trouble at all—our workers here do this sort of thing regularly. Here's your handcase; it has a few little things in it you don't want to be too far away from. That looks good; what's it called?"

His mouth full, Lawrence pointed it out on the menu; Alexander punched up the combination. In the moments before it arrived, he said, "We have about an hour to kill. Clearances have already been taken care of; we can go on board at the last minute. But we can't leave the passenger building. If there's anything you want to buy, the shopping area is on level three. You can order things delivered to your room on the ship—the *C. P. Snow*, B-619. We have adjoining."

While he ate, Lawrence finished and headed for the shops. He was examining the displays in front of the men's furnishings section when he felt something touching his side. He moved away automatically; it followed. He looked down and saw the tip of a small beamer projecting from a traveling cloak carried over a man's arm. The man was somewhere behind him.

A soft polite voice said, "Please do not move again unless directed to do so, Mr. Edwards. You are of no value to either of us dead."

Alexander and his tests, thought Lawrence with a scowl. *Well, all right, I'll play his silly game.* He planted his left foot and buckled his right knee, grabbing for the beamer as he fell. He connected with a wrist, heard a sharp buzz, and his foot felt very hot for a moment. For a fraction of a second he felt vague anger that Alexander should have left the safety lock off when playing games, then something solid hit him on the shoulder and he saw red. This was entirely too much! He swung up from the pavement, a long right uppercut that connected somewhere near the left ear. His opponent stumbled back. Lawrence saw with shock that it was a short, pale man—a total stranger.

His instant impulse was to apologize for the blow, then he remembered this man had, a moment ago, threatened his

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life. He leaped forward, but the stranger faded back and Lawrence nearly landed flat on his stomach. He managed to gather his feet under him before he hit, but sprawled across the floor anyway. A moment later he heard a girl cry out and a man grunt in pain. Scrambling to his feet again, he saw his attacker, doubled over, some ten feet away. A slender girl in green travel-togs had apparently just planted a boot in his anatomy and was presently belaboring him about the head and shoulder with a large heavy handbag. Lawrence hurried over to her, saying, "Stop that, please! Don't kill him—we need to talk to him!"

She looked up from her work, and paused reluctantly. "He tried to kill you," she stated bluntly. "I saw the whole thing."

"Yes, ma'am. I was aware of his intentions," said Lawrence untruthfully. "It's his motives I'm interested in now."

He noticed a few people looking out of doorways but they seemed to prefer anonymity to involvement. No one appeared to offer assistance or interference.

Alexander came hurrying up, pausing to pick up the beamer the man had dropped. He held it up and looked at Lawrence accusingly. "What have you been doing? Can't I leave you alone for a minute?"

"Just a minor case of armed assault. Nothing to worry about." He was still flushed with excitement; it seemed only fitting to be able to say something supremely casual. He almost didn't notice the girl's eyes gleaming with interest as he said it, and then he forgot the look as Alexander took over.

"Okay, tell me what happened."

"I was looking in the window there and this gentleman came upon me with a gun. I started to take him down, he got away, and this young lady stopped him."

"That was good of her, but we have a ship to catch in a few minutes and we can't leave your playmate here in the corridor clutching himself. Lady," he added, looking at the girl, "you fight dirty."

She smiled proudly and said, "My daddy taught me."

Alexander looked at her doubtfully, then went off to a corner, pulled out his pocket communicator and muttered into it for a minute. Meanwhile, Lawrence looked down at the other man, then up at the girl. "I'm glad you happened

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to be on my side," he said. "Tell me, whom do I have the honor of having my life saved by?"

"My name is Ginger Collins," she said. "And I didn't save your life, I just stopped him from getting away. If you'd caught him, you might have hurt him."

"You didn't do so badly yourself, Miss Collins."

"He said you were boarding a ship in a few minutes," she said, gesturing toward a doorway opposite where Alexander appeared to be holding earnest converse with his cigarette case. "Are you on the *C.P. Snow*?"

"As a matter of fact, we are. To Herculon."

"How *nice*! That's where I'm going, too. I guess I'd better stay around in case you need help again."

"Oh, but that really won't be necessary. This man must have mistaken me for somebody else."

She smiled slyly. "Oh no. I can tell a real adventurer when I see one. You live in constant peril," she went on dramatically. "Secrets of interstellar importance teem within your brain. Hosts of enemy agents are after your knowledge. You hop from planet to planet, outwitting them at every turn. Well," she added, looking down, "almost every turn."

Lawrence paled at the suggestion. "No, it's not like that at all! Honestly!" Then he thought about it for a fraction of a second and realized with horror that he actually *did* have a secret of interstellar importance, that he knew of one probable enemy agent who now lay on the floor at his feet, and that in a few more minutes he would indeed be hopping from planet to planet. "Not at all like that," he repeated feebly.

"Can you tell me your name?" Ginger asked. "Or are you traveling under cover?"

"I'm Lawrence Edwards," he said. "Lawrence T. Edwards. And I'm *not* an adventurer. I'm just an archaeologist."

Alexander came back. "Lawrence, we've got to get on board. The local office will have a couple of men here in a minute to pick up Rover. I'll hold him down till they arrive. You get on board. Stand in the door if you have to so they don't leave without me, but I'll be right along."

Lawrence nodded, and took off. A moment later he realized Ginger was still beside him, trotting toward the passenger ramp. "Now look . . ." he began, but she interrupted.

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"What's wrong? I'm booked on that ship too," she chattered away. "Local office will have a couple of men here,' huh? You're a secret agent. And your name is Lawrence. I'll bet they call you Lance."

"They don't, really." He was starting to feel desperate. The girl was attractive, but obviously insane. She could be another enemy agent! A perfect way to gain his confidence would be to appear to save his life. He looked at her quickly. She was trotting along beside him, looking straight ahead, grinning gaily. She was awfully pretty for an enemy agent—the last one had been sort of homely. But that could still be a trick. . . .

He let her up the ramp ahead of him and showed his boarding pass to the officer at the hatchway. "My friend will be along in a moment," he said.

"He'd better be," said the officer. "That hatch closes in ninety-five seconds, regardless of who is in or out. Now get in there, *sir*, and the stewardess will find your cabin."

Lawrence stalled, standing just inside the door, shifting from foot to foot. The seconds ticked off. Sixty—forty-five—thirty—footsteps pounded up the ramp and Alexander appeared, moderately winded. He flipped out his boarding pass and slipped through the hatch with fifteen seconds to spare. "All taken care of," he said. "They'll let us know what they find out."

The stewardess politely seized them by their sleeves and hustled them down a corridor, down a lift, and down another corridor to B-619 and B-621. "Your rooms, gentlemen. Keys on the tables. Into your bunks, please—we lift in four minutes." And she was gone.

Lawrence piled into his bunk and heard the cabin speaker announce, "Minus three minutes. We will be under five g's acceleration for a period of ten minutes, then normal gravity will return. Do not attempt to leave your bunks until normal gravity returns. Cabin doors will be locked automatically during acceleration. Time signals will be given during the acceleration period." There was a very long pause, then, "Minus two minutes. We will be under five g's acceleration. . . ." The message repeated. After "Minus one minute," the seconds were counted backwards, all the way to zero.

The ship lifted. Lawrence relaxed and let himself sink into

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the bunk. The speaker continued to call off time on the plus side; after an hour or so it reached "plus ten minutes." Lawrence bounced up from the bunk; his stomach flipped over once. The speaker said, "We are now accelerating at one gravity. You may leave your quarters. The main viewing room is now open."

Lawrence hurried eagerly to the viewing room, some ten minutes travel away, hoping for a sight of the moon. But the Earth still filled much of the field; the moon was a small disk, far on the other side of the planet.

He watched it until Alexander spoke from behind him. "I thought I'd find you here. Ever been off-planet before?"

"Oh, sure. Three times. Once out of the system, in fact the Sirius IX diggings. Did my Master's work there."

Alexander took the next seat and leaned back. "I got my degree in Political Science. Practical. My paper is still classified—it described how four other agents and I took over the government of a small military dictatorship near Capella. That was my first big assignment—and I didn't really do much on it but take notes and carry the box lunches. Oh, by the way; did it occur to you that this girl you've picked up might also be an agent? She's on the ship, isn't she?"

"Yes, it did. And she is. How did you know?"

"She took off in the same direction you did to get aboard. Did you get her name? I can check her background in half an hour."

"Ginger Collins. About 5 feet 7 inches, 120 pounds. Brown hair, green eyes. About 25 years old."

Alexander looked at him with mild surprise. "Notice any birthmarks or scars when you searched her?"

Lawrence scowled. "Archaeologists learn to observe and record data," he said. He sank back into his chair, staring at the Earth.

Alexander looked at the view, then at him. He thought better of saying whatever he was about to say, and departed.

After a while Lawrence rose and started out, thinking vaguely of the ship's bar, when something went "Hsst!" He looked around, and saw a figure beckoning from a nearby doorway. He started toward it, cautiously. Ginger stuck her head out and whispered loudly, "It's okay—only me."

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"What do you want—"

"Shh! I'm not supposed to be on this deck. I'm in third class. Hi, Lance! You're listed under your right name. That's brilliant. They'll never suspect."

"But honestly, I'm—"

"Did your partner get aboard all right? I wanted to stay and wait, but the stewardess caught me."

"Oh, yes, he—"

"Good. Let's go to your cabin."

Lawrence decided the time had come to be firm. "Now look here, Miss Collins. This absolutely must stop. I will not—"

"Please call me Ginger."

"Ginger. I will not . . . No! *Miss Collins*, I will not put up with your following me around. I am not a secret agent. I am an archaeologist, on a perfectly innocent vacation. That man back at the spaceport must have mistaken me for someone else. Please, now, go back to your cabin."

Her eyes shone. "You're in danger and you're afraid I'll be hurt if I stay near you. Don't worry. They won't strike unless you're alone. I know their type. Archaeologist, huh? Who founded the first Egyptian dynasty, and where?"

"Uhh . . . Menes, at Buto."

"Well, you're up on your subject, but you picked the wrong person to bluff. I took two years in Archaeology at U.C.B.H."

"Look, Miss Col—"

"Ginger."

"Look, Ginger. I was on my way to the bar when you assaulted me. Perhaps I can convince you . . ."

Lawrence was standing in the open doorway, visible from the lounge. Ginger was behind the door. Suddenly Alexander appeared on the opposite side of the door, unaware of her presence, and addressed Lawrence. "I got identification on the girl. Just graduated from U.C.B.H. in Xenosociology, after majoring in History, Archaeology, Math, and Drama. Took her six years. Father Michael, architect; mother Helen, artist. Member of Theta Pi Beta, good record with a few exceptions. College record says she has a talent for getting into trouble and out again, but no tinge of anything criminal or political. Fencing team, swimming team, chess team. As near as we can tell, she's clean. But don't let her find out

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about our mission—the cover's apparently been blown. That guy at the spaceport was an O.C. agent, all right, with orders to get you off this ship and onto a private yacht. They went for the yacht but it had already lifted. It's a Krissman, model 12, Vega registry, which means nothing, name of *Boomerang*. We'd better watch out for it; they're going to be trying for you again."

Lawrence had been making gestures and faces at Alexander, trying to curtail his cheerful revelations, without result. As he finished, Ginger stepped out from behind the door, eyes aflame.

"I'm so pleased you consider me clean," she said in a voice that would not have melted an icicle. "Since your cover has apparently been blown, perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me a little more? Just what was your cover supposed to be, anyway?"

Alexander stammered unhappily as Ginger stared daggers at him and Lawrence. Finally Lawrence said, "Alexander, uh, Ginger and I were about to go down to the bar. Would you care to join us in a private booth where we can try to explain this whole thing?"

He nodded, and sighed. "Well, that did it. Overconfidence. I'd better turn in my badge and beamer and go back to tapping pipes."

Later, in a dimly lit and very private booth, Ginger was saying, "But I never connected the names. I thought the Edwards who translated the XXX script was an old man. You mean you're really the same?"

"I am."

"Do you mind if I call you Lance anyway?"

"Well, no one ever has before. But if you like it . . ."

"What about me?" came from across the table.

"You're a real secret agent. You should change your name every day. Besides, there aren't any really good nicknames for Alexander." She addressed herself to Lawrence again. "You won't tell me why you're going to Herculon, will you?"

"No we can't. Really secret."

"You're a nice girl," added Alexander. "We'd hate to see you get hurt. After all, this is dangerous."

She shrugged docilely. "In that case, goodbye. I'll stay away from you the rest of the trip." She scowled at Lawrence.

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"You should be ashamed of yourself," she said. "Leading girls on, making them think you're dangerous and exciting, and all the time you're just a college professor. You're just a phony—that's all! I'll bet you never did anything brave in your life!" She jumped up and left the table.

The two men stared after her in silence. Neither one spoke as they finished their drinks.

The silence was broken sometime later by a loudspeaker saying, "We will enter warp in fifteen minutes. Please go to your cabins."

As they walked back, Lawrence said, "Do you suppose we'll ever see her again?"

"I hope not," said Alexander fervently. "But I suggest a block on this memory segment."

"I don't think that'll be necessary. I think she can be trusted."

"Let's hope so."

The ship warped and the viewscreen stayed dark in the main salon for two days. Then they came out and the screen was ablaze with light. Eighteen hours of deceleration ahead lay Herculon Interstellar Spaceport.

True to her word, Ginger was not seen after the conference in the bar. At first Lawrence continued to expect her to appear from behind curtains or through doors; he later discovered he was disappointed when she didn't. But he convinced himself they were well rid of her.

They touched down at Herculon and found they had a day to wait before catching the ship to Marmion. Alexander disappeared to check their visas; he told Lawrence to go ahead and browse around the shops if he wanted. "But be careful who you stand close to."

Lawrence was waiting for a ground car to take him into the shopping area when he felt something against his side. He sighed. A voice murmured, "Mr. Edwards, you will not escape us this—hunh!"

He looked and saw a thin, pale man slumped between two darker men in light suits. One of them touched his hat and said, "Don't worry about your friend here. We'll take care of him."

"Thank you," Lawrence started to say, but they were gone. He took the next vacant car, feeling much safer, and

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arrived in the midst of the commercial complex a few minutes later. He dismounted and stopped in a doorway, looking back as the next car pulled in. A slender girl with long brown hair and green travel togs stepped out and looked around. Lawrence shrank back.

Suddenly the doorway was blocked by two large men. They stepped forward, grabbing both his arms as he tried to defend himself, and broke something under his nose. He gasped, and felt his head starting to swell. It got bigger and bigger until it burst painlessly, and he remembered no more.

IV

LIGHT GRADUALLY BEGAN TO intrude itself through his eyelids, faintly red. Something soft was pressing against his back; after considering the sensation he decided he was on a bed. Kinesthesia sent vague information to the effect that his legs were straight and his right arm was across his chest. There was no sound around him until he concentrated a little and detected the faint hush of an air-conditioning system. He breathed, feeling comfortably cool air with no particular odor.

He didn't hurt, except for an extreme dryness in the back of his throat. He moved his lips very slightly and found they were stuck together. They felt as dry as his throat. He disliked the sensation and spent an indefinite length of time thinking what could be done about it.

Something to drink. Water, probably. Now how would he go about getting water? The first step would involve reestablishing control over his body. *The lips moved*, he thought.

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He moved them again to make sure. They were still uncomfortable.

Now he was becoming aware of another discomfort, intense and dull, low in his abdomen. Bladder. He swore mentally and tried to move an arm. It worked. He rolled it off his chest and slowly began to flex the fingers.

When they seemed to function smoothly he started on the leg muscles, tensing and relaxing them. No trouble there—his body seemed to be operating properly. He took a deep breath and attacked the final big step.

He opened his eyes, slowly and carefully. It wasn't easy; the lids seemed as stuck together as his lips. But they parted and focused.

The ceiling was light colored and close. Illumination was coming in from the sides. He turned his head slightly to locate the source. It seemed to come from slots along the top edges of the two side walls. He swung his gaze down and saw another wall beyond the foot of the bed where he lay. It was a pale green and there was a door in it.

A twinge of internal pressure spurred his exertions and he slightly shifted his weight. The bed gave easily; he found there were no bedclothes over him. He twisted and rolled to a position on his side, where his feet could swing around.

The floor was not dangerously far away; gritting his teeth, he got his hands under him and pushed himself upright.

The effort didn't do him much good. His head buzzed and darkness pressed into the edges of his vision for a few seconds while his muscles threatened to go on strike. He stayed up, however, and when he had recovered from the momentary effects of his sudden verticality, he put a little weight on his feet.

They held up reasonably well, so he dared to lever himself to a standing position.

It took both hands bracing on the bed to hold himself balanced—the effort of lifting one foot to take a step was just a little beyond him. The wall wasn't far away, though. He pushed off from the bed, keeping his knees locked, and fell sideways, catching himself against the wall.

Bracing against the green metallic surface, he moved slowly along toward the nearest door, which was slightly ajar. He

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leaned against the doorframe and breathed deeply. The metal was cold against his naked body. He worked his way around the corner into a little room where he found a sink with two water taps, a plastic glass, a slightly cramped stall shower, and the other appurtenances he needed. He used the latter first, then moved to the sink.

He filled the glass under the right-hand tap and took a mouthful. It was sweet, cold, and most wonderfully wet. He held it in his mouth a while, feeling it soak into the dessicated tissues, then sluiced it about and spat it out. His mouth tasted as if his teeth were rotting.

The rinse helped. The next mouthful he allowed to trickle slowly down his throat, absorbed on the way by the cells in the lining of his esophagus. He could almost feel them expanding back to their normal size.

He carefully finished the glass of water, refilled it, and drank again at a more normal rate. He could remember nothing in his life that had tasted so good.

He did not feel especially hungry. If he had been asleep as long as his thirst indicated, he should have had a raging appetite.

His immediate bodily needs satisfied and strength oozing back into his enfeebled limbs, his mind began to function again. Starting from the question of how long he had been asleep, he began to ask how he came to be here. For that matter, where was *here*? He'd been on a ship to Herculon No, he'd gotten to Herculon. He'd gone off on his own, seen Ginger, and while he was avoiding her . . .

He'd been kidnapped; that was it. He nodded. Simple problem. But no, that didn't really answer the question of where he was.

He tottered to the other door and tried the latch. It was locked, and he was in no condition to try breaking it down just at the moment. In fact, he was still a little tired. Maybe he could work out this mere problem better in bed. He was able to move about now without holding onto the wall; this was enough progress for one time. He fell back onto the bed and straightened out with his hands under his head. In a few seconds he was fast asleep.

When he woke up, there was a tray of food beside the bed. He sat up carefully and looked around for a few seconds

before he identified the source of the odors that had awakened him; then he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and set to work assuaging his new found hunger.

As he ate, he took a long mental look at his situation and tried to establish a theory of some kind to answer the main question: that of his location—and all that implied.

The last thing he remembered was being braced in a doorway by the two large men—and worrying about being kidnapped. . . . Then the whole sequence of events came back to him. The weapons cache, the expedition, Alexander, and especially Ginger. Had *she* betrayed him? He picked up another sandwich and shook his head.

Ginger was too nice a girl to do something like that, even if she was a little silly. Besides, her record was as complete as the C.S.C. could make it and showed not a hint of connection with the Old Colonist powers. On the other hand, they would be unlikely to use anyone who could be spotted as an agent of theirs, either *prima facie* or by inspection. He considered this through a bowl of soup.

He decided to suspend consideration of how he had gotten here in favor of the question of just where "here" was. The kidnapping had obviously been successful; he was probably tucked safely away inside some O.C. ship bound for the other side of civilization. He wouldn't be at all surprised to find it was the same yacht that had been at Mariana Spaceport on Terra. What was the name of it? Alexander had told him, but now he couldn't remember.

If it was a private ship . . . He looked at the silver fork in his hand, and smiled. An ornate letter "B" was set in the handle. He put it down and looked at the pillow on the bed. In flowing script of the same color but different texture was embroidered the name *BOOMERANG*. He remembered Alexander's words.

"It's a Krissman, model 12, Vega registry, which means nothing, name of *Boomerang*," the C.S.C. agent had said. Krissman was one of the O.C. companies, and Lawrence knew little about them. The furnishings in his cell were luxurious enough, especially to one used to the relatively spartan atmosphere of a cubicle in the lower levels of the University complex, and thus indicated that the ship which contained

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them would probably be of an equally palatial design—with powerful engines and sensitive equipment to match.

Not that engines mattered on long runs—either you were in warp or you weren't; the oldest bucket of bolts made the same time as the newest, sleekest ship of the line. The difference came only in the shorter, interplanetary hauls.

Lawrence felt better now. Both his hunger and a fair portion of his curiosity had been satisfied. All he needed now was something to occupy his time. He looked around the room. There were no tables and only one chair. No reading matter, no controls for artificial entertainment, nothing but the blank walls and the indirect, unobtrusive lighting. He was cast back upon his own thoughts. Undistracted, they naturally, turned to methods of escape.

The food had come in. Presumably it would be replaced eventually—though probably not for a while, since this meal had been most satisfying. The natural thing would be to attack whoever brought the next meal and get out the same way they came in. But once he was out of this room he might not be able to go very far. He seriously doubted his ability to take over control of the ship, turn it around and guide it back to wherever Alexander waited for him. For that matter he would prefer to go all the way back home and forget this whole unpleasant business.

But idle thoughts were getting him nowhere. He sighed. It probably wouldn't be worth the effort of escaping just yet. After all, the place was comfortable and meals were regular—at least, he hoped they would prove so. Better to wait until they touched down on an O.C. planet somewhere; then escape and try to get in touch with the Terran undercover agents on that planet. He didn't doubt that there would be such agents—the O.C.s were the only threat that faced Terra and his people had the manpower and capability of keeping close watch on them. Therefore they would be doing so.

The Old Colonists took a lot of watching. Each planet was fiercely independent, but the natives of each were just as fiercely clannish. Few of the planets exported or imported anything except for a few luxury items. Almost all were xenophobic to a remarkable degree, only their pride compelling them to admit aliens to their soil at all. Each O.C.

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planet was unique in art forms, styles of architecture and religion, yet their languages were mostly similar, as were their forms of government and basic philosophies.

The reasons for the differences and similarities lay over a thousand years in the past. The warp-drive was discovered in the middle of the 22nd Century and man spread out from Terra to the stars. One third of the population of the overcrowded planet streamed into space and out to the hundreds of new worlds that were opened for colonization. Terra had visions of an empire among the stars as her colonies became self-supporting.

Then nature reminded man that she was still master of his fate. In 2317, under circumstances that were never definitely established, a mutated virus appeared which attacked the human race. No other animals were affected. A week after its first appearance it had spread around Terra. It was isolated in medical laboratories any number of times, only to claim the lives of the researchers who worked on it. Terran civilization collapsed before either cures or preventatives were found. Every human being on Earth contracted the disease; less than five percent recovered. In the ten years it took the plague to run its course, no ships left Terra. Some had taken off, plague carriers, during the first week. A few arrived at their destinations, and the planets they touched died like the Earth. The ships that landed on Terra never took off again.

In 2325, it was estimated that the population of the planet Earth was about fifteen million. The survivors were immune to the plague, but not to starvation or to the hundreds of other diseases that arose from the past to attack them again. Long-dead diphtheria, forgotten smallpox, legendary bubonic fever followed. Many had been immunized, but many more had not. There were a few hundred doctors left in the world, most of them in the American continent and in Europe; the story of any one of them would be an heroic epic of courage and strength. But civilization was gone. No ships lifted from Terra for over eight hundred years.

The survivors returned to the soil. Cities were looted for machinery that would still operate on inexhaustible solar power. Self-controlling nuclear power stations kept electricity

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flowing through the wires; radios worked; small ships could still cross the oceans.

There was no Dark Age. Literacy was maintained and democratic governments gradually re-formed on local levels; some communication was maintained between nations and continents. When equipment began to wear out, some could be replaced and some couldn't. Then a substitute was found or they went without. But knowledge was retained, in the books, in the films, and on the tapes. And the race worked constantly at surviving, advancing and multiplying for thirty generations.

But the colonies knew nothing of this. There was no sub-etheric communication; since the ships traveled infinitely faster than radio waves, no reason had been found for any other message-carrying medium. And then there were no more ships.

Few of the colonies were fully self-supporting by this time; most were still dependent on regular support from Terra for the bare necessities of existence, living from supply ship to supply ship. But the next supply ship never came.

Those who survived were the toughest, the smartest, the bravest and the strongest of those who had left Terra. Many colonies perished entirely; others were reduced to a handful of survivors. They survived by adapting to the planet, cultivating native foods, improvising shelter. But they survived. Inbred for strength and stubbornness, they survived with a legacy of betrayal by their mother planet. In their oral tradition and in their literature, the theme of betrayal and deferred revenge appeared again and again. Terra had left them to die; they would not forget.

When Terra struggled to her feet again, she found herself cut off from the rest of the universe. It takes a large and efficiently functioning technology to fuel and launch an interstellar ship, even if the ship itself is sitting ready in its dock. There was no organization, no trained personnel, no fuel. The facilities for producing more were there, but no one was competent to operate them. And by the time new generations had been raised and the population multiplied many times, the facilities had deteriorated. Space had to be conquered again, the path made only slightly easier because of those who had followed it before.

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The *Ad Astra* lifted from Terra in 3172, the first star ship of the new generation. They found a surviving colony on the fourth system they touched, and were nearly slaughtered when they identified themselves. They took refuge in their ship and told the crowd of the plague that had struck Terra and their history since then. An uneasy truce was arranged and the ship left for the next colony.

The same scene was repeated many times. They found about one colony in three still functioning. Each spoke a form of basic Terran; each wrote the same alphabet; each had the same hatred of Terra. Most were close-knit and highly democratic. There were a few exceptions to all averages. Some colonies were bitterly divided between warring clans, none of which remembered any reason for their conflict except that it had always been so. A few had completely forgotten Terra and bore no animosity to her representatives—but very few.

The *Ad Astra* returned to Terra and the world government began to take steps to heal the wounds of their colonies. But the colonies themselves rejected offers of aid in the strongest possible terms. They could forgive their desertion, but they could not forget it. And so it remained.

Star travel had now been carried on regularly for nearly three hundred years. The great hiatus was already a part of history, remembered like the Roman Empire, but considered as dispassionately by all but a few monomaniacal old scholars—on Terra.

On the Old Colonist planets, it was still very real. They knew Terra was friendly, that the desertion was not wilful before. Terra would not desert them again. The mother world was no longer necessary to their existence. They knew there was no reason for a feeling of animosity. But a thousand years of tradition die hard.

Only the fact that their xenophobia extended itself to *all* aliens had prevented the O.C.s from banding together and finding a valid reason to attack and destroy Terra. But now intelligence agents on half a hundred major planets reported stirrings of unity. A fleet was being constructed and armed; a peaceful—and unmilitary—Terra was justifiably worried. A small section of the hopes of the world had been riding on the Edwards expedition to Marmion. And the Edwards ex-

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pedition himself was beginning to lose the few hopes he had.

He knew he could not escape at the present. He remembered all the stories he had seen where the hero escaped from the villains by some perfectly simple ruse which always seemed reasonable enough. He only hoped he would be as adept as applying what was still purely theoretical knowledge when the time came. There was likely to be only one opportunity.

Until that presented itself, he could only wait. He lay back on the bunk and composed his thoughts, casting around for something of value to occupy them through the indefinite length of time until the ship's arrival.

He was making mental notes toward a thesis on verb forms in the XXX language when a soft electronic sound somewhere brought him fully awake and listening. A loud-speaker had been turned on somewhere in the room; presumably someone was about to address him. This also implied that there would be a concealed microphone to transmit his responses—possibly a vision pickup. He tried to cover himself with the pillow.

"Mr. Edwards?" asked a voice from nowhere.

Even though he had been expecting it, Lawrence jumped slightly. "Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Rimb Coralsen. I regret the discomfort and inconvenience this must cause you, but I fear you cannot be released from your room for some little time. You will wish to know where you are. . . ."

"I already know that," said Lawrence coldly. "I am on board the yacht *Boomerang*, a Krissman model 12, of Vegan registry. And you must be aware that I am a Terran citizen, and that you are committing a serious crime by abducting me and detaining me against my will."

There was silence around him. The casual display of knowledge about the ship he was on must have hit home. Lawrence remembered the fear of Terrans which was common among even the best educated O.C.s—a fear which was trained into the youngest children in nursery stories.

A Terran child learns to fear ogres, evil magicians, witches, vampires and demons; when he grows up, he learns they are only imaginary and fears no more. An O.C. child learns to fear Terrans; when he grows up, he sees them at a

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distance and occasionally meets them. Of course they seem smiling, friendly and helpful—and it is just at this time, he remembers, that they are most dangerous. He can study history and he can learn that Terrans are just as other men, both good and bad, with no dreadful powers. But his heart-beat still speeds up a trifle when one looks at him, and his hands begin to sweat.

Lawrence knew that his captor's hands were probably sweating now; the thought gave him a certain perverse pleasure.

There was still no sound from the concealed speaker, so he said, more politely, "I understand your desire to keep me under lock and key, Mist-Rimb." He suddenly decided to use the other's first name. If this was his yacht, it implied a fairly high socio-economic level in whatever his culture was, and informality was very rarely a concomitant to such position. "But surely you realize that I could hardly leave this ship in warp."

Coralsen had probably already thought of that and had rationalized his action one way or another, scarcely aware that he was afraid this lone, unarmed Terran would overpower him.

"You are merely being restricted for your own protection, Mr. Edwards. My crew has not the understanding which I have. They might attack you out of some foolish fear of their lives. It would be a matter of great personal embarrassment to me were you to be harmed before you arrived at your destination."

"I quite understand," said Lawrence. "I feel much the same way."

"Did you find your meal to your taste?"

Lawrence paused. No sense in being too agreeable. He feigned a bored hesitancy. "It was acceptable; no doubt the best you could do within the limits of such a small galley."

Coralsen started to say something, but didn't. Before he could organize his thoughts, Lawrence went on. "I am finding this confinement rather boring; if you could possibly supply me with some books and a viewer, I would certainly appreciate it."

There was a polite agreement from the other end. "I will have them placed in your room shortly. The *Boomer-*

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ang boasts quite a fine library; do you have any preferences as to subject matter?"

Lawrence thought. "Light fiction—and a history of the planet to which we are bound. If you dare." The last three words had slipped out almost unbidden, as he thought them. He regretted them, not wanting to antagonize his host unnecessarily, but they had been said.

He worried for the few seconds it took Coralsen to answer. The answer took no notice of the gibe. "Certainly, Mr. Edwards. A child's history of Nidever will serve to pass the few days before we arrive. I doubt if you will have the opportunity to see any of the scenic wonders while you are a guest of the government, so I will take the liberty of including a set of solidographs of our most beautiful areas. I hope you will enjoy them. And if there is anything else you wish, please don't hesitate to call on me."

"Thank you," said Lawrence.

There was no further answer.

V

HE WAS AWAKENED BY the landing deceleration of the ship. He had no idea of the time, except that the cabin was darkened for a sleeping period. He spent some time after touchdown expecting a door to open, but what seemed like an hour passed without a sound. He was unable to stay awake and dozed fitfully.

Sometime later the lights came on again. As he rolled over and focused his eyes the door slid open to frame two uniformed men with drawn guns. He looked up at them, then closed his eyes and rolled over again.

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"Get up, you," one of them said.

"Are you planning to parade me through the streets naked?" Lawrence asked without changing position. "If not, I wish you'd get me some clothes."

He heard a faint hiss as the door slid closed again, and permitted himself a smile.

He was sitting up on the edge of the bed, having completed a quick shower during the delay, when the door hissed open again and a bundle of clothing was tossed at him. The same two guards stood in the doorway and waited while he dressed. He wished there had been some way of removing a few days' growth of stubble from his cheeks and chin; it gave him rather a villainous look. On the other hand, unaesthetic though it might be, it could have a useful psychological effect on his captors.

He had spent much time asking himself what Alexander would be doing in such a situation. His only decision was to try to keep the enemy as much off balance and on the defensive as possible. Always take the initiative and assume command in any situation. It sounded easy—now would be his chance to see if it could be done.

He fastened his shirt, slipped into the low shoes they had given him, and stepped toward the door. The guards gave back as he came through. Instead of waiting for them to direct him, he turned right and marched up the corridor a pace ahead. Apparently the guess of direction had been correct; they fell in behind, in step.

Unfortunately, at the next crossing corridor his confidence wavered. He paused a moment, looking in both directions, and the guards came up to bracket him. One took each elbow and they hustled him down the passage to the left. A short distance away they came to a hatch and one tapped a panel with his free hand. The hatch slid back into the wall revealing a small airlock, big enough for two.

One guard stepped in without a word and the lock cycled. Thirty seconds later it opened again and Lawrence's guard pushed him in, then joined him.

Lawrence toyed with the idea of overpowering him, switching clothes and making a break while the outside guard was confused, but by the time he had fully formulated the plan,

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the outer hatch sighed open and daylight splattered in, striking dazzling sparks off the bright metal.

He squinted against the glare and tried to remember how long it had been since raw natural light had penetrated his pupils. Just before taking the Terran shuttle? No, that had been midnight. He thought back. He'd been up to the surface and looked through a panel onto the ice cap about a month before—but that had been filtered through plastic. He seldom saw the sun in the University, and the two spaceports he had seen in the last week had been entirely enclosed.

His mind was entirely occupied by this as his two guards marched him quickly across the hot surface of the landing field toward a building which he saw without noticing, low and gray, a few hundred yards away. A ground car sat in the shadow of the building, an occasional wisp of smoke rising from its exhaust pipe and a door open on his side.

He was put into the back seat with a guard on either side and a heavy transparent shield between himself and the driver's seat. He was aware of these details and equally aware there was little he could do at the moment to bother his captors, other than ignore them. He returned to his thoughts.

He was rather shocked to realize he had not seen unfiltered sunlight and breathed really fresh air for almost a year. His last vacation had taken him to the wilderness area in the midst of the central European Alps. Since then, his environment had been more or less artificial. Lawrence shook his head slightly. He had never considered himself an outdoors man, but he hated to admit he was such a stranger to nature.

The worst part of it was, he doubted if he was going to get much of a chance to enjoy the great outdoors on this planet either. They were not likely to let anything as dangerous as a Terran wander around loose. He'd probably be in a jail cell most of his stay—which, he suddenly realized, could turn out to be the rest of his life. Not that that was likely to be too long, he reflected. A month, two weeks—less if they became convinced he would be of no help to them.

A cold lump congealed in his stomach and a slightly bitter taste arose at the back of his throat. He was helpless, and they quite probably would not mind killing him at all.

He took a deep breath and swallowed. *Like dogs or horses*, he thought. *If you let them know you're scared, you're dead. Only at least these people can't smell it.* He swallowed again, and took a solid, if trembling, grip on his nerves. Out of the corner of his eye he could see both the guards watching him cautiously. *Remember*, he told himself, *you're scared of them with reason, but they're scared of you without reason, which gives you the edge. Unless they get too scared and panic and kill you.* It would simply be a matter of keeping them worried, but not too worried. He settled back and looked out the windows, trying to enjoy the ride.

Considering what was waiting for him, the ride didn't last nearly long enough. There had been no conversation within the vehicle during the trip. When they stopped before another large gray building it took no words to communicate the idea that he was expected to get out and accompany his guards up the wide stone steps.

He tried to get out in front of them again, but it didn't work this time. They had him by both elbows all the way from the street through the big metal doors. They passed a few silent and deserted corridors and into a small barely furnished room.

A desk squatted there with a man behind it. The guards put Lawrence down in a chair and spoke to the man. Their speech sounded similar to Basic, but with odd constructions, a comparative paucity of cognates and a very slurred accent. They were probably counting on the prisoner's unfamiliarity with their dialect to conceal the details of the conversation.

But a training in languages can come in handy. Lawrence's mind had absorbed not only the content of the simple history books he had been given, but also the language they were written in. Working from what he could follow, with the help of the pictures and context and a great deal of study, he had in the few days on board the *Boomerang* developed a moderately good vocabulary and a grasp of the fairly simple grammar. He was well aware that this was not a knowledge to be lightly displayed; he kept his face expressionless as the three men discussed him quite uncomplimentarily in the third person. At times it was difficult, but he concentrated

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on studying the accent. If he got a chance to escape, he would need to be able to disappear into the population.

Escape plans were always good to occupy the mind in dull moments. He doubted that his accent would be able to fool a native without a great deal of study and a native tutor—which he was unlikely to find. But he could probably pass himself off as an O.C. from another system; he wouldn't be welcomed as warmly as another Nideverian, but they'd be less likely to slit his throat on general principles.

He became aware he was being addressed in Basic.

"Edwards, you understand you are a prisoner, completely helpless, unable to communicate with your allies."

He nodded.

The other man, short, balding, rather pleasant looking in fact, sat on the edge of the desk near him, casually swinging a leg. "My name is Scaphio," he said. "You'll probably be glad to know that I don't share the general prejudice against Terrans; I spent some time on your planet when I was a boy." He paused expectantly.

Lawrence nodded again and waited for him to continue.

"Now, this current business is really in very bad form. We know all about it, of course—there are many highly placed Terrans who sympathize with our desire to be free of interference. I'm sure you can understand our worry about your government getting all the power those artifacts represent. All we want is to be left alone. *My* government believes, perhaps unfairly, that this power could be used against us and our allies in an effort to prevent unification. If all the Old Colonies banded together, it would present a threat to Terran supremacy. So I quite appreciate your unwillingness to see it carried through. But you understand also that we have no desire to see another power with the ability to destroy us. This is why we cannot allow you to complete your raid. It's quite simple."

"It's even simpler than that," said Lawrence. "Terra has no intention of using the XXX weapons against you. One single planet could not possibly sustain an offensive against half a thousand—it would take all the power those weapons represent just to be able to defend ourselves against potential attack."

Scaphio shook his head. "You have no idea how much power

that cache contains. There could be a thousand of something capable of shattering a star. The weapons should be destroyed before they can be used in war again."

"But think of the knowledge they represent," said Lawrence, shocked at the thought of this trove going up in a radioactive flare. "We could learn so much about the XXX from studying these things. There's certain to be communications devices—and we're sure they had a much more efficient star drive than we have. Remember, we still have no idea why they disappeared. If we could learn something about that, we could know whether it might happen to us, and have an idea of whether we could do anything about it if it does. It might be some disease or another intelligent race, or—or anything! But we have to *know*."

"There's one possible answer," Scaphio said slowly. "If we sent a team in along with you and everything was kept quite open. You could study the mechanisms and anything else you found of interest. When you had extracted all the information—and shared it with us—the weapons would be destroyed."

Lawrence smiled slightly. "You mentioned the general prejudice of the Old Colonists against Terrans. Do you really think your people would be willing to cooperate on something like that—to trust us?"

Scaphio considered this and frowned. "I can only speak for this planet's government. We would trust the Terrans—if they would trust us. What about *your* government?"

"I can hardly speak for them," said Lawrence. "But they scarcely want war. Neither does yours. Officially, both sides could conclude a treaty easily. But what about the men who would have to be involved? Do you honestly think fifty O.C. soldiers and fifty Terrans could work together on something this important without trying to grab everything for their own side? Even knowing that such an attempt could set off the war everybody has been denying?"

Scaphio didn't seem to notice. His leg stopped swinging and his face was more sober. At last he said, with a sigh, "You're probably right. Most of my fellows are less than rational on the subject; I suppose the same goes for your Terrans. You and I, as rational men, can see where this must lead—both sides afraid of each other; eventually some

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demagogue is going to convince one or the other that the enemy must be destroyed. Fear breeds fear, and fear breeds hate. This is why those weapons cannot be allowed to exist. Whoever gets them will end up using them."

"No, we won't," said Lawrence positively. "The Terran government wants them only as insurance against O.C. attack."

"How can you be sure? For that matter, I can't be sure that the news of the weapons themselves, spreading around the rest of the Old Colonies, will not set off an attack on the theory that it would be better to destroy Terra before she finishes developing the potential to destroy us. Most unfortunate, but dangerously likely."

Lawrence said nothing. He had just realized, with a slight shock, that he couldn't be sure either. Maybe the Terran Security Council *would* use the weapons against the O.C.s. Even if they didn't intend to now do so, perhaps the temptations would be too great. Or the O.C.s might attack and the weapons would have to be used. Either way they would be the decisive factor.

He looked down at his hands. He couldn't think clearly; everything had happened too fast. What was he doing here, anyway? He wasn't anybody in particular; he couldn't make decisions like this. He had no right to even try. Something hard was forming under his breastbone; it interfered with his breathing. He swallowed hard, but it didn't go away. When he tried to say something, it took three attempts to get a sound out.

"I . . . Look here, I can't take a position for Terra's government. I don't know the first thing about what's going on in the rest of the galaxy—I'm an archaeologist, not a politician." His voice shook slightly. "I didn't ask to be mixed up in this mess."

"But you are now and nothing can be done about it," said Scaphio. "Your only reasonable action is cooperation. Tell us what we want to know. After the few weeks it'll take to check out your answers, we'll take you home again. It's very simple."

Lawrence looked up at him. "But I don't know any answers."

"You know more than you give yourself credit for," said

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Scaphio comfortingly. "You know where the weapons cache is, don't you?"

"No, as a matter of fact."

"You know what planet it's on; don't deny it. You translated the memorandum."

He paused, watching Lawrence's reaction closely and coldly. "If you are considering the heroic course of denial and stubbornness, you should be reminded of the therapies which have been developed for the extraction of information, whether it is consciously available or not. Regardless of whether its holder wishes to share it."

Lawrence scarcely heard him. None of his training had prepared him to face pain, dismemberment or death with stoicism; all three now appeared to be almost upon him. He was wrapped in his own fear as his mind chased itself around and around the walls of his dilemma. If the weapons were recovered and his people got them, there would be a war which Terra would probably win. If the O.C.s got them, there would be a war anyway, and the Terrans would probably lose. If the weapons were destroyed, one of the most valuable sources of knowledge in the universe would be lost forever. But nobody was likely to destroy them.

He could die a hero without revealing whatever they wanted to know, but it was far more likely that they would get it out of him before he died. He had no illusions about his courage; the idea of suffering seemed most unpleasant. So did the idea of interstellar war. Millions of people would suffer. But at the moment his own suffering was also important. But could he live with himself, knowing that he had betrayed his home world?

Scaphio's voice came softly again. "Mister Edwards, your answer. Where are the weapons?"

"I don't know," he whispered.

"Yes you do. Where were you going from Marmion? We know all about that. From Herculon to Marmion—and then where?"

Lawrence looked up, surprised. They already knew? "Nowhere. Marmion is the planet. But I don't know where the cache is—they told me it'd be safer if I didn't know until the right time." He managed a feeble twitch of a smile. "I guess they were right."

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Scaphio shook his head. "Mr. Edwards, you can't expect us to believe that a highly trained operative of the C.S.C. would go directly to such an important goal where he knew he would be watched at all times. No, Marmion had to be merely a stopping-off place—a location where you could transfer to another ship, leaving your pursuit far behind, and go ahead to your real destination. Now, where is it?"

"But . . ." Fear rose up and began to pluck at his throat. "But it is Marmion!" They weren't going to believe him. He didn't have a chance left—he'd tried the truth, but they wouldn't accept it.

"Lawrence," Scaphio said softly. "I have tried to be most patient with you. Your goal could not have been Marmion. I could have believed that you do not know the exact location of the cache, but I cannot believe you do not know the planet. As a result, your previous statement is now also in doubt. I will ask one more time—*are you willing to cooperate?*" His voice grew suddenly hard on the last five words; Lawrence felt dizzy as his heart pounded fiercely.

"Wait," he gasped. "Please—I don't feel well. I . . ." His thoughts raced ahead in this deadly maze, examining turns and routes, finding only dead ends. He temporized desperately. "I can't think. Look, you can't expect a man to betray his planet just like that."

Unexpectedly Scaphio nodded. "You're right, Mr. Edwards; forgive me for thinking so little of you." He spoke to the two guards, who had stood motionless against the wall during the interrogation. Lawrence could almost follow him, word by word. "Take him to—(something)—for a day or two. Get the tapes running and leave him."

Scaphio turned back to him and said, in Basic, "You will be given a place to rest and think. I regret that your room is directly adjacent to our intensive interrogation chambers, but I'm sure you won't be bothered. The walls are quite thick." He stood up. "Remember my offer—cooperate, and you will be returned unharmed to Terra. Refuse, and we will get our answers sooner or later anyway. You have a great deal to lose and little to win."

He gestured to the guards, who stepped forward. Lawrence tried to stand, but his knees buckled and he fell back against the arm of the chair. The two men caught him by the el-

bows and, half supporting him, marched him out of the room. He threw a quick despairing glance over his shoulder to see Scaphio stand, stretch, and yawn, before the door closed.

They went down a cold, bare-walled corridor, around a corner and down a flight of steps. The guards supported Lawrence when he stumbled. Nidever might be a major O.C. planet, but apparently they still didn't have any better way of getting from level to level than this silly series of platforms.

Then through another door, into a small room similar to the one on the floor above, but with only a bed and a chair. He was directed inside and one guard followed him. The door closed, the guard took the chair, and Lawrence sat on the bed.

His custodian didn't seem inclined to conversation and Lawrence couldn't think of anything to say anyway. The man probably understood Basic Terran—it was a *lingua franca* among all the O.C. planets—but he would probably refuse to use it with a Terran. Lawrence leaned back on the bed and started thinking about escape again. He had trouble concentrating.

Suddenly the silence was filled with a faint, distant sound—the sound of a man screaming in agony. It was muffled, but the terror and torture in the voice came through the walls clearly.

Lawrence shot upright, shaking. The guard had not moved; he sat with his booted feet thrust out in front of him and a bored look on his face. The scream sounded again, this time trailing off into gasping sobs which were lost in the masonry. Lawrence found himself listening hard. He could just barely hear voices. He couldn't distinguish the words, but they were curt and harsh. They stopped, and after a few seconds a low moaning sound began: the voice of a man who has suffered beyond endurance and begs for the luxury of a quick death.

Lawrence lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. But he couldn't close his ears. He found to his horror that with his eyes closed he could see the wretched man, blood oozing from infected gashes, livid welts over his bare skin, shattered hands twitching feebly at scabs over charred areas of

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flesh. He felt sick and opened his eyes again. He had to get away; it was no longer a question of betrayal, but of survival.

Scaphio hadn't believed him about Marmion. They were going to put him in that other room and do things to him that he couldn't even think about. He gasped in sympathetic agony as the faint distant voice began to scream again.

His head spun as he stood up.

The guard looked up as Lawrence staggered toward him. "Water," he choked out. "I feel sick."

The guard considered him suspiciously, then rose cautiously and started toward the door. He tapped on a panel in an irregular pattern and a moment later it opened. The other guard looked in, and the first said something to him. The other nodded and opened the door all the way.

The corridor was empty. As he passed between the two guards, with a strength born of panic Lawrence stiff-armed the left one in the stomach and hit the right one in the jaw before the man could react. The sudden burst of activity from their previously apathetic prisoner took them both by surprise. Unconsciousness prevented reaction.

Leaving the door ajar, Lawrence managed to wrestle both men back into the room. He pulled the door almost closed and hit the guards on the side of the neck in such a way that it probably wouldn't kill them. His knees were shaking so badly he could scarcely stand; his hands trembled as he went through their pockets. He stripped the clothing off the guard nearest his size and quickly changed. It seemed an hour before he could make the fastenings work—his hands felt like those of a stranger and he kept hearing footsteps outside the door.

He found what was almost certainly currency and thanked whatever powers of society there are that make money look alike the galaxy over. He stuffed all of it into the wallet he found in the trousers.

He had no idea what prices were, or what the monetary system was; but the denominations were small and there were several of each, which indicated each unit was a reasonably useful size. Only in inflated societies will a man carry notes for a million units each and then the system is on the verge of collapse. This one could be sound.

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Strange, thought Lawrence madly. One thinks of the oddest details at a time like this.

His hands had almost stopped shaking by the time he got the gray cloak fastened at his throat. Then he heard the faint and far-off scream of anguish again and his legs almost collapsed.

The door opened a crack to his touch and he looked out. The corridor was empty. Breathing like an exhausted runner, he stepped out and closed the door behind him. Ahead he could see the stairs.

The skin of his back crawled as he ascended them, expecting a shout, a hand on his shoulder, or a blaster bolt from somewhere. Then he was in the next hall; to his right a double door opened into daylight.

He straightened himself with a conscious effort and somehow managed not to break into a run as he approached the doors. Then he was through and out on a street. The sun was low in the sky; the few pedestrians who passed did not give him a second look.

He was alone; an escaped prisoner; possibly a murderer; certainly wanted; on a strange planet; in a strange city. But he was free.

VI

THE QUESTION WAS, how to stay free? The guards would either recover or be found, and sooner or later the whole planet would turn out to look for the Terran agent. The first problem was different clothing. This uniform was fine for covering an escape; it would tend to distract people

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from the man inside it. But it could shortly become a positive liability. He had money; could he risk going into some small store and buying a suit of clothes? No, he didn't know enough of the language; his accent would give him away in a moment. And he couldn't pretend to be a tourist from another O.C. planet—not while wearing this uniform.

He kept walking briskly, as if he knew where he was going. As far as he could tell no one noticed him. He scarcely observed his route, his mind busy sorting through risks, chances, possibilities, probabilities, problems and solutions.

He had to get native clothing without revealing himself to be an alien. And since he couldn't buy it . . .

He looked around and realized the sun was nearing the horizon. The atmosphere was relatively free of the industrial pollution that characterizes most primitive mechanical cultures; the light struck directly between two low buildings behind him. His shadow stretched darkly against the gold of the street; he stared along it, thinking: theft or assault?

He'd have to go inside a shop for simple theft, but the thought of cold-blooded assault left him terrified. Then a picture of a public bath of some kind flitted through his mind—without clothes one man looked very much like another.

In a matter of moments the plan formed in his head. He wouldn't have to fight or talk to anyone, or do anything except pick up a set of clothing and walk out. There would still be a description of the stolen outfit, but clad normally he could walk into a cheap store and buy a suit which would be untraceable. He mentally shook hands with himself, and then stopped to wonder where he would find a public bath, if indeed Nidever had such things. How he would get into one without talking to anyone? And what sort of protection were other people's clothes given?

He had little choice in the matter. He could not face any more violence, and sneak thievery was a lot safer than open. He'd have to solve the various problems as they came up.

His days with the Child's History of Nidever had not been wasted; though he might barely be able to speak the local patois, their signs were readily legible. He was also

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able to figure out much of the planet's cultural pattern, and was reasonably confident of his ability to fit into the acceptable O.C. mold.

Still too unsure of himself to ask for directions, he wandered the darkening streets until an illuminated sign offered warmth, ease and relaxation in infrared radiation, steam, or water. After a furtive glance up and down, he ducked inside.

A large muscular man behind a wooden counter scarcely glanced at him as he handed him a wire basket and mumbled something about a door. There was only one besides the entrance; Lawrence went through it and found himself in a stone-floored room lined with benches. Here and there rested similar wire baskets containing neatly folded clothing. Better than he could have hoped; simply pick out one that looked promising, put it on, and walk out.

No, something told him; that would be too easy. The man at the desk would probably notice if he came out right away. Also there had to be some system of payment; he might have to pay something when he left. It would be much better to start playing the role of innocent tourist as far as possible right away. All he really had to do was get rid of this uniform.

He peeled down to the skin and found the floor remarkably warm to his bare feet. Some kind of internal heating was apparently piped through it. He began to realize just how dirty and ragged he felt and thought with a jolt how much luck had been with him when he came in that the attendant had not noticed a guardsman with several days' stubble of beard.

He had shed the uniform, but what to do now with the money? He frowned, then decided to leave them together for the time being. It could always be transferred to his new outfit before he left. As for now, as long as he was here why not have the full treatment? If they did personal grooming, he might as well be shaved and have his hair cut short at the same time. Although the latter was not necessary, it would confuse the search.

As he padded into the next room, he heard voices. Wisps of steam came through one of the several doors which opened off it and a placard on the wall listed services available

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with prices. *Why shave?* he asked himself suddenly. *Have that stubble trimmed; it'll start looking as if it belongs there.* He smiled. With a very short haircut—the style on many planets—and the beginnings of a beard, he could easily pass unrecognized. At least he hoped so.

Two and a half hours later a new man stepped out onto the street and inhaled the evening air. His hair was a dark stubble on his head; a neatly shaped beard was a similar texture on his chin. He wore a suit of moderately good quality; the shoes were tight, but their warmth when he had picked them up had told him that their owner had but recently stepped out of them, and would therefore probably be unaware of their absence for some time.

Lawrence had very decently left the contents of the suit's pockets on the bench; in the moments between customers leaving and entering, he took the money he had borrowed from his erstwhile guards and tucked it in these same pockets.

The staff inside had been only slightly suspicious of his accent; he was soon able to convince them that he was a wealthy farmer from Sirius VII, known as Carondolet. While lounging in a tub of enervatingly hot water, he had decided on his supposed home planet for one valid reason: he actually knew the place moderately well. When his Master's work was in progress on Sirius IX, the next inner planet but one had been their only tie to civilization. He had spent much free time there.

The planet had little habitable land area and the culture there was primarily ocean-based. It was one of the few that bore no enmity for Terra; in the period after the cessation of supplies, somehow the very existence of the mother planet had been forgotten. A nomadic society had arisen from the few survivors, highly mobile and therefore inevitably independent and individualistic.

To a people with this background, the bureaucratic impedimenta of organized civilization such as passports and registration papers were utterly incomprehensible.

This trait often caused them difficulties with less liberal-minded cultures, but Carondolet had developed sea-farming to an extent where the few natives exported tremendous

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quantities of food all across the Confederation. Like wealthy eccentrics since time immemorial, their foibles were generally tolerated.

Now he had a plausible identity and an adequately passable disguise. All that remained for him to do was lose himself in the city in such a way that relative strangers could find him, while the natives could not. Not an easy problem.

What he wanted most was to find the local undercover agents of Terra. He had to get a message back to Alexander, wherever he might be. Neither was this an easy problem; the agent was certainly adept at remaining undiscovered.

Having covered several more blocks in a direction roughly diagonally away from the building at the start of his flight, Lawrence decided to stop for something to eat and drink. Inside a warm little place he exchanged some of the currency for a plate and a mug.

His appetite was only slightly impaired by the suspicious glances the waiter occasionally threw his way; when he caught one, he threw it back. There was no sense trying to hide his alienness; better to show it openly and disarm some of the antagonism. He knew his vocabulary was small and his accent atrocious. His manners were quite probably different from those used here on Nidever. He only hoped they weren't too readily recognizable as Terran. In this, at least, the anti-Terran sentiment worked for him; most of the natives would be ignorant of exactly what their enemies were like.

One man in this city would be able to spot a Terran easily. And somehow Lawrence had to make sure that he would. The Terran agent could not be found if he did not wish it; therefore he must be enticed into revealing himself. He would probably have a good knowledge of everything that went on in the colony—possibly the arrival of a Terran prisoner and his subsequent escape might not have escaped his notice. If he hadn't heard about Lawrence, he would be most difficult to attract. The slightly paranoid tendencies of the Old Colonists kept them on a constant alert for Terran agents; anyone who continued to work in their midst would have developed a fantastic amount of caution as a prerequisite to continued survival.

Lawrence had to attract this individual's attention—and

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do it without attracting the attention of the local authorities who would be after him with everything at their disposal. Including, he suddenly realized, quite possibly a counterfeit Terran agent.

It came to him how far out of his depth he was; he felt a momentary surge of the blind panic that had overcome him earlier. He squeezed his eyes tight shut and gripped the edge of the table until his hands hurt. After a moment it passed.

He had no right to be in this situation! Alexander or someone properly trained and conditioned to survive under stress should be here—not him. He had never had to survive in his life. He'd never before been outside of the comfortable protective environment he was brought up in.

He breathed deeply through his nose and opened his eyes again. He glanced around the room. None of the other customers seemed to have noticed his momentary lapse. The waiter was nowhere in sight.

His life had been wrapped about with the security of technological civilization. From childhood, his adult years within the University, he had learned everything except what he needed most—self-reliance.

An intimate knowledge of cultures and languages dead three thousand or three billion years was useless to him. He could have conversed with a Roman citizen, allowing for difficulties in the accent, but he could not have spent one night in the streets of Rome and come out alive. His specialty was theory, not practice.

Two choices faced him: he could survive, or he could succumb. There were a great number of ways to do the latter; be captured; surrender; be turned in by a native; or simply be killed in an alley by some local who hated aliens more than most. And there was only one way to do the former: stay alive until either he found the local Terran agent or the local Terran agent found him.

No, there was another possibility. Maybe he could get off the planet by himself. Either buy a ticket back to Herkulon or stow away on a ship. Or get a job on a freighter But he'd need identification of some kind for that, certainly.

One thing he did know; survival was preferable to succumbing. This decision improved his mood slightly. At least

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he knew what he wanted to do, even if he wasn't quite sure yet how to go about it.

He finished his meal and left.

The streets were fairly well-lit, but seemed dim to his Terran eyes, quite unused to natural darkness. Overhead, stars were visible. He walked along staring up at them until he almost bumped into the wall of a building. The shock brought him back to himself and he looked around, wondering where he was.

By this time he was thoroughly lost. He became aware of a great number of very dark shadows all about him, any one of which could conceal criminals ready to pounce on the unwary traveler. The skin of his back crawled slightly as he turned around; his ears tensed, listening for the sound of an approaching footstep.

The street was certainly no place to spend the night. Did this unfriendly city have such things as hotels? Or was everyone supposed to stay at home after dark?

He realized he had seen only a few pedestrians. Where did they all go? They couldn't all have gone home so early. Were there theaters, or private clubs, or was there an eight o'clock curfew of some kind?

Whatever the reason, a lone pedestrian could be suspect. One man alone doing something that nobody else did was always suspect. And one of the most important things he had to do was to not attract attention—especially the attention of the authorities.

But at the same time, he wanted to attract the attention of this hypothetical undercover agent the Terran Council Security Command should have planted somewhere in the city. How to come to the notice of the one while evading the others?

He decided to sleep on it. He began wandering again, this time with his eyes at street level, looking for something that might indicate sleeping quarters for rent.

There were brighter lights visible the better part of a mile away. He hurried toward them. *Civilization may have its faults*, he thought. *But it also has artificial lighting.*

His steps slowed and he breathed more easily once he was among the lights. They were somewhat dim and uninspired by Terran standards, but they were a lot more efficient than

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the stars. Stars were lovely—in their proper place, which was the view-window of a spaceship. Not filling the entire sky with nothing but a thin layer of atmosphere between you and them.

There were more people here; not crowds, but people who strode purposefully along the streets and occasionally turned into or out of various doors. There were only small signs advertising what might lie behind, not always illuminated. A few were so forward as to have flashing lights, but that was the limit of their condescension to the psychology of mass advertising. They probably depended on word-of-mouth, he decided.

Lawrence looked at every sign as he wandered along the street, ignoring and being ignored by everyone. Some two-thirds of the signs simply bore a name, apparently on the theory that everyone knew who they were and what they specialized in. Bren's; Parella's; Scroob's: all conveyed nothing to him. Clothing he understood, and marked the store to be visited on the morrow, to replace the stolen clothing with new and untraceable garments.

Then at last a sign said "Rooms." The building wasn't any larger than its neighbors and didn't promise much in the way of capacity, comfort or convenience, but there it was—shelter both from the unfriendly night and the even more unfriendly officials who must be after him by this time. He went up the three stone steps and tried the door. It was open.

The front room was comfortably furnished, but without the cold impersonality of the few hotels he had known. It looked like someone's sitting room, well-kept, but lived-in. He stopped just inside the door and looked around, shifting nervously from foot to foot.

A moment later a plump, pleasant-looking woman bustled out from the back room and greeted him warmly.

Lawrence cleared his throat and decided to try the accent again. "Uh—I'd like a room for a few days."

"That's what we're here for," she said, her warmth somewhat abated. "Don't get many off-planet visitors this far out from the center of town. Where're you from?"

"Carondolet—Sirius VII." He knew he had the number right; he used the original for the star's name. "My first

trip to Nidever; please forgive my clumsy use of your language."

She smiled. "You're doing very well. Would you like some supper before you go to bed?"

"No, thank you. I have eaten already this evening." His story seemed to have been accepted. He looked around again. "Don't I have to sign a book or something?"

"A book?" She seemed puzzled. "You mean our guest book? You can if you'd like, but most of our guests don't sign until they leave, when they make comments on our rooms. Would you like to see it? They are mostly quite favorable."

Apparently he'd gotten a word wrong, and he had no idea what the word for *register* was. He tried again. "No, a book for my name and home, so you have a . . ." What was the word for *record*? "So you know who is here, when they came, and how much money they owe."

She shook her head. "I still don't know what you mean. We know who is here because we give them their rooms. And they pay us every night—or sometimes every week."

No registers, then. That meant no records of him anywhere for the police to search. They'd spend most of their time looking at regularly registered aliens all over town before they got to him—hopefully. If not, he could always hope for a back window and a ground floor room.

"I see," he said. "How much should I pay for three nights?" The period was taken at random; it would establish him as a steady resident and shouldn't leave a large dent in his capital if he had to depart suddenly.

She named a reasonable figure, some ten times what dinner had cost. Lawrence counted it out from his wad of currency. At a fast guess that money would last him for about a week. Then he either had to find an honest source of income or turn to crime. Turn *back* to crime, he corrected himself—he'd gotten off to a bad start for a Terran, with assault and battery, flight to avoid custody, and larceny. He hoped it wouldn't have to become a habit.

She tucked the money away somewhere about her capacious person and led him through another door. "Do you have any luggage?" she asked.

Oops! That was something he hadn't thought of. His

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mind worked with a quickness lent by a surge of adrenalin. "There was confusion on the ship," he improvised glibly. "If they are unable to locate my luggage, I will be given money for new clothes and everything else within a week."

He felt pretty proud of that one—in one quite believable lie he had disposed of his luggage forever and planted an explanation for all the money he might have to steal from somewhere before his own cash—his own *stolen* cash—ran out.

She nodded understandingly and led him up a short flight of steps to an upper hall. Six doors opened off it on either side. She opened the second on the right and snapped on a light. Lawrence looked past her and saw a bed, a nightstand, a chair and a table. There didn't seem to be another door, though there was a window. An open closet stood opposite the bed.

"Where is the . . . Uh . . ." His vocabulary was lacking not only the necessary word, but also any euphemism. They proved unneeded; she understood perfectly.

"Right here," she said, opening the third door on the right. "Next to you."

"Thank you," he said. "Have you anything to read?"

She looked doubtful; he added, "I can read much better than I can speak your language."

"Well, what would you like?"

"Do you have any magazines of general interest?" He knew such were published because he had seen a sign advertising them at one place he had passed.

"Of course. There should be some beside your bed."

"In that case, I will say good night." He started into the room.

"Should we call you for breakfast?"

"What time, and is it paid for?"

"Eight o'clock. It was included in the cost of the room; if you don't want breakfast, you can have some of your money back."

Well, why not? A good breakfast was necessary to start the day off right and he might have a busy day tomorrow. "Yes, please call me."

She smiled one more time. He closed the door between them, and turned toward the bed, unfastening his shirt. He sat down and slipped off his shoes. Then he slipped them

back on again, opened the door into the hall and looked around. Deserted. He stepped over to the next door, tapped lightly, then went in.

A few minutes later, feeling refreshed and ready for bed, he came back and finished undressing. There were indeed some magazines on the stand by the bed. He leafed through them looking for a place to start expanding his vocabulary. The accent probably wouldn't be too much trouble; the language contained no severely non-Terrestrial sounds or combinations.

He settled down on the bed, which creaked slightly under his weight, and started to read.

Occasionally he heard soft footsteps passing in the hall. When they did he stopped and listened, ready to jump and run. After the first time it happened, he waited until they had passed, then rose quietly and checked the door for a lock. There was none. He braced the chair firmly against it and lay down again. Probably an unnecessary precaution, but it made him feel a little better.

He read articles on many things he did not understand, but his vocabulary swelled like a sponge. The rather simple-minded fiction gave him the very blurred beginnings of an insight into the character of the people he would be dealing with—and evading. It was not an unpleasant character, he had to admit; honest, trusting, straightforward; marred only by one flaw—the pronounced xenophobia.

There was certainly less of it on Nidever than on many O.C. planets, but it was still there. The general feeling at present seemed to be lessening as more and more of the Old Colonies discovered their basic similarities and kinships through the infinite varieties of cultural differences which had separated them for so long. And all this meant trouble for Terra.

He couldn't worry about Terra's troubles at the moment—his time was fully occupied worrying about his own. Which reminded him, as he put down the last magazine and reached for the light switch, to check that escape route.

He turned off the light, then made his way to the dim gray rectangle of the window. He pulled aside the curtains and looked out. Nothing but stars could be seen above. The sight made him feel a little chilly. Nothing could be seen

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below at all. No way of telling how far above the ground he was. But if the terrain was fairly level, as it had seemed to be, and since he hadn't come up more than about fifteen feet from the street, it seemed a safe bet that it wasn't much farther down.

He checked the window; plain glass in a sliding frame. He slid it open a little and the night breeze whispered around him. He shivered and closed it again.

Then, bare-footed and cold, he padded back across the floor to the bed, climbed in, pulled the covers up around him, and, eventually, slept.

VII

A TAP ON THE door awakened him as a voice announced breakfast. He was about to answer in Terran when awareness came back to him. He managed a nonverbal grunt of acknowledgment. *That* could have given him away, but he still seemed safe. He yawned deeply and ran his memory through the moderately incredible events of the previous day.

He didn't like being a hunted man. Any thrill of the chase, he decided, must be entirely on the side of the chasers. As the chatee, he found it to be more than lacking in emotional security and quite devoid of fun. He had been a little scared when he went to sleep; he was a lot more scared when he woke up.

He'd been in one place for several hours; if the search had continued through the night and they had looked under all the bushes in the parks, and checked over the vagrants, then they would probably start a house-to-house check of all

the places that took in tourists. They must have pictures of him; probably voice-prints, retinal patterns and EEG traces as well. For that matter, with his luck, they might have planted a small high-frequency transmitter in his stomach while he had been under sedation on the *Boomerang* and be waiting outside the door at the moment with a matching small high-frequency receiver. And guns.

Or, on the other hand, they might not be. And breakfast was, if they weren't. And it had been paid for. He weighed the odds against the payoffs and decided to go ahead. He was certainly hungry enough. Even if he was captured, they'd probably feed him.

He dressed, rinsed his mouth, and headed downstairs. There were several people sitting around the table; food was just being served. The plump woman who had met him last night greeted him and introduced the others. Lawrence, after a moment of blankness, gave his name as Rexmuger—the first name he could think of, a man he had met briefly on his short trips to Carondolet during the Sirius IX expedition. His hostess identified herself as Mrs. Munitz.

Of the other guests, most were tourists from other parts of the planet, visiting the big city for the first time, full of wide-eyed interest at the artificial lights. They appeared almost uncomfortable on paved streets.

Lawrence wondered in amazement how such a backwater planet could be one of the leaders of the growing O.C. confederation. He made his first decision of the day. Immediately after breakfast, he would find a library of some kind.

It was still fairly early when he stepped out into the street again, looking both ways for uniformed figures. Mrs. Munitz, apparently the sole staff of his present residence, had given him vague directions to a literary repository which was open to the public and indicated that he might be able to find a map of some sort there.

Her directions proved adequate. Lawrence soon found and entered a large stone building—unidentified, like most of its neighbors, but fitting his hostess' description. Inside there was an official-looking woman at a desk.

With the help of some arm-waving and a great deal of circumlocution to make up for the fact that his vocabulary

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still lacked the word for *newspaper*, Lawrence finally was handed a small pile of printed material. The woman, very perceptively, added a medium-sized dictionary to the pile and directed him to a line of semi-enclosed booths along one wall. He moved into an unoccupied space and began his studies.

The most recent newspaper was on top but the date on the front page bore no relation to any calendar he was familiar with. It could be a month old or two days—in which case, it would have nothing of his escape in it. There was no photograph of him on the front page, but, then, they might want to keep his escape a secret. Perhaps the news of a Terran at large in the city might inspire panic among the population. A cheering thought.

Lawrence looked around the main room of the library; a wall calendar caught his eye. The date it showed was one digit advanced from that on the paper. But was it morning or evening?

It took several minutes of examination to convince him it was an evening edition. The final decision was based on a small item announcing the arrival of Leading Citizen Rimb Coralsen, back from a business trip to several planets, including Terra. So the *Boomerang* had docked before the paper went to press. But he hadn't escaped until several hours later. Well, he'd just have to wait until tomorrow.

While he browsed through the newspaper and the dictionary, his thoughts returned to his biggest problem—finding the Terran agent on this planet. The library was as good a place to wait as any, and better than most; there were few locations less likely to spring to the mind of a law-enforcement official as a hiding place for a desperate and wanted criminal. Libraries, he also remembered, were often favored by the spies of fiction as contact sites—possibly because furtive whispering would tend to pass unnoticed.

For that matter, a Terran agent here would be likely to frequent the library; much important information is readily available for analysis and interpretation. In fact, it was quite possible that the Terran agent was here at the moment. And if not, he might be in later. If Lawrence hung around the place long enough, his man was almost certain to pass by eventually. Not that it would do either of them

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any good; neither would dare be recognized without being absolutely certain of the other's identity.

How to make contact? There was the rest of the problem. Lawrence reluctantly pushed it back to those unconscious regions of the mind where insoluble problems often surrender at the most unlikely times, and hoped for continued luck as he returned his awareness to the printed words before him.

Time passed quickly. When the shaft of sunlight from the window above him had traversed some forty degrees, he felt ready to try his vocabulary on the problem of ordering lunch.

Observing the occupants of other booths leaving their materials in place as they departed, he did the same, unsure as to whether they would be left for his return or put away by an attendant, but unwilling to act any more oddly than was absolutely unavoidable.

Outside, the streets still seemed strangely empty. Only a few powered vehicles passed. Almost all of them ran on wheels, an anachronism which caused Lawrence to stop and stare for several seconds before he remembered his character. Of course wheels would be more common on the O.C. planets; their replacement by ground-effect vehicles had not completely taken place on Terra until *after* the great hiatus.

His experience with O.C. cultures was still awkwardly shallow—Carondolet had been mostly water. Simple flotation craft served well enough there where there was no need for great speed for over long distances. Whatever solid land there was could be walked across in the time it took to sail around it.

Lunch was simple and nourishing and soon over. The sun was bright, but Lawrence was beginning to get used to it. The feeling of fresh air on his face was pleasant. He decided to walk for a while.

Suddenly he remembered his clothing. It would be most embarrassing if he should happen to encounter the gentleman they had been stolen from. The theft had certainly been reported by this time; when coupled with the guard's uniform that had been left behind, it would point inescapably in his direction.

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There was a clothing store somewhere near his hotel—he'd seen it last night. It would be a good place to spend some of the afternoon. But he'd go back to the library first. At the library he found his booth untouched. Apparently a reader who had finished brought his material back to the woman at the desk.

Again he found himself wondering, as he stared at his newspapers and dictionary, where the Terran agent was—if he might be in the library at the moment. He looked surreptitiously around at the people who were seated about the main floor, calling himself a fool as he did so. What was he looking for? A sign saying "Spy"?

No, everyone looked quite normal. A couple of young women, plainly dressed and deeply intent on something; a few obvious students; several old men, here and there about the room.

And one of them was looking back at him.

Lawrence switched his eyes back to his book instantly with a twinge of fear. He'd been noticed.

Or possibly he hadn't, he told himself; after all, when people are stared at, they often **stare** back. He should have known better.

Still, he could no longer concentrate. He kept fighting down powerful impulses to look up and find out if the old man was still staring at him. He had nothing he could use as a mirror; he tried screwing glances out of the corner of his eye, but couldn't make out anything. Finally he gave up. It was well past the middle of the day. Why not just pick a few things to read this evening—perhaps another history, more advanced—and leave? He did want to buy that new outfit this afternoon, before the description of his present ensemble went out all over town.

As he stood at the desk he was able to steal another look at the old man. He still sat facing the wall of booths, with his back to the desk. His face could not be seen. Lawrence wondered what there was about him that seemed different—almost familiar. It must have been the way he had looked at him, he decided. A direct, almost challenging stare. Perhaps some trick of the lighting, Lawrence told himself, and tried to put the old man out of his mind.

It wasn't easy. An hour later, as he stood in a small shop

diagonally across the street from his temporary place of residence, trying on clothing, he saw a stooped figure sham-ble past the door and thought for a moment of panic it was the man from the library again. But he was gone by the time his presence had registered; only the retinal image on the edge of his vision reminded Lawrence of the stranger.

For a few seconds he wondered wildly if the old man had followed him, perhaps was going to report him to the police. But how could *he* know who he was?

The evening papers! They could be out already with his picture and a description of his clothing. Well, the former was taken care of fairly well by the neatly trimmed dark stubble on his chin and along his jaw and by the different haircut, which seemed to change the shape of his face considerably; the latter was being taken care of at the moment.

As soon as the necessary alterations had been accomplished, Lawrence took the package, paid cash, and left. He started up the street in the opposite direction from his little hotel, hurried around the block, and came at it from the other side.

No one saw him come in and fifteen minutes later no one saw him leave, dressed quite nicely in his new suit of clothes. He suspected the flaring trousers and full sleeves were not quite the height of fashion, but he didn't at all mind looking like a farmer from some small unsophisticated planet, since that was precisely what he was supposed to be. It was getting dark now as he sauntered along the street, feeling a little more secure, in search of the latest edition of the newspaper.

The streets were lit adequately, but not brightly. Lawrence kept his attention everywhere but where his vision was directed—looking straight ahead. He concentrated on the cross streets, on the other pedestrians he passed, and on sounds behind him. He was becoming more and more apprehensive the farther he strayed from the snug security of his little room, but he was driven by a perverse curiosity. He had to know whether he was as directly in the public eye as he felt himself to be. If he wasn't, he could relax to a certain extent; there was far less likelihood of Mrs. Munitz turning him over to the authorities if she didn't know who

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he was. On the other hand, if he *was* on the front page, he might just as well keep walking.

He kept track of his direction and the turns he made, glad that the city was laid out in a regular grid rather than a random tangle of streets. A simple mental count of the number of streets crossed in which directions, adding or subtracting as he went, could take him back to his starting point without a missed step. If only it were as easy to find some place that sold newspapers.

Maybe there weren't any, he suddenly thought. Maybe they were only available by delivery at home, or by mail. He stopped and looked around vaguely. In such a case, he could only go back to his room and see if a paper had been delivered there; a hotel should have them for the convenience of the guests. He could only hope that no one recognized him from his pictures—if there was a picture.

Indecision again. He closed his eyes for a moment and for the hundredth time wished most fervently that Alexander were here in his place. Alexander would know what to do. *He* didn't belong in this situation; he belonged back in a nice safe air-conditioned room deep under the Antarctic ice cap, translating business accounts and working on an enlarged vocabulary of the XXX script. He sighed and opened his eyes, deciding to continue walking for a while, taking a roundabout route back to the hotel.

He didn't take the first step. Across the street an old man was standing, looking at him. He couldn't be sure under the artificial light, but it seemed to be the same old man he had seen in the library and passing outside the tailor's shop.

He looked away quickly. It was probably three different old men. After all, it would be easy to excuse a touch of paranoia under the circumstances. Old men tend to look a lot alike if you don't look closely for differences.

Ignore him, he told himself. *If he is following you, he hasn't turned you in yet, which means he isn't sure. Don't give yourself away. If he's not following you, don't give him a reason to.*

He started off up the street again, swinging along with a casual stride. At the next corner he turned left; at the following corner he turned right; then right again. He stopped

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in front of a store and studied the display in the small window without really seeing it. His attention remained on the corner he had just rounded.

About a minute later an old man came around the same corner. The single street light high above the center of the intersection clearly illuminated him; this time there was no mistake about it. It was the man who had been studying him in the library.

Lawrence froze, except for his quivering knees. He kept repeating to himself, *Don't give yourself away! Don't give yourself away!* He didn't turn his head as the thin, bent figure shuffled by, no more than eight feet behind him.

He counted to fifty, slowly, and risked a glance to the left. The slow-moving figure was nearly to the next intersection. He turned quietly to the right and ducked back around the corner. Then he took off.

He double-timed for two blocks in a straight line, then began to take random turns. It was some ten blocks before he was sure he was no longer being followed. The only question was whether the old man knew of the hotel or if he'd passed the tailor's shop by coincidence. It might not be safe to go back to his room.

But it was getting late and the chill of the night was settling in, damp and uncomfortable to one who had spent most of his life in a thoroughly controlled environment. Comfort, food, and bed were enough enticement to draw Lawrence back into the possible danger of his current hide-out.

It was eight more blocks back to the hotel. Lawrence's legs were as tired as he could remember their ever having been when the familiar little building he was already beginning to think of as home came into sight. Still cautious, he slowed his pace and studied the street. No suspiciously casual loungers decorated it; no vehicles were drawn up nearby. It looked just as it had the night before, sign unobtrusively illuminated, lights glowing warmly from the downstairs window.

His feet hurt and he was getting hungry. The thought of food and a bed hurried him along. Once inside he could eat and lock himself safely inside his little room, away from

wandering ancients who seemed to dog his footsteps, and relax for the first time since morning.

He stepped inside and looked around for Mrs. Munitz. None of the residents were in evidence, but the faint odor of dinner still hung in the air, pricking his already hearty appetite. He probably should have waited until after the meal to go for his walk. But there still might be something left in the kitchen. He started toward the back of the house.

Suddenly a sound startled him. Before he could turn, a voice said harshly, "Hold it right there, Terran."

He froze, his stomach cramping and his throat constricting. Somehow he managed to speak.

"I beg your pardon?" he said. *Deny everything*, his mind said desperately. *You're from Carondolet and your name's Rexmuger. And that's all.* He turned around slowly.

"Come on, Edwards, just try something. There are five blasters pointed at you and five men who don't care if they get a little mess on the furniture. We've been looking for you for two days."

The speaker was standing behind a chair; he did indeed have a large and unfriendly-looking handgun aimed in the approximate direction of Lawrence's center of gravity. A quick glance around the room identified three more guns, leaving one still unaccounted-for, probably hiding behind a curtain in case he somehow managed to overpower the rest of them. Not the sort of arrangement he would want to rush barehanded, in the hopes of disarming them all before they could fire.

"Edwards?" said Lawrence blankly. "My name isn't Edwards. It's Rexmuger. And I'm from Carondolet—Sirius VII—not Terra." Since the guards had addressed him in Basic, he decided to answer them in the same language. He could shift into the local speech or the Carondolian dialect with equal ease—not perfection, but ease.

The man behind the chair shook his head. "If you're not Edwards, you won't mind coming along with us for a little while. All we want is your retinal pattern. It won't take more than half an hour—if you really are Rexmuger from Carondolet. But you aren't," he added confidently.

"Now look here," said Lawrence, the irritation in his voice far from feigned. "I've been out all day. I'm hungry and my

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feet hurt. Now you want to take me off somewhere for some silly piece of identification; probably make me walk some more, and postpone my supper for an indefinite length of time. If you must, you must; I know many otherwise sensible cultures have this superstitious priority of officialdom. But on my planet, each man is his own. I am used to eating when I am hungry and I don't like the idea of having my meals interrupted by some officious busybodies with guns, even if they are licensed by the state. I'll be perfectly willing to go along with your little games, but only after I finish my evening meal."

Uncertainty flickered across the officer's face. "Well, I'm sorry if you aren't Edwards. But we've got to take you downtown for a complete identification before we can be sure."

"You also have an uncommon fetish for identities, it seems. Just who is this Edwards from Terra, anyway? And why are you so anxious to find him?"

The man's face hardened. "He's a Terran spy. He was captured and nearly killed a guard when he escaped yesterday. It's very important that we find him."

Lawrence realized that the officer had used the third person in referring to him, and recognized his advantage. "What could possibly lead you to suspect me?"

"Well, you don't have any papers of identity; you appeared here the same evening this Edwards escaped; you weren't listed on any of the tourist lists we examined for the last week; and you fit the physical description. Look, you're Edwards. You've got to be."

"Coincidence," said Lawrence unsteadily. "Purely coincidence. I can explain everything."

"Good. You'll have a chance to." The uniformed man gestured with his gun in the direction of the door.

"Without any supper?"

"Right now. If you're Rexmuger, you can eat here in an hour or so. If you're Edwards, you can eat downtown."

There was nothing more he could say. Lawrence started toward the door, his brain working rapidly. There was no chance of overpowering the guards—not with four or five of them, all armed and nervous. Cooperation until the last possible moment would have to be his course of action.

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The nearest man to the door opened it and stepped back as Lawrence came through. For a moment he wished he could have seen Mrs. Munitz and apologized for the inconvenience the police must have caused her, taking over her living room to lie in wait for him. Then he realized that after they had told her they were after a Terran spy, she was probably most happy to help them out any way she could. Even if he could have proven himself to be an innocent citizen of Carondolet, he did not think he would be welcome here again. There were some things about which suspicion was almost as bad as actual guilt.

Now there was a vehicle drawn up in front of the house, with a door open. Lawrence knew that this was as far as he would be able to go. His next stop would be some kind of maximum security prison where he would be probed as deeply as the O.C. technology would allow, and then left to rot. They would find out that he knew practically nothing of the weapons cache on Marmion and then they would dispose of him one way or another.

He looked around. Maybe a violent attempt at escape and a quick death in the blaster beams would be preferable to whatever they had in store for him. In months to come he might look back on this moment and wish he had made the attempt at escape. But right now he couldn't.

Regardless of how bad the future looked, somehow it seemed preferable to certain death here and now. He walked peacefully down the steps toward the open door.

Then a moving figure across the street caught his eye. Did the uncertain light deceive him, or was it the old man again? That old man was a jinx of some kind and a puzzle which now would never be solved. Lawrence looked away.

At that moment the puzzle began to solve itself. The figure moved slightly and something bulky appeared in its right hand. Before Lawrence was quite sure what was happening, uniformed figures began to crumple to the sidewalk on both sides of him. A numbness started coldly in his left arm, but faded in seconds.

And then he was standing alone, looking about in complete confusion. The old man suddenly straightened up and sprinted across the street with remarkable spryness.

As he approached, he spoke for the first time. "Come

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on," he said peremptorily. "Let's get out of here!" He spoke in Terran; the voice was familiar.

Lawrence gaped at him for a moment. "What . . . ?" he began.

"Don't just stand there," said the old man, who somehow didn't seem nearly as old at the moment. He indicated the crumpled forms about them. "There are going to be more of these around in a matter of moments. We don't want to be the only ones present and conscious to try to explain things to them."

Lawrence looked very closely at him and thought hard about the voice.

"Alexander?" he finally said weakly.

"Of course Alexander," said the other. "Who were you expecting?"

"But how did you find me?"

"Trade secret. Look, we can discuss the fine points of practical espionage some other time. Right now we've got to clear the immediate area before the rest of the government comes down upon us. I'm pretty good, but I don't think I could hold off an army single-handed."

"But . . . Where are we going?"

"Never mind; follow me."

Lawrence did.

VIII

THEY WERE HALF A block away before Lawrence got close enough to Alexander again to gasp, "I think you might be interested—there was one more man inside the house."

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Alexander threw a quick glance over his shoulder and led the way around a corner to the left. "In that case either he didn't see what happened out front or he's practicing the better part of valor." He hurried up to the middle of the block and turned left again into an unpaved alley. Lawrence followed close behind him.

"You're going to come back to the place from the rear?" he guessed aloud.

"Right. I want to take a quick look at what these extensions of the long arm of the law are doing toward our recapture."

"They didn't look as if they'd be in any condition to do much when I left."

"Oh, they'll be up and around again in no time. But if there was an extra man inside the house, he's probably noticed something amiss by this time and may well be taking action. If it's something particularly clever, I'd like to know about it. We're always in the market for original ideas—we may be able to use them ourselves some time."

"He'll probably be rather upset about your killing the other four," Lawrence suggested.

Alexander looked at him in the faint starlight and his expression was one of slight distaste. "Killing? What do you think I am? I don't go around casually killing people. It's not only in very bad taste, it's quite dangerous. The survivors are much more awkward to handle and are likely to put all sorts of extra effort toward your capture. Besides, it's wasteful. Ninety-five times out of a hundred, in this business, you don't want people to be permanently dead; you just want them to leave you alone for a little while. You don't care what they do after you've left. So the obvious thing is to simply stun them a bit." He indicated a board fence on the left side of the alley. "Take a peek through the next crack over from mine," he suggested. "We'll see what's going on out there."

Lawrence applied an eye to the ill-fitted boards and shifted his angle of vision until he was oriented. The sidewalk he had been propelled onto at gunpoint two minutes earlier was some fifty feet away. Light from the front of the house spilled rectangles of yellow across it, picking out

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two prone and two sitting figures. The latter were rubbing their heads dazedly and looking about them.

A fifth man, moving about briskly, appeared from the portion of the walk blocked by the house. Bending over the two unmoving figures, he began administering some form of therapy which was indistinguishable from the distance. It seemed effective; in a matter of seconds they were moving feebly, then sitting upright with help.

By this time the first two were on their feet, unsteady, but upright. Lawrence whispered, "Hadn't we better get going? They'll be after us in another minute."

Alexander held up a cautioning hand without removing his eye from the fence. "Not yet. First we have to know which way they'll be going after us. Then we go the other way for a while."

"Wouldn't it be better to head directly for wherever we're going? They haven't *been* following us. We could've had a three-block lead on them by this time."

"Not necessarily, Lawrence my lad. They are unlikely to have only five men out to pick you up. Remember these people usually are scared of Terrans; they'd be more likely to send out a whole division with air support." Lawrence instinctively glanced upward. There was no sound of any kind of aircraft, but Alexander was uncannily right so often that he suddenly felt as if he were being watched from somewhere. The Terran agent continued imperturbably, "On the other hand, if they weren't sure, they would have brought along somebody who had seen you before you escaped and could identify you."

He paused, considering this, then went on slowly. "On the third hand, if they had a great number of suspects—recently arrived tourists with papers which could have been forged, or people whose places could have been taken by you—they would be more likely to send out a small group of men to get each of them and bring them to some central point for identification." He nodded, satisfied with that theory.

"On the fourth hand," Lawrence contributed, "they seemed awfully sure that I was the right one."

"Probably just your guilty conscience reading things into his words, and his nerves putting things there that officially

shouldn't have—whoops! There they go, off in the direction we ran. Excellent. Come on." He straightened up and went on down the alley at a brisk walk.

"Now," said Lawrence as they entered the next street and turned right, "how did you find me and where are we going?"

"Going? Why, we're going on to Marmion," said Alexander, in the same tone he would have used to explain to a reasonably intelligent child that he had to go play with his friends whether he wanted to or not. "As for finding you, we never lost you. If you hadn't wandered off from your guards back at Herculon, we'd be most of the way to our goal by now."

"What have you been doing for the last four days, then?"

"Tracking you down, mostly. If you had stayed put, we could have had you out a lot easier. We'll exchange stories once we get into a little more secure position. After all, we're enemy aliens at this point; the nature of your disappearance from the embrace of official custody will have the entire pack baying after us in a matter of half an hour or so."

"Then let's stop talking and cover ground," said Lawrence, pleased to be able to score a point against the voluble agent.

"I have enough wind for both of us. Besides, it's not very far. The others are on their way to meet us."

"The others?"

"One of the local operatives and a friend."

Lawrence shrugged. He should have guessed there would be more than one lonely Terran agent planted on Nidever, which was, after all, a comparatively major planet in the O.C. scheme of things.

The streets were darker now; they hadn't seen a pedestrian for the last few blocks. There were small lights in front of some of the buildings which now huddled closer together with only narrow strips of worn dirt between them. The same sort of nondescriptive nametags adorned some of them, but hardly one in a block had any kind of window facing the street on ground level. There was an almost oppressive silence in the air. The soft sounds of their footsteps on the cracked pavement seemed to heighten the

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silence rather than dispel it. When Lawrence spoke, after a long time, it was in a near whisper.

"They're going to meet us down here?"

"Nearby," said Alexander noncommittally. "The river is just a few blocks from here. Smell the water?"

"River?"

"Of course, river. Practically every major O.C. city is on a river."

He turned suddenly up a short flight of steps to a door and knocked with an irregular rhythm. A panel slid open and closed; the door clicked and rattled and opened enough to let them slip through.

Inside there was a short dimly-lit hall and an unpleasant-looking man in rough clothing. His voice was incongruously soft and well-modulated as he greeted them.

"You must be Lawrence Edwards. Glad to see you. Your friend is in here; we've been having a terrible time keeping her quiet, since Alexander has been out most of the day."

Lawrence knew who would be there the moment before the door swung open and a slim figure in green stepped out. "Well," she said with relief. "So you managed to find him after all. Now maybe we can get on with the expedition."

"Ginger!" Lawrence said. "Somehow I should have known you'd be here."

"Where else should I be? If I hadn't been keeping an eye on you back at Herculon you wouldn't be here now."

"That's true enough; if I hadn't been distracted by you following me, I wouldn't have walked into those two guys that grabbed me."

"I distracted you? I'm flattered. But they would have gotten you anyway; they were professionals—you weren't."

"You still shouldn't have been there," Alexander said. "Lawrence was being properly guarded by two of our own men."

"Sure. And they bit on a decoy. If I hadn't seen him being carried off to the *Boomerang* and then gotten word to you, it could have taken years to find him."

"Look," said Lawrence. "I really am extremely interested in hearing how you spent your vacation. But at the moment I'm more interested in getting off this planet. If Alexander feels we must go on to Marmion, I'm willing. I'm far from

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delighted about it, but I'm willing. But let's go, shall we?"

"In a little while," said Alexander. "Wouldn't you like a bite of supper first? We don't have interstellar ships sitting in every back yard, after all. It'll take at least an hour to have one in condition and cleared to take off—not to mention the trouble of getting you through customs."

"I'd been meaning to talk to you about that, too. Uh, did you just say 'supper'? I knew there was something I'd forgotten in the excitement." He followed the Terran agent through the doors into the inner room where Ginger had been waiting.

"Just sit down," said Ginger. "It'll be along in—"

She was interrupted by a thunderous pounding on the outer door. Alexander swore and Lawrence saw the vision of dinner fading like mist. His appetite disappeared as well. He'd had little experience with the police, but the knock awakened an instinctive reaction that was as old as social conflict.

He jumped to his feet and looked around desperately as the knocking was repeated. "Is there a back door?"

Ginger looked at him disgustedly. "Is there a back door?" she gibed. "What kind of amateurs do you think we are? Of course there's a back door—several of them. Show him, Alexander."

Alexander shook his head. "The back doors will be covered; probably by more men than are at the front. They'll expect us to make a break for it. There's a safer way, but somewhat tricky. Come on—into the kitchen."

The rough-looking man who had opened the door to them was standing beside the stove. Alexander spoke. "Sorry about blowing this cover for you, Tolf."

He shook his head. "We only keep it to be used; can't complain when it is. In six months we'll have it back. Don't worry about it. You know the rest of the way from here. Left, right, two lefts, two rights, and straight on out."

"Check. Now give us a hand and then jump."

"That's what I had in mind." Between them they lifted the heavy stove. To Lawrence's amazement it was fastened to the floor. A large rectangle of boarding came up with it, revealing a black hole with a ladder leading down into darkness. Ginger went first, Lawrence following hesitantly.

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"I can shove this back into position," said Tolf reassuringly. "Get in there, Alex. They've just brought up the axes; hear 'em? I'll take the chimney route. Not likely to see you again this trip, so good luck till next time."

"Thanks," said Alexander briefly as he slipped down the ladder.

A moment later the stove was back over the hold and all was dark. They heard Tolf's footsteps padding swiftly away and then only the faint sound of chopping could be heard.

It was less than a minute before faint shouts announced the success of the invading forces. A minute after that they heard heavy footsteps clattering into the room over their heads. Voices muttered.

"What do we do if they find the trapdoor?" Ginger whispered.

"That depends on how fast we can move," Alexander whispered back.

"Then why not start now?" asked Lawrence.

"I don't know about you, but I already have." The agent's voice was a little farther away, to the left. "Unless you want to stay here and see if they find us, follow me."

"Ginger?"

"I'm not that interested in whether they think of moving the stove. If you decide to stay, though, I won't be responsible for what they do to you."

"Does anyone have a light?" Lawrence asked as soon as he caught up with them.

"Shouldn't need one," Alexander said. "The tunnel is clear. Just keep your left hand on the wall, and when it turns, follow it. This place is a maze which has never been completely mapped. If we lose track of where we are we could spend days wandering around."

"Or forever," Ginger whispered.

"Not forever," said Alexander. "It's not that big. After all, it's only three blocks or so to the river."

"Is that where we're going?"

"Exactly. Here's the left. Now shift over to the right hand on the wall. By the way, let's keep conversation to a minimum. Sound often carries oddly in these tunnels. It would be most embarrassing if one of the local officials heard suspicious voices coming out from under a stove. He might be

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moved to investigate; and heaven only knows what he might find."

The advice was sound; they remained silent through the right turn, the two left turns, and finally the two right turns. Lawrence had been keeping track of their orientation in his mind; it seemed to him they should be getting close to the river.

Then the whole tunnel turned slightly and he could feel a puff of cool damp air on his face. A few more paces and the blackness ahead of him lightened almost imperceptibly to a faint gray. Alexander stopped and Ginger ran into him.

He shushed her. "We're just about there," he whispered, very softly. "You two stay here. I'm going to sneak ahead and see if the exit is covered."

He was gone without a sound.

It seemed darker than before. Lawrence twitched violently when a warm hand touched his arm.

"Quiet," hissed Ginger. "It's only me."

He brought his other hand up and took hers in what he imagined to be a comforting grasp until she shook loose. "Don't break my fingers," she whispered. "I was just trying to calm you down a little."

Lawrence quietly ground his teeth in frustration and was still too distracted to be startled when Alexander materialized beside them with a soft, "All clear. Come on."

The tunnel opened behind a clump of bushes rooted at the lapping edge of the night-black river. A broad pier ran several feet out immediately above their heads, shielding their exit from casual observance. The faint starlight, after their period underground, was sufficient to guide them along Alexander's footprints in the sloping mud bank to a rough wooden ladder which ran up the bank to the foot of the pier.

Alexander was first up. He stuck his head cautiously above street level, looked all around, and then continued up. He reached a hand down to help Ginger; she did the same for Lawrence as he climbed to the top.

He was about to ask what they were supposed to do now, but apparently Alexander had planned everything out. He

was already moving at a quiet trot down the embankment. The other two followed him without a word.

Two piers farther on he turned out, stopped, and pointed. Bobbing some six feet below them was a rowboat. A flight of steps led down to a floating platform beside the boat. Alexander paused at the head of the steps to make sure the other two were still following him. They practically trod on his heels as he stopped and turned.

"The landing field is across the river and about three miles downstream," he said. "A diplomatic courier ship will be ready to take us off as soon as we get there. We notified them as soon as we had definitely located you," he explained to Lawrence. "They were, naturally, overjoyed."

"I'm honored."

"I'm cold," said Ginger. "Are we going to take that little thing down there?"

"None other. Be brave; it won't be long. And remember, you volunteered."

"Incidentally," said Lawrence, "I've been meaning to ask you about that. I had the distinct impression we'd gotten rid of you back on the *C.P. Snow*. How did you manage—"

"And I'd been meaning to ask *you* what happened to your face," Ginger said. "Is that a fungus growth, or have you been so busy being a hunted criminal that you had to neglect the elementals of personal hygiene? The hair alone makes you look like a fugitive from a penal colony, but at least it goes well with the overall impression."

"Alexander," Lawrence appealed. "Why didn't we push her out when we had the chance? And how did you let her come along this far?"

"It's a long and ridiculous story," the agent answered. "We'll have lots of time to go through it step by step for you at a later date." He pointed up the street. "At the moment we have more imperative matters to attend to. Like getting the hell out of here."

Looking back in the direction indicated, Lawrence knew about what he expected to see. Sure enough, there they were: at least a dozen of them, in a ragged line across the street. There were probably at least as many more in the shadows of the buildings.

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"Can't you just sort of spray them with your freezer?" Lawrence asked uncertainly.

"Not at this range. Besides, it's not a continuous output. I'll run you through the checkout procedure again once we're out of here. Come on, kids—into the boat, and hope they don't have the river covered."

In a matter of seconds they were seated in the little open boat. But instead of reaching for the oars, Alexander reached under the back seat and seemed to be searching around for something. Lawrence was counting off the seconds it would take the approaching men to cover the block between them and Ginger was quietly fuming.

"What are you doing under there?" she muttered nervously. "Do you want me to row?"

"Don't worry," said the agent confidently. "I've got another surprise for you."

"You're just full of them tonight," she said. "I hope this one works better than the last few; we haven't been able to shake that mob yet."

"Well, this should catch them off guard, at least." He pulled on something and there was a loud gasping sound from the stern of the boat. "Excellent," he said. "Cast off the bow and stern lines and hold onto something."

Lawrence slipped the ropes off, reaching across Ginger for the second one. Alexander continued to fiddle around under the seat; a moment later the little boat suddenly shot forward toward the middle of the stream with astounding velocity. Alexander grabbed one of the oars and stuck it over the stern to act as a rudder, pushing it hard to the left as they swung into the middle of the channel. The rowboat swung obediently right and was caught up in the current. Whatever kind of engine the thing had seemed to work efficiently; they didn't hydroplane, but a fair enough sized bow wave was kicked up to dampen Lawrence's shirt as he sat in the front of the boat.

Behind them, the pursuers had reached the end of the pier and were giving expression to their frustration with poorly aimed blasts from a wide variety of weapons.

"Lie down flat," Alexander snapped. Lawrence complied as he saw a small patch of water a few feet away suddenly steam and boil for a second or two. Something hummed

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through the space where his head had been. He squirmed around to check on Ginger.

She, too, was huddled in the wet bottom of the boat, silent for a change. Alexander was crouched in the stern, holding the oar braced in its lock, continuing to direct them straight down the stream.

They were out of range in short order and Lawrence sat up slowly. "How long is three miles?" he asked.

"In this, about five minutes," said Alexander. "Unless we run into any more trouble. For instance, if that boat ahead is looking for us."

Ahead a searchlight swept the water with a dazzling white beam. It was high enough above the surface to imply a fairly large craft behind it.

"Under the circumstances," Lawrence said, "it should be fairly safe to assume the entire city is looking for us."

"Right," said Alexander. "Lie down again and I'll see if we can get by too fast for them to react."

Their speed increased as he spoke and the prow of the boat began to increase its angle to the water, occasionally jumping violently at a ripple. Lawrence crouched low and held on tight.

The searchlight grew ahead of them and Alexander leaned hard on the steering oar. They heeled over and whipped past the light. The shape of a small cruiser loomed large and black against the night sky, uncomfortably close to them: a wall of metal rising sheer out of the water. Lawrence had a momentary mental picture of a crewman dropping something on them as they shot past and then they were clear and untouched, with the shouts of startled watchers ringing across the water to their ears.

Ahead Lawrence could see the lights of the landing field; it would be only a short sprint across the open ground to the ship and then they would be safe. And he would finally have dinner.

He stood up in the bow, heedless of the danger behind. He heard Alexander say something, and started to turn. Then something struck him a numbing blow. The lights ahead and behind whirled about him, blurred, doubled, and faded. His entire body chilled and he fell forward into utter blackness.

IX

IT STAYED DARK for a long time.

Slowly he became aware of a blinding headache. He raised a feeble hand to see if the top had come off his skull, but halfway there found something cold and slippery. A voice was saying, "Drink this. Go ahead, drink it." He wrapped his hand around what he guessed was a glass and it was guided to his mouth. The stuff tingled in his mouth and throat; he coughed. His head was still about to burst.

"Are you alive?" It was a girl's voice—a nice voice, he decided, and said so.

"You've ni' voi' . . ." he mumbled.

"I guess he's all right," said a man. "That makes as much sense as most things he says."

"Or does—standing up in a boat under fire! Twice as foolish as usual," said the girl. "Lance, are you going to wake up or am I going to have to pour this over you?"

He forced his eyes open and squinted against the dim light of the room. "I hate to use a cliché," he said, forcing himself painfully into coherence, "but I really would like to know where I am."

"You're on the *Wotan*, bound for Marmion," said Alexander. "You've been stuck to that bunk for about thirty hours—since you soaked up the edge of somebody's beam."

"What about Ginger?"

Alexander sighed and nodded his head toward the other side of the bunk. Ginger sat there, holding a glass that fizzed menacingly. "She's right here. I don't think there's anything we can do about that."

She smiled and handed the glass to Lawrence. "Drink up, now," she said brightly. "You'll be feeling just fine in a few minutes."

He did, and rather to his surprise, he was. He sat up and looked at Alexander. "What is Satan's answer to a ministering angel doing here, anyway? I appreciate the fact that she believes herself instrumental to my salvation, but she really isn't working for Terran Intelligence, is she?"

Alexander shook his head sadly. "It might be better if she was. But when I tried to get rid of her, she blackmailed me. Threatened to write to the Council—to my boss specifically—and tell him I was incompetent, a threat to the success of the mission and a menace to navigation—unless I let her come along."

"I also made some specific contributions to the rescue effort," Ginger said haughtily. "Alexander was going to try to sneak into Nidever all by himself, when obviously they'd be looking for some lone man trying to find you."

"Actually, we didn't expect you to escape on your own," the agent added. "It would have been a little easier if you'd stayed put, so we'd have known where to find you. As it was, it took us another day and a half to run you down."

"Anyway," Ginger went on, "I pointed out to him that he could move much more freely if he had a completely different cover—like a married couple on an innocent vacation. It only took a little bit of correction on his passport and we came in together. We connected with the Nideverian agency and started looking for you."

"That was merely the best excuse you could think of to come along," said Alexander stubbornly. "I still think I could have gotten him out easier by myself."

"Oh? Who was it suggested you watch the library?"

"Well . . ."

"You're a trained agent. You have a hard time thinking like a college professor, out in the real world for the first time in life, because you automatically know the right things to do. I knew that the first place he'd go would be somewhere he'd feel safe and at home—like a library."

"Now just a minute," said Lawrence. "I didn't go there because I was lonely for books. I was trying to find out from the local newssheets what information was publicly

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available on my escape and because I thought it would be a likely place to encounter intelligence agents. And as it turned out, I was right."

She shrugged. "Elementary justification. Your *real* reason was to find someplace in an alien environment where you'd feel at home."

"I still say," said Alexander, "we would have been checking the library regularly. Since he was alone on an enemy planet, he'd want to learn as much about it as possible and the obvious place would be the library, regardless of your other explanations."

"Hindsight— isn't it wonderful? I *still* suggested it before you did. Anyway, Lance, I was instrumental in saving your life, for whatever that may be worth. If they'd been a day later in checking the library, the O.C.s would have recaptured you."

"And we could have gone ahead with our original plan," Alexander muttered.

"Well, I do appreciate it, Ginger. I'm just as happy not to have been recaptured, even if it would have made our leader happier. But why are you calling me Lance?"

She sighed. "I don't know. Primitive belief in word-magic, I guess. If I keep calling you Lance, maybe you'll start acting like one."

"How is one supposed to act?"

"Heroically, you hopeless mule!" She snorted in disgust. "I can't imagine how I could ever have thought I was in love with you!"

"I'm sure I can't either," he snapped, "but it comes as a great relief to find out that you aren't." He turned to Alexander. "I suppose you've told her everything?"

"Of course not. But she knows just about everything you know."

"I'd like to think I know a little more about some things, thank you," she flared. "Like standing up in a boat under fire."

Lawrence glared at her. "Why don't you run along and play in the airlock? This is a serious business and we have work to do."

"Serious!" she said. "It's tragic! And I can help on any work you need done."

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"Lawrence," said Alexander, "there's nothing to do. We can't murder her; she won't submit to a mind-block; and she is absolutely set on helping us all she can. All I can think of is to have her sign a paper releasing us from responsibility for her life, limbs, and sanity, and let her come along. Ginger, are you willing?"

Her green eyes gleamed, and she bounced up. "You figured it out! Just give me that paper and pen!"

Lawrence sank back on the bunk and sighed.

In a matter of a few minutes the legal formalities had been taken care of, and Ginger Collins had been sworn in as a temporary assistant in the Council Security Command, without pay, for an indefinite period, with no legal rights or privileges whatsoever. Instead, she accepted a lot of responsibilities, including complete obedience to the orders of her superiors. Alexander countersigned the document. He was the superior in question, though he had no illusions about Ginger's acceptance of his commands; Lawrence witnessed it. Then the document was sealed and filed with the commander of the *Wotan* for dispatch to Terra.

This done and a light lunch consumed, Lawrence once again tried asking for the story of exactly what had gone on with the two of them after his seizure on Herculon. With some allowances for exaggeration on Ginger's part, he eventually got the whole story in fair detail.

Ginger denied following him into town. After some debate, Lawrence accepted that conditionally, realizing that it would be impossible to prove either way and recognizing that it really mattered very little. She had seen two men supporting a limp companion out of a doorway and into a waiting ground car and had recognized Lawrence as the one in the middle. She immediately realized that whatever power had attempted to kidnap him back on Terra had tried again, this time succeeding.

Sensible enough not to attempt alone to detain the two kidnappers, she reentered the ground car she had arrived in and followed them back to the spaceport area. She had seen Lawrence carried aboard a private yacht, his two supporters chanting happily in intoxicated voices while reeling slightly. She noted the number of the parking slot the yacht was berthed in and raced directly back to the *C. P. Snow*,

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where Alexander was still in the process of disembarkation.

She caught him there, giving him the full story as quickly as possible. To his credit, he believed her immediately and contacted the port authority with full official priority to have the yacht in berth ninety-three forbidden clearance and sealed until a governmental search party could go through it for a kidnapped Terran citizen.

But the port authority reported that berth ninety-three had requested clearance an hour before and the yacht therein had lifted—apparently within seconds after Lawrence had been taken on board. The yacht had been the *Boomerang*, owner Rimb Coralsen, Vegan registry. . . .

"We know, we know," Alexander interrupted. "What is her destination?"

"Nidever," the port master said.

In the course of the discussion, Ginger found herself somewhat forgotten. So she popped up at once as soon as Alexander cut off. He was on the verge of beginning a soliloquy unfit for any girl's ears when she reminded him of her presence by asking briskly, "How soon can we start for Nidever?"

"A matter of hours," Alexander said, without thinking. Then he looked down at her, excited and eager to get into action. "What do you mean, *we*?" he asked.

"You let them capture him," she said. "I demand to come along to be sure you can get him back."

Alexander gaped at her, his self-possession for once utterly gone. "Utterly impossible," he said, when he recovered a modicum of composure. "You're a private citizen. My cover has no provision for you. This is far too dangerous and difficult for a girl—especially a young and untrained one."

"I'm not that young, nor am I that untrained. Remember, I just finished a degree in Xenosociology; it just happens that Nidever is a very important planet in the O.C. confederation and we spent quite some time studying it. It has achieved its status among the presently forming confederation," she recited briskly, "due both to its comparatively large population and its valuable exports of minerals, notably the fissionable elements, for which it maintains extensive processing facilities on its smaller moon. It is governed by a Master and an advisory council of thirty-six Citizen

Representatives. The major city is also named Nidever, as is the river which flows southward through it. The river floods regularly and many of the local crops are dependent upon this for . . .”

After several futilely repeated gestures Alexander managed to shut her up for a moment. “All right,” he said testily. “You know all about Nidever. But that’s not the problem. I will have to sneak in there completely undercover, try to find where Lawrence is being held, break him free, and get us both out again. I couldn’t do it with a third party along upon whom I would have to spend additional attention and worry.”

“The hardest part will be getting onto Nidever, right?” she said.

Alexander thought, and nodded. “They’ll be especially suspicious of strangers for a while, expecting a rescue party to come in after him.”

“Would they be as suspicious of a couple of innocent tourists—a man and wife, say?”

“Probably not—no, you cannot come! You would get in the way, you’d not only be in danger yourself, you’d be increasing the danger for both me and Lawrence. And this particular operation is extremely important to Terran security. I can’t tell you any more about it; you’ll simply have to accept the fact. And you must also consider yourself sworn to absolute secrecy about whatever you may have heard or guessed.”

“Of course, of course,” she said impatiently. “But look, hadn’t you better be talking to someone about arranging for a ship to Nidever? The longer we take, the harder Lance will be to find.”

Alexander muttered something better unheard, and picked up the communicator again. When he had completed arrangements, he looked down at the girl, who still stood defiantly before him.

“Look, Miss Collins,” he said. “We deeply appreciate the assistance you have given. But there is nothing else you can do. You really should go on with your own business and leave us to ours.”

She smiled sweetly up at him. “But you can’t handle yours alone. And if you leave for Nidever without me, I will have

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a message off to Terra within an hour describing in glowing terms exactly what has happened and how your incompetence has endangered the entire operation—whatever it is. If it's as important as you say, there will be an immediate investigation and you will probably be parked behind a desk until your legs rot away."

Alexander insisted that at this point he was primarily concerned with the maintenance of secrecy. He knew that Ginger would cheerfully tell the whole galaxy enough to destroy any chance they might still have of getting to the weapons cache before the O.C.s did. Since they obviously knew something, having already taken Lawrence, they must at all costs be prevented from learning more. Therefore he agreed, against his own better judgment, to accept her offer to pose as his wife for the journey to Nidever.

Ginger just snorted, and said that since the O.C.s had taken Lance, it was obvious they already knew what they were after. Anything she told anyone would be a great deal less than what they could wring out of their captive. Alexander, she said, had simply realized that her suggestion had been valid. Rather than admit it, he had invented this transparent excuse for accepting it.

Lawrence just nodded.

They arrived on Nidever within ten hours after the *Boomerang* and were already in touch with the local operatives when he had suddenly and quite unexpectedly escaped from custody. Lawrence was called upon to explain just what had happened; he reluctantly described the questioning and the detention cell. His voice shook with remembered terror as he told about the sounds which had filtered through the heavy stone walls from the intensive interrogation chambers, which had triggered his berserk attack on the guards.

Alexander leaned back in his chair with a broad grin and laughed softly to himself with evident delight. Both Ginger and Lawrence stared at him until he finished. Then he shook his head.

"There's no such thing as an intensive interrogation chamber on Nidever," he said. "One of the first things I asked the local man about was their methods of questioning. They rely entirely on psychological methods. There are simply a couple of small loudspeakers buried inside the walls of the room

where you were taken. They have a set of standard tapes, highly dramatic and apparently quite realistic, of several poor souls being tortured to death, created by a couple of talented actors several years ago. What really makes it enjoyable is the fact that, in this case, their subtle methods were their own downfall. Instead of breaking you down, they strengthened you enough to break out entirely on your own."

"Well," said Ginger proudly. "I *knew* there was a spark of something heroic down inside there somewhere, Lance. It only comes out when you're in a blind panic, but it's there. There may be some hope for you yet."

"Somehow," said Lawrence, "I'm not as pleased about that as you seem to be. So far, heroism seems to be just a prelude to nearly getting oneself killed. And I can do without that, thank you anyway."

Ginger just smiled smugly.

The *Wotan* touched down on Marmion after half an hour of unsteady deceleration. There was another half hour before the port authorities would allow her to unseal her hatches. Then they spent two hours passing through customs. Alexander neatly avoided the inspection by a practiced combination of dodges which Lawrence was completely unable to follow even after they had been explained to him. There was some difficulty because Ginger had not received advance permission to land, but some fast talking and a few well-placed bribes got the necessary stamps on her passport.

They had hotel reservations for two and it took more bribery to convince the desk clerk that he had another room for the girl. Unfriendliness bordering on open hostility seemed to be the rule as far as Terrans were concerned.

Alexander checked the rooms for concealed microphones and found one in each of the reserved singles, each showing signs of age and disrepair. He pointed them out to Lawrence, explaining briefly that these rooms were obviously those reserved for tourists from Terra. Then they went over Ginger's room a floor below and found it bugproof. Here they sat, making plans.

"You two can go out and play tourist or just sit tight," Alexander told them. "The latter would be safer, but the

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former would attract less attention. You've got your Carlson's Guide to tell you what to see. I'll be with you part of the time, but I have to find our agent on this planet; it may take a while."

It did. During the period Ginger and Lawrence showed each other the city park, the governmental buildings, the botanical gardens, the art gallery and the two museums. Marmion had native plant life, but no higher animals than very simple insects. The atmospheric balance was maintained by the plants themselves, different species of which utilized each other's wastes. The insects fed upon the plants and cross-fertilized them and the plants fed to a certain extent upon the insects. Man had tampered but little with the ecology.

Biologically the planet was primitive. Geologically it was incredibly ancient. There were no natural radioactives left to date its formation; there was no volcanic action. Weathering and solar seismic stresses gave the surface but a few minor mountain ranges of perhaps seven thousand feet. Broad plains ran for hundreds of miles and sloped gently into shallow seas.

The weather was mild. Lawrence and Ginger wandered through the few attractions of the small city, taking pictures and recordings here and there, while Alexander went out mornings and came back evenings, continuing his search for the solitary agent Terran intelligence could boast upon this planet. The search took four days.

X

ALEXANDER SPOKE LITTLE of where he had gone or what he had done during those four days. The last evening he called Lawrence and Ginger together in her room for a conference.

"I've found our agent. He was out of town tending to his cover. I've told him roughly where we want to go, about five hundred miles north of here. He can get us there with no trouble. Charlie knows the country as well as a native—he's been here for twenty-five years. We'll have to check out of here tomorrow and connect up with him tomorrow night; he's leaving for his northern route at dawn the next day. We'll travel disguised as natives in his caravan as far as he can go, which will leave us about fifty miles to cover on foot—an easy couple of days. Then we get down to the weapons cache, open the stasis shield, check over the contents, and I call the fleet.

"Now, naturally, Terra will be worried about three citizens who have disappeared in the backwoods of Marmion, an unfriendly planet. And they'll demand to send a number of unarmed ships down to make a search in the area where we were last reported. The only unarmed ships we have are a lot of heavy freighters. They land according to my radio signal, load up the weapons, and us; report we are found, alive and suffering from exposure but recovering, and thank the government for allowing them to make the search." He stopped and drank a glass of water.

Ginger asked suspiciously, "Am I supposed to hike through fifty miles of underbrush and sleep overnight with two strange men?"

Alexander put the glass down. "You insisted on volunteering, against all advice and against direct orders. And you have signed a paper releasing us from all responsibility for you. *All* responsibility. This paper was sent back to my home office on the *Wotan*. Besides, we aren't strangers to you any more, or we shouldn't be. I don't know how Lawrence feels, but I think that if a man tried to make love to you, you would criticize his technique all the while."

"If he deserved it," she said coolly.

Lawrence scowled. "Alexander, I have been putting up with this girl for four straight days now; my nerves can't take much more. Let's get to bed. If I'm going to have to travel and live with her for the next week, I'm going to need all the sleep I can get."

Ginger started to say something bitterly scathing, and thought better of it. "No, I won't say it. We have a job

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to do and we'll be able to do it easier if we aren't fighting. So I, for one, am going to try to be agreeable. I hope you'll do the same. Now good night." She ushered them to the door and locked it behind them.

They checked out the next morning. In answer to the desk clerk's question, Alexander informed him unhesitatingly that they would be traveling overland to the town of Dead Wilson, about four hundred miles northeast, by rented aircar. As they left the hotel, Lawrence regarded him with a doubtful eye. "You told that desk clerk we were going to a town only a couple hundred miles from where we really *will* be going. I thought we didn't want to be followed."

Alexander winked. "We don't. Two hundred and fifty miles is a long way in open country, but we want the Terran fleet to have an acceptable reason for searching the area where we really are."

Lawrence shook his head. "Sometimes I think Ginger is right about you."

His partner scowled. "For that matter, sometimes I think she's right about you, too."

Lawrence started to bristle and Alexander made a quick gesture of apology. "Well, at least we know we're both right about *her*."

Lawrence laughed. The two of them hurried on to meet Ginger, who had checked out earlier with a large share of their bags. She had stashed them in a rented locker downtown, to be picked up just before the caravan left the next morning.

Then, having some time to spend before meeting her two secret agents, she went out to do a little window shopping. Occasionally she was aware of suspicious glances. This was the major city, after all; while Terrans were not common, neither were they especially rare.

The original colony on Marmion had survived fairly well, so there were more differences among the natives than on worlds where only one family had survived to breed. On such worlds, familiar characteristics and peculiarities amounted to racial traits. Here there was only a slightly ruddier skin tone that told her they belonged here and she didn't. She was an attractive girl and she had a sparkle that had caught eyes on many streets before—but they had always looked with

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admiration or envy. Here they looked with dislike, resentment, and controlled hatred.

Ginger wandered from shop to shop, checking her time once in a while, working in the general direction of the restaurant where she was to meet Lawrence and Alexander for lunch. But the contents of the shops were so interesting. And the morning so long . . .

She stopped noticing her watch and wandered on.

Lawrence was more worried than he admitted to himself. He hoped nothing had happened to Ginger. Her talent for getting into trouble might have gotten her in deeper than she could handle. He could imagine that vital, exciting girl thrown in jail, or lying beaten in an alley. He took a quick drink and said something to Alexander, who looked as if he didn't have a worry in the universe.

Alexander was also admitting only to himself how worried he was. He should never have trusted something as valuable as the luggage to that girl. It would've been so easy for her to make a slip, blow their cover again, and have all their equipment confiscated. Much of it was indispensable to their mission. And if she was picked up, the locals would be after them in a matter of minutes. But taking any defensive action now would only draw attention; and that could be fatal. Best to stay cool, and very alert. He took a quick drink and answered whatever Lawrence had just said to him.

Then suddenly she was standing beside the table, and they both looked up and spoke at once.

"What happened to you?"

"Is the luggage safe?"

"Perfectly safe," she said, drawing up a chair between them. "Unless the coach depot has burned down in the last four hours. And nothing happened to me—I was doing some window shopping and lost track of the time."

Alexander cringed. "Ginger, dear Ginger, please don't wander off along like that again. There's no law against suicide, but it's considered very bad form to take others down with you. No, I'm perfectly serious. I don't think you realize how much we are in danger here. Most of the people out there on the street would gladly join in a group effort to kill us,

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given the least excuse. The government would be terribly sorry and would pay the expenses to ship whatever they could find of us back to Earth. But I don't think that would make you feel any better."

Ginger looked at him a long time, without any expression at all. Then she said, slowly, "We really are in mortal danger."

"Yes. Really."

The corners of her mouth tightened and quivered as a smile was trapped behind her lips; then it burst forth in her eyes, which danced and shone. "I believe you. Honestly, I do. But you were both worried about me! Thank you!" She sobered. "And if it is as bad as you say, I promise to try to behave and be terribly careful from now on."

Alexander focused his attention on his lunch and said, "Good."

They finished the meal without further reference to her truancy, and then started at a leisurely pace for the edge of town. When they were clear of the business district, Alexander started speaking. "There are a few more things. I won't be leaving with you tonight; I'll have to turn you over to Charlie for a day or two. Remember, we're supposed to be taking a rented aircar to Dead Wilson. They'll check. So I'll rent it and take off tonight. A couple of hundred miles from town I'll land and hide it where it won't be found for a year or so. I can make it on foot across the plain to Charlie's route and meet you." He looked at the sky.

"Sunset in three more hours," he went on. "Our relay satellite should be in range now. When we get out to the Tombs I'll try to call home."

A mile outside the city were the ancient tombs of the first leaders of the Marmion colony after the desertion by Terra. The Sebastians were to a large extent responsible for the survival of the colony and their descendants had ruled the planet for two hundred years, until the crown prince was knifed in a fight in a bar and the line died out. The royal house was replaced by a series of elected councils. But the name was revered and the Sebastian Tombs were considered a prime tourist attraction.

They were also lonely in the late afternoon. Alexander unwound a long wire from the back of his little communicator

and laid it out along the ground, listening to a tiny speaker. Three times he took up the wire and laid it out again in different directions, then he nodded. He twisted a knob and began reciting a series of numbers. The receiver whistled back at him, then a faint voice came through. Lawrence and Ginger could not hear either end clearly, so they wandered among the pillars, great monolithic chunks of rough stone balanced on their ends and sunk into the soft soil in the form of a circle. On each was faintly visible a name and a date.

The sun was touching the horizon; Alexander was still kneeling with his communicator while Lawrence and Ginger stood, a foot apart, arms folded, watching the sunset. They were startled by a polite cough behind them; they leaped aside as though it had been an exploding bomb.

It was only a little old man with grizzled whiskers, a battered hat that looked as old as he did, and rough country clothing. He coughed again. "Kennkhl! Didn't want to embarrass you two. It's a nice sunset and an old man shouldn't come walking through the middle of it."

Polite as he was, he stayed some ten feet from them and showed no sign of leaving. Ginger whispered, "Lance, we've got to keep him from seeing Alexander! I guess he can't tell we're not natives, but he'd sure be suspicious if he saw somebody talking to a little box. And this place is one of their shrines. We've got to keep his attention."

They started moving slowly and casually away from where their friend crouched hidden, in secret communication across the light-years. The old man turned to watch them until his back was to the main tomb. Ginger started chattering happily. "Yes, we often come out here to watch the sunsets. In fact, it was right here he proposed to me, two months ago. This is sort of our own special spot, isn't it, darling?" She elbowed Lawrence in the ribs and he picked up the hint.

"Yes, yes, it is," he said quickly. "When . . . When I saw . . ." He looked at Ginger and tried to figure out what he saw. "When I saw you standing in the gold of the dying day, with the sun touching your hair with copper fire and the wind tugging at your cloak, looking just as you do now, I knew I could never love any other girl who ever lived."

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Ginger stared at him in frank amazement for a moment, then snuggled up to him and looked at the old man. "Isn't he wonderful?" she gurgled.

There was a long pause. "Kennkh! Well, you two want to be alone. No sense in an old man like me disturbin' you. Wish you all the happiness in the world."

He started to go just as Alexander appeared around a standing stone. "Hey, let's get going," he said. "We're in trouble."

The old man turned around, and said in perfect chorus with Ginger and Lance, "Shut up!" They all looked at each other with wild surmise as Alexander trotted up to them.

"Charlie, Ginger—Ginger, Charlie. Charlie, Lawrence—Lawrence, Charlie. Ginger, Lawrence—Lawrence, Ginger. Consider yourselves all engaged. Been waiting long?"

"Couple minutes. I thought these two lovebirds was natives."

"Lovebirds?"

"We were just . . ." they both started to say, and Ginger finished, "We were pretending to be so he wouldn't notice you were here and suspect we were spies and so on. That's all!"

"But I told you Charlie would meet us here. Didn't I?"

"No, you didn't. Did he tell you, Lance?"

"I don't think so. . . ."

"Stop distracting me. I said we're in trouble, and we are—or will be soon. The *Boomerang* was reported to have lifted from Nidever about eight days after we did. It'll probably be bringing full data on Lawrence as well as everything they know about the weapons cache. The confederation isn't firm enough yet that they can give orders, but the locals will probably be anxious to cooperate when they find out what's at stake. They don't know there are three of us and they don't know exactly where we are or where we're going. Lawrence is the only one they know definitely by sight, but they'll be able to connect him with Ginger and me pretty soon. The home office has also uncovered a couple of O.C. sympathizers inside the Security Council—apparently the source of information that set you up for your kidnapping, Lance. At the moment, though, we're still a couple of jumps ahead of them. Charlie, you'll be leaving about dawn?"

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"Yeyup."

"You'll have Lawrence and Ginger made up as natives, riding up front with you. I'll meet you along the trail—they'll explain why. Now we have to hurry." He turned to the other two. "Once you get on that caravan you'll be safe. Nobody knows about Charlie. Ginger, you're useful, after all—they've been looking for one or two men alone, and probably still will be. Even if you and Lawrence are spotted, they'll never think you're another man. But if he's recognized, you might still have some trouble. So let's get going again."

As they hurried back to town, Ginger was muttering. "That's a secret agent! He looks like my grandfather—except that my grandfather looks reasonably intelligent. And by the way, that was a remarkably good speech you improvised there about me and the sunset. It sounded fairly realistic. Have you done any acting?"

"No. I . . . uh . . . I really meant it."

She stopped and stared at him for five seconds, then slapped him. She didn't speak to him again until several hours had passed.

XI

ALEXANDER LEFT THEM at the edge of town. Charlie led Lawrence and Ginger along the alleyways to a large warehouse where the vehicles of his caravan were stored. Here they were repaired, stocked and fueled for the long trip ahead of them. The place was deserted. Without a word he led them to a small cubicle with a couple of cots.

"You'll be needin' your sleep. I'll have to wake you up

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before dawn. There's some food over there." He pointed. "You can feed yourselves while I'm gone. Now, ma'am, could you give me the tag so I can get your luggage here before we leave?"

Ginger produced the tag from some concealed pocket and Charlie thanked her. "Now I'll leave you two alone. I've got many things to do before we can get you out of here and on your way." He closed the door behind him.

Ginger looked after him, insulted, then glared at Lawrence, who was busy doing something else entirely. "Why, that dirty old man! If I wasn't absolutely necessary to the success of this expedition, I'd walk out of here right now."

Lance put down the can he was heating. "Miss Collins, you are *not* necessary to the success of this expedition. You are, in fact, the most serious liability this expedition possesses. I may be a coward; Alexander may be incompetent; but neither of us is an arrogant, pigheaded fool. May I point out that the door is unlocked, it opens onto the street, and you are most cordially invited to use it in one direction only. You may remove your vapid face, your scrawny body, your irritating voice and your indescribable personality from my life, now and forever!" The last adjective was more or less deserved, but the first three were wholly gratuitous.

Ginger stared at him, her green eyes locked with his brown ones. Hers fell first. "I'm sorry," she said sincerely. "I guess I have been a little hard to get along with sometimes."

Lawrence went back to work on supper. "You have no idea how hard," he said.

"Would it help if I said I was sorry?"

Pause, considering. "No."

Long silence. "Well, I can't go out there alone. And if I did, I don't have any way of getting off the planet, or even of calling home for help. And I signed a paper, so you're not responsible for me at all."

Lawrence didn't speak, but searched for a spoon.

"So you're perfectly within your rights to throw me out. Therefore, the only thing I can do is earn your protection by making myself useful. Okay, sit down. I'll get supper for you."

Lawrence turned without expression and handed her the two cans he had just opened. She found dishes and a few

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minutes later they ate. Then they went to bed in their two cots, on opposite sides of the table. A moment after he turned out the light and lay down, he heard Ginger say, "Lance? Thank you."

"Huh?" he said. "For what?"

But there was no answer, and he decided she must have been dreaming.

It was sometime before dawn when Lawrence was awakened by Charlie shaking his shoulder. "Come on, young fella. We've got some work to do before you'll be presentable."

He sat up, and shook his head. He yawned. "What time is it?"

"About 3:30. There's a can of breakfast in the heater. Fresh yourself up and wash your face and hands real well—you're gonna look like a native when we leave."

Lawrence was feeding himself when Ginger joined him with another can. Neither of them spoke. When they finished eating, they washed and then found Charlie sleeping in the office.

Unwilling to wake him, Lawrence found the makeup box in one of the suitcases and started looking for the proper bottle. Then Charlie was up, and standing beside him. "That's it, right there," he said. "Put it on light. You've seen the natives—or me. You two'll have to use Maggie's mirror, though; I ain't got one anywhere."

"Use what?" asked Ginger.

"Tell each other how you look. It's just somethin' they say. I got some clothes for you, too, when you're done."

Lawrence and Ginger became friends again in the next hour. It is next to impossible for two people to stay angry while they are seriously engaged in smearing one another's faces with paint.

Charlie passed on their makeup jobs and gave them some rough native clothing to wear. "You'll be travelin' as part of my company. You'll ride with me most of the time. Keep away from the rest of the people. Once we get started, we're on our own. You'll be about as safe as you can be around here."

"What about the cases?"

"We'll rig packs for you to carry 'em. Come on now; my crew's been comin' in all night and they're about ready

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to leave. If I stall 'em, they'll start thinkin'. We don't want that."

They dressed and, following Charlie's directions, sauntered out into the main room where the vehicles waited and straight to his personal bus. Both were dressed about alike—the loose-fitting garments hiding Ginger's slender figure, her hair caught up under the floppy broadbrimmed hat the natives wore. She noticed the natives kept their face-netting wrapped around the crown of the hat while in the city and arranged both her own and Lawrence's the same way.

They entered the little cabin-on-wheels that was Charlie's home and waited for the caravan to get under way. They barely awakened when it finally did.

They were a hundred miles away from the city when night found them and the caravan stopped. They dined in Charlie's bus, then threw down their beds on the grass under the trucks along with everybody else and slept in their clothes. That day and the next were peaceful, happy ones. They were safe from discovery, they got plenty of sleep and fresh air and ate simple hearty meals. It began to look as if the enemy had been completely foxed; it would be a simple matter to skip over the hills, dig out the weapons, call the freighters down, and sail home.

About noon on the third day, a figure was spotted far ahead. The lumbering vehicles slowed; Charlie stopped and pulled him aboard. It was Alexander, footsore and hungry, unshaven and with his native clothing moderately tattered. He'd crashed the aircar some fifty miles away and steered by a pocket compass until he hit the only trail in that part of the country. He'd been waiting a little more than a day; he was most pleased to see them.

The fourth dawn Charlie pointed the caravan north, to where a line of gray lay on the horizon like a distant cloud bank. "That's where you're goin'," he said. "It's 'bout a hundred and fifty miles from here, but we got to go around the badlands and that'll take an extra day. There's one village up there; I can make a stop as an excuse for goin' off my regular route. Then you get off and I head east. You'll have 'bout fifty more miles on your own to the mountains. You'll have to find whatever it is you're lookin' for by yourselves."

"When'll we reach the village?" asked Lawrence.

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"Tomorrow afternoon," said Charlie.

"We have plenty of time," said Alexander. "But all the same, I'd feel better if we had all our gear ready in the packs so we could just take off if we had to."

Ginger looked excited. "You have a hunch," she stated. "Your animal instinct is warning you of impending danger. Good. We'll all be on the lookout for it. Lance, let's get those packs ready today."

They spent the hours until lunch arranging systems of straps and slings that would allow the three of them to carry twelve cases, containing two full field agents' packs, plus a small kit for Ginger and a large case which Charlie had added to the set on instructions from Alexander. They spent the hours after lunch wondering how three people could possibly expect to carry all that through the woods and across country and still hope to make twenty-five miles a day.

Alexander started going through the cases, throwing things out. "We'll need both sets of clothing," Lawrence started to say, but Alexander shook his head firmly.

"We can stay native. Make us harder to spot, for one thing--and for another, you'll learn when you've knocked around the galaxy a little longer that the native form of dress is almost always the most comfortable and efficient, as well as the easiest to keep clean and neat. We'll keep one heavy traveling cloak each; the nights get cold."

"Fine," said Ginger. "Two big ones out of the way."

"Wait," said Lawrence suddenly. "A lot of my personal things are in there. I brought some bookpools, toilet articles and my camera. And can I get my clothes back sometime?"

"I'll ask Charlie to send them back to Terra, C.O.D. The Council will take care of the postage."

"Well, can I bring my camera along?"

"Anything you want to carry, you can bring."

Lawrence started through his personal case while Alexander and Ginger looked over the rest.

"The medical kits are small and very important. We'd better bring both of them. The communications and electronics cases are middle-sized; we'll stay together and talk instead. Drop one of them. No, hold out both short-range hand transceivers; we might get separated."

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"What about these two little ones? They're awfully heavy."

"Power supplies. We need one; we might need two. Set one aside."

"These big ones? *Life Support*, it says."

"Food concentrates, collapsible shelter. There's food for a month, an atmosphere still for water, miscellaneous survival gear. We can drop most of one. The food in the other will feed us well over a week; one still will do for water and we can always find fresh. We may need both shelters; stick the second one in a corner."

They looked at the two middle-sized cases remaining. Alexander said, "Weapons. All kinds. If we were being chased, I'd take both if I had to carry them myself. But we're in the clear. We probably don't need to take them at all. One handgun. I'm sure I won't need it, though. Why bother to carry it? Hmmm. There aren't any dangerous animals; we won't run into any natives in this part of the country. Certainly no use for a beamer. . . . But I just don't feel right without one," he concluded suddenly, as he selected a high-power pistol-type from one weapons case.

"Well, that's it," said Ginger. "And quite an improvement. Now I can leave my own suitcase to be sent back with the rest and we have only five to worry about instead of a dozen. Or is it six? What about the box you got from Charlie? It's big and heavy."

"That has to come. And no, I can't tell you what's in it; we won't open it 'till we need it."

"Oh, Alexander! I'm a signed-on partner now. I should know what's in the box. I have a right to know."

He leaned forward conspiratorially and said, "Do you really want to know? Then I'll tell you, if you give me your solemn promise not to open it and look."

Ginger leaned her head forward next to his and promised eagerly.

"All right. In that box is a big evil Genii who is very shy. And if you open the box to take a peek at him, he will tear you into little pieces and fly away and we will be very unhappy because the museum at Geneva was going to pay us a lot of money for him. Now, don't tell Lawrence, because it's supposed to be a surprise."

He patted her on the cheek and ducked out of the bus

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to where the supper bell had just rung. He quickly closed the door behind him, just in time to block a well-aimed case that was flying at the back of his head. Probably one of the power supplies, he guessed, from the sound it made as it struck.

After dinner, peace was restored in the family and they agreed on a distribution of the loads. Ginger would carry one medical kit and the communications gear—a small case and a medium-sized one. Lawrence would carry the power supply, small but heavy, and the big food-and-shelter case. Alexander would carry the other medikit and the big heavy box which, to Ginger's annoyance, he continued to insist contained an evil Genii. Each would have a handi-talkie, Lawrence his precious camera, and Alexander a hand-beamer. Each would carry a traveling cloak. Ginger volunteered to carry the extra shelter unit, for her own privacy, then everything was taken care of.

The caravan got under way as usual at dawn the next morning. The trail ran along the edge of a different world. To their right, the grassy plain spread out to the horizon. To their left, the smooth ground dropped suddenly into a vast eroded area, with pillars and potholes, caves and crevasses, boulders and arches. Far beyond it the green-black of the distant forest began. Rising on the edge of the world was the gray range of mountains where their journey would end.

They had been under way perhaps five hours when a native boy astride a scouter caught up with the lead bus and hailed Charlie. "There's company comin', boss! Aircar about two miles behind us."

Charlie acknowledged and turned to Alexander. "This is funny. No more'n a few hundred aircars on the planet. Most folks stay home all their lives, except for a trek into the city every year or two. You don't suppose . . ."

"Let's not wait to find out," Alexander said, and vaulted over the seat into the back part of the bus where Lawrence and Ginger lounged, watching the scenery.

"Somebody's coming. They probably aren't for us, but it'll be good practice to pretend they are. How quick can you grab your packs?"

They scrambled around, looking for their cases. A minute

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later they heard an amplified voice outside. "Hey Charlie, something wrong? You're way off your route."

Charlie's voice boomed back through the loudhailer, "Nothin' wrong; just thought I'd call at Cross Trees this trip."

"You didn't file a route change."

"It's a free planet, ain't it?"

"Well, sure, but if somethin' happened we need to know where to look for you."

"I can take care of myself, thanks."

"All the same, I think you'd better stop for a few minutes while we take a look around. There's some Terran spies in this country and we wouldn't want to let 'em get away with holdin' you hostage."

"If it'll make you happy, come on down. It's near lunch time, anyways." The bus braked to a stop, and Charlie stuck his head over the seat. "Looks like this is where you get off," he said. "Alex, you got your compass and a map. Hit for the badlands when the hovercar touches down; they'll be on t'other side of the bus. I think you're gonna want to take both boxes of weapons, now."

All three were in their carrying harness; a quick check showed nothing missing. In a moment of bravado, Lawrence stuck his camera up to the right-hand window and took a picture of the hovercar descending, then shook hands with Charlie. So did Alexander. Ginger started to, but the old man raised her hand to his lips while she stared in surprise. "Good luck, kids," he said, looking at Lawrence and Ginger. "I hope you're very happy together."

Ginger's eyes started to flare dangerously, but Alexander glanced out the window. "They're down," he snapped. "Get going!"

Lawrence went first, out the door and across the grass, running low. Ginger followed, fifty feet behind. They were over the edge of the grass in thirty seconds and turned to look back. There was no sign of Alexander. They waited half a minute, looking over the edge of the plain, lying in the dust. Then he burst from the door of the bus, carrying a middle-sized case in each hand, besides his slung load. A uniformed figure appeared around the front and leveled a beamer. Forty feet from them, Alexander stumbled

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and fell and the figure broke into a run. Lawrence swore and scrambled to his feet.

Across the grass he raced, weaving from side to side. He reached Alexander and saw his hand fumbling weakly for the gun at his side. Lawrence grabbed it and fired at the approaching figure. The man crumpled.

Then Ginger was beside him and they had Alexander supported between them. They were over the cliff in the same moment more men came around the end of the caravan, guns flaring.

Alexander was trying to walk and they let him. Lawrence led the way down the crumbling cliff and pointed them around a corner to a tunnel he spotted. Here they stopped.

"They won't dare follow us here; they know we're armed. We can get out after dark. Ginger, give me that medikit."

She did and Lawrence found the tube of quick-healer. He peeled the burned sleeve back and smeared the clear jelly across the blistering flesh. Alexander winced, but his system had not recovered from the shock and he was unable to articulate. Ginger found an ampule of some restorative, popped it into his mouth, and pushed his jaw closed on it.

In another minute or two, his mouth opened again. He said faintly, "I had to get the weapons together. Thanks—Lance. Good thing you had your cloak on—looks like it stopped one of the beams. I should've had mine. Next time I'll remember. Luck came through again, though—he was set for stun, not kill. They want us alive, to tell them where those weapons are."

XII

DURING THE REST OF the day they took turns at standing guard and napping. They made a dull but nourishing supper out of the survival case; Lawrence noted with pleasure the

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quotation on the lid of the box of concentrates: "*Danger is the finest spice.*" After they finished, Alexander said, "We didn't count on these weapon cases. We'll have to redistribute a little."

"What can we do without?" asked Lance.

Alexander thought a while. "It'll have to be one of the medikits. We must have food and shelter. . . . No. We can drop the shelters. The cloaks will keep us warm enough, there's no rain this season, and the insects aren't interested in animal life. Keep the pads—we can't sleep on bare rock. We can drop some of the food. . . . No, better not. Even an army this small travels on its stomach. But taking the shelter out of the life-support case means we can fit the other medikit in. Ginger, you'll trade that kit for a weapons case. Let me get a couple of bottles out first. Lawrence, put my medikit in here, where the shelter was. Good. Should balance about the same. I think that'll do it."

"What about this power supply I've got?"

"That is most essential. Carry it and you'll see why when the time comes. Till then, trust me. Now, let's take a look ahead and see where we go from here."

Alexander spread out his map and located them approximately in an area he could cover with his fist. "Our bearing is roughly north by northwest," he said. "We were pointed straight at our target, then turned east. We'll have to make it through the badlands mostly at night, I'm afraid. They'll have an air search out for us. At the bottom edge of this mess is the Little Squirring River. We'll have to find a ford. Now the nearest one is probably the Don. It's west of us, upstream. It'll take all night to find it and we'll probably get across about dawn. If there's any sign of pursuit, we'll have to lie low all day."

Ginger was crouched near the mouth of the cave, scanning the hillside. She looked back and said, "But we're armed and dangerous. If we see an aircar, we could just shoot it down."

"They may be under orders to take us alive, but remember, we're Terrans. If we gave those crews any reason, they'd love to kill us in self-defense. We're well enough armed, but we don't have any defense against a concentrated H-E or atomic attack."

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"Atomics? On this planet?"

"This isn't such a backwater. Where do you think their electricity comes from? Waterfalls? And the atomic plants are incidentally set up to produce high-grade fissionables, in not-so-small quantities. All the O.C. planets are arming themselves for the Big Day when they can attack Terra. That's why we're out here: to put that day off for a while."

"Whoops! There's an aircar!"

"Then shut up. They probably have sound detectors."

They lay in silence and heard the distant gentle thunder of the hoverplane as it drifted by, perhaps half a mile away. No one spoke until the sound was gone.

"I saw it!" said Ginger. "It was big—and it looked mean!"

"It probably is," said Alexander. "Now there's something else I should tell you about. In just about any kind of country except this, keep quiet until a long, long time after a car has gone over. They're likely to have a line of men on foot, moving very quietly a quarter of a mile or so behind the car, watching and listening for people who think the danger has just gone by. Fortunately, we should be safe here. The only way to cover this area is by air."

Then they were all quiet for a little while longer, until Lawrence drifted off to sleep. Alexander took over the watch from Ginger and told her to do the same—it would be a long night.

It was. Shortly after sunset, Alexander produced a pair of owl-eyes from one of the cases and led them out and across the tangled tumble of barren rock until the rising stars were high in the sky. Then they all stopped to collapse and catch their breath and have a quick snack. As they ate, Ginger suddenly cocked her head skyward.

"Listen," she said.

Lawrence listened and Alexander looked. "Flatten out," he whispered. "Pull your cloaks over yourselves and don't move until I tell you to."

The aircar came closer and Lawrence could feel the edge of the wind from its impellers. Suddenly a voice thundered, "*Hey, Terrans! We see you hiding down there. Come out and surrender or we'll beam you where you are.*"

In a rush of fear, he almost stood up before he noticed the sound of the aircar was fading. It had called without

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stopping, hoping to trick them into showing themselves. He lay weakly for a long time, until he heard Alexander say softly, "All clear. You can get up now."

He peered from under the edge of the cloak and looked out at the night. The aircar was gone. Ginger whispered, "Can I talk now?"

"Yes, but quietly," said Alexander.

"They were bluffing, weren't they? If they'd known we were here, they would have beamed us without warning."

"Probably."

"But they don't want to kill us."

"I hope not. But remember—these people are sane, practical, and even understanding—on any subject except Terrans. They may not react sensibly. So expect the worst and try not to find out."

Lawrence was studying his cloak appreciatively. "What will these things do, anyway?" he asked. "It stopped a beam for me this afternoon and just now it made me invisible."

Alexander shrugged. "It'll keep you warm and dry, too. That's about it. The material is highly insulative and quite heatproof. It'll attenuate a low-level beam at a fair range. Don't try it on one at a lethal setting; the guarantee lapses rather suddenly. As for making you invisible, it's just neutral colored in most spectra. Blends with all sorts of backgrounds. Not *all* our equipment is magic; actually, most of it is scientifically explainable."

Ginger looked at him. "You know, for an undercover man, you talk an awful lot. Why are you still alive and in this job?"

"Luck. Most valuable single talent an agent can have."

Lawrence looked at her. "You know, for such a cute girl, you're awfully irritating. Why are you still alive?"

"Now look here," she flared. "Just because I have the honesty to tell people the truth about themselves—"

"Knock it off!" snapped Alexander suddenly. "A little kidding is fine, but you two are starting to get serious and that can be deadly under these circumstances." He lowered his voice and said, "Now. Remember this and remember it well. That darkness out there is where our enemies are. There is only one man in ten light-years we could trust not to kill us

on sight and we're not likely to see him again. Literally, it's us against the world. We have a good chance of coming through together and alive as long as we stick together, but I don't want to be beamed down or blown up because you two can't cooperate. Now hear this. Lawrence, do not snarl at Ginger, regardless of provocation. Ginger, you are not necessary to this expedition. If you continue to cause difficulty you will not stay with it."

She stared into his eyes, and said, "If you left me out here it would be murder."

He looked straight back without a trace of expression. "I would only kill you if it became necessary to preserve *our* lives. But make no mistake—I would kill you."

Lawrence felt his throat contract. He knew, somehow, that this time Alexander meant every word he said. He was perfectly capable of acting to save the expedition at any cost. And Ginger knew it too.

With a little choked sob she took a step backwards, her eyes still held by his. After a long moment, he released her and bent to start gathering up the packs. Lawrence did the same. And then so did Ginger, slowly and carefully. She was next to Lance; he noticed with a twinge of sympathy that her hands were shaking slightly. He felt he ought to say something.

"Ginger . . . I'll take one of those cases for you, if you'll carry my camera."

She looked up with a hesitant smile. "Thank you, Lance, but you don't have to do that." She paused, looked down and then looked up again. "Lance, I . . . I'm sorry. I promise to try to behave myself." She reached out uncertainly and took his hand. "Lance, he meant it, didn't he?"

He nodded. She stared at him and nodded with him. For just a moment, Lawrence had an impulse to take her in his arms to comfort her and tell her that he would protect her. He was stopped by the realization of the trouble *that* could cause, setting up Alexander as an enemy.

Instead, he said, "He meant it, but he doesn't want it to happen. Neither do I. Nor do you. So behave yourself." He gave her hand a quick squeeze then withdrew it and went back to work.

Alexander was close enough to see and hear without ap-

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pearing to. He raised his eyebrows slightly when Lawrence came back empty-handed, but made no further comment.

The stars wheeled overhead as they clambered through the night. Marmion was closer to the Galactic Hub than Terra and the sky was a blaze of lights. Colors could not be distinguished, nor print read, but the way was not completely obscured. With Alexander, artificially sighted, leading them, they were able to pick their way over the rocks and down the gullies without severe danger of falling. Each of them fell more than once, but more because of the uneven ground than blindness. As dawn approached, they stumbled more often, although the terrain had begun to smooth out.

Lawrence asked once if there were any go-go pills in the medikit. Alexander said, "Some. But I'd rather save them till we really need them."

There was no conversation through the long second half of that night. Lawrence looked at the stars for a while, then tripped over a rock and began to keep his attention nearer home. After a few hours he found his attention practically gone. Before the sky began to lighten he was foggily counting out the next hundred steps, over and over, promising himself he could just get through that hundred each time.

As the stars in the east began to fade into a general grayness, Alexander tried to hurry them. Most of the sky was light when they stumbled across another ridge and saw the river shining below. Beyond it, across perhaps half a hundred yards of grass, the forest began, and rising above it, far in the distance, the gray mass of mountains.

Alexander motioned them into a concealing crouch as he studied the river and the trees beyond. After a while he announced, "We're too late." He started back, straight away from the river perhaps a quarter mile before he spoke again.

"They're ahead of us," he said softly. "There are two soldiers in the trees, about two hundred yards apart. It's a fairly safe bet there are others all along the edge of the badlands. Let's find a quiet cave and wait out the day."

They cast about in several directions till Ginger found a middle-sized hole in a rock wall. It ran in about fifteen feet, then made a right angle bend into a pocket about twenty feet square. A chimney ran diagonally up through

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the rock overhead and sky could be seen at the far end. Alexander looked around in the dim light and said, "Perfect. If it had running water and radiant heat, I could spend the rest of my life here."

"Don't say that," said Lawrence. "If they find us, you might."

The cases were lined up against the wall and the pads from the discarded shelters placed about the floor. Alexander took something from his weapon case and ducked outside. He returned in a few minutes, empty-handed but smiling.

"We can sleep soundly," he said. "Our watchdog is awake." He fiddled with his pocket communicator until a low humming came from the speaker. "Hear him growl?"

"What is it?" asked Lawrence.

"A watchdog. I set him up to cover the entrance to the cave. If anything moves near us, it'll be beamed. So don't go outside without having me turn him off. If he functions, this hum he's broadcasting becomes a loud buzz for as long as the beam fires. This'll wake us up so we can be ready to defend ourselves. Of course, he'll blow up if he's tampered with, but after that he wouldn't be able to protect us."

He set up the communicator down by his bed pad, slipped off his boots and lay down. Ginger pulled her pad to the far side of the cave, rolled up her cloak for a pillow, and turned her back on the others. Lawrence did the same and was asleep almost instantly.

It seemed a moment later he awakened, but he could see the glow of the descending sun on the wall near the entrance. Alexander had a hand on his shoulder; he was whispering, "We're under attack. The watchdog's barked three times and he's still growling. Leave Ginger here; I've got a beamer for you. We have to prevent this patrol from getting back with news of us. If we can draw them off, we won't have to put them out. Can you make it up the chimney?" He pointed to the crack that opened a few feet from the floor. It was about two feet across at the bottom, and ran upwards toward the light at about sixty degrees.

"I guess so. . . ."

Alexander went first, scrambling up the narrow crack, back and feet braced, shoulders pressing against both sides. Lance

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waited until he was clear of the shaft, then started up.

It seemed like an awfully long way. The walls of rock pressed in on all sides and each hitching motion scarcely seemed to move him at all. The light stayed just as far away. His heart began to pound and his muscles ached. Hitch forward, brace sideways, reach up for a new purchase. Do it again. And again. Hitch. Brace. Reach. One. Two. Three. One. Two. Three. Then his fingers touched the lip of rock and there was daylight all around him. He hung there, catching his breath for a moment, then clambered the rest of the way out. Alexander was lying on the rock next to the opening.

"Get stuck? You took almost two minutes to climb twenty-five feet."

Lawrence shook his head.

"Never mind," Alexander whispered. "Let's go do some decoying."

He led the way down the side of the rock and then went to his stomach, indicating Lawrence should do the same. They wormed forward some fifty feet, stopping behind a low wall of eroded stone. They peeked out, cautiously.

Lawrence saw about half a dozen uniformed men, each carrying heavy-duty beamers. Near the entrance to the cave, three more were lying. Their compatriots moved slowly, searching every part of the scenery, staying away from the fallen soldiers. Apparently one had blundered into range and the others had gone to rescue him. By this time, the remaining men had figured out that some kind of machine covered only that small area and inferred that the hunted Terrans were probably protected by it. It was not unlikely that they had dispatched one of their number to summon reinforcements.

With a slight start, Lawrence realized that these heavily armed soldiers were probably terrified. Terrans were bogies to the Old Colonists, objects of mixed fear and hatred. He had the sudden feeling that if he were to leap up, waving his cloak and shouting, they would run in panic. Then he had another feeling that, of the six, at least one would retain the presence of mind to fire a lethal beam at the bogey. He decided the fun wasn't worth the risk.

The soldiers not only kept watch all around, they watched each other. They stayed always in view, moving slowly and

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cautiously and spreading out only slightly. He wondered what Alexander intended to do.

Before he found out, one of the soldiers gave a low whistle and beckoned the others. "They've found it," whispered Alexander.

The other soldiers ran up to the box and the finder poked at the unmarked controls. Alexander ducked below the level of the wall and Lawrence did the same only a moment before a flare of light dazzled them and a heavy concussion slammed the ground.

They rose cautiously. Alexander sighed. "I'm sorry about that," he said. "I wanted their uniforms. Well, there are still the three that were put out by our watchdog. Let's see how they feel."

Together they picked their way across the rocks to where the three bodies lay as Lawrence said, "How they feel? Aren't they dead?"

"I hope not. Remember, I don't like to kill people. It uses them up too fast. They should just be unconscious." He knelt beside the nearest one, checked the other two, and nodded. "Nothing wrong with them. We'll strip them and leave them. These uniforms will be our passage across the river and into the trees. Only one heavy-duty beamer here—you carry that. I've got my handgun."

As he spoke he was efficiently stripping the soldiers. "It's just about dark now, and these boys were probably ordered to get back for supper. We wouldn't want to be late. Better go wake up Ginger. Give her this to put on, and tell her to hide her hair however she can." He handed the smallest uniform to Lawrence.

He took it and headed into the cave. He started to speak as he came around the corner into the inner room, but something clouted him across the back of the head and he pitched forward.

The cave spun around him and he heard a frightened voice from a great distance saying, "Oh, Lance! Darling, are you alive? Don't just lie there!" He moved his outstretched hand a little. "You are all right, aren't you," the voice asked anxiously.

"Just fine," he muttered feebly. "I'll be up in a minute."

A pair of slender strong arms slipped under him and

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half dragged him to a bedpad, then rolled him over gently. He forced his eyes open. There were two big moist green ones looking into them, a few inches away. "Ginger," he said, "what was the first thing you said after you hit me?"

"I . . . Uh . . . I don't know. I think I asked you if you were all right. Why?"

"Just wondering if I was dreaming, that's all. What did you hit me with, anyway?"

"One of the extra hand-beamers."

"Why didn't you just shoot me as I came in the door?"

"Well, I wasn't *absolutely* sure you were one of them."

He started to nod and discovered his head hurt. "You must have knocked me dizzy," he said. "I was about to say that makes sense."

"What?"

"Never mind," he said, sitting up slowly. "Look, here's your new spring outfit. It's all the rage on the other side of the river, where we're going. Slip into it and see if you can hide your hair."

She took the uniform, then looked at him pointedly. He looked back blankly. "If you can walk," she said, "I'd like a little privacy in my dressing room."

Lawrence rolled clumsily to his feet, stood up and promptly fell over again. "Would it help if I put my face to the wall and pulled a cloak over my head?"

She looked worried. "You *are* all right, aren't you?"

"Frankly, no. But I'll be functioning again in a little while if I can lie down and recover."

"Then hide your face. And next time, knock before you enter a lady's bedroom."

"Next time *you* look before bashing somebody over the head."

There was no answer, so he lay there in darkness and listened to the rustling of clothes. He tried to visualize the scene behind him, but his head still ached severely. Eventually he went to sleep.

He felt much better when he woke up. He rolled over to see Ginger and Alexander sitting beside the heater with steaming open cans of food. He crawled over to them and held out a hand. "How cute," said Ginger. "When did you teach him to beg?"

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Lawrence glared up at her. "Keep that up and I'll bite you in the leg. In fact, if I don't get some breakfast in about fifteen seconds, I may bite you in the leg anyway."

Alexander laughed and reached for a can. "I see you're your usual good-natured self again. Pour this over your tongue and then see how you feel. When you've finished, climb into your uniform. It's too late to join the neighbors for supper, but we still must do a little trespassing."

Lawrence's head felt much better after dinner—or breakfast, as it effectively was for them. Then, all three uniformed they crept out of the cave past the three unconscious soldiers. Lawrence looked at them and whispered, "Are you sure they're not dead?"

"You can check the pulse yourself. They'll sleep till almost dawn—about twelve hours from the time they were hit. The watchdog is usually set for that." They moved off, single file, across the rocks toward the river.

Down the last incline they went, straightening to military posture, and splashed across the shallows, holding the cases high above their heads in the hip-deep water. Alexander's foot slipped on something and he splashed violently for a moment trying vainly to retain his balance. He struggled upright again, soaking wet, and continued. They were clambering up the opposite bank when a voice from the shadows challenged them.

Alexander answered hoarsely, "It's us—what's left of the patrol. We found the Terrans. We got 'em, too, after they got everybody but us."

"Who did they—" the voice began, but Alexander interrupted, as he kept moving forward.

"We got all their gear, too. Decided not to bring the bodies back; they got kind of messed up."

"Which of you did they—" the voice began again, and was again interrupted.

"Look, we can't stand here talkin' all night. We're hungry, and this stuff is heavy. Give us a hand takin' it back to HQ, will ya?"

"Sure." The guard came out from under the trees, holstering his gun. He came up to them, then looked closely at

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Ginger. Realization dawned suddenly and terror distorted his face. "You're not . . ."

"You recognized us," said Alexander softly as his hands gripped the guard in two painful places. "Penalties of fame, I suppose. We're the terrible Terrans. We just killed the whole patrol and ate three of them raw, which is lucky for you because we're not so hungry at the moment. Nevertheless, if you don't cooperate we could still divide you among us for dessert."

The guard looked extremely interested in cooperating. Alexander continued to explain. "First you will answer some questions. Every time you try to lie to me, I will break one of your fingers. When we run out of fingers, I'll start on your arms, then your feet, then your legs. Then I will put your eyes out one by one, and if you haven't started telling the truth by that time I will slash your tongue to ribbons and leave you here to drown in your own blood."

The guard's eyes rolled back in their sockets and he sagged limply in Alexander's grip. Ginger looked at him coldly. "I could have told you you were overdoing it a little," she said.

Lawrence nodded. "Slashing the tongue to ribbons wasn't really necessary."

"I guess not," said Alexander. "But I'd gotten rolling nicely there and I needed a really powerful finish."

"You knocked him dead, all right," said Ginger. "Come on, let's pour some water over the poor man and see if he can remember his own name after what you've done to him."

"Terrible Terrans," said Lawrence, as Ginger hurried off to get some water from the stream. "I like that. Just make it up?"

"No—that's a relic from my first assignment. I'll tell you all about it some time."

The guard, once revived, remembered his own name with no trouble, as well as the entire strategic layout of the woods, the plans of his superior officers, the entire chain of command, all the gossip, and brief biographical notes on everyone in the division with a rank above Corporal.

Alexander thanked him most politely. "Now," he said, "we will go see if you have given us the correct information."

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And since it will be a long walk back here to punish you if you have told us a lie, you will come with us. Now these cloaks we wear are ray-proof, but you aren't. Remember that. And because you've been so cooperative, I'll give you a chance anywhere along the line to change your mind about our route and not have to worry about being caused severe agony. On your feet now and let's go."

The four of them faded into the night.

XIII

ALEXANDER CONTINUED TO WEAR the owl-eyes; he steered them through the nightened forest. The guard had simple night-goggles on, too, and could tell roughly where they were. He had been convinced it would be better for his fellow soldiers that they shouldn't meet the Terrans, as well as for his own life. One time they were challenged but Alexander simply assumed a voice of command barked, "What are you doing out here, soldier? Get back to your post before I have to come over there and find out who you are."

"Yes sir!" snapped back from the darkness and they heard someone moving quickly away through the underbrush.

After a while they passed the guard-infested perimeter, and Alexander turned to their guide. "I'd like you to know you've been most cooperative," he said, "and it's been a real pleasure working with you. Now, thank you, and good night." His beamer hummed softly and the guard dropped unconscious.

"Good night, sweet private," quoted Ginger, "and flights of sergeants sing thee to thy rest."

Lawrence looked at her, moderately appalled. "Another victim of a classical education."

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"Come on," said Alexander. "We haven't got all night and we're not out of the woods yet."

Lawrence scowled. "I was expecting one of you clowns to say something like that, sooner or later. Okay; shoulder up the packs and back on the trail."

"One thing I didn't mention," said Alexander hesitantly, sounding rather embarrassed. "When I slipped crossing the river I lost the weapons case I was carrying. Ginger, do you still have yours?"

Ginger looked terribly smug. "Yes, I do," she said. "And now let's have no more remarks about my being in the way or unnecessary."

Alexander took her case, Lawrence took the medikit from his life-support case and gave it to her, balancing the loads equally again. Then they hoisted their packs and set off, Alexander steering roughly by the stars he could see through the foliage.

Again they stopped about midnight for lunch. They dug a hole under one of the trees and buried the three uniforms, after changing back into the native garb they had carried. Lawrence kept one of the lapel insignia as a souvenir.

When the sky grew light at last, they could find no place to hide. The forest was thick, but the soldiers would be searching for them carefully and knew their approximate direction. It would be suicide to stop and sleep. It probably would be impossible any time before they reached the mountains—some three full days journey ahead. Alexander stopped and lowered his pack.

"Now," he said, "it's necessary."

"What is?"

"The go-go pills you asked about. Friends, we will have to keep on the run for at least another thirty-six hours without stopping more than a few minutes for food. I'd better tell you a few things now. Have either of you ever used these before?"

"I did once," said Ginger. "For a final exam. But just one pill."

"Okay. You'll have some surprises coming. We will all help keep track of time on this and we will each take a pill every six hours. If we miss one, the energy drain will catch up to us and we'll sleep for a day and wake up captured or dead."

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Everybody will remind everybody else every six hours. We'll eat every three hours, the special rich concentrate—it's in the lid of the case. We'll need lots of water, but there are streams around here, all pure." He looked at his watch. "It's just about six o'clock," he said. "Next pills at noon."

He knelt, opened the medikit, and found a bottle. He handed out two little white pills and took a third one himself. They each drank a cup of water, then Alexander replaced the medikit except for the pill bottle, which he tucked in a securely fastened pocket.

Then they were on their way again. After some ten minutes, Lawrence stopped feeling sleepy; a few minutes later he stopped feeling tired; and a few minutes after that he felt like Hercules. The forest was beautiful in the morning, with sunlight streaming down and a soft wind rustling the trees. All it needed was some birds. But the only birds on the planet were in the zoo back in the city. He sighed regretfully and looked at Ginger. She was in the middle, as usual.

He watched her walking for a mile or so and contemplated how the rough, baggy native clothing failed to hide her attractive figure. He thought about what a marvelously unique girl she was and what kind of man it would take to win her—and he wondered whether he was really out of his mind, because he wanted to be that man.

Nevertheless, he decided, this was neither the time nor the place for a proposal—he'd wait until they stopped for lunch. No! He *was* out of his mind. She'd probably much prefer Alexander. He was the dashing, brave, romantic type she seemed to adore. She wouldn't be interested in a drab archaeologist.

He didn't feel much like a drab archaeologist now, with a go-go pill boiling through his bloodstream and assorted mortal dangers behind him and ahead of him. Ahead of him . . . Well, he couldn't very well ask her to marry a man who might be killed in the next day or two. But then she might, too. The poor kid! His eyes started to fill with tears.

Just at that moment Alexander called a halt. "Food," he said briefly.

They sat, got out containers and opened them.

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"How are you doing?" he asked. "Physically I can tell you're all right; how are you mentally? Emotionally?"

Ginger spoke with her mouth full. "Having a little trouble concentrating. Mind is running full blast, hopping among many interconnecting chains of thought. No direction."

Lawrence said, "Something similar. I think I'm emotionally over-reacting to my own thoughts and I can't organize my thoughts. Moderate confusion. Nothing serious."

"About what I expected. Both of you have active minds and the pills increase everything about you. If you're strong, they'll make you stronger. If you're smart, they'll make you smarter. You just have to pay for it afterwards."

"What do they do for *you*?" Ginger asked.

"They make me even more entertaining and lovable. Now finish off those cans of food and let's hit the trail, kiddies. It's a long, long way to bed."

They ate again and took another pill at noon and kept on their way. Perhaps five miles past lunch the roar of an aircar was heard faintly in the distance, approaching.

"Here come our old friends," Alexander said. "And just in time. The afternoon was getting a little boring. Now for some excitement. I don't think we want to kill them; just slow them up a bit. Weapons kit, please."

He set it down, opened it and began rummaging around, humming happily to himself. "First we let the aircar go by," he said. "If it crashed it might hurt somebody. Now, Lawrence, here's one for you—and Ginger, one for you. Fire only from cover and don't fiddle with the settings or you might kill one of our misguided enemies. The Council would then be upset and dock my pay."

He handed them each what looked like a standard hand-beamer. Ginger regarded hers vaguely, and said, "It's a gun, isn't it? Will it just put them to sleep?"

"For about twelve hours. They'll be cold and wet and alone in the woods at night when they wake up, but they shouldn't be chasing innocent tourists like us. Right, Lawrence?"

"I guess so. . . ." Things somehow lacked a sharpness of focus to Lawrence. He was somewhat aware they were all being a little bit silly, but it didn't really seem to matter because he felt so good all over. "Sure! We have to sleep

out in the cold because of them, so they deserve it." He started to laugh and heard himself giggle.

Ginger looked at him strangely and was about to say something when Alexander wagged his beamer at her. "Not a word, little girl. The foemen are almost upon us. Let us dig in, and prepare to fire upon them from cover."

Knowing his life depended upon his sobriety, Lawrence concentrated every effort on sensible action and took refuge in a clump of trees, concealed both from the air and from the ground. Moments later the aircar thundered slowly overhead, kicking up the vegetation in its wake. Lawrence crouched, silent and patient. He peered out carefully, watching for the soldiers. He looked for Alexander and Ginger and was relieved to find he couldn't spot them. He started thinking about Ginger again and only the greatest effort of will brought his mind back to the job at hand—*The lurk that must be done*, he thought, and pinched himself hard on the thigh to keep from giggling again.

There was silence through the forest and then his eyes caught a movement. Soldiers, about twenty feet apart, stepping silently over the brush, guns in hand, looking about as though they expected a demon to spring at them. As, in a way, they did.

And, in a way, one did. He waited until they passed, the nearest some five feet away. Then he fired at the farther one, who fell without a sound but the crunching of leaves and the thud of a dropped gun. His companion turned in terror as Lawrence spoke, just loudly enough: "The Terrible Terrans have trapped you!" The soldier spun, firing his beamer blindly, and fell as his friend had fallen, to sleep innocently for half a day.

Then there was confusion. There were about a dozen soldiers to start; six fell before the others could react. They dove for cover and began blasting every tree and shrub in sight. Lawrence hugged the ground and fired back. The leaves were stripped from the branches above him and a bush a few feet away burst into flame. One soldier screamed as a beam from another hit him. Lance shook his head sadly and fired at the sound. Sleep is the best first aid in the world.

After a while things were quiet. Lawrence waited, then threw a small stone against a nearby tree. There was a

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crackle as the trunk charred. He considered the implications of this, and lay very still.

Quite some time later, Alexander appeared in the middle of the clearing and called, "Alle, alle out's in free!"

Lawrence stood and stepped out, looking for Ginger. She appeared a moment later, sliding down the trunk of a tall straight tree. "I got six all by myself," she said proudly. "I could see them all beautifully, but I didn't want to hog all the fun."

"You're too generous," said Alexander. "Is everybody okay? I heard a scream back there."

"Fortunes of war," said Lawrence. "One of the heathen got in the way of his own side's beams. That's one danger in giving charged beamers to idiots."

"Oh, I don't know," said Ginger. "We seem to have done all right."

"Luck, little girl, pure and simple. You're pure and we're simple."

She laughed gaily and flipped the beamer into the air. "Thank you, sir," she said as she caught it, butt down, ready to fire. "The three of us are alone on a hostile planet, with at least one army looking for us and every resource turned to our destruction. All we have is our wits, our charm, our good looks and two agent's kits. The enemy is therefore hopelessly outnumbered. For their own sakes, they'd better realize it soon, before they kill any more of their own men."

Lawrence found himself laughing with her. "In that case, wouldn't it be kinder to put temptation beyond their reach as quickly as possible?"

"Right," said Alexander. "Back on the road, team! It's an hour till teatime and I want five more miles behind us before then."

They made that five miles and ate, twelve miles more by the time they stopped for supper. Alexander was keeping track of the distance by counting paces—every thousand double paces was a mile, and he shifted a pebble from his left pocket to his right.

They stopped by a brook to swallow their six P.M. pills and downed about a quart of water each, laughing wildly at Alexander's goldfish imitation. A bite to eat at nine, then a full meal and another pill at midnight, when Alexander an-

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nounced they had covered, to the best of his measuring ability, some eighty miles in the twenty-seven hours they had been on the march since crossing the river.

"We'd better be safe now," he said. "They'd never think of looking for us so far away." He giggled. "They think we're only human. They don't realize we're immortal, invulnerable, and untiring."

"Illegal, immoral, and fattening," gasped Lawrence.

"Irrelevant, immaterial, and incompetent," gurgled Ginger and the three of them collapsed on the ground, laughing uproariously.

Alexander recovered first and said, as seriously as he could, "I'm awfully pleased our morale is so high, but we're still only two-thirds of the way there. We're going to be pushing our limits to stay on these pills for another twelve hours, though we might make twenty-four—we have enough of them. Now drink your water like a good little boy and girl, and we'll start pounding the dirt again."

The trees were thinning by three A.M. when they ate again; another ten miles lay behind them. The hours before dawn began to lack reality for Lawrence; he seemed at times to be an island of consciousness swaying freely in the darkness, but unconnected with it.

Things didn't seem as funny now. The star-crusted sky was pressing down uncomfortably close and the few trees were figures of menace looming against the night. Lawrence caught himself looking around quickly, hoping to catch one of them moving, but they always stopped as soon as he looked straight at them. He made a wide circle to avoid walking too close to one tree that stood in their path, but he knew it started to follow them as soon as their backs were to it.

He spun around suddenly, heart pounding, and the tree was still where it had been. He eyed it suspiciously for a minute, then turned to look for Ginger and Alexander. They were some fifty or sixty feet away and plodding steadily on, unaware that he had stopped. He began to feel terribly lonely and hurried up to walk beside Ginger. She looked vaguely in his direction and kept plodding ahead. He felt better walking beside her and stayed there until dawn came, time for another meal and another pill.

The trees lay behind them now and the mountains rose

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gently ahead, beyond an expanse of grasslands. After briefly consulting his map, Alexander looked at them and said, "Another thirty miles to go. Sometime late this afternoon. How you two feeling?"

Ginger frowned. "Not as happy. Reality is slipping a little. I still can't concentrate, but it's not as much fun as it was."

Lance nodded. "I had an attack of the whim-whams a couple hours ago, but it went away. I'll be okay in the daylight."

"No, you won't. We're past the fun part. Our systems are overloaded. Things are going to get rough today. Emotional tone is going to drop, we're going to be harder to get along with. For all our sakes, all of us have to remember we need each other. Drink your water now; the sooner we start, the sooner it'll be over."

Nothing about that last day seemed real to Lawrence. They waded through knee-deep grass, following a faint trail part of the time, cutting across the rest. They ate at mid-morning; shortly before noon they heard an aircar and lay flat until the sound went away, but it didn't come near them. Lawrence was beyond caring either way.

They didn't talk much, guessing it would be safer; less likely to touch off tempers that were gradually growing larger and more spiky.

At noon, they had a large meal and Alexander handed pills around, saying brusquely, "If we can keep going, these ought to be the last ones we'll need."

The sun crept across the sky and they crept across the rising grasslands to the foothills of the mountains. Lawrence found he had trouble focusing his eyes now and his hands shook when he adjusted the straps carrying his burden. The three of them were strung out over some distance now, Alexander still in the lead.

An hour later, things finally gave way. Ginger had stopped to shift some of her load. Lawrence, plodding along with his head down, bumped into her. She dropped the medikit and spun on him, eyes burning. "You shambling half-wit," she snarled. "Can't you keep your adjective eyes open? Get away from me, you ham-handed baboon!"

Lawrence boiled. "Why you foul-mouthed little slut, I wouldn't touch you with plasteel gloves!"

She slapped him, hard, and he gave her a full backhand across the face that sent her sprawling. "You've been asking for that for too long, you—" She grabbed him by the ankle and pulled a leg out from under him. As he fell to one knee, she was on top of him, clawing and biting. His cheek was raked before he could capture her wrists. And then he threw her over and cuffed her again, twice, coldly and viciously. She broke and went limp in his grasp. He jerked her to her feet, grabbed her around the waist with his other arm, and pulled her to him, tilting her head back. He kissed her brutally, full on the mouth.

She squirmed against him and bit at his lip, but he escaped. He held her arms twisted behind her with one hand, as with the other he slowly forced her head back and took another kiss. This time she gasped and began to respond. He bent her body back and might have lowered her to the ground but for the sudden sound of pounding footsteps and an incredible stream of multi-lingual profanity approaching.

Alexander ran up to them as they broke apart, swearing passionately. "What do you think you're doing? It looked as if you were fighting a minute ago."

Both Lawrence and Ginger were breathing too hard to talk; Lawrence's knees were shaking so he could hardly stand. His heart was pounding so hard, every part of his body throbbed with it; his ears rang and his mind spun around inside him.

Alexander swore again and seemed a little calmer. "Look," he said, his voice unsteady. "We're nearly there. See? In four more hours these pills will wear off. By that time we will be dug into a cave up there and we can sleep as long as we want. After that we'll talk about this, or fight if we still want to. But right now, *we have got to keep moving!*"

They picked up their cases. Ginger was shaking as much as he was, Lawrence thought. They didn't look at each other and they didn't speak. At three o'clock they were just short of the foothills and stopped to eat. No one spoke.

The sun slipped down the sky and the three climbed up into the hills. Rocks erupted through the grass oftener until only wisps of yellowish green showed among the stones.

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The sun was out of sight behind the mountains but there was still light in the sky when Alexander called their minds back to their bodies. "There," he said.

A cave opened before them, part-way up a steep cliff. They managed to scramble up to it, and inside. It wasn't too small and looked fairly safe. Alexander set up another little box inside the entrance and opened the food case.

"Last meal," he said. "No pills. We have about fifteen minutes before they start to wear off and then we'll fall apart. Have your bedpads laid out."

Ginger started opening the packages of food. Lawrence wanted to ask if the box in the entrance was another watchdog, but he couldn't think of the words to phrase the question. Then the food was hot and they ate.

The food finished, Alexander lay down and was asleep in a minute. Lawrence and Ginger lay down. He could feel his limbs going numb and bowstring muscles gradually slipping loose as the effects of the drug began to fade. He looked at Ginger and caught her looking at him. Their eyes held for a moment, then his hand reached over and touched hers. She accepted it and returned his squeeze. Her eyes smiled, then glazed over slightly and her lids fell. Lance held her limp hand and let the growing waves of utter exhaustion wash over him until he was submerged in a bottomless sea of dark, warm sleep.

XIV

WHEN LAWRENCE AWOKE, he wondered for a moment if he had slept at all. The sky was still dim outside the cave, with the golden light of sunset reflecting off the cliff wall

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opposite. He ached in every muscle, but at least he no longer felt completely exhausted. It took some will power to turn his head and scan more of the surroundings. Then he remembered he must have slept, because he'd had the strangest dream—there had been an endless grassy plain and an incredible tiredness, and a strange and beautiful girl. . . . And he had been a different person, too—a strong, commanding, violent person. He wasn't sure he liked the dream, but he remembered the fierce kisses and the passion that had surged between them. . . .

Suddenly his eyes opened wide and focused on the low rocky ceiling. Oh dear Lord! It hadn't been a dream! He felt a hot blush rising through his face in an agony of embarrassment and he rolled over suddenly to hide in his cloak.

A voice said, "He just moved. I think he's still alive."

Another voice said, "Either that or rigor mortis is setting in."

"Wave some of this under his nose. He'll probably be too ashamed to speak to me."

Lawrence tied up inside and then, as the odor of hot food reached him, his stomach came to life and started howling. He reached up a hand and a can was placed in it, which he brought down to his level and proceeded to engulf, still without showing his face.

Ginger spoke again. "Lance, you can hear me; do so. You don't need to feel embarrassed. Those pills had us both in warp and you cannot be held responsible for your actions. I'm not upset. Now come out from under there and speak to us."

He considered this without moving for a long minute and heard Alexander and Ginger muttering to each other in the corner.

"... possibility ... psychemotional damage?"

"Define damage. Found out ... about himself ... didn't know ... damage?"

"... change relationship ... ?"

"Doubt it. Remember ... safety factor as long as your leg."

Lawrence tossed the empty can at the voices and sat up in time to see Ginger field it. He looked at her, grinned, and

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winked. "As well as I can remember, you didn't mind it much."

Ginger colored just slightly and said, "Remember, none of us were sane at the time. Alexander, how did you manage to stay fairly well balanced through it all? And be serious this time."

"Seriously, then—one of the first qualities an agent is picked for is stability. I have to be able to take more than anyone else without showing stress. Also, even when the reaction phase hit me, I was able to blow the pressure off in profanity. It's a handy safety valve. You might remember it next time."

"I hope there isn't a next time. I feel as if I'd been run through a tenderizer, turned inside out and shaken hard, then wadded up and jumped on for a day or two. How about you, Lance?"

"Something like that. Uh, how about some more food? Judging from the condition of the day out there, we've slept a solid twenty-four hours, and my stomach agrees."

"Just about," said Alexander. "Chef, retire to the kitchen and prepare another full meal for my friend here."

Ginger reached over and pulled another can out of the heater. "Here you are, sir," she said. "Remember, twenty-five percent tip for extra fast service."

Lawrence accepted the can, then raised an eyebrow. "No tip," he said. "No spoon."

He reached for the can he had discarded and found the plastic spoon. As he ate, he asked, "Have you been up long?"

Ginger said, "I woke up about half an hour ago. He says he was up since about three this afternoon."

Alexander nodded. "I went outside for a while and looked over the area. I think we'll keep this cave as a base of operations while we look for our cache. We should be within ten miles of it here. I took some preliminary readings with the mass-differential detector and got some vague indications, but it'll take a couple of days to pinpoint it."

"And how many days to dig down to it?" asked Lawrence with his mouth full.

"We'll see. Big Brother has some surprises under his cloak."

Idle conversation filled the rest of the evening and no sign was heard of any enemy. Toward midnight, they fell

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to yawning; after another good meal, they went to sleep again. Lawrence, back in his right mind, almost reached for Ginger's hand before he went to sleep, but decided against it, regretfully. There were certain advantages to temporary insanity.

They rose and breakfasted a reasonable time after dawn the next day. There were few sore muscles left after a round of pills and a spray of some pungent liquid over the afflicted areas.

Ginger was given the choice of coming with them for a day's walk with no promise of success, or staying around the cave with nothing to do. She elected unhesitatingly to accompany them. Each carried a side-arm with a twelve-hour stun capacity and Alexander carried a delicate piece of equipment with a couple of knobs and a couple of dials. Ginger carried lunch and Lance carried his camera. He was quite surprised to find he had taken some twelve scenes since installing a fresh reel in Charlie's caravan—try as he might, he could not remember when or of what they could possibly have been taken.

They spent the day wandering about the hills, admiring the scenery and the silence and watching Alexander fiddle about with his detector. After lunch he started getting excited and hurried them on to each next location marked on the big map he carried. After taking a reading he would scribble something on the map and study it a bit, then chuckle happily and hurry them on to the next spot, where he would repeat the performance.

Miraculously, they ended up back at the cave again about sunset. Alexander did something with his communicator and then allowed them to climb the rocks to the entrance. Once inside he turned their guard back on.

Lawrence spoke first. "I suppose you now know exactly where the cache is buried?"

"Not quite exactly. It seems to be about half a mile across and it's under a few miles of mountain. However, by descending into this valley"—he pointed on the map—"we'll be about four miles horizontally and one mile vertically away from it."

"Well, that's just wonderful!" said Ginger. "Do you two dig while I carry away the dirt so it won't be noticed?"

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"Not really. I guess there's no need to keep it secret any longer—that big box contains an evil genii, all right. Only it's called a portable field model mining disintegrator. Our power source will hook into it and give us a little over a minute at full blast if we need it that long. Though we shouldn't need more than about thirty seconds."

"What's special about a mining disintegrator?"

"A funny fringe on the edge of the beam that fuses the rock or whatever so you have a lined tunnel that won't cave in."

"And why did you keep it a secret?"

"Just wanted to surprise you. Besides, Ginger was so anxious to know what it was. I couldn't resist teasing her a little."

They stared at the box for a while, then turned to supper, conversation, and, eventually, bed.

The next day they packed up their gear again and headed for the deep mountain valley that should be the gateway to their goal. They found it well before noon and had set up camp again in time to eat lunch there. It was a beautiful valley, silent and cool, with trees across the floor and spreading up the sides to where the rock broke free and soared up another half a thousand feet in some spots. They stood in the bottom and looked up in wonder at the mountains all around them. Lawrence saw the steep walls on all sides and the precipitous trail by which they had descended and felt like an ant in the bottom of a bowl. If Ginger or Alexander felt awed, they didn't remark on it. But one seldom does.

Alexander turned on his detector and got a reading immediately. He pointed. "There it is," he said. "If you imagine real hard, you can almost see a huge mass far away below that mountain. It's round and it's five miles away, but it stretches from there"—he pointed to one part of the rock wall—"to there. It's big," he added. "And it's all ours."

"All we have to do is tag it," said Ginger. "Where's your genii?"

Lawrence set down the box he had carried from the cave and Alexander opened it. Ginger handed him the power source and he placed it nearby. The sides of the box folded down in an ingenious way to make a sturdy stand; the disintegrator stared out of it with three sunken eyes. The

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one in the middle was small, the two on either side were large and menacing.

"Ever seen one of these?" asked Alexander.

Lawrence and Ginger shook their heads.

"This little hole is a laser range finder," he went on. "These two big lenses direct the alpha and beta components of the disintegration field and the rangefinder keeps them focused on the end of the hole, as well as automatically narrowing the beams so the hole stays about the same size. It'll go through a mile of rock in about five seconds. Never mind where the rock goes; we don't know. The air goes, too—everything in range—so there's quite an implosion when the beam cuts off. We'll have to be well away from it and protected. But we don't have to worry about damaging the weapons—the odd readings I was getting on the mass differential detector confirm it has the same kind of force shield the XXX ship did and a disintegrator won't touch it. We've got another gadget to open that, though; like the one that finally cracked the ship. You'll use that when we get to it."

Alexander took one final reading and proceeded to set the focus on the three lenses. He stepped back and looked at Lawrence and Ginger. "You two find a safe place to sit and watch the show," he said. "I'll get this thing started and join you."

They went about a hundred feet away, to where a small hummock would provide them with a sort of natural breastwork and crouched. Alexander fiddled with a few settings, then connected the power cable, threw the switch, and sprinted for cover. He landed beside them, saying, "It'll fire in a few seconds."

In those few seconds, a muffled thunder swelled over the edge of the hills. They looked up and saw a large, fast-moving aircar appear above the rim of the cliff, heading toward them. A loudspeaked voice shouted, "We've got you now, Terrans! Try to outrun this!"

Lawrence knew without seeing what it was. There was no time to react any way but one. As the last word echoed down from above, there was a spitting crackle as the disintegrator began to fire. Lawrence was out from cover and sprinting toward it. The roar was coming from the cliff

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where a hole of absolute blackness had appeared; the device itself whined angrily. Lawrence turned to see the aircar, still approaching at about five thousand feet, release something tiny and black. It arced down with amazing slowness. Lawrence seized the disintegrator, and lifted it, still firing. It tore a gigantic gash across the face of the cliff as the beam swung about.

Standing with legs spread, both arms bracing the heavy machine, Lawrence swung it across the sky. With a cloud of dust and a rumble delayed by distance, the top of the opposite cliff wall fell into the valley. The almost invisible beams stabbed into the sky and a violent wind tore at Lawrence's clothing and lashed the treetops. Sweeping the beam back and forth in a tight pattern, Lawrence tried desperately to hit the falling bomb. He swung high once and saw the tail of the aircar vanish, in a flash of perception, then had to scan for a frantic second to find the falling bomb again. The beam swung low and a swath of treetops fell as though lopped by an incredible scythe. The air thundered about him as he swung the heavy disintegrator. The bomb fell and fell. He waved the beam of destruction like a hose of water, praying to connect. Then the bomb vanished and Lawrence swung the beam two more times from momentum before the fact registered. At that moment the whine of the beam stopped and there was a sky-splitting thunderclap. The concussion stunned Lawrence and he staggered backward, dropping the disintegrator to its base and falling on his back.

Somewhere behind him he heard a dull explosion and remembered the aircar. *Serves 'em right*, he thought, and fainted.

Then Ginger had her arms about him and was shaking him. "Lance, wake up! You're not hurt!"

He opened his eyes and said, "Only my ears. They'll be ringing for a week."

Then he couldn't speak because Ginger was kissing him. After a second or so he grabbed her and started returning the kiss. Then she broke. "Oh, Lance! You *are* a hero—and you deserve a hero's reward," she announced. "Alexander, wasn't that the most wonderful thing you've ever seen?"

The agent was checking over the disintegrator and re-

setting it. "Just offhand, I would guess so," he said. "I certainly can't remember ever having seen it done before."

"Well, you won't see me doing it again soon, either," said Lawrence. "My ears hurt. And I just realized—that metal was hot. I think my hand is burned. Ginger . . ."

"Right here." She had the salve from the medikit for his hands. "Hold them out and they'll be fixed up in no time."

"They're just starting to hurt," he went on vaguely. "I didn't notice when . . ." Things started to blur around him and he was suddenly dizzy.

"Shock," said Alexander, somewhere faraway. "Put his head down and his feet up. He's probably never had a charge of adrenalin like that in his life."

Lawrence retained a dim awareness of what was going on around him, but he had absolutely no interest in it for some time. Gradually the world solidified and he tried to sit up.

"Come on; on your feet," said Ginger. "We're heading back to the bunker. We've still got four miles of mountain to drill through."

They took their positions again and a moment later Alexander joined them. In the few seconds before the disintegrator fired, he said to Lawrence, "Now if they come back, stay here and I'll try to get them with a beamer. We only have a little power to spare left in the pack."

But they didn't come back. Lawrence had a mental picture of the command post watching the sky for a flash of brilliance and a boiling mushroom cloud. And then waiting for the aircar to come back, and finally going to their chapel and praying for protection from the Terrible Terrans. . . .

They had their hands over their ears and their mouths wide open when the disintegrator shut off. The concussion scarcely bothered them. An unearthly sound came out of the hole as the air rushed in to fill it and another clap rumbled out of it as the air hit the other end. Some rocks fell from the overhang where the beam had torn a gash on Lawrence's first swing and the hanging sheet of rock quivered ominously, but the tunnel itself held firm.

They stood and looked at the opening. Alexander spoke first. "There we are. The way is open. Now, Ginger, you can go ahead with Lance or wait here with me. You'll go

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ahead? I thought so. Lance, you know what to do. I'll wait here and call the fleet when you've broken the field, then join you down there."

"Right. But watch out for the follow-up patrol. They'll want to know what happened to their bomb—and their bomber."

"No problem. It'd take them three hours to get here from just outside the valley—and they wouldn't be inside the valley before the bomb was dropped. We've got time to spare. Now, on your way. We've all got work to do."

Alexander proceeded to take apart the disintegrator and pack it up as Lawrence and Ginger, with one lantern from the kit, shouldered their gear for the last time, looked once more around the valley, which was no longer quite as pretty as it had been, and began the last leg of their long journey downward to their goal.

XV

FIFTEEN DEGREES IS A considerable downgrade, especially over fused and slightly bubbly glassite. The daylight disappeared behind them after less than a mile; after that distance became unreal. There was an area of light from their lantern about them, ahead of them and behind them, for perhaps twenty feet. Their shadows made dancing grotesques on the wall and reflections flickered all about them. The walls and floor were slightly warm to the touch. The tunnel was a tube, like a drainpipe, about eight feet across. The floor curved out of the walls. They went single file.

The setting felt completely alien. Ginger said once, softly, "It feels like a walking tour of a blood vessel. Or an intestine."

Lawrence agreed, but said no more. There were strange echoes all about them and speech seemed out of place. The tunnel went on until Lawrence lost count of his steps. He occupied his mind for a while trying to calculate the vertical component of the distance they were traveling, and arrived at a figure between a mile and a quarter and a mile and a half, both of which seemed far too large. He remembered the down-angle set on the base level of the disintegrator mounting was fifteen degrees, but the slope they were following seemed much too steep. . . . His ears popped and he said so.

Ginger said, "Thank you for reminding me. Mine just did too." She was walking fairly close behind him and he was glad of the company.

They seemed to descend for miles. The bubbled walls ran out of darkness ahead and into darkness behind and the world seemed far away. Their feet would occasionally break a bubble in the floor with a soft crunch, but there were no sounds in the echoing tunnel except for their own breathing.

Then the tunnel stopped ahead of them at a featureless gray wall. Ginger took a deep breath. "We're here. Lance, that's the force shield, isn't it?"

"I don't know. The one around the ship was semi-transparent. Bring the light closer."

They held their light up to the shield and peered through. There were blobs of darker shade visible far away inside, but their lights seemed strangely attenuated. Lawrence turned on his communicator. "Hello, Alexander. Can you hear me?"

"Clearly," said a metallic voice. "But I'm standing directly in front of the tunnel mouth. Give me a signal for a few seconds while I move around and see if five miles of rock interferes."

"All right. Once upon a time there were three Terrible Terrans—a big Terran agent, a middle-sized Terran archaeologist and a little Terran girl. And they came to a planet on an innocent expedition, but the natives were very rude to them. How's it coming through?"

"Good, but a lot of fading. I presume you're at the bottom?"

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"Right. And ready for the last step. Get clear of the tunnel mouth and I'll call you back when things calm down."

"Will do. Good luck."

Ginger looked at Lawrence doubtfully. "When things calm down? Good luck? And what's going to be happening around the tunnel mouth?"

Lance started to open the communications equipment case. "This stasis field was closed about two billion years ago," he said. "When it was sealed, this planet was an interstellar wanderer. Sealed behind that wall is a half-mile sphere of absolute vacuum. When we open it, there may be a draft. I wouldn't want Alexander to get caught in it."

Her eyes were wide. "But what about us? We don't either."

"Exactly." He found two little boxes. "We anticipated this and planned for it." One box he placed on the floor, touching the stasis shell. The other box he anchored to the tunnel wall about knee level, some twenty feet from the shell. "This"—he indicated the first box—"has a one minute delay from the time it's turned on till the time it starts generating frequency patterns of a type to cut off the shell. And this"—indicating the other box—"is a gadget of great ingenuity. When the button on this side is pressed, it sets up a stasis shell which includes this half of the box and an area about six by ten feet. An air-pressure sensitive switch, which is outside the field, breaks the shell."

"But won't the whole shell be sucked in with the air?"

"It shouldn't be. The shell will include a fair-sized portion of the tunnel wall and *that* should hold. Then, when the pressure is equalized and the draft stops, the switch will trip, cutting our field and we will go forward and claim our prize."

"Uh . . . what's it like in a stasis field?"

"You'll never notice it." He looked at his watch. "He's had five minutes. If he isn't safe by now, neither are we. Crouch down right here." He pointed to a spot a yard from the second box. "And pray."

She did the former and probably the latter, while Lawrence checked the boxes over one last time. Then he pushed the timer button on the first box and came and crouched by

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Ginger. He set his finger to the stasis generator button and said, "We have a few seconds. Any last words?"

"Yes, Lance—I . . . I think I love you."

BIP! There was a flicker of nothingness. Lawrence looked at Ginger in amazement and tried to think of something to say. Then the communicator yammered for attention, and got it.

"Hello, down there—hello. Do you hear me?"

Distracted, Lawrence pushed the switch and answered. "Yes, we hear you. Our stasis field just cut off. How long were we out and what's happened on the surface?"

"About an hour and a half. It took a lot of air to fill that hole. There was a follow-up patrol after all, but I stayed under cover and they left again just before you blew the shield. I've got some small charges planted to knock loose that shelf of rock you tore up with the disintegrator over the mouth of the tunnel—after I come in, I can pull it in after me to keep the mice out. I presume you haven't been to look at our prize yet?"

"When have I had a chance? We've been listening to you since our stasis cut off. Give me a minute and I'll see."

Still holding the communicator, Lawrence and Ginger stepped to the edge of the hole and looked down about fifty feet to a metallic floor. The lantern, held forward, caught reflections off machines of vast bulk and alien design. They stared in wonderment for a full minute. Then Lawrence breathed a sigh of pure awe. "I think it was worth every bit of trouble just to see this," he whispered.

"Well," said Alexander impatiently, "what's there?"

Ginger didn't speak. She looked up and saw a metallic ceiling some twenty feet above them. She tapped Lawrence on the arm and pointed up. He nodded. "I'll guess there are twenty or more levels and some of them are probably bigger than this." His voice resounded strangely in the great chamber.

"What's there?" insisted the distant voice of Alexander.

Hesitantly, Lawrence began to recite what he felt was a wholly inadequate description of the scene before them. "Well," he started, "it's big. The level we're at must be seventy feet high and the light is lost before it gets to the center. There are definitely things here—I suppose they

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must be the weapons, but . . . I can't describe them. Look, I'm going on in. I'll call back when I've taken a look around and made sure everything is reasonably safe."

"I'll be waiting," said Alexander. He cut off.

Lawrence handed the communicator to Ginger, then anchored the top of the rope ladder and tossed the other end into the hole. It snaked out, uncoiling as it fell, and snapped straight five feet from the floor.

Lawrence felt his heart pounding in his throat. He had come two hundred light-years to this spot, from a quiet office under the Antarctic ice cap. He had found a new name, he had performed a couple of heroic deeds, and he had fallen in love. As Alexander had said, he would never be the same. But now he didn't care. He stepped backward onto the rope ladder and started down.

He paused and took a deep breath as he came to the end and then dropped lightly the last five feet to the floor and looked about.

The light from his little lantern seemed lost in the great darkness around him. The machines, whose purposes he couldn't even guess at, loomed over him. A clear lane before him stretched away out of sight toward the far wall, which must have been at least a third of a mile away. Then the ladder started jerking; a moment later Ginger landed beside him.

"Alexander is going to stay up there while you take a quick look around, then he'll call the fleet. He says they can be landed outside in three hours if they're where they're supposed to be. Now, where do we start?"

Lawrence was still looking about him, wondering the same thing. "I guess we look for directions. Would you recognize XXX script?"

"I think so. We spent a month on the culture in Xenosociology."

"Good. Start looking."

They stayed close together around their lantern and walked slowly down the aisle. Ginger spotted one sign, which Lawrence read as an injunction against something equivalent to smoking, and a second which described the contents of this level, which was the fifth. The central noun of the description was indecipherable. The second sign also indicated to

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Lawrence that they were close to a way of getting from one level to another. He started casting about for a stair or shaft or trapdoor of some kind.

They found a spiral ramp behind a small mountain of metal. The ramp ran up through the ceiling and down through the floor, corkscrewing out of sight in both directions. Beside it was a sheet of inscribed metal which Lawrence puzzled over for some time. It was a directory, obviously. Two-thirds of the words, mostly nouns, he could not puzzle out; he read them to Ginger as, "Big guns, little guns, bombs, cannons and crossbows."

She demanded to see which word meant crossbows, and Lawrence admitted he was translating freely. He did show her the symbol-set which meant something like "office," or "central control area," and told her it was on level two.

"Let's go back and tell Alexander, so he can call the fleet," said Ginger. They hurried back to the rope ladder and called. Alexander answered at once.

"It's beautiful," said Ginger.

"From what I can see," said Lawrence, "everything is in perfect shape. I've found a ramp to the other levels and we'll be heading up to level two, where something called 'central control' lives. This is level five. The ramp is behind a big machine with wing-like things sticking out—come straight down the center aisle to about the middle and look to your left. If we're not right at the top of the ramp on level two, we'll leave a note for you with directions."

Alexander said, "I'll be down in a couple of hours. It's a long walk to the bottom. Behave yourselves now and don't set anything off." He was gone.

Lawrence and Ginger hurried back to the ramp and started up. There were no stair treads. The surface looked slick, but there was strong friction between the surface and their boot-soles. It was like walking on nearly-dry tar, except that there was no stickiness and their feet lifted away without resistance.

They climbed some seventy feet to the ceiling and stopped to look back. From here it was still more eerie to look out over the weapons. The walls could not be seen in any direction and darkness pressed in all about them, above and below. Lawrence raised the lantern above the level of

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the next floor and the shadows fled backwards while others surged in around their feet. Ginger shivered and gripped his arm.

On this level, the weapons were long cylinders, lying in racks that marched away into the dark. They kept climbing, passing through another floor of metal, smooth and cold and five feet thick.

Level three was full of boxes, rectangular and shiny, in great piles which reached nearly to the ceiling. They were labeled, but Lawrence did not stop. He could feel Ginger growing tense; he didn't feel particularly calm himself. The darkness was starting to get to both of them. They climbed through one more floor and got off the ramp on level two.

This level was more open. They could barely see the walls at the edges of their light. There was a greater variety of things standing about; not stacked on each other, but set out and open, as if intended for use. "This could have been where the security force worked," said Lawrence. "I think it's a planetary defense center. Look—over there is a viewing tank. It's like the one that was in the ship, but it's about twenty times the size. And I *think* those are projector controls, but I'm not sure what they project. And what was that you said just before we went into stasis?"

"I . . . I said I love you, I think. That's what I wanted to say."

"But—didn't you say something back in the city about not even being able to imagine falling in love with me?"

"Yes. And I meant it. Nobody could possibly have loved you the way you were then. But you've changed, Lance. You're stronger, and more of a man, and . . ."

Lawrence didn't care what else he was. Ginger's sentence was covered by an embrace; by the time the long kiss ended, she had forgotten what she was going to say. "See? You couldn't have done *that* two weeks ago."

"Nonsense. Of course I could have."

"Then why didn't you? If you had, I would've fallen in love with you sooner. You're a wonderful person, Lance, and I liked you when I first saw you back on Earth. But I didn't respect you until today. You couldn't have taken an aggressive move any more than you could . . ."

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Lawrence took an aggressive move. Ginger gasped. "You . . . couldn't have done that, either!"

"You still didn't seem to mind."

"Oh, Lance . . . don't stop now. . . ."

There was something nearby about eight feet long and perhaps four feet off the floor. There were sheets of metal rising another six feet around three of the four sides making it a large flat booth. Lawrence carried Ginger to it and placed her there. Neither of them were in any mood to care what it could have been and it was only a few minutes later that an involuntary kick bumped a switch on a small panel at one end. Both Lawrence and Ginger were too occupied to notice when a small meter, which would have been out of their line of sight even if they had been able to see anything except each other, stirred off its stop-pin and rose across a scale, stopped, rose, rose, fell and rose again, going at last off the top of the scale into a red-colored zone. It stayed there for some time, then gradually fell again, stopping about halfway down the scale.

They lay beside each other, sides touching lightly, hands clasped between them. The lantern squatted on the floor a few feet away and the shadows loomed over the cold hard metal sheet which looked so uncomfortable but which seemed the finest bed in the galaxy. Neither spoke for a long time. Lawrence felt very much in love and more than a little concerned with what he had just done. *I guess I haven't changed all that much*, he thought.

Ginger lay with her eyes closed, her hair spread about her head like a pool of silk. Lawrence rolled over and kissed her, slowly and deeply. She smiled. "Mmmmmmmmmmm . . ."

"Ginger," he said gently, "I know this may be sort of sudden and maybe not the best possible time to ask, but . . . would you marry me?"

Her eyes opened slowly, and focused on his. "Now is the best time," she said softly. "Yes, darling. I will."

"Things won't always be like this, you know. Usually I live a normal, rather dull life."

"Not any more you won't. You were a normal, rather dull person then. Now you're a hero and an adventurer. And you're mine. And even if you go back to the same life—and I don't think you can now—you won't be the same. You'll

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never be Lawrence again. You're Lance now and Lance you will stay."

They kissed again and lay together for some longer time. Then a faint sound in the distance, echoing up through the floors, startled them, and they broke apart.

"Hellooooo . . ." Faint and far off, somewhere down the ramp. "Hellooooo . . ."

Lawrence and Ginger looked at each other. "Alexander!" they whispered and slipped off their ersatz bed. Neither of them noticed a meter that dropped suddenly back to zero. There was a quiet flurry as things dropped were picked up and put in place again and other things that were disarranged were set right. Meanwhile, Lawrence called back. "Come on up the ramp. We're in the control section. Level two." Under his breath he added, "And don't hurry."

Alexander hurried. But Lawrence and Ginger were socially presentable when the second lantern appeared over the level of the floor, closely followed by Alexander's uncharacteristically anxious face.

He sighed nervously and said, "I sure am glad to see you!" He came out of the ramp and hurried toward them, continuing, "I thought I was pretty stable, but five miles of tunnel and then all this space and silence and dark was beginning to get on my nerves. Have you figured how to turn the lights on yet? And what are all these things?"

"Well, we really haven't had much time to look around," began Lawrence.

"How much time do you need? You blew the shield over two hours ago—almost three. I've called the fleet and they'll be grounding in another hour or so. They've been worried—people starting to get suspicious about all these Terran ships hanging around for the last week or so. Then I had time to walk five miles down a rather steep tunnel and look through this labyrinth to find you. What have you been doing all this time?"

"Uh, nothing," Lawrence temporized vaguely, but Ginger intervened.

"If you must know, Alexander, Lance has proposed marriage to me and I have accepted."

"Did that take two hours?"

"Yes, it did," said Lawrence, a little sharply. "And I apolo-

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gize for the delay. Now I see no point in wasting any more time in conversation. Let's get looking around for light and power. You check around the ramp for anything that looks like it might be a switch that isn't obviously part of some machine."

"Yes, sir," said Alexander automatically and started off. He stumbled a moment later when he realized what he had said and how he had said it, then he shrugged just a little bit and went on.

Lawrence was fooling around with the big viewing tank, the one piece of equipment he felt he could probably operate. He sat on something that certainly wasn't a chair, but which had a flat area big enough and was in a position convenient to the front of the panel. His feet dangled just off the floor. The controls looked like those on the *Star-Walker*, the old XXX ship he had worked over. This, then, should be the master power supply switch. . . . He activated it and a faint black glow spread through the tank. There *was* power, then—probably emergency circuits always available. He looked for the display control and turned it. There was Marmion, deep in the center of the tank. There were a few ships visible, tiny orange-colored flecks of light. Orange represented ships that could not be identified as friendly or hostile and since the criteria the tank functioned by bore no relation to anything it could observe now, everything was listed provisionally as unknown. There was no sign of the Terran fleet.

Lawrence looked the control panel over carefully and found the field magnification control. The planetary sphere of Marmion shrank rapidly, and the ships around it seemed to dwindle and draw in. Other traces of ships appeared at the sides of the tank and were drawn in toward the center. Looking at the display with one eye, it seemed that the observer was drawing away from the planet with the speed of light. But looking at it with both eyes, or moving around it, it seemed to be pulling away into some fourth spatial dimension, going farther and farther away without actually moving.

Then in one corner of the tank appeared a cluster of heavy ships. The previously observed flecks had been different shapes—spheres, cubes, prisms, cylinders, cones, tetrahe-

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drons. This was apparently a differentiation of the ships by mass, and therefore, at least in a battle situation, by type and purpose. The ships now displayed some two million miles from Marmion were mostly spheres and cones—probably heavy freighters and protective destroyers. A heavy freighter would register the same as a dreadnought, at least to his untrained eye.

Lawrence stared into the tank and continued turning the knob. The images continued to shrink into the center while new information was displayed at the edges of the volume. A few more ships appeared, then the glowing mass of the sun and, one by one, some of the other planets, strung out at an odd angle in the tank, which was oriented with the planet it was on. Then he saw something flare close to the speck that was now Marmion and he quickly zoomed in. The planet inflated until all the ships were clearly defined. But there were now several times as many, in two groups, with the larger ranged in a staggered sheet across a quarter of a million miles, moving visibly toward the Terran fleet.

Lawrence called and Alexander came running. "Look! We weren't calling for a big battle fleet, were we? Some of those look like middle-sized warships and that's an attack formation if ever I saw one. Can you call our fleet and ask them, or warn them, about that mob?"

"Not from down here. Not with two miles of mountain over our heads. No, wait a minute. There's enough in the communications kit that I could put together a powerful enough transmitter—but it might take half an hour."

Ginger was standing behind Lawrence, looking into the tank where the grouping of ships now filled most of the available volume. "I don't think we'll have that long. At the rate they're going, we won't have ten minutes. Lawrence, where did they come from?"

"Right out of warp. That flash the tank showed when they appeared indicates something either going into or coming out of warp."

"But that close to a planet? I thought . . ."

"So did I. Apparently they don't have to worry about the mass affecting them when they warp. They could strike anywhere without warning. Alexander—do you think I should try to attack that fleet myself?"

"Huh?"

"Well, I think I recognize some of the controls here; and most of the labels I can roughly translate, though I don't have much context. That panel, the one colored sort of greenish, says something like 'Axe' across the bottom, and I think it's some kind of long-range weapon that can be directed through the tank. Do you think I should try it?"

"Look, Lawrence; I can't tell you how well you think you can operate something I've never seen in my life; I can't tell whether you could be sure of hitting the enemy instead of our own ships; I can't even tell you for certain those are the enemy. You're running the show—you have been since we got inside here. All I can do now is watch and follow orders."

Lawrence looked blankly at him, then turned and stared into the tank. The second fleet was moving closer. Ginger's hand fell on his shoulder and remained. His own hand came up to caress it briefly. Then he said, "I guess I'll have to try something. Ginger, will you swing that over here?"

He indicated a device mounted on a boom affair, apparently connected with the tank. Hanging down from the boom to about the height of a standing man was a metallic dome, opening downward. Less than half a sphere, it was still some two feet across. It swung about on its mounting and could be raised or lowered. Ginger took it carefully and swung it over to where Lawrence sat. He reached up and pulled it down slowly until it rested on his head like a big funny lampshade. No one laughed.

"Ginger, I'm going to activate this. I think it's another version of the viewing device—the visual equivalent of ear-phones, so the information comes as close to you as possible without any distorting distance. I want you to hold my hand and if you feel anything strange, or if I squeeze your hand very hard, hit this little switch, then lift off the helmet." He took her hand and placed it lightly on the switch for positive identification. Then with his free hand, he turned all the knobs as far to the left as they would go, except for two which he centered. Then he pressed the little switch.

To Alexander and Ginger, it seemed as if his head were suddenly surrounded by a thin black balloon. They could still see his features, but faintly. He spoke. His voice was muffled,

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and held a note of tension. "Ginger—don't let go. You're still there, aren't you? I can feel your hand."

"Yes, Lance, I'm right here."

To Lawrence, the room had disappeared. He could feel the pressure of the seat on his legs; he could feel the warmth of Ginger's hand in his. But as far as his eyes and ears were concerned, he was floating, bodiless, in complete blackness. He called Ginger's name, loudly. And faint and distant he heard her answer. It felt strange to shout into darkness and hear a faraway answering shout from the person who was holding your hand.

Lawrence began to describe what he saw, which was nothing, and then he reached blindly for the control panel and began to move the knobs whose labels he had been able to translate. The first three had no effect. But as soon as the fourth left its stop, something ghostly dim appeared in the blackness.

He advanced the control very slowly, talking constantly to Ginger. In the void, a sun gradually appeared. As he inched the knob up, it brightened. Experimentally, he dimmed it, then brought it up again. Then planets appeared, and then, too small to see clearly, the tiny fleets. He moved his head slightly and the whole universe spun around him until he was looking at the same scene from another angle entirely. He practiced with this until he could control the effect.

Then he tried the other knobs again. One of them brought him in closer. He turned this up until he seemed only a few thousand miles from the approaching fleet. He ran it up higher and the fleet disappeared behind him as he found himself rushing in toward the planet. He stopped and looked around. The fleet was behind him and to one side. He backed off the control until they were before him again and then went on to the other knobs. The two he had centered moved his location in space; he finally settled into a position about a hundred miles from the Terran fleet. He had gotten close enough to see the insignia on the ships, but had found none on the attacking fleet.

He no longer saw the ships as orange symbols floating in a tank, but exactly as they were. It was as if, somehow, his

perception had been projected into space and he actually was floating at this instant a half a million miles from the planet, watching a space battle about to begin.

And it would be a slaughter. The attacking fleet was not only five times the size of the Terran fleet, it was made up entirely of fighting ships. The Terrans had only heavy freighters and perhaps a dozen light destroyers.

"Ginger," Lawrence called into space. "Is Alexander working on that communicator?"

Her voice came back, as far away as the planet seemed. "Yes. He says he should be able to test it in a few more minutes."

"I've got a test to make now too. Would you guide my hand to the green panel I pointed out and then shift your grip to my shoulder? I may need both hands for this job." He felt and followed her pressure and then the slick cool surface of the panel was under his other hand.

This was what they had called the "Axe." From what had been read on the *Star-Walker*, it was considered a fairly simple weapon and rather primitive; much as a projectile pistol in their own society, or a crossbow bolt a thousand years ago, or a club a thousand years before that. But it was simple to use, at least for the XXX soldiers, and effective. There was no exact description of what it did precisely, except that it did do something very definite to the target—if you could hit it.

Lawrence had studied the layout of the board he now handled and remembered where the on-off switch was located. Again turning all the controls far left, he touched the switch.

A small dot of light appeared in space. It was faint and it moved with a slow and jerky motion. In a moment, Lawrence discovered the light was apparently directed by his eye movements. Experimentally he crossed his eyes and the light split into two dots, indicating both direction and focus. There were only two knobs and a pushbutton on the panel. The button was labeled approximately, "Do It," and had a shield around it. This was probably the firing stud.

He had taken several minutes going over the viewing device and figuring out the Axe. What his eyes registered, his brain ignored, intent upon analyzing the impression gained

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through his fingers. A flare of light brought him back to the depths of space, where he seemed to hang. The sheet of attacking ships had curved and was surrounding the Terran fleet—and had just fired upon them! A freighter spun in space, a gout of silent flame gushing from her side where fuel tanks had been ruptured by a well-aimed bolt.

The destroyers were in defense formation and were already returning the fire of the enemy, but they were half-englobed and wholly outnumbered. The battle looked as if it would be a short one.

One destroyer scored a hit on the largest enemy ship, which continued fighting with only slightly lessened power as one quarter of its guns were silenced. Lawrence desperately looked straight at the ship, focusing on the dots, and touched the stud. Nothing happened.

With his other hand he brought up both knobs at once, to halfway, and touched the stud again. Green flame sprang from the point on the side of the ship where he looked and ran out to consume the metal of the hull in a few seconds. Lawrence released the button in horror and the flame disappeared, leaving the prow and stern of the ship untouched. The two halves drifted slowly apart and Lawrence looked quickly elsewhere.

There was no way to judge the effect this might have had on morale on either side and he did not stop to think of it. His eyes flicked about the fleet, resting for a few seconds on each ship, focusing the little dots that floated constantly in the center of his sight and touching the button.

He tried varying the two knobs and found that one changed the color of the flame all through the spectrum and the other varied the speed with which it would consume the ship. At minimal setting it would bore a hole through the ship but scarcely spread more than a few feet. At maximum, the entire ship would vanish in a soundless flare of eye-aching color in an instant.

The Terran ships had stopped firing and were watching without reaction as this nameless force moved among the enemy, destroying one ship at a time, every few seconds. There was no visible source for the energies that consumed them—it was as if a plague of spontaneous combustion was spreading among the attacking fleet.

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To Lawrence, there was no feeling of reality to it at all. He seemed to be in a strange shooting gallery, draped with star-flecked blackness, looking at little artificial targets and causing them to vanish with a glance and a touch of the finger. A sort of godlike feeling grew in him as he watched these meaningless toys flare and fade at his will and the strange idea began to grow in him that none of the ships out there had any particular reason to exist. He could will them out of existence with hardly a motion. They meant nothing to him and since it was as easy to destroy them as it was to stop the chain of action, why stop?

The surviving ships of the attacking fleet suddenly executed a ragged turn and fled away from the planet. Lawrence's eyes tracked them, coldly and relentlessly, and another ship flared briefly and was gone. Then, seeing his immediate targets leaving, he increased the speed of destruction, that he might reach them all before they entered warp and became lost to him.

Suddenly he became aware of Ginger's hand gripping his shoulder and his finger stopped, just touching the button. Sanity flooded back upon him. **Those** ships were full of men! He had just killed uncountable numbers of human beings and had been intent upon killing more! His other hand dropped from the firing stud.

The fugitives from his wrath vanished with a flash at the corner of his eye—they had gone into warp and would take the news of their defeat back to their masters, who would now think twice about attacking Terran fleets or Terra.

The fleet of freighters opened up and went into a landing orbit for Marmion. Lawrence faded both knobs of the axe to zero and turned off the main switch. Slowly, beginning to feel weakness in his arms, he groped for the helmet control panel, faded everything, and cut its power.

Space was gone and he sat on something that was not a chair in a pool of lantern light with strange shapes of metal standing around him. There was a warm hand on his shoulder and he leaned back gratefully against a warm body that stood behind him.

Alexander spoke. "I've got the communicator working. Just made contact with the flagship. He says there was a battle,

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all right, but they didn't fight in it and won anyway. Do you want to talk to him?"

"No. Tell him anything you want to," Lawrence said feebly.

Ginger bent over him and looked into his eyes, concerned. "Are you back with us?" she asked.

Lawrence considered and shook his head. "Not yet. Reaction is setting in. I'll have to try to describe how it was to you. For half an hour there I was a god—and my soul just isn't up to that yet."

"Half an hour?" said Ginger. "But, darling, you were only under the helmet for about four minutes! And what happened? All we could see in the tank was ships disappearing one at a time. Did you do that?"

Lawrence nodded vaguely. "I guess I had something to do with it," he said.

He lifted the metal cap off his head and slipped to the floor. In the tank he could see the Terran fleet coming toward the planet, in a definite landing orbit now.

Alexander was on the communicator. "No, you'll have to leave two-thirds of your freighters in orbit. There won't be room in the valley for all of them to set down. You're what? Well, go ahead, but be careful. Remember, we're right here."

"What is it?" asked Lawrence, standing now, leaning on Ginger and desperate for something to distract his mind from what he had just done.

"The commander is going to use a ship-mounted beamer to cut the top off the mountain we're under to get at the weapons. I told him to be careful. Uh, Lance, how well protected are we in here?"

"Well, I don't think it would stop a really heavy beam. But it will stop any of the side effects, heat and such, from bothering us." He paused, and said faintly, "I think I'd better lie down."

Ginger helped him over to the wide metal shelf they had shared so recently and he climbed up onto it and stretched out. A moment later he gasped and sat upright. A surge of passion had poured through him the moment he had relaxed, sweeping the sickness from his system—and it was a passion he remembered from only a short time ago.

"What is it, Lance?" asked Ginger.

"I don't know," he said, looking around. He leaned forward and looked at the end near his head. There was a control panel and the power switch was on. A meter was registering and a pilot light was glowing. Even sitting there, Lawrence could feel the same emotion. Closing his eyes he seemed almost to have Ginger in his arms again.

But he was too far gone to appreciate it. He reached around the end and cut off the switch. The meter fell, the light winked out and Lawrence lay down again.

With his eyes closed, he described the entire space battle to Alexander and Ginger. When he finished he felt much better. He opened his eyes again and looked around. Alexander finally spoke. "That's pretty hard to imagine," he said. "I wonder how long it'll take the research teams to figure out exactly what you were doing. And the mind goes limp trying to guess what the rest of this stuff can do. Like that thing you're lying on—I wouldn't get on it! For all you know it could be some kind of garbage disposal that could turn *you* into a puff of colored flame."

"Well, it isn't," said Lawrence. "I think I know what it is, though. Ginger, get up here beside me and lie down."

She did and Lawrence reached around the head of the machine and flipped a switch. Ginger gasped and made a small sound in her throat. Lawrence could feel the same things she was feeling—the same things they had both felt half an hour ago. He flipped the switch off and the emotion faded slowly. Ginger caught her breath and her hand groped for his.

They looked at each other and Ginger nodded, her eyes shining. She leaned over to him and whispered, "Lance, my dearest—did it feel quite the same to you this time? Think about it a minute."

He thought, then said hesitantly, "No, it didn't. There was much more to it this time."

She nodded and whispered again, "You felt both of us—and so did I." She raised her voice to a conversational level. "This thing is a recorder of some kind, only it plays feelings instead of sounds or pictures."

"Judging from the way it shook loose my shock," Lawrence added, "they could have used it for raising the men to a high pitch before the fight and calming them down

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afterwards. Or for emotional first-aid during a battle. They must have been similar to us, emotionally and physiologically."

Alexander closed his eyes. "Well, we've partially figured out two—no, three of the things in this one room; and two of them are barely comprehensible and all three are unbelievably valuable. How big did I say this place was? Half a mile sphere?" He sighed and opened his eyes as the communicator hummed.

"Calling ground force. Alodian, are you still there? Answer, please."

He touched the button and identified himself.

"The first group is down," said the voice. "We're about to start cleaning the top off your mountain. If you want to get under something, we'll give you a minute. We'll call back when we've cut to the top of the sphere. Answer, please."

"No need to hide. This place is built solidly. We'll be waiting for you." He cut off the communicator and turned back.

"Well, it'll take them a day or two to load all the stuff on the ships—they've got a lot of hoists and tractor beams and so on to handle the loot, but they'll have to cut down through the floors one at a time. Unless you can come up with a service lift, it may actually be a week or more before they've got everything loaded up. But I think the ships will be heading for Terra as fast as they load. We won't have to worry about the Old Colonists for a while. You threw quite a scare into them."

Very faintly, through the floor, a distant vibration came to them. "There go the beams," said Alexander, happily. "In another hour you'll be out of this place and in a nice cozy spaceship cabin. How long has it been," he asked rhetorically, "since we slept in beds? About a week, come to think of it. It seems a lot longer. And a bath—and good food—and a good stiff drink. . . ."

Lawrence and Ginger were standing and now Ginger spoke. "Lance, I didn't want to distract you with this before, but I found this while Alexander was looking for a light switch." She reached under her cloak, which was folded on the floor, and handed Lawrence a large but rather thin

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volume, with an inscription in blocky XXX symbols on the front. "I wondered if you'd translate it for me."

He looked at it, and the first symbol he recognized was that for *catalogue*. He lowered the book and stared into the distance. He remembered another man, a stranger named Lawrence, who had sat in a quiet comfortable office two hundred light-years and a dozen lifetimes away, and complained because he was given nothing to do but translate catalogues. He wondered if he would be able to go back to that kind of life, sealed safely away from this world of adventure, fear and exhaustion which he had come in some strange and wholly upsetting way to enjoy. He wondered, if he was to go back, would Ginger come with him? And if she did, would they both be completely miserable? He couldn't see her as the wife of a professor, with no greater problems than seating arrangements at the next faculty tea or what to wear to the graduation dinner. And he couldn't see himself back in that little office, translating catalogues like this one for the rest of his life. But what else was there for him to do? He couldn't be an agent like Alexander—that took years of specialized training and all he knew was the XXX. Thoroughly useless information outside of a museum. He looked again at the catalogue and it seemed to symbolize the pointlessness in his future. He sighed very deeply and started to examine the cover.

Catalogue, it read, of Light and Heavy Weapons Caches, Subclassified by Area and Contents, With Notes on Defenses Afforded and Staff Listings.

He stared and read it again. He continued to stare at it, eyes growing wider, until Ginger said, "Lance, what is it?" and poked him in the side. He looked up and started to laugh. He dropped the book, grabbed her around the waist and swung her around him a couple of times. "Ginger, have you had fun the last couple of weeks?"

"Let me down, you big idiot! Of course I've had fun."

"How would you like to keep on doing it for the rest of your life?"

This time Ginger stared at him. "Well, I'm not so sure. Will you be along?"

"I sure will! I won't do a lick of work for them unless I get to come along and head every expedition!"

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"*What expedition?*" Alexander asked impatiently.

"Every one for the next hundred years or so," Lawrence laughed. He picked up the book and read its title to them. They gaped as he continued, leafing through the pages, "It looks as if there are about five hundred caches listed—there are five on each page. A lot of the bodies they were on will have left the galaxy; some will have fallen into stars; but a lot will still be around. Maybe we'll find out what happened to the XXX and maybe we'll find a better star drive—they couldn't have destroyed *all* their ships—there might even be a few small ones here; the top level is big enough to hold a ship or two. Alexander, you can come along as gunbearer or something if you'd like."

"Well, you two will need somebody to keep an eye on you—we'll see what my boss says about it."

Then there was a muffled thunder above them and a faint light leaked down the spiral shaft from the top level above them. The communicator buzzed and announced the fleet had cut through and spotted something very big on the top level, and would they check on it please? Ginger hurried over to the shaft as the sound of the beam faded and looked up. Lance was beside her and they scrambled up the spiral ramp together and stopped, looking up at the curving wall of metal that was the side of the ship stored there—an XXX ship, probably in perfect operating condition. There could be no greater joy, except one. They kissed again and still were when the first flier from the fleet settled beside them.

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