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HIERARCHIES

JOHN T. PHILLIFENT

She and her pet were only a
cover-up for the theft of
the Crown Stones—and the
few who knew might
have to die for it!

KELLY FIRENS

He was careful to make it appear as if his trajectory were strictly follow-the-leader, so that only he knew by what small fraction it was off. The wailing scream of ruptured atmosphere came now and the screen picture shimmered into ionic disturbance, but was clear enough to show a range of small, low hills, well-wooded, a shallow gorge between them, and the slope down to the shoreline. There was a small, shingle-edged river-mouth. A scattered array of timber shacks on either side of that river would be the troops' living quarters. There were radio masts pointing to the sky. The alien ship was well ahead now and just settling down into the water.

Sixx had been merely tickling his jets so far. Now he leaned on them hard, grunting as savage deceleration shoved him deep into his seat. The Clipper bellowed down . . . and down . . . and washed that scatter of shacks with searing blue-and-white flames laced with shock diamonds. Some of that terrific thunder came back through the hull as the squat ship slowed down to a hovering halt, hung on its devastating tail for an undecided moment . . . then lifted . . . and drifted along . . . started to go down once more . . . changed its mind once more . . . slid away in another direction . . . and now there was nothing visible at all on the screen but dirty steam and black, roiling smoke.

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JOHN T. PHILLIFENT, one of Great Britain's most prolific science fiction writers, has had his work published in both periodicals and books, both in America and abroad.

HIERARCHIES

by
John T. Phillifent



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MISTER JUSTICE

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I

The picture on the monitor was steady, clean and sharp-edged, the colors lifelike. The scarlet and gold draperies of the Jewel Room were shown so clearly that one could see them trembling very slightly in the gentle but constant waft of the air-conditioning.

"You're certainly up to date here," Sixx murmured, more in an effort to butter up the guard captain than from any genuine appreciation. He had already noted the Nipponese trademark on the cameras and monitor. The air-conditioning system, too, was imported. He had seen better, and in any case his attention was focused on one small part of the action, not on any pictorial quality or effect.

"We spare nothing, we have only the best," the guard captain said, in careful Anglic, "when it is a matter of the Imperial Royal Treasures!" There were implied capitals in his tone, and a mild reproof in his manner that this stranger Earthman, strangely garbed, could imagine anything less than the very best for the Imperial Crown Jewels of the Three Worlds of Khandalar. He would have been shocked out of his mind had he known exactly what it was that Sixx was watching and waiting for. As one security man to another he was, truly, interested in the watchful system, but his eyes were all for two men, down there in the Jewel Room. Two men had the velvet-hung splendor of that room all to themselves for a brief moment of privilege. Two men, but only if you discounted the eight eagle-eyed bowmen who stood, four to a wall, watching the performance every bit as narrowly as Sixx and the monitor cameras. Sixx didn't discount them at all. Privately, he felt that Jason Horn

had underestimated their devotion to duty, and the next few seconds would prove it, one way or the other.

Of the two men in the center of the picture, one belonged there by right. King Emperor Lagas was, by Khandalar standards, a tall man, almost five feet ten, and he didn't show anything like the eighty-four years he had lived. But then, as Sixx knew, the Royals of Khandalar were notoriously long-lived, with an expected lifespan that was the equivalent of a century and a half in Earth terms. His hook-nosed, black spade-bearded face was calm now as he made slow gestures in explaining things to his guest. Having made some point or other, he armed back the ornate sleeves of his dress-cloak and stretched one long arm into the central crystal cabinet that held the most prized gem of all. Sixx tensed slightly and moved a hand to a microswitch in the lapel of his uniform. Any minute now!

The other man down there was as old as Lagas and four inches taller, but his dress was sober businessman blue, and his hair—what there was left of it—was a carefully brushed white fuzz about his skull. Jason Horn, Managing Director of Interstellar Security, had long since passed the stage of being flamboyant. That was something he could safely leave to others. His business was planning, and this scene had been planned to the last heartbeat. A badly placed microphone picked up the dialogue in a faint murmur. Lagas was speaking.

"And, of course, the famous—one might almost say the sacred—Crown Stones of Khandalar. I assume you will have heard of them?"

"Naturally, Your Majesty. I have heard a great deal. It would be almost criminal to visit your capital city, the seat of government, without taking the opportunity to see such a phenomenon. This is a very great honor."

"An honor that could so easily be fatal." Lagas had a wry touch of humor in his voice. "If you have heard other things you have certainly heard this, that no one other

than those of Royal blood may touch the Crown Stones? Accept my assurance, it is absolute truth. I now hold in my hand the master shell in which they are all assembled. You see? I hold it thus, and you may peer and observe and admire. But never forget there are eight pairs of very keen eyes watching you, and, even though you are my guest, should you stretch out your hand to touch, you are a dead man eight times! Interesting, yes?"

Sixx restrained his imagination, which had a trick of running away at such times, grinned to himself at what must be in Horn's mind and touched the microswitch delicately. Very softly he murmured,

"Go, man!"

Three seconds later, while Lagas was still holding the precious bauble just so, in his fingertips, there came a measured double-thump at the massive doors of the Jewel Room, and a creak and clatter as they swung open. Sixx had to grin again. Just by himself, Roger Lowry was a spectacle to catch the eye and hold it. His fine and noble head, his mane of pale gold hair, his blue-eyed ingenuous stare and his six-foot six inches of poised herculean brawn were impressive enough, but when you had all that wrapped in the glare-white and glittering gold facings of the uniform-suit of Interstellar Security, you had something that demanded a second, even a third look. And that, really, was the whole point of the exercise. Now, after paralyzing all eyes for a long breath, Lowry set away to march, slowly and solemnly across a venerable polished floor, along the long center aisle and up to Jason Horn. There he halted, saluted, and declared,

"Ready when you are, Mr. Horn."

"A big one, that!" the guard captain commented approvingly. "Perhaps a little slow, but strong. He would make a fine soldier!"

"Speed isn't everything." Sixx murmured. "Tell me, can you swing this camera to scan the entire room?"

"Of course!" the captain declared, first satisfying himself that the Public Cabinet was once more secure, the Crown Stones safely back in place, and Lagas chatting idly with his visitors. Then he put the monitor through its paces while Sixx pretended to be interested. What he felt was immense relief when he saw that the bowmen were down from their feather-to-ear stance and looked relaxed.

So much for that, he thought. *One hurdle jumped, now for the next!* After a while the drifting monitor showed the small visiting party making for the main door, on the point of passing out of sight.

"Thanks for the demonstration," he said, "but I can't stop any longer now, sorry about that. That's my boss down there. It looks as if His Majesty King Emperor Lagas is taking him away to discuss business, and he will need me along, so I have to go. Which way do I go to join them?"

In fact Sixx knew the layout of the Palace almost as well as the guard captain, having studied it thoroughly on the way here. It was one of Interstellar Security's mottos to "leave nothing to chance." Still, it did no harm to feign innocence. He allowed himself to be led away by a young cadet halted and gestured to indicate that he had arrived. He followed through a series of narrow passages of smoothed stone with tall, grudging window slits, and eventually to the King Emperor's private suite. Pike men, also in sturdy leather, stood immobile either side of the door. An oddity, he mused, as the cadet halted and gestured to indicate that he had arrived. These people had arrows, swords and pikes—but no armor? That said something for the Khandalar mentality but he wasn't sure just what, and let the thought run on for a moment.

By Earth standards, if your enemy had weapons, you worried about some kind of defense. Which he promptly copied, or bettered, and then it was your turn to devise a

better weapon, better armor . . . and, just like that, you had the genesis of an arm's race! Maybe the Khandalar mind didn't have that pattern? The thought didn't seem to go anywhere after that, so he let it slip, leaned on the door, went in, and armed it shut behind him.

Lagas was seated in a worn old chair that looked comfortable, alongside a large round table. His ornate cloak had been cast aside, to show him in a simple dark tunic. On the table stood an interesting-looking jug and several crystal goblets. Jason Horn, also seated, held one casually as he said,

"Your Majesty, this is Rex Sixx, the other operative chosen by me for this mission."

Sixx hooked off his helmet, tucked it under his arm and bowed easily. Lagas smiled.

"Your uniform," he said, in Anglic that was flawless, "is so glaringly spectacular as to be almost an insult. So visible! Such a target! Please come and sit down, Mr. Sixx. Here at least, if nowhere else, I can be comfortably informal. Such a precious thing, comfort. Doesn't that fancy dress make you feel uncomfortable at all?"

Sixx cast a quick look at Horn for approval, then shrugged and said, "It all depends on the point of view, Your Majesty; on who is looking." He took a chair and moved it closer to the table, noting that Lowry was already seated and with a drink in his hand.

"From a bow-and-arrow point of view, yes, it's conspicuous. It stands out a bit. But it isn't often that we operate under conditions like these. Practically everywhere else in the settled galaxy this uniform is enough, all by itself, to make any intending rogues stop and think a bit. Interstellar Security has that much of a reputation."

"That's the whole thing in a phrase." Horn endorsed. "That uniform is known, a trademark throughout the spaceways. When my father started this business, almost a hundred years ago, he knew more about crime and crooks than just about any man alive at that time. He

was quite a character, old Raphael. His idea was to gather all the data he could get, not just his own, but everything available, even going back into ancient history, all on crime. Then he fed it all into a strategy computer and had it all analyzed and codified. He taught me to do the same, to follow through on it. That data is constantly being up-dated. As a result—it is a fact that I am proud of—I.S. has yet to lose a consignment. We have had some close shaves, quite a lot of tough ones, and we have missed a deadline or two, not many. But we've never yet failed to deliver. So far. And that is known. We don't make a big brag about it, but we don't hide it either. And that is the reputation backing that monkey suit. It's a good one."

Lagas nodded thoughtfully. "It is a remarkable thing, Mr. Horn," he murmured. "That your culture and mine, so different in many other ways, should be so very similar in this. That beliefs, ideas, abstractions, concepts. . . that they are so much more powerful and important than any amount of physical energies, or technological skills, new inventions, things like that. The way people think, what they believe, that is what matters. Wine, Mr. Sixx?"

The wine was highly palatable and smooth, with a delicate tang that hinted at a compromise between peppermint and orange peel but was neither. He sipped it, let it vaporize in his mouth for savor, and cast an appreciative eye over the relatively homely chamber. He noted the scuffed rugs, the simple wooden furnishings, the plain drapes, a niche filled with shelves that was an extensive collection of tape-cassettes. There was something about the gestalt that bothered him, and it must have shown in his face.

"Something puzzles you, Mr. Sixx?" Lagas asked. "You may speak freely here. We have a number of alien innovations and improvements, as you have seen, but we are not yet to the stage of bugging devices."

"That's part of it, Your Majesty. You see, Roger and me, we had the routine hypno-tape information-impress on this culture, on Khandalar, on the way here. That's just for orientation. There's a lot to know, and we didn't get it all, only the gist. Earth first contacted the Khandalar three-world system in twenty ten. That's . . . seventy-four years ago. The contact has been constant—if very careful—ever since. So we do know a good deal. It's a very ancient culture; no one knows how old. A feudal culture. A stratified society. Peasants and seamen at the bottom, then artisans and craftsmen, then civil servants, the military, the Royalty—and that's it. And that is the way it has been ever since who knows when. And yet . . . this could be anybody's home parlor. In a Royal Palace, in the capital city? And you speak Anglic as fluently as I do. And you don't act like the hereditary absolute ruler over fifteen billion people! Not that my personal experience of feudal royalty is all that extensive or expert, it isn't! It's close to zero. But for me the picture is all wrong. Meaning no offense, of course!"

"Offense?" Lagas chuckled. "On the contrary, you have paid me a big compliment. I am flattered. All you have said is true. I am a feudal monarch, the absolute ruler of fifteen billion people—in popular theory and belief. But no longer in fact. It is inertia alone that keeps the system going. My father was King Emperor when the first Earth ships came here. He was then old, but wise. I wish to say that with some emphasis. It is a myth, common to both our cultures, that old age brings with it wisdom. It is very seldom true, but in this case it was. He was a very wise man, wise enough to see the inevitable outcome right from the start. The inevitable: that contact between your culture and ours would bring change—change for us. Not many—I would say none—of the other Royal houses realized it, not at that time. They are seeing it now, now that it is glaringly obvious. And they are not liking it. I owe it to my father

that the others are wise enough to accept the facts and be guided by me.

"You see, one of the wise things my father did was to send me to Earth to finish my education. To learn something of your ways, your language, your freedoms, your ideas, your technology, your democracy. Over there," he aimed a finger, "on the wall, is a photocopy of one of your most famous documents. I know every word of it by heart. Listen. 'When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them to another . . .' You know it, of course?"

"Declaration of Independence, July fourth, seventeen seventy-six," Sixx declared. "But I'm not with you. You haven't any political connections with us, not right out here on the Rim! Earth has deliberately played down that—"

"Yes. I am aware. The political bands I am thinking of are those that have held the Khandalar culture together all down the centuries. They are dissolving now, moment by moment as we sit here. Soon they will be entirely gone. If we are to avoid total chaos something must take their place. We must build, indeed, in a small way we have already begun to build, a new system. It has to be a system based on an educated citizenry, with free choices, opportunities for talent and ability, opportunities for progress, openings for mobility between social layers. Sweeping changes, Mr. Sixx, and dangerous ones. But, in part at least, the reason why you are here."

"Now you've lost me altogether." Sixx admitted, looking his bewilderment at Horn, who shrugged easily.

"I'm not exactly crystal clear about it myself, but I expect we will all catch up in a minute or two, when it's properly explained. We're waiting for Andrew McLaren. Once he shows up we can get down to the real meat of the . . . ah, that should be him, right on cue."

The massive doors sighed open and clicked shut again

behind the newcomer, a small, birdlike man with a monk's tonsure of startlingly bright red hair, black brows over dagger-bright gray eyes, and moving at a half-trot walk that belied his obvious years. He nodded briskly to Lagas, glared at Horn.

"Well, man, did you get it?"

"Certainly. Right here." Horn dipped two fingers into a breast pocket and brought out a small, sparkling fire-glowing cube of crystal.

"Ah!" McLaren stood quite still for a moment, not moving, as if holding his breath. Then, as if at the release of some brake, he trotted to a massive chair and man-handled it across to the table before Sixx could scramble up to help him.

"Your Majesty," he said, "you'll have to forgive my somewhat cavalier manner. I know exactly just how much that bauble means to you and Khandalar, but you can take my word on it, the thing means every bit as much to me and Earth science!"

"It is understood." The expression on the King Emperor's face mirrored his internal upheaval. "Despite all my common sense and all my Earth education, I am still Khandalar, still of the Royal blood. Those stones . . . have power!"

"Of course they do. That's why I'm here. You two men better move up and listen closely, pay attention." To Horn he snapped, "Just put the blasted thing down on the table where we all can see it. I'm nervous too, damn it. I'd rather not touch it at all, just yet." As Sixx and Lowry hitched their chairs closer he added, "You need to know just exactly what it is you'll be carrying. This is the real thing, of course. That other one, in the Public Cabinet, down there in the Jewel Roo, is a fake. An exact duplicate, made up from measurements and photographs supplied by me. That much is obvious, right?"

Sixx nodded. He wasn't likely to forget the careful discussions and elaborate rehearsals, the timing, that **had**

gone into eluding those argus-eyed bowmen down there. It had all worked, but it had never deserved to work, and he repeated that complaint to Horn now.

"You took a hell of a chance, sir, making that switch in the few seconds while Roger was holding their attention. I still don't believe it, not all eight of them!"

Horn chuckled gently. "That wasn't the way of it at all, Sixx. His Majesty made the switch while he was reaching into the Cabinet. That was the easiest way. Palm the fake, reach in—where no one could see his hand among all that glitter—and switch, bringing out the fake in plain view. Change hands to hold it up . . . and there it was done, all slow and easy."

"Then what was all the charade for?"

"Very simple. For conviction. When Lowry made his diversion at the door, you can bet not one of those bowmen took his eyes away from His Majesty for one minute. That's what they are trained for. And what did they see? They saw me turn around. They saw His Majesty, very properly, put the jewel-cube back in the Cabinet, very fast, and lock it . . . and *then* look around. And they can swear to that, quite truly. Very convincing, and necessary, as you will see."

"All right." Sixx sighed. "So we have stolen the Crown Jewels of Khandalar. Even with Royal connivance, that's a bit far out, isn't it? For that they had better be worth a lot more than they look!"

"They are!" McLaren broke in impatiently. "They are worth more than any cash price you could name. And we are not stealing them, only borrowing them. I'll say that again, as it is important. We are only borrowing them. That must be expressly understood."

"It is crucial," Lagas muttered, still staring at the small thing on the table. "I am gambling on them. I think I have the courage to see it through. But with a vast and ancient empire at stake, I must have the insurance. I must be sure that they are returnable, unharmed."

"You've got that!" McLaren extended his hands now, flexing his fingers but not touching the prize yet, like a man fighting a craving. "Now let's get a detail or two right. These are not the Crown Jewels. Those are downstairs in the Jewel Room, and a pretty fabulous lot of gems they are too, by all accounts. As precious stones. But these are different. These are the Crown Stones, which is a small difference in words, but an enormous difference in meaning. There are three planets, Loges, Metera and Aldan, this one. On each planet there are two ruling Royal families. Six altogether. One Crown Stone each. And there they are, all six of them. Once every ten years they play their part in a ceremonial showing. They are collected here, in this Palace, and then taken back to their respective kingdoms to be publicly and ceremoniously displayed for a celebration period. Then back they come, to be replaced in the Union Shell, and put on display in the Public Cabinet. And now, there they are. But what are they?"

Sixx studied the gem collection again, critically this time. A cube of some highly refractive crystal, with the corners rounded off a little, and buried in the center of each face a tiny red pinhead of fire. And the whole thing no more than an inch each way. Not a lot to look at, for all the song-and-dance McLaren was making about them. He waited for the scientist, open to conviction. What were they?

II

McLaren began deliberately, obviously selecting his words with care. "Each Crown Stone has its own small shell, which in turn fits into the master shell, as you see here. In that condition the stones are insulated, and thus harmless and ineffective."

"Insulated?" Sixx queried. "That kind of power?"

"That kind." McLaren agreed. "And yet not. If only it were that simple. This is a power completely different from any we know. In fact, one of the very few things I am really sure about is that it exists at all, and I catch myself doubting even that at times." He shook his head, shut his eyes very tight and suddenly looked his age. "The latest ten-year celebration is only days past. In that period, with the Stones out of the Cabinet, and with the gracious assistance of His Majesty here, I had my third chance to investigate one of them at close quarters. I checked as closely as possible with the limited equipment available to me, and with all the cooperation I could get, making due allowance for the demands of ceremonial and the zealous attentions of overanxious guards. Quite a time. It's a wonder my hair isn't snow white. But there it is. Three brief times in over twenty years, gentlemen. It adds up to a lot of waiting, impatience, thinking and studying. And I am absolutely certain of one or two things. The Stones are microcircuits of some kind, almost certainly on a molecular level, almost certainly rechargeable in some way in ordinary daylight. Hence the emphasis on the ancient ritual of exposure, and the insulation. Of course they are unthinkably ancient. Just one more instance of the immense and fantastic technology that was once known to the Khandalar people. An irritating and frustrating example, but immensely important. Because virtually all that technology is now utterly lost, completely forgotten. No offense, of course, Your Majesty."

"That is perfectly all right." Lagas made a stiff gesture and then a sigh. "I appreciate the fact just as keenly as you do. There can be no doubt at all now that our long-forgotten ancestors were wizards. My own small acquaintance with your culture, your ways of thinking, has helped me to look back, to see them in a new light. It seems obvious now that they were very far advanced

indeed, I suspect to the point of being afraid of the powers they had developed. And having reached that point they ardently desired to create a stable, secure and harmonious culture that would long endure. They were very wise, our Old Ones. Or extremely foolish, depending on the point of view. In a way, they succeeded in their aim. They achieved a stable culture, but the cost has been, to us, total stagnation. No . . . it has been even worse. Not only have we not progressed, in these hundreds of centuries, we have crept irreversibly backwards! For example, we have ships that can and do leap from planet to planet inside our own system. We have craftsmen and artisans who know how to fly those ships, and how to maintain them—but not how they work! Or, to take another instance, we have the Royal weapons, the Wands, which can spit fire at a man, or stun him, or, by choice and need, can kill. We have armorers who know how to maintain and service those weapons. But no one who knows how they work! No one! So many centuries have gone by without the need to know how. Or why. Or even to ask that kind of question. When there is no need for change, there is no need for curiosity either.”

“Your Old Ones didn’t do too badly.” Horn murmured. “They built a successful and stable society that had been a going concern for centuries, at the time when our ancestors were still fighting over which was the best cave to hide in. Is that such a bad thing?”

“The question is academic in any case, now,” Lagas said. “Once your Earth ships came, that was the beginning of the end. I tell you, my father saw it coming at once, and by now most of the Royals and the Civil Servants can also see it. Every year more and more of our young men leave the land, the plough, the net. Young artisans leave their benches and tools. They seek service in your ships. They travel. They venture out into the stars. They see and hear new and strange things. And then they come home

and talk. Of course the centuries of tradition do not die overnight. But they do die, in the course of time. As it is, there is already growing unrest. There are bandits in the hills, rebel groups in our cities and towns. This I am told. There are, even, pirates in our skies. We have been forced to build new and different schools, with new teachings. We are seeing the start of labor protectives, guilds, unions. Our ancient culture is no longer stable. It is breaking apart."

"But what," Sixx demanded, "have the Crown Stones to do with all that?"

"It is really very simple." Lagas sat up straighter now, held his head high, his expression stern. "I am of the Royal blood. By ancient tradition I am appointed to rule. But not just by tradition. I have more than that to back me, to enforce my power. Only the Royal blood can command warriors and men-at-arms. Only by Royal command, and in the hands of the duly appointed, will the Wands perform, and spit their lethal bolts. And, above all, only to those of the Royal blood is given the power to control and change the minds of men, by the Crown Stones. With one of those in my hand, or inset into a ring on my finger, or in a diadem to be worn here," he touched his forehead, "I can detect and sense, be aware of, the emotions, the thinking, feeling, decision and action of those around me. And I can exert influence. I can control them, compell them to my will. That is absolute power, against which there is neither shield nor defense—nor any dispute!"

There was a long-drawn moment of silence, and then McLaren said, very quietly, "That, gentlemen is absolutely true. That is another of the few things I am certain of, on my professional reputation. Don't ask me how or why. I don't know. I could give you a jugful of theories, worth nothing at all. But the facts are beyond argument. Fact: removed from its insulating shell and so worn as to make skin contact with the living body, any

one of those stones confers upon the wearer the power—ability—amplification—talent—you name it—to detect and become aware of any strongly held emotion or intention nearby. Within at least a thousand yards, probably much more. To be aware of, and to change it, alter it, at will. That is fact!”

Now the silence in the cosy room grew thick and chill. Sixx felt his mind seize up and grind to a stop as he tried to evaluate the full significance of what he had just heard. He stared at the pretty bauble with greatly enhanced respect. A little thing like that, yet it was, potentially, bigger than any bomb. To everyone’s surprise it was Roger Lowry who broke the silence.

“Why do you want to commit suicide, sir?” he asked, and Lagas snorted, managing a stiff smile.

“It seems like that, to you? Foolhardy? Perhaps it is, who knows? I have tried to reason it out in a slightly different manner. Just for a moment, leave aside the purely physical effects of power. Think of another kind of power, equally great, possibly greater. The power of belief. Ours is a hierarchichal society, a pyramid. Royalty rules. The Civil Service administers. The military, a token force, applies pressure when and as needed. The artisans make and maintain the wheels we run on. The peasantry supplies the raw power to turn those wheels. In more than ten thousand of your centuries that pattern has not changed. So long as the great mass of the people believe in and accept absolute power it cannot change much.

“Before you people came they did so believe because they had no other culture with which to compare. Now, of course, and by slow degrees, they are beginning to doubt, to seek change. And change is inevitable. But change can come from either of two directions. If it comes from the bottom up it can be explosive. If it comes from the top down it can be peaceful. It can be. Before you came, change in either direction would have been

impossible and unthinkable. As you should know from your own history, the prisoner does not necessarily leap to lose his chains. Quite often he is dependent on them for his reality, and neither knows nor cares that he *is* a prisoner. He does not know what freedom means, and he would not know what to do with it if he had it.

"When a prisoner discovers that he is confined, when he has to struggle and fight to gain his freedom, he begins to believe there must be something worthwhile in the very act of struggle, that freedom is something he *must* fight for. But if, on the other hand, he finds his cell door standing ajar, no one forcing him to come out, or stay in, or to menace this newfound freedom, he is much more likely to be amenable to reason. And now, to look at the other end of the scale, no matter how far-sighted, or humane, or progressive a ruler may be, all the time he holds absolute power he has no real incentive to change things. But when that power is taken away from him he comes under pressure. He *must* rule wisely. He *must* do what is best. He must demonstrate that he is qualified to rule, by his ability rather than by some show of absolute power, some gift. For he faces disaster if he fails."

"That fits!" Sixx exclaimed, all at once struck by the connection. "It's part of the culture. Your soldiers have weapons, but neither armor nor defense. That's the way you think. If and when you pick a fight with somebody, you have to be pretty sure you're good, or you're dead! You think like that."

"Exactly!" Lagas agreed. "And I have thought, long and hard, along with the ruling heads of all the other Royal families. Change is on us. We can fight it off, if we choose, for a while, but not forever. That way we would destroy ourselves, sooner or later. Far better then, that we recognize it and go to meet it. Far better that we say 'We will not use our absolute power to compel. Instead we will sit down and reason with you.' When a man realizes that the only powers he has are his wits,

then he will use them. So, when the Crown Stones are on their way to Earth, *we* will know they are gone. No one else will know. Khand forbid that they should ever find that out! But *we* will know. The die will be cast!"

"You're taking a hell of a chance," Jason Horn murmured, and Lagas got to his feet abruptly, making the rest of them scramble to stand up too.

"I know what I am doing," he said harshly. "I do not like it. I am tormented and afraid. I am tempted, even now, to snatch that thing away from you. But I have made my decision and it must stand. Dr. McLaren, our agreement is fulfilled, I think?"

"To the letter, Your Majesty. The rest is up to us. We will take care of it, the whole thing."

They all stood respectfully as Lagas made a stiffly formal bow and left the chamber. Then Sixx turned wonderingly to the scientist.

"Agreement? A deal? What possible kind of deal could that be? Don't tell me Earth has *bought* this bomb?"

"Nothing like that." McLaren turned to stare down at the precious gem-assembly until Horn reached casually, took it and dropped it in his pocket. Then he sighed. "No, not bought. Only borrowed. I told you. We couldn't possibly put a cash value on a thing like that. But the scientific value is enormous. The implications are staggering. Patterns in the brain structure—" he seemed to be talking to himself, contemplating some design the others couldn't know. "For a long time we have known—suspected anyway—that there are superconscious mechanisms in the brain. Must be! But how to get at them?"

"Superconscious?" Lowry echoed. "The superego, you mean?"

"Nothing like that." McLaren grinned crookedly and seemed to be all of a fidget on the inside, as if possessed with bursting ideas. "Not like that at all. It's difficult to explain in layman's language. Look, we commonly take for granted that the consciousness, the fact of being self-

conscious and aware, is the ultimate in being human. That's where it starts, and everything goes away down from there. A devolution. But it is just not so. Tell me, suppose I could show you a new color, somewhere in between red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. Would you be able to see it?"

"That's not a question," Lowry retorted promptly. "You've covered the whole visual spectrum. There are no other possible colors."

"That's what *you* think!" McLaren cackled. "And you think that simply because that is the way your eyes are designed, and your brain. If there was a different color in there your eyes wouldn't detect it, because they aren't designed for it. And your brain wouldn't register it, because *it* isn't designed for it either. In other words your senses, your whole nerve net and your brain already have patterns designed into them, patterns which sort out and arrange, and select, all the data—and the ideas—that your conscious ego is ever going to get, before it gets them. So you can reason, and think, and feel only in certain ways, and those ways, those patterns, are already built in. And that is a set of hierarchies in your own brain that you can never, by definition, become aware of."

"It's a nice theory," Lowry admitted willingly. "But I can't see how you're ever going to prove it. In fact, going by your own definition, it can't be done!"

"Not prove it, no. But I can postulate it, on evidence that is right in front of your nose. For instance, you're a smart operator, or you wouldn't be here. Which means you can learn fast, and have learned a lot. But when did you ever learn how to learn, and who taught you how? Or, take logic. Logical reasoning has one characteristic above all others, that it is not human as we know the word. It is a lot smarter than we are. All the time we are compelled by logic to do things we don't like to do, don't want to do, simply because we know how smart

it is, how *right* it is. The same is also true of mathematics. It is a whole lot smarter than the mathematicians. And that is also true of intuition. And where do all those come from? We didn't invent any of them. We discovered them. Because they were already given. Built in. Even the language we speak, no matter which one it may be, even this hideous click-and-choke set of noises they talk here, has built-in rules. Rules that were never invented, but had to be discovered. Sure we fool about with grammar in an attempt to impose some kind of conscious rules, but that comes a long time after speech. You learned to talk a long time before you knew anything at all about grammar. No, my young friend, we have these capacities, all of us, simply because they are built in.

"They are built in so beautifully that we are never aware of them as they operate. At the risk of making you tongue-tied, think of this, sometime. When you start out to say something, anything, any time, to anyone, *you* don't know, as you begin, what your last words are going to be, in any given sentence. You start with a word or two, an idea, an intention . . . and some mechanism inside your head so arranges things that you wind up with a proper sentence. Think about it sometime. That is just one more example of the hierarchical systems designed into your brain as the result of millennia of selective evolution. Successful patterns. And they are super-conscious. Or preconscious, if you prefer that term. But there they are. And all we have ever been able to do, so far, is to speculate and wonder about them. Because they are, by definition, out of our reach. But now, maybe, we might just be able to get a fingernail hold on how some of the machinery works. Maybe!"

He turned to Sixx. "To answer your question, about the deal. Earth has agreed to give massive aid to Lagas, and to the whole Khandalar system. Not with money. That would be pointless and futile anyway. But it is going to cost us money, just the same, to provide know-

how and advice in the shape of technical experts. Teachers, technologists, social scientists, organizers, public relations, everything, the whole works. It is going to be a massive operation. And there has to be a ten-year deadline. Not that it will be all over and done in ten years, of course, nor yet a hundred even. The idea—the *hope*—is that by the end of that time we should know whether or not we have achieved enough to show that it has a chance of working out. Hopefully, by the time the next ten-year ceremony falls due, Lagas will be able to make a public renunciation of his absolute power.”

“And if it doesn’t work out?” Sixx demanded. “If the whole thing goes boom in his face?”

McLaren hesitated. “Put it this way,” he said at last. “It is going to be a long hard row, whatever happens. There will be clashes, small revolts, rebellions and uprisings, a lot of pain and suffering, almost certainly some bloodshed. That’s unfortunate, but we are making omelettes here and the eggs have to be broken. That is unavoidable, expected and allowed for. There will be hairy moments. But if the whole thing proves to be inherently unworkable, if it *all* starts to go sour, then it will be very bad indeed, and it will have to be stopped. And there’s only one way to stop it. Those gems. If and when called for, they had better get back here fast. That’s what Lagas meant by insurance. He won’t ask for them to be returned until he absolutely has to, because that will mean an admission of total failure, and he won’t like that at all. So, if and when he should ever ask for them back, he really means it, and he wants them—fast! That’s the agreement. That is why we are only borrowing them, why we will treat them with great care, and why we are entrusting them to I.S. as carriers. I think that just about covers it, Horn. The rest is all yours, and I wish you good luck, gentlemen.”

A minute or two after the scientist had departed Roger Lowry stirred, his good-looking face unusually serious. "Isn't this just a little bit too big for us, sir?" he wondered.

Horn pulled down his jutting white eyebrows and leered up at him from under them. "First time I ever heard an I.S. man say that, Lowry."

"You're the boss. If I'm talking out of turn, you just say so. And I can see why this can't be done with a squad of marines and the whole Space Navy standing by. That would advertise the cat right out of the bag, for sure. But we too need a kind of insurance, don't we? As a rule we can cover loss value, or replace. But not this time. Those trinkets are unique!"

"That's right, they are. But we didn't get our reputation by taking on just the easy jobs. Also we have one or two things in our favor, and to which I hope to add one or two more. Here, stow the thing away in your belt."

He handed the tiny object to Sixx, who had to rein in his imagination to overcome the tingle he felt in his fingers, which was almost certainly subjective. The thing was not alive, it merely felt that way. Unfastening his suit-front, he snapped open a pouch on his body-belt and secured the precious item within.

"For one thing," Horn went on to point out, "we have the present set-up. So far as anyone else knows, the Crown Stones are visibly and solidly there, in place, in the Public Cabinet. Very few people will even dream of suspecting that Lagas could be so treasonous, or so insane, as to play hanky-panky with them. In the second place, nobody but a Royal would—or is, in fact, allowed to—go anywhere near the things. Just on the side, incidentally, that influence works, whatever it is, with anybody, not just for the Royal blood. That part of the Royal blood business is a myth. McLaren is certain about that part of it. But the other thing about Royals is true,

that they live a long time. That's a genuine datum, and it reminds me of a score we ought to put on the other side of the ledger.

"Up to about a year ago there was a team of scientists on Loges studying the longevity angle. In a careful, slow, delicate way, doing a thorough check-up on life-lines, diet, living habits, that sort of thing. As I said, being very careful about it, not wanting to offend anybody. But they weren't careful enough. Just about a year ago the whole team was jumped by bandits, ambushed in an out-of-the-way location, and nearly all of them were wiped out. That was the end of that project. I'm telling you this just to get the point across to you that this is not necessarily a pushover. And there is another thing to bear in mind, too." He rose, crossed the room silently, threw open the massive doors and peered out, nodded politely to the two pike-men guards, then came back in again.

"Lagas is no fool. You've seen that for yourselves. But he is Royal, and Khandalar, and an idealist. And he has the same handicap all idealists have. He can't really grasp just how corrupt a society can get. This Palace, the whole capital city of Casta in fact, is a hotbed of rumor and gossip, of cells and factions, and groups of all kinds. Just like any other seat of government anywhere. And while Lagas may think he holds this secret along with the ruling heads of the other realms of Khandalar, I say a secret split six different ways is a very fragile thing indeed."

Sixx snorted. "And you said we had things in our favor?"

"We do. I'm not trying to undersell gossip and rumor, or unrest. They are genuine hazards. But solid and positive violent action is something quite different. That calls for planning, organization and a degree of conviction. So far as I can determine, there's nothing of that . . . yet."

"All right, if you say so." Sixx stirred. "Let's be thankful for small mercies. When do we leave? The sooner

we can get back inside our ship and en route to Earth, the better I will like—" he faded into silence as he saw Horn's expression. "It's not going to be like that?"

"Er . . . no. I'm afraid not. Not exactly. It's going to be just a wee bit more complicated. Sorry about that!"

III

Sixx settled back into his chair and sighed sadly. "If it's anywhere in the I.S. Handbook, then it must be in the fine print that I've never yet had the time to read properly."

"What?" Horn asked obligingly.

"The bit where it says it's against the rules for us to have any easy, straightforward assignment, just once in a while."

"Hah!" Horn chuckled. "You and Lowry are my best team, that's why you were selected for this job. And you don't earn that kind of reputation by doing milk runs."

"Honestly and truly, I wouldn't mind one little bit if somebody else had the compliments once in a while . . . sir! Anyway, why can't we just grab that jet-copter on the roof, scoot back to the coast, to Padash and our ship, and go straight home?"

"Because," Horn retorted, "that is exactly what would give all the rumors the teeth they now lack. You think about it. I've been here three times now, having an audience with Lagas each time. I'm known for what I am, no way of camouflaging that. Then you two show up, marvelously conspicuous. You are seen to stay only a brief while. Then you take off again, heading back to Earth. That's simple arithmetic, isn't it? You came for something. You got it. You've gone off with it. Other people can think like that, and will, and start asking awk-

ward questions, and the next thing, Lagas will have his big showdown a long time before he wants it. So we don't do it like that. We make a smokescreen. Which I have already fixed. And—you'll excuse me—I think that might be it now."

He crossed the room again in answer to a resounding thump on the door and opened it to reveal a pikeman just standing away in favor of a highly decorative court lady. Sixx, by long habit, was immediately interested. The orientation tapes had carried brief details on Court procedure and dress, enough for him to realize that he was looking at a lady-in-waiting. This particular specimen was the Khandalar average in height, about five-foot three, and elderly, and skinny. A memory from the tapes told him that the Khandalar standards of beauty heavily favored the angular type, the lean and bony look, but he hadn't realized it was this extreme. The lady swept them all with a fast glance of estimation, settled for Horn, bobbed slightly, and addressed him in very careful, very precise Anglic.

"You are Jasonhorn?" She ran the name into one long syllable. "The Princess Mellida will see you now."

"Thank you very much," he bowed his head. "If you'll show us the way. Come on, boys, this is it."

With their helmets tucked under their arms the two agents strode either side of their chief and let themselves be led, slowly and sedately, along quiet corridors and shallow-pitch stone stairways, to an entirely different part of the Palace. Sixx had put to one side his momentary disappointment at sight of the gracious lady and was now idly curious about her dress. It was all in ribbons, long floating strips of gorgeously colored stuff about six inches wide, randomly and riskily secured here and there with strings of jewelry, fragile gold chains, loops of pearls, so that she moved within and through a constant ripple and flutter of drifting ends. It concealed practically nothing. On anyone else it might have been tantalizing.

On her it was a dismal failure. In his opinion, anyway. If there were any design to it, he couldn't see it.

With the other part of his attention he listened to Horn's murmured explanations as they strode along. "There should have been something in your tapes about the Royal Household, and in particular about the Royal pets. One of them, a thing called a sorki, is rather special. The Royal Sorki. It is supposed to be a distant relative of the common, wild bassorki, but different. It is extremely rare. The bassorki is common enough, a semi-predator something after the style of a small wolf, but the Royal version is strictly a pet. Something on a parallel with our Siamese cat, or the Royal Pekingese dog. That kind of thing. Anyway, very rare, very scarce too, absolutely restricted to the Royals and even they are allowed to have only one clutch, brood, or pack, whatever the term is, per family. Now—there are all sorts of pet-animal groups on Earth who'd give their ears to have a Royal Sorki. Preferably, of course, a female one."

Sixx came suddenly alert. "Oh no!" he protested.

"Oh yes!" Horn chuckled. "It wanted some doing, believe me, but between us—me, Lagas and McLaren—we finally managed to talk Princess Mellida into parting with one. Not that we were asking her for any great sacrifice, at that. You see, it's the custom, once the brood female has whelped or whatever it is they do, and the offspring are established, to have the old female put down. That's how they restrict the numbers. But not this time. Instead of giving it the chop, they are giving it to us. Exclusive, handle with great care. Deliver safe and sound and in good health. Worth a small fortune to us, nothing to anyone here. Good, yes?"

"I suppose!" Sixx groaned, swapping rueful glances with Lowry. Of all assignments, livestock were the worst. Anything else you could take full responsibility for and feel confident, but a life-form could up and die on you for no predictable reason at all, just whim! And pets

were worst of all, as they needed special care, special diet, coddling . . . ah well!

"You certainly laid on a great smokescreen," he admitted, as they turned a corner and passed a spectacular aquarium. "But this means we'll have to travel tourist!"

"That's right. The slow route. And you'll be conspicuous, maybe just a trifle ridiculous. But in the circumstances that's all to the good, isn't it?"

The argument was unbreakable. Sixx sighed again. There was no more time for protest anyway, for their ribbon-clad guide had now brought them to a set of rooms visibly, odorously and noisily devoted to the care and cossetting of furred and feathered friends. The large chamber in which they were told to remain and wait was carpeted in a plain yellow woven material that bore all the spotty signs of having been scrubbed hard and often here and there. The walls were half-hidden behind a riot of flowering plants that loaded the hot air with fragrance. Against these stood a profusion of bird cages of all shapes and sizes, all open to allow their occupants the run of the room, although "run" was hardly the word. Another part of Sixx's orientation came back to assure him that all these birds, presently savaging the air with ear-hurting screeches and swooping crazily about in streaks of blazing color, were all "soft-beaked and live by sucking nectar from suitable flowers", but the reflex urge to duck was hard to stifle.

He caught sight of a slow-stalking four-legs in one corner that was much too big to be a cat and not quite big enough to classify as a tiger, but of that type, apart from such minor details as a glossy green pelt and amber-yellow eyes. Their original guide-lady transferred them to another, who was even older and more angular, and he put his attention back on the tiger-cat. Sixx wondered just how many of the feathered friends would survive, and for how long, if amber-eyes had his own way, with

those highly visible fangs and claws of his. Their second guide returned now.

"Her Royal Highness, the Princess Mellida, will be here in a moment."

Sixx sharpened his attention again. A Royal Princess! Common sense told him that she would be just as lean, angular and uncomely as all the others, but there was a magic ring to the words that fired his imagination nevertheless. Common sense won, as it usually does. Princess Mellida turned out to be even older, possibly more angular, just as dangerously dressed, but quite pleasant as she exchanged formal greeting with Horn. Seemingly it was considered part of the Royal obligation to be able to speak the foreign tongue, and that was a considerable blessing for the native Khandalar speech was, as McLaren had said, a click-and-choke business that he could understand a little and speak even less, only a phrase or two.

His attention wandered again, went back to the magic. A Royal Princess! In all the fantasy literature and tapes high-born ladies were always something special, radiant super-persons with some kind of inner charisma that automatically set them apart from the herd, but in all his limited experience of meeting "uppers" he had yet to come across one who looked anything more than just tediously ordinary.

One day he mused, reiterating an old dream, I will meet the girl who, at that very first glance, will make me catch my breath, will stun my senses, dazzle my eyes . . . and all that rest of that. One day. There has to be one girl like that, somewhere, else where did all the fantasy writers get the idea from in the first place?

Princess Mellida was explaining now, unnecessarily, just how precious and valuable her pet sorki was, how sadly she would be missed, how she needed very special care and attention.

"My men are fully qualified to take care of everything like that," Horn assured her firmly.

"We are?" Sixx queried in an amazed whisper, and Horn shushed him with a small gesture.

"Just the same, Your Highness, we would be grateful for some codified information, a manual, instructional tape, some kind of guide?"

"That has been taken care of. I have appointed one of my staff to go along with my precious Quema and take good care of her."

"Oh!" Sixx breathed. "Oh brother!" as he watched Mellida smack her hands smartly together and heard her call out.

"Elleen! You may bring Quema now, quickly!"

He swung around, ready to protest. A Khandalar female, on top of all the other problems, would be just too much. All eyes were now on an archway to the right. It filled. The protest withered in Sixx's mouth. It happened. It was she, the impossible dream made flesh. In that long-stretched moment he divided into two people, the one aside and cynically acute while his other self was caught breathless, stunned, dazzled and with all the other symptoms of instant and acute infatuation. This girl—woman—was tall, fearfully, wonderfully, magnificently rounded where it was right and proper for her to be, sapling-slim everywhere else, Madonna-innocent, blonde, her gold-sheen hair restrained by a silver filigree band across a noble forehead away from cornflower blue eyes . . . cherry-red invitation of a mouth . . . skin of satin and cream . . . poems of grace . . . wood-nymph . . . idyll . . . his analysis collapsed into total blur as he just stood and absorbed her through his pores. After a while he remembered to breathe. No one else seemed to notice or be affected. The Princess Mellida was brisk now.

"This is Elleen Stame, who has been here helping, studying all about sorkis and Quema in particular. I have

appointed her to accompany and take care of my precious one."

Sixx dragged his attention away from the divine radiance to the "precious one" and thought the description a shade overdone. The sorki was a small beast, its bent and spindly legs supporting it no more than five or six inches from the floor, its little lean body oddly distended about where its stomach ought to be, its short tail up in a tight curl, and its black pop-eyes bulging on either side of a ratlike head. But all these particulars faded into insignificance when compared with its enormous sailplane ears, either of which was easily as long as its entire body. All over, even those ears, it was a sheeny gun-metal blue. Sixx was not impressed. His eyes found its collar, followed the line of its jeweled lead up to the flawless wrist that held it, along a Grecian arm, and came happily back to his dream vision again.

"This is unexpected," Horn was saying, carefully and politely, "but a great relief and a very thoughtful and helpful gesture. We are very grateful to your Highness for the arrangement. If Miss Stame will be responsible for the car of Quema, my men will attend to everything else. You can be assured they are highly competent and will not fail. And I think that just about takes care of everything, apart from the official transfer documents."

"Of course. I will give you those in one moment." Mellida turned now and aimed an admonitory finger at the sorki, speaking to it, presumably bidding it farewell and charging it to behave properly, apparently not in the least affected by the animal's sublime indifference to her words. The tiger-cat had prowled near in curiosity and Quema moved now, aimed her pop-eyes balefully, spread her sailplane ears, and whistled a shrill note. The cat-creature backed up swiftly, hissed and departed.

"All right, boys," Horn declared cheerfully, "it's all yours. I'll leave you to get on with it."

"Just a minute, sir!" Sixx spoke urgently, stepped

across to his chief to touch his arm, and lowered his voice. "As I've already said, the smokescreen is fine. It's great. But it wouldn't hurt to have a little bit of extra insurance. And I happen to know what a devious character you are. You just wouldn't happen to have *another* fake duplicate of that gem set on you, now . . .?"

Horn grinned. "You shaved that so fine, Sixx, you had me worried. I thought I was going to lose a bet with myself. She is a very pretty girl, isn't she? Enough to confuse a man's mind just a little? I'm relieved to see yours is still working well. Here." They shook hands ceremoniously, and something cool and roundedly cubical passed between them. "I had it already planned. All you have to look out for is that you don't confuse the two, so that you know which one is real and which one is phony. And good luck. I'll have all the experts laid on and waiting for you. Your job is to get the whole shebang safely back as far as Armstrong Base, Luna. See you!"

And then he was gone away after Princess Mellida and the documents, leaving it all up to Sixx and his partner. He turned to see Lowry crouching low, confronting the sorki, not making any overtures, just swapping stares with it. He strode across to stand in front of Miss Stame, just to look at her and hope that his total devastation wasn't showing too plainly. Because of his inner upheaval, foolish and gauche words came to his mouth when he would have preferred to be suave and gallant.

"You're human, of course?" he said, making it a question.

She giggled. "Now there's a silly question to ask a girl," she said. "Of course I'm human! Don't I look like a human being?"

"Yes," he said, softly and regretfully. "You do." She also sounded human, too much so. The shattered fragments of his exquisite vision were almost visible on the floor beside her dainty toes. Even the toes, in barefoot sandals, were sculptured perfection. But that voice! As

resonant as a lead bell, as softly musical as cracked tea-cups, as appealing as a five-year-old's first violin lesson—it was incredible, an offense, that such obscene noises could emerge from between those rose-petal lips. He ordered his face to smile in a polite fashion. "All right, let's get moving, shall we? You'll have stuff to pack, of course, and gear for the pet, but if you're quick about it we might be able to catch a lift on the same chopper that Mr. Horn will be taking, to the coast—"

"Oh no!" she interrupted, making him wince. "Quema couldn't possibly travel in a flying machine. She would be airsick or something. She's very delicate!"

"Yes!" Sixx sighed again. "I should have known. It's just not my day, is it? So what do we do instead?"

"It's all been arranged. There ought to be a gracca train in the courtyard, all ready and waiting for us. Just a minute." One of the attendant ladies had brought in an ornate box which she now deposited on the floor and stood away. Miss Stame went to it, crouched down and moved a pair of catches which let down one side to reveal a silk-lined and padded interior, complete with cushions and an air-grille. She then turned and tugged gently on the lead.

"Quema!" she called. "A li! A li!"

Sixx watched in breathless fascination. The Khandalar costume, with its drifting ribbons, inadequate on the court ladies, was utterly unable to contain this shape and contour or this demanding pose. Seldom had his eyes been exposed to anything so pleasantly devastating. But Quema was not in the least impressed or moved. The sorki goggled its eyes at her, whistled defiantly, and stood fast. She tried again, with the same negative result. Then Lowry, from his crouch, extended two huge hands, scooped the reluctant beast and dumped it smoothly and efficiently within the box, slapped the side shut, drew the end of the lead from her astonished grasp, tucked the whole thing under one arm, and stood. Sixx let out a

shaky breath of regret. There were times when Roger was just too damned efficient.

"We'll wait for you downstairs, miss," he said blandly. "C'mon, Rex guard me, huh?"

The near-noon sun scorched them as they reached the courtyard. Sixx saw the transport that stood waiting for them and felt dubious. Slender poles, cane basketwork and leather lacings made a kind of litter that was slung about three feet clear of the ground between four patient oxlike beasts—gracca. They looked powerful enough to carry anything the assembly would carry, but not at all fast. He hoped there was going to be someone else to drive the things. Then the distant clatter of a jet-copter drew his head back and his eyes up in time to see the machine wheel away from the Palace roof and rapidly off into blue distance. He snorted gently. Horn would be on that thing, along with McLaren, sitting back in airconditioned ease for the hour or so that it would take them to span the one-hundred-mile-plus distance to the coast. A few brief minutes to the splashdown port of Padash. Then into a fast and comfortable executive ship. A slick twenty-four hour warp to Sol, to Armstrong Base, Luna. Home, just like that!

"That's just great, isn't it?" he muttered. "Sometime around noon tomorrow they will be as good as home, by which time we will be something like half the blistering way to Padash! Some people have it easy."

"You heard what the man said, Rex. For us, they pick the hard ones." Lowry dumped the carry-case on the litter, hoisted himself up alongside it and armed off his helmet, looking serenely unworried. "Compliments, yet!"

"And you heard me tell the man. That kind of compliment I can live without and never miss. Once, just once, we ought to draw an easy one."

"It hasn't been too rough so far. And we have pleasant company anyway. That Miss Stame is very easy to look at."

"She's a dish all right; until she opens her mouth!"

"For beautiful elocution you can always listen to a drama tape, Rex."

"I suppose. She certainly has everything else, and then some. Not at all uptight with it, either. Very pleasant. But I can't help wondering just who she is, and how come she is here, in residence as a sorki expert?"

"You'll get your chance to ask her," Lowry murmured. "Here she comes now, with all the fixings."

Sixx took a long hard look at the burdened Miss Stame, and then at the attending relays of staff lugging boxes, bags, bales and bundles. He sighed, shook his head, slid down to the cobbles and went to meet her.

"All this is necessary?" he demanded.

"Some of it is for Quema," she confessed, "but most of it is mine. It's surprising, isn't it, the things you pick up? But as I'm going home and may never have the chance to come back here, I couldn't bear to leave anything!" She looked again at the enormity of it all, and appealed to him. "Will it make very much trouble for you?"

Sixx eyed the growing pile of clutter and shrugged. "All part of the job, I suppose. If the gracca-litter can stand it . . .?"

Four leather-clad pikemen with Royal flashes had come to stand, one by each beast, ready to mount up. They didn't look too worried, so he assumed it would be all right. The basketwork and leather creaked and sagged, but held. He gave her his arm to lean on so that she could scramble up and settle beside Lowry, leaving room for himself on her other side, and the all-important Quema riding right behind them. The pikemen outriders mounted up briskly and the gracca started to move, ungracefully out of step for a moment or two as they wheeled around in the courtyard and made for the exit arch, then more bravely as they gathered a trot and struck a kind of rhythm. They made plenty of clatter on the cobbles,

enough to warn any unwary pedestrians out of the way. All in all, Sixx was pleasantly disappointed at the turn of speed and the gentle swaying. A hundred miles of this might not be too arduous, after all.

"You'll excuse me, Miss Stame, but I'm curious about you," he went directly to the point most occupying his mind. "We Earth people aren't exactly *persona grata*, here in the K-culture, not unless we're accredited scientists. And not even then, according to Dr. McLaren. Yet here you are, established in the Royal household, one of the staff, and in charge of the Royal pet. That is quite a trick. How did you manage to work it?"

IV

"Well," she said as the litter swayed around a sharp corner, "I'm not a scientist, of course. Not with degrees or anything. But I was working with a scientific team, as an assistant. On Loges. Until about a year ago. Dull work it was, too, but it filled in the time. And then, of course, there was that terrible business with the bandits, and everything was spoiled."

Even Lowry was startled at that. "You mean you were a member of that team that got jumped by bandits and wiped out?"

"Not all wiped out, silly!" she squealed. "Else I wouldn't be here to tell you, would I? No, what happened was this. My uncle sent me on ahead with Dr. Lafarge, on to the next village, to arrange for food and billets for the night, while the rest of the team broke camp and gathered everything together, ready to follow on. We were to expect them to arrive somewhere about sundown or just after. We often did that kind of thing. Dr. Lafarge and I were the only women in the team, and the men would

never let us do any more of the hard work than they could help. And my uncle always said I was much too valuable ever to be allowed to go anywhere on my own."

"Valuable." Sixx quoted resignedly. "You'll have to forgive my ignorance, please. Valuable how?"

"Well, for one thing I speak the language fluently. You see? Anyway, we reached this village. Rosper, it was. And we made all the arrangements. And we waited. And they didn't come. In the morning we rode back . . . and we found what was left of them. Dr. Lafarge took care of all that part of it. They were all dead, and all the equipment, the stores, the records, instruments, everything all broken and burned. So that was the end of that. Fortunately we weren't too far away from the coast and a splash-port. And an Earth station. So we were able to get that far, and then Dr. Lafarge managed to get some help for us. She went back to Earth eventually, but there wasn't a lot of point in my going back with her. You see, as I said, I'm not a scientist at all. I'd never have been with that team if it hadn't been for my uncle."

"Your uncle." Sixx nodded as if he understood, fascinated despite himself, and perfectly willing to play the patsy. "Forgive me again, but who was he?"

She turned to stare at him in gorgeous astonishment, and her rose-petal mouth, this close, was a terrible temptation, until it moved again to emit the scraping noise, and the information, "Why! Sir Bernard Monkton, of course! He was in charge of the team!"

"Wow!" Sixx murmured, startled out of his crazy impulse to stop up his ears and kiss her anyhow. Monkton was a really big name. In all probability he knew more about the diffuse and difficult subject of gerontology than any other men alive. Or he had. And now that he was dead, it would be an almost impossible task to find someone big enough to take his place. No wonder the entire project had folded. And this exquisite birdbrain was his niece!

"So what did you do then?" he prompted, giving only half an eye to the fortress-thick walls as they clattered through the West Gate of the city. "You were all on your own. Stranded. No visible means of support. Tough on you!"

"Well, yes, I suppose. But Uncle Bernard had told me, often, that if ever I needed help I was to seek out Dr. McLaren and ask him. So I did. I radioed him from Loges, and he arranged everything. He fixed it for me to come here."

"Some fixing. He arranged for you to get a soft job as keeper of the Royal sorkis, just like that?"

"Oh, that!" She laughed distractingly and hideously, setting his teeth on edge and his pulse leaping simultaneously. "That was easy! Nothing to it at all. All I had to do was learn up about sorkis. And it's all written down and preserved in the records, you see. So that only took me a few minutes."

Sixx drew a careful breath, leaned forward to look past her at Lowry and shake his head, just fractionally, in despairing resignation. "It only took you a few minutes to read all the records and learn all about Royal sorkis," he repeated.

"Of course!" She opened her beautiful blue eyes wide, leaned even closer to him in confidence and smiled ravishly. "I can do things like that. Easily. It's my only talent. You see, I'm mnemonic. That means—"

"I know what it means!" he interrupted, firmly and just a little too loudly. "You have complete eidetic recall. You remember things."

"That's right," she agreed happily. "Anything and everything. It's a kind of gift!"

"Yes," he sighed. All at once he felt tired and a little angry. Life could be grossly unfair sometimes. Here at last he had met the girl of his dreams, single and uncommitted, perfect in every visible detail, ravishly dis-

played in breeze-blown ribbonry that offered plenty of opportunity to inspect those details, and right handy. Except that his dream-design had carelessly omitted voice specifications, taking them for granted, and had completely overlooked anything unique or different in the mental equipment department. It was barely possible that something could be done about the sound effects, but that peculiar talent had to put her right out of court . . . for him.

"Time you said something, Roger," he suggested. "I seem to be doing all the entertaining so far."

Lowry was as placidly calm and competent as always. "Do you have to make any special effort?" he asked curiously. "To remember stuff, I mean. Do you consciously select? Like, for example, the periodic table of elements—"

"One. H. One-point-oh-oh-eight-oh. Two. He. Four-point-oh-oh-two-six. Three. Li. Six-point-nine-three-nine. Four. Be—"

"Hold it!" he interrupted gently. "That's fine, but you didn't answer my question. Do you have to try to remember, or does it just happen?"

"I don't know." She sounded suddenly deflated. "It just happens. I think. I don't know. I don't *know* anything at all, really. Not to know. To understand. You have to ask me questions."

Sixx turned his head away and tried to give his attention to the rough countryside they were passing through. Arrested development. Apart from her freak talent, she was a child, a baby, an innocent! He listened awhile to Lowry coping, asking her, patiently, to recite everything she knew on the subject of the care and welfare of Royal sorkis, and he had to grin wryly. Trust Roger to put his finger unerringly on some way of turning a difficult situation to good advantage. Miss Stame started in happily enough, yapping away, reeling it all off, anat-

omy, markings, behavior, food requirements and preferences, mating habits, ancestry, care and attention, show points—the whole book.

The peasant small-holdings gave way to stony ground and scrub, ragged hills breaking the skyline on all sides, the dirt road leading ahead to a narrow pass between two crests. There would be no traffic problem. This road was used only to provide the occasional link between Casta and the splash-port of Padash, and there wasn't much commerce this way. The sun overshot noon and began to slide down the sky. Sixx relaxed into a half-doze, lulled by the steady drone of statistics and the gentle swaying movement. On the other side of that gorge, he decided, they would make a halt, take a spell to rest and eat, and then go on until dark or the halfway village, whichever was first. The gracca were making a good fifteen miles an hour and looked capable of keeping it up indefinitely.

Semi-sacred animals, used only for work, never for food. What was so wrong about a feudal culture, anyway? Who would want to change all this open country, and peace and quiet? The little microphone in his lapel emitted a small squeak that sliced instantly through his doze. He turned to stare at Lowry, reaching by reflex for his helmet.

"What?"

"Not sure. Movements, on ahead and up, either side. People up there seem mighty curious about us. Could be just gawpers, but it could be ambush just as easy."

Sixx armed his helmet into place with a movement that looked casual but wasted no time. Roger had more senses than a cat and was not given to crying 'Wolf!' just for fun. He sharpened his own senses.

"Comes anything," he said conversationally, "you grab the pooch-box, I'll take care of the lady," and he braced himself for fast reactions.

"The essential differences between the Royal sorki and

the wild, or common bassorki in summary then, are, size, coloring, fertility rate . . . here, what are you two mumbling about?"

"Nothing for you to sweat over, sweetheart. Just keep right-on talking like that . . . hup!"

His upcast eye caught just a flicker of rapid movement, a flying splinter of sunlight. It was enough. All in one convulsive movement he wrapped one arm about her waist and launched himself sideways and over, taking her with him, hearing the screaming hiss of something that struck him a violent blow between the shoulderblades, and the wail as it went disappointedly away. He hit the road catlike, heard a choked-off scream from somewhere else, and then he was in under the litter, crouching, putting her down none too gently.

"Stay still!" he ordered. "And keep quiet!"

Here came Lowry from the other side, bulking huge, with the sorki-box under one arm and an arrow trapped in the crook of another.

"There's at least six of them," he hazarded. "They got all four of our outriders, and both of us, all in one flight. All hits, no misses. Those laddies can surely shoot!"

"Next thing, they have to come up close, to make sure we are finished off right, right?"

"Gives us a minute or two. This is quite a bolt. Take a look." He slid the arrow across to let Sixx observe the razor-sharp barbed head.

"Barbed! Not a toy at all. What d'you suppose they're after, loot?"

"Who knows? Pickings, maybe? Anyway, we're all dead."

"Check!" Sixx grinned. "Let them come and find out, huh?"

Miss Stame was completely bewildered. Her golden hair was down around her face, her startling pieces-gown in total disarray, her blue eyes staring as she lay prone between them. Sixx took her arm, gently but firmly.

"Listen carefully," he told her. "This is what you do. You lie still, there, like dead. You do not—repeat *not*—move until one of us tells you to. Right? Do it!"

A moment later all three were artistically sprawled out, the two men so arranged as to be able to see and grab when the time came. They could all hear Quema in her box, whistling angrily. Sixx concentrated on the task of shutting out that noise and other distractions and tuned his ears for more important cues. Soft noises. The slap of leather sandals on rock and rubble. The cautious calling to and fro of several voices. Now he saw feet and hairy legs. Then sun-brown weather-beaten faces tilted sideways, with eyes squinting against the angle. There came proddings, vigorous ones, from the butt-ends of spears. Sixx heard much tongue-clicking and wonderment over the glare-white uniform-suits and glitter-gold facings. And gabble, that he could follow well enough to know that someone in charge was giving the order.

"Drag 'em out where we can see what we are doing!"

And others, not so confident, who pointed out the uneasy absence of any signs of blood. But then rough hands grabbed and heaved. A flicked glance showed him Lowry's bulk disappearing in the opposite direction. He risked another to weigh up the opposition. Four sturdy little men, rough-clad in leather, spear in one hand, broad-bladed sword in belt, quiver and bow slung back out of the way. All right. He gathered his energies. Clumsy fingers started investigating his helmet.

Coming suddenly alive, he grabbed, seized wrists, heaved and got himself up at the expense of the man he held, kicked his feet out from under him, gave him the full force of an armored knee in his face as he fell, spun him away and went around himself. Balancing, he kicked another man into folded-up agony, then tramped forward, arms eagerly outstretched. Man three lost himself trying to work out what to do with his spear while wanting hopelessly to drag his bow forward, but man four had

faster reflexes. He had already drawn his broadsword and slashed with it now as Sixx moved at him, set his feet, hunched a shoulder to the blade and rocked with the impact of it. Then he rocked back. The swordsman's arm was numb with shock. Sixx chopped it hard, caught the sword as it fell, spun and flung it violently at the third man, who was still struggling with indecision. Not bothering to follow the flight of it, he carried the spin on all the way around and back to the man with the numbed arm, now astonished and still. He reached out almost gently with his left hand to nudge the man into just the right position, then hit him with a right that came all the way from the litter back there before it exploded as a fist on the jaw.

And that part of it was all over. With one quick and comprehensive survey, he trotted, flexing his gloved fingers, around to the other side of the litter. And stopped to chuckle at what he saw. Four supine bodies were distributed in fine disorder about the road. Lowry held a fifth in his left fist, choking him purple, while with his right hand he reached up and back and hauled the sixth from his leechlike cling between his shoulders. Then he brought the two together with a solid thud, like a man striking cymbals, shook them just to be sure, and threw them away.

"Persistent little feller, that last one," he remarked. "Kept right on trying to open me up with his sticker. Couldn't believe it was all a waste of time. Just couldn't understand it."

"He'll never get it now." Sixx dusted gently at his suit, sending a keen stare about the scene. "Seems like the end of the performance. This bit of it, anyway. Say, Roger, d'you reckon these people will ever catch on to the idea of armor?"

"In time, maybe, but let's not wait around for that. Better call forth the fair damsel. She'll be wondering what's going on."

Sixx gave her the word to emerge, and Miss Stame crawled out from under the litter more wide-eyed than ever. At the fine display of bodies she goggled, and forgot all about trying to bring order to her disarranged ribbons.

"Gosh!" she shrilled. "Whatever happened to all those poor men?"

"We did." Sixx told her gravely. "We often do. I'm afraid they tried to chew up more than they could bite off. That often happens too. Don't be worried about it. We had better get on if we hope to strike a village before nightfall."

"Village." she said, blinking. "Ostrik. Forty-nine stads from Casta. That's equivalent to fifty-one miles. It can't be much further on."

Sixx studied his chronometer, calculating their recent speed as about fifteen miles an hour for a little over four hours, and concluded that she couldn't do arithmetic. That, or they had passed the village without noticing it. It didn't seem to matter much.

"Never mind that," he dismissed it. "Thing is, one of us is going to have to ride point, better both of us I reckon. So you'll have to mount guard on Quema all by yourself."

"But what are we going to do about all these poor men?"

"We are going to do exactly the same for them as they would have done for us if their plans had worked out; the same as those other bandits did for your uncle and his team. In fact, nothing. We will just leave them here for somebody else to find. We have other matters to tend to. When you're ready?"

She offered no argument and showed no signs of hysteria, at which he was glad and impressed. She put her foot willingly in his palm and went up into the litter again lithely. Still impressed, he had an afterthought.

"You're the fixer-type when it comes to villages and accommodation, meals and stuff like that, I hope?"

"Oh yes," she said. "I'll take care of all that."

"And expenses? Do you have local currency?"

"We won't need that. I'll just charge it, to the Palace."

"Yes, of course!" he was impressed some more. "That's good thinking." He went away to mount up. The gracca had short stumpy horns which made good handholds, and the heavy ridges of muscle across the shoulders made sitting not too painful, but for all that Sixx was glad to see the village come into sight shortly after they had passed the rocky defile. More from long habit of observation than anything else he had marked this place from the air on the inward flight. He had been curious as to why the planet's capital city, and the senior city of the entire Khandalar culture, was located in the heart of such rugged and inhospitable terrain. He had put it down to just one more aspect of feudalism, the safety-conscious aloofness of the power-elite. At that time it had never occurred to him he might be making the return trip over this same terrain. Now he wished he had paid more attention, especially to the village.

In the rapidly approaching dusk it was hard to grasp details. There would be, he guessed, no more than five hundred inhabitants all told. What dwellings he could see were scattered, wooden, and low. By contrast the inn was handsome and spacious.

"That's not so surprising," Lowry murmured, once they were seated in the public bar, each with a flagon of the local brew. "This place will be the logical stop-over for anybody traveling between Casta and the coast. A kind of staging-post. Probably their best income-getter."

"I suppose," Sixx agreed, glancing over his shoulder to where Miss Stame was debating with the deferential innkeeper. "I owe her an apology. She is neither dumb nor dim. Charge it, huh?"

"One way or another, you can bet it will show up in our bill, though. Old Man Horn isn't dim either. I gather there is some kind of garrison here, Rex. You reckon we ought to report our little fracas?"

"Garrison? That will be one noncom and five, at the outside. And it will be black dark in ten minutes. No, I doubt if it would help anybody any. Here she comes now. I'll bet the locals don't know which to stare at the most, us or her. That handful of ribbons is purely a waste of time as a dress. Not that I'm complaining, mind!"

She reached the table and sat, making futile sweeps with her arms to gather as much of her drifting finery as possible into some kind of order, and then shrugging away the task as immaterial. "It's all fixed," she told them. "We will be called at sunrise. Fresh gracca all laid on, and two riders. Two rooms for us, and supper is on the way. I hope you won't mind if Quema eats right here at the table with us?"

"So long as mine host doesn't object, I suppose it's something we're going to have to get used to. We can't start any earlier."

If nothing else, it must have been wonderful entertainment for the local peasantry, the sight of two I.S. uniforms, one alien lady in Court Dress, and one pop-eyed royal pet, all dining at the same table in their own inn. The more Sixx saw of the sorki the less he could see anything charming about it. To his simplistic mind a pet had to have some visible grace or beauty, like maybe a bird, or a cat, or even a snake . . . or some practical value, such as a hunting dog, or a horse. But he could see no saving graces at all about this midget creature. It was somehow able to snuffle out food from its bowl and crunch on it without once getting caught up in its own incredible ears, and somehow without ever shifting that malevolent pop-eyed stare. Sixx found necessary to whisper to his colleague,

"You get the feeling the damn thing is staring at you, all the time?"

"You too? It must be the way its eyes stick out, either side."

"Well," Miss Stame announced, after a while, "again, I hope you don't mind, but I'm going to discard this fancy dress tonight. Not right here and now, of course!" she added hastily. "But I'll put it away somewhere in my luggage and change into something a bit more civilized in the morning. I mean, it's very pretty if you like that kind of thing, and at Court I had no choice, but it's hardly practical, is it?" Again she made a gesture at getting the inadequate strips under control and gave up. Even while Sixx was trying to concoct some plausible argument against her eminently sensible suggestion, his partner came out with it flatly.

"I'd rather you didn't, Miss Stame." Lowry said. "What I mean, I would prefer it if you stayed dressed like that for a while."

"Would you?" she wondered. "Whatever for?"

"Well, all the time we are on-planet that dress is conspicuous. It has meaning. It's Court dress, and that counts for a lot. It's as good as an introduction. Look at the way it has swung things here, for instance. We might need it again. Once we reach our ship and get aboard, once we're up and away, then it won't matter at all what you wear, but I'd like it fine if you stayed that way until then."

She looked at him with an exquisite frown between perfect eyebrows. Sixx hoped his own expression was as pure and straightforward as Roger's. She shrugged at last. "Very well. If you think it matters that much. You're in charge, after all. Come, Quema, you've had enough."

She collected her charge back into its box and departed in a swirl of color to take the sorki up to her room. Sixx eyed his massive friend.

"Now what was all that about?" he demanded. "I'm with you in not wanting our gorgeous guest to take the veil, but we are on a job, remember? You're not supposed to think about things like that."

"Like what?" Lowry retorted innocently. "It's just the way I said it. That fancy dress is a kind of identification. Just like our uniforms!"

And you don't believe that, either, Sixx thought, but let it ride. Whatever game Roger was up to, there would be a valid point to it. Meanwhile he had a little worry of his own to attend to. Some ten minutes later, in the dim-lit low-ceilinged room appointed to them, he bounced experimentally on the bed and found it respectably soft. Lowry, restless, announced,

"I'll just trot along and check up, see if our lady friend is all bedded down safe. Can't be too careful."

Sixx scowled awhile after his partner. It was extremely unlike Roger to be so transparently devious, so obviously up to something. Then, dismissing the minor problem, he tackled a major one. Hauling off his right boot, he unscrewed the heel to reveal a hollow cavity.

"Corny old gag," he announced, to no one in particular, "but worth one more play." Undoing the front of his suit he retrieved the precious gem from his belt and stowed it carefully away in his heel. Then he placed the fake in the belt and put everything back the way it had been, and was just stretching out on his bed as Lowry returned.

"All safe and snug," he reported. "She's along at the other end of this passage, can't miss it." He inspected his wrist. "We'll be called at sun-up. I make that about six-thirty. No sense in wasting any of it."

He stretched himself out on his bed just as he was and prepared for sleep, leaving Sixx to wonder all over again just what his friend was up to. But not for very long. The I.S. uniform, so conspicuous in many ways, had a variety of qualities that were not nearly so conspicuous. Apart

from being invulnerable to anything short of an ultra-high-velocity steel-jacket slug at close range, or prolonged temperature in excess of two thousand degrees centigrade, it was designed for a man to be comfortable in, to live in for as much as seven consecutive days if necessary, with only small interruptions for vital purposes. So sleep was not long in coming.

It departed much faster, almost instantly, at an urgent nudge on his shoulder and a grunt from Lowry. "C'mon, Rex. Something's blown!"

"What?" Sixx rolled onto his feet and snatched his helmet. "What?"

"I put a body-bug in her room. It's howling now. She's gone!"

V

They went, swift and silent, along the dark passage, seeing their way by the narrow spotlight beams from their helmets. That all-important door was shut and enigmatic, but the body-bug inside was still howling its message. Set to scream on a certain wavelength if the occupant went away and stayed away for more than ten minutes, Sixx could hear it himself, now that he had activated the circuit. Delicacy went by the board.

"Bust in!" he said, and they drew back together and launched forward. The door yielded explosively and they charged in. The far window was standing open, curtains torn and blowing in the breeze. The bed was ruffled. There were muddy footprints on the floor. Quema whistled furiously from her box. This was not the time for wondering why "they" had snatched Miss Stame in preference to the precious pet.

"At the most, Roger, they have a ten minutes start on us. So we need transport, something fast . . . and we need to know which way."

"Whoever it was," Lowry scanned the room hurriedly, "they took her clothes. That figures, all those jewels and pearls and stuff. And that means we know which way to head. I bugged one of her sandals. Let's roust out the landlord. C'mon!"

Going down the staircase they made enough clatter to wake the dead. And the innkeeper wasn't dead, he merely looked ready to die of fright as Lowry loomed hugely over him.

"Tell him, Rex. Tell him good!"

Sixx worked his tongue awkwardly around the alien sounds, enough to tell mine host that they needed two fast gracca, now! And that they were leaving the royal sorki in his care, to be preserved from all harm, at whatever cost, until they returned. To emphasize the point, Lowry gave him a bleak stare, reached for a heavy pewter tankard from a shelf, held it in his left hand under the innkeeper's nose, and crushed it into squeaking ruin. Then they were outside in the chilly dark, with jewel-bright stars overhead and a stiff breeze whipping the innkeeper's nightshirt about his skinny knees. The gracca snorted and moved. There was a steep and stony path leading towards nearby hills, and in Sixx's ear now there came a repeated one-second tweeting that told him which way to go. They charged off, swaying, plunging and scrambling as their eyes gradually adjusted to the gloom, struggling to find the best compromise between the direction they wanted and the paths they could find.

"You have been a busy little fellow, haven't you?" Sixx murmured, as they made some speed between high rock walls and the tweeting grew louder in his left ear. "Mind letting me in on your deliberations? Why in the sacred

name of sanity would anybody want to knock off the lovely Elleen?"

"I dunno why," Lowry admitted, between bumps, "but it figures she has to be important. You and me, we both know what a very crafty character Jason Horn is, check?"

"All the way on that one."

"So the Crown Stones are valuable, sure enough, but only as a symbol. One way or another, this culture is going to fall apart no matter what. You check with that, too?"

"Right on the button. You can't stop progress, not nohow, once it gets started. Whoa . . . I think we bear right here, and then left. That's better. So—I'm with you so far, but then what?"

"And the sorki is a smokescreen, just like Mr. Horn said. It's a rare and valuable animal, I'll buy that all right, but not so much as to bring the Old Man himself all this way out here just to supervise. So there has to be something else. And what else is there? It's sticking out a mile that Miss Stame is it, whatever it is."

"You've sold me," Sixx admitted, ducking to avoid an overhang. "I hereby award you the cigars *and* the blue ribbon. She is certainly it, all right. But what? What has she got, apart from enough of this and that and the other to make an ordinary woman drop dead from envy?" The measured tweet in his ear grew suddenly louder. "I think maybe we ought to slow down a bit, proceed with caution. By the volume, we're right on top of . . . hah! Over there, to the left. A light. Campfire?"

"That's what it looks like from here."

Both men halted their mounts and sat perfectly still to observe.

"Don't need that tracer any more," Lowry murmured, touching his helmet to cancel it. Sixx copied, at the same time dropping an infrared snoop visor to aid his dark vision. One look made him whistle softly.

"You certainly earned those cigars. That is quite a party. Somebody must think a hell of a lot of the lovely Elleen to organize an operation this big. I'd say there's forty-five to fifty of them, altogether."

"Backed up into a box canyon, too. That ought to make it a bit easier for us. Black-out, huh?"

"Check!" Sixx agreed, slipping down from his mount and breaking open a pocket in the thigh of his suit. About three minutes later the pair of them were almost invisible inside a thin-film overall suit. The film was sheer, tough, and with the handy property of passing light in one direction only, so that the man inside could see out but no one could see in, nor did he radiate any sign of his presence except a shadow. It was the next best thing to a cloak of invisibility, and only their hands and the soles of their feet were clear of it. In warm daylight a man inside that suit could get very hot very fast, which was a drawback, but in this darkness they wouldn't have any bother.

"You take the right-hand wall, Roger, I'll take the left. Watch out for the odd sentry. You never know. Somebody with brains organized this."

"And who would that be," Lowry wondered, "apart from Royalty?" He had groped through a slit in his suit and was now holding a slim and efficient needle-gun in one hand while he made careful adjustments to his helmet with the other. Sixx, copying him, settled his helmet visor firmly and touched a stud.

"Do you read me?" he asked. "What d'you mean, Royalty?"

"I read. It has to be Royalty, Rex. You know the social set-up here as well as I do. What I mean is the same as Jason Horn said, if you split a secret six ways you might as well forget it altogether. This kind of secret, anyway. Maybe some of the Royals are crazy keen to be democratic, maybe. But I'll bet there are a few who don't fancy the notion at all, who have other notions entirely.

Would you go out of your way to surrender absolute power?"

Sixx started climbing, using his eyes warily. "Never having had it, I wouldn't know. And I'm no idealist, so I can't imagine what kind of price would buy me off. But, all right, suppose it is one of the Royals, one a long way down in the hierarchy—you have still left a big hole to fill. Why knock off Elleen?"

"Couple or three reasons." Lowry's voice came steadily, evenly. "Maybe for ransom. Maybe a bargaining lever. Maybe just to lure us into a trap, even. I like that one best!"

"Now you tell me!" Sixx retorted, and then froze as a rough-clad shape took form in the gloom above and moved to lean over an edge and look down. He became aware of the strange dark shadow much too late. The needle-gun made no sound at all as its solenoids sent a narcotic-laden dart zipping on its way. The unfortunate lookout man slumped slowly and lay still. Sixx climbed on.

"To lure us into a trap," he observed, "means that somebody knows far more than is good for him, or us."

"That's what I said"—a pause—"bye-bye, friend. What I said. It has to be a Royal. It's too clever for anybody else. You'll notice those arrows all went where they were pointed, one to each rider, one for you, one for me . . . but none for her. And those laddies could shoot!"

"You have a nasty way of adding things up, Roger. But you are still not getting the answer I want. Why her? What has she got?"

He bore away to one side now and was able to overlook and see right down into the canyon where the bandits were assembled. There was enough firelight to make the infrared visor unnecessary, so he flipped it up out of the way and peered vainly across the dark gulf in an attempt to locate Lowry.

"You set yet?" he demanded, and grew tense as the reply was slow to come back. "Roger? All right?"

"All right now. Had a hairy moment there, for a while. There's a damned great back-up of loose rock and scree just here. One sneeze would be enough to bring it all down in a rush. Might be handy, you never know. I've planted a cracker anyway."

"It's a thought, but let's not blow the doorway until after we get out, right? Make a little flash for me, huh?" Sixx peeled back the hood of his suit and waited. He heard a sigh of effort.

"A minute!" Grunting noises. "Right. This is me. Where are you?"

Sixx caught just a wink of bright light, blinked his own headlight in response, then settled down to study the scene in more detail. A first urgent look had shown him that Miss Stame was in no immediate danger. The fire crackled well back into the canyon, not far from the wall where she was secured. Someone had thrown a rope over a high spur and the dangling end held her wrists high. Not painfully so, but high enough to ensure that she couldn't do anything except stand there and watch while a motley group around the fire argued and squabbled over her jewels and gold chains. They had left her stark, which was an indignity someone would pay for, but wasn't fatal. He guessed she would be feeling a little chill from the night air, but that wasn't fatal either, and she would just have to endure that discomfort for a while longer.

"Questions," he murmured, while the other part of his mind considered a number of possible strategies. "They certainly don't seem to be treating her with any kind of respect . . . nor yet with any particular animosity either. Which could mean that you were right. Either she is for ransom, or to lure us into some kind of trap."

"So we got lured." Lowry sounded not in the least perturbed. "I make it thirty-eight of them, not counting

the boss man, sitting back there by the wall. See which one I mean?"

"Over here on my right, in a purplish cloak? Right, we'll save him for possible questions. Meanwhile I suggest long-barrels and let's thin out the opposition a little. You take all those your side of the fire, I'll cover this side. But we leave that bunch by the fire, those slobs arguing over Elleen's jewelry, for later."

"Check. Two shots each, just to be sure. Go!"

Sixx squirmed, got out an extra six inches of rifled barrel from a leg pouch, screwed it carefully into place, and started in, deliberately but swiftly, to knock out all those he could see on his side of an imaginary line drawn from the fire out to the box-canyon exit. The needle-gun magazine was good for fifty rounds and he had a spare clip if necessary. The strange scene below grew more and more quiet, as if some strange influence, a deathly hush, were spreading over it, until at last the seven who squabbled by the fire had to notice it. So too did the solitary one who squatted apart, he whom Roger had called the boss man. All at once all their boastful self-assurance evaporated, the gaudy ribbons, the pearls, the jewels, fell from their hands, and they began to stare uneasily around. Then the boss man stood. The others scrambled to their feet.

"It's like the clock that stops ticking," Sixx murmured. "You miss it, even if you don't know quite what it is that's gone."

"I'm all through, Rex."

"Check. I would say it is now your cue to make a spectacular entrance, something that ought to scare the pants off them, while I sneak up on them from the rear. Go when ready!"

Grasping the slim barrel he went hurriedly but silently down the rugged slope, leaving it to Lowry to attract their attention. And so he did, with characteristic

thoroughness. The first intimation the uneasy bandits had was a sudden puff of fire that thrust a slim finger up in the dark. That spear of red fire grew high, higher, then erupted into an eye-blinding star that crackled, and drifted, and bathed the entire canyon in harsh glare. The shocked bandits cowered away from it, shielding their eyes. Then, in the pitiless light, they saw a monstrous man-shaped thing in shining white and glittering gold come leaping lightly down the rocks, bounding from one ledge to another until it reached the valley floor and started to pace menacingly forward. The boss man was the first to shake off his stupour.

Pointing with one hand, waving frantically with the other, he shouted "Shak! Shak!" But no "shak" came. Sixx cast a wary glance over the prostrate shadow-shapes, just in case, but the needles had done their work well and there was no movement. It was left to the seven by the fire to shake off their fear and start to scramble for their weapons, getting in each others' way, cursing and shoving, and still that fearful white figure came on. Sixx trod warily, on the alert. One bandit got an arrow nocked, drew as far as his chin . . . and folded like a sack. Two more got so far as nocking arrows . . . and lay down in quiet silence. Another, half out of his mind with fear, drew his broadsword, charged, and ran into a sprawling heap on the ground. The drifting flare began to dim. Sixx disposed of the remaining three rapidly then went to look for the end of the rope that held Miss Stame. The boss man no longer shouted for "shak" but stood as deathly still as any man can who is shivering in terror.

Lowry halted now, raised a hand to his helmet, and his voice came, in growling amplification to echo from the walls.

"You all right, Miss Stame?"

Sixx found the rope's end, released it. She staggered a moment as the tension came off and almost fell, but recovered and clasped her wrists.

"Yes, I'm all right," she gasped, "I think. Is that . . . Roger?"

"Right. That character in the purple cloak. Who's he? D'you know his name?"

"I've heard the others call him Sarpio."

"Good enough. Tell him to kneel. Tell him if he doesn't, right away, I will strike him dead, just like all the rest!"

As she chattered the noises Sixx peeled off his black-out suit and put it away. Sarpio fell promptly and abjectly to his knees. A second glare-white monster materializing from his rear put the final touches to his demoralization. Sixx had intended, all along, that he should be saved in order to talk, and there was no difficulty about that at all. The hard part was in getting him to stop, at least long enough for Miss Stame to have time to translate his babbling. And, after all that, it turned out to be nothing very much.

He was an old man, this Sarpio, gray and lean, a member of the Civil Service class. He was, he confessed further, the chief revenue officer for the whole of the southern empire of Aldan, and he would inevitably be put to death by Lagas for his part in this affair. He was so certain of this that he repeated it three times before he could bring himself to go on and tell, dejectedly, that after all he was only a very small cog in a very big machine, in a huge revolutionary movement. It was truly vast. All three worlds, the entire Khandalar culture, were involved. Millions waited impatiently for the big day when Lagas and his evil clique would finally be overthrown, and honest and simple people would come into their own. The big day.

In any language, no matter how alien, the phrases were old and shopworn, miserably familiar. All the courts were corrupt. So were the administrations, on all three worlds. Soon, and inevitably, they would fall. The rebels would surge to power, to a new way, under a new

and mighty leader, now in exile but ready and waiting to take over.

"And so on, and so forth, and all the rest of the pitiful blah!" Sixx interrupted impatiently. "Get him off that track, will you? Let's get down to cases, to some real meat. Ask him why he picked on us especially. That's the bit we're interested in."

It was obvious from her tone that the going had now become complicated. "This is so silly," she declared, in a while, "but here is what he is saying, anyway. The Tapesa—that's me—is well-known to be one of the hated outlanders hired by Royalty to ferret out and study the private and personal ways of the K-people, so as to bind and crush them more severely than ever under the imperial yoke. Was she not with a spy group on Loges? Did she not flee from Loges to Aldan, and there go direct into the Imperial Court? And is it not true that even now King Emperor Lagas has sent for outlanders to take her safely away, with her valuable knowledge, so as to help to prepare new and even more terrible ways of grinding down the helpless people?

"Our Great Leader warned us that something like this would happen, that the traitor Lagas was working together with the outlanders. Lagas claims that the outlanders will bring great wisdom and knowledge to benefit all, but this is a great lie. Lagas means to use the knowledge and the power for himself and his kind, for the Royals, so that they will be even more powerful than before . . . but that is simply ridiculous!" she interrupted herself. "I'm not doing anything like that, at all!"

"So you say," Sixx told her. "And it doesn't cost me a thing to say I believe you. I do. But you'll have a hard time convincing him of that. And I'm not so sure but what he has the right story, in his way, only that is none of my business right now. You guessed right, Roger. There's a brain back of all this. I'd love to know who, just to complete the record. Would you ask him, Elleen,

if he will be so good as to put a name to the Great Leader of his? Go on, try it!"

She made the necessary noises and they all waited, but Sarpio was suddenly through with talking. His lined old face settled into stubborn folds. Lowry gave him a hard look and shook his head.

"He's not going to talk, Rex. And we can't persuade him, either, you can bet on it. He has already seen what we can do, and if that doesn't scare him nothing will."

"I'd say you're right again," Sixx admitted. "I'm not all that well up on torture anyway, as it happens. And I will bet the locals know a few tricks worse than anything we could dream up. Lagas will put him through it, and he knows it . . . and he still isn't going to spill. But we have to know, right now, if only to take the weight off our own backs!"

VI

It was a highly frustrating situation in several ways. Time was the one commodity they didn't have too much of, for one thing. And there was enough firelight on Sarpio's face to confirm their diagnosis, that he was never going to talk, not under any kind of persuasion. For once, Sixx regretted his humanity. Then Miss Stame, idle, moved closer to the fire to warm herself and became suddenly aware of her nakedness.

"Gosh!" she exclaimed, more in surprise than embarrassment. "No wonder I feel a bit chilly! I've just realized—"

Sixx moved hastily to rescue her tattered finery from the unconscious hands of the bandits. As he thrust it at her he said, "I don't know that this stuff will keep the chill out anyway. We'd better get back to the inn, fast. We don't want anything happening to you now!"

"I'm all right!" she answered his tone rather than the words, slipping her feet into her sandals. "It's not *that* cold, and being undressed doesn't bother me any. If it's important—"

"It's important, all right." Sixx was torn between natural solicitude for her, the pressure of time, and the knowledge that a vital bit of information was just out of his grasp. Then Lowry cut the Gordian knot in his characteristically innocent fashion. Reaching out to grab, he said,

"Here, take hizzonner's cloak. He can spare it, and it'll keep you warm. I'll go round up a gracca for you."

She accepted the cloak thankfully, swept it around herself, stuffed her ribbonry into a pocket, and Sixx scowled. There had been that tone again in Roger's voice. Something he had seen. But what? In a moment Lowry came back leading a mount, and Sixx gave her his arm for her to lean on as she scrambled up. Together they tramped rapidly back the way they had come, back to their own patiently waiting transport . . . and still Sixx was puzzled. It was not like Roger to abandon something this easily. What had he seen? As soon as they were all mounted, Lowry announced cheerfully,

"We had better lock the door after us, make sure that bunch stay put until somebody comes to collect 'em. Like this," and he touched a trigger-stud in his chin-stay. There was a faint and distant crack, a spit of light and then a thunderous rumbling as a considerable section of the rocky canyon wall slid away down into echoing stillness. "That's our motto," he said. "Take no chances!"

Breakfast was a busy time for them. There was the inn-keeper, fawning fearfully, dreading that the blotted reputation of his hospitality might get back to the Palace. There was the local garrison commander to be seen and told where to take his men to round up the miscreants. There was Quema to be fed and soothed. There was the litter to be seen to and new riders found. And Miss Stame

to wash and change, this time with Lowry's approval, into something more civilized. "Something more civilized" for her meant a brief jersey top and even briefer pants in pale blue that couldn't have fitted more snugly if they had been painted on, a sight that almost distracted Sixx away from his puzzle. But not quite. As soon as they were once more jogging on their way steadily, with two sturdy peasants riding the lead graccas, and the coast and Padash no more than forty miles ahead, he decided to surrender gracefully.

"I give up, Roger," he said. "Let's have it. What was the big idea in stealing the tax-gatherer's garment?"

"Oh, that!" Lowry, seated once more on the far side of Miss Stame, stretched a long arm back into the pile of baggage and retrieved the garment in question. "Playing a long hunch, maybe. I never yet heard of any rebellion, widespread conspiracy, underground movement or out-group of any kind that didn't have some kind of emblem, or symbol, or trademark. And especially the officers and subleaders. How else can they get it across to the rank-and-file that they have the true voice of the Cause?" He was examining the cloak carefully as he talked. "It would have to be, though, something a man could conceal, something he could shed real fast if it was dangerous for him to be seen wearing it. And the cloak seemed to me to be the best bet. I reckon that could be it, maybe?"

He held the garment now so as to expose an area that would, in wear, be underneath the right breast. There, tacked on with small stitching, was a blazon. It was oval, the size of a man's palm, and black, with a design embroidered on it in red and yellow. Sixx drew it close to study.

"Two crescent moons either side," he murmured, "with a dagger in between, point downwards. That much seems obvious. But that squiggle at the bottom has me stopped. All right, genius, you found it. What's it mean?"

"Not me!" Lowry objected. "Her!"

"Of course. Sorry, it's early yet, and we've had a rough night. So . . . Elleen, sweetheart, what's this pretty thing?"

"It's a Royal Crest," she said, and stopped there, staring at it. He looked at her, so close, so flawlessly lovely in profile . . . so thick! He made himself be patient.

"A Royal Crest. Good. *Which* Royal Crest?"

"Loges South."

"How d'you know that?" he asked unwarily.

"Aldan is a dagger and two crescents. Metera is two crescents and a dagger. Loges is a crescent, a dagger, and a crescent. This is Loges. The dagger pointing downwards is Loges South. The dagger pointing upwards would be Loges North."

"All right," he said. "Good. And now what's this squiggle stand for?"

"That is Lorian."

"And who or what, pray, is Lorian?"

"Lorian is the third son of Teltor, who is the second eldest brother of Rimas, who is the King of Loges South."

"Now we're getting to it," he sighed. "Now, please, give me a full run-down on this Lorian."

From the moment of his first question her face had gone blandly blank, and it remained dream-calm now as she started to recite.

"Lorian-dis-Teltor. Born twenty sixty. Sent to Earth to complete his education, twenty seventy-six. Reported good to excellent in technology, administration and management, history, socio-economics. There were disturbing reports and rumors in twenty seventy-nine of unofficial and unorthodox activities, and he was recalled to Khandalar in twenty eighty but failed to return. His present whereabouts are not known."

"That sounds like our boy, all right. Do you have a physical description of him?"

"I'm sorry, I do not have that information."

"Ah well, let's not be greedy. If nobody has seen him officially in four years it wouldn't be any too accurate anyway. You did very well." And he meant it. But he couldn't resist just one more question. "What's tapesa mean?"

"It means—" she started, then blinked out of her semi-daze and turned indignant blue eyes on him. "I am not going to translate that! Fat and overdeveloped, indeed! Do *you* think I'm fat and overdeveloped?"

"No, I don't." Sixx gave it to her deadpan, at the risk of straining his facial muscles. "By Khandalar standards, maybe you are . . . what you said. But by me you look just about perfect. I can easily forgive you all the other things."

"Why, thank you," she smiled, and then caught up. "All what other things?"

"Never mind. Later, maybe. You did very well. Thank you. And you did pretty good yourself, Roger. Now we know who the Great Leader is."

"A computer could've done it just as easily, near enough," Lowry disclaimed. "Just logic, is all. They may kid themselves they want to overthrow the Royals, but leaders come from a certain class of people, a certain way of thinking, and the Royals have been breeding that type for generations. It had to figure out that way. Couldn't be anybody else."

"You shouldn't explain," Sixx reproved. "You make it all sound too easy." He brought his attention back to Miss Stame. "How come you knew all that stuff?" he wondered. "And already translated into Earth values like that?"

"Dr. McLaren asked me to do it. To spend my spare time reading up on all the records I could get access to. He said it might be useful. And, in any case, it's exactly the kind of work I had been doing all along."

"That's right," he said. "So it is. All that stuff about longevity. I suppose it's all part of the day's work, for

you. But very handy for us. Now we have something to report, if it should ever come to that. It's always useful to know who the opposition is." He settled back into a more comfortable pose in the litter, but she was restless now.

"All *what* other things?" she demanded again.

"Forget about that. Let's talk about something else. About you. What do you plan to do with yourself when you get back to Earth?"

"I don't know," she confessed. "I don't really know anything, much."

"Oh come now!" he objected. "You could always set up shop as an authority on the Royal sorkis of Khandalar!"

"I couldn't!" she denied, and her growing distress was distractingly visible in her hard breathing. "That wouldn't work at all!"

"Why not? You've learned everything there is in the book about them?"

"But it's not like that!" she wailed, close to tears. "I'm no good unless somebody asks me questions, the right questions. I mean . . . I can ask myself the obvious ones, some of them, like 'What would she eat?' and I know the answer. How long should she rest? How much exercise? And stuff like that. That's routine. But I don't really know how to ask the hard questions. How can you ask yourself something you don't know?"

"So all right!" he tried to soothe her. "I can see you're in a fix on that. But it isn't anything to blow up about!" She was really heaving now, putting a tremendous strain on the sheer jersey material.

"But it is!" she insisted unhappily. "I need to know. She's sick! Right nw! There's something wrong with her. And I don't know what. And I don't know which questions to ask myself, either!"

"Oh brother!" Sixx put aside the distractions and realized the distress that caused them was more important,

and genuine. He sat up, tried to scratch his head and wasted that effort on the outside of his helmet. Ask her some questions. Not the obvious-type ones, they wouldn't work, obviously. A word of Lowry's came back in the shape of an inspiration. A computer. *That* kind of question.

"Is it due to something she ate or drank?"

"No, positively."

"Is it the result of a knock, bruise, sprain, bump, jar or other injury sustained while in transport or being moved from place to place?"

"No, positively."

"Hold on now," he demurred. "How can you be so sure of that?"

"Because it has been coming on for some time now, at least two weeks, perhaps longer."

"I get it. And you were the expert, so you couldn't ask anyone else. Great!" He scratched his mind for another angle of approach. "What are the symptoms? No . . . cancel that. What do the observable symptoms indicate, to you?"

He had expected a negative, and was surprised. "Pregnancy," she said. "But that is flatly impossible!"

"Impossible? How?"

"Because there is only the one male sorki in Casta, the Royal Male—Mooli—and Quema hasn't been anywhere near him in months, certainly not since her whelping. Positively!"

"I give up." Sixx sighed. "At any rate, it isn't urgent. Is it?"

"I don't know. All I have to go by is the normal pregnancy pattern, and on that basis the event won't become urgent for another two weeks or so."

"If that's all we have, that's what we have to use. At least it will get us as far as the Clipper and aboard. And secure. And then off-planet. Two weeks!" He did desperate arithmetic in his mind. By the tourist route, as-

suming no further hazards or emergencies, they might—just might—make it to Armstrong Base in time. His imagination led him away into chill contemplation of the awful possible alternatives, so that he only half-heard the dialogue that followed between her and Roger.

"I can understand," Lowry admitted, "how you could remember the K-language right off, once you'd heard it, but how do you come to speak it so well?"

"That was easy enough. Uncle Bernard had a tape collection on it. It was the standard thing, you probably know it. A set of words or phrases in Anglic. You push a button on the rewind, and the Anglic goes faint, and someone says the Khandalar equivalent over it? Like that. All I had to do was play them over a time or two."

"So you didn't have to practice with an ordinary tape machine at all?"

"No. I can get most sounds straight off, or the second time anyway. I have a good ear. Why?"

"I just wondered whether or not you'd ever heard your own voice, on a playback. Have you?"

"Now there's a funny thing!" she declared, and Sixx winced. "I never have. Isn't that funny?" Sixx passed it by. Lowry was up to something again, but this time he didn't want to know what, or why. A two-week deadline, both for arrival home and the delivery of the Royal—and impossibly pregnant—sorki. An organized revolt dedicated to seeing Miss Stame didn't get home, however mistakenly. And a beltful of incredible power that, in theory, no one knew anything about. That added up to problems enough, without wondering what queer games Roger was playing with the exquisite Elleen.

Padash was more than a village, but not quite a city, and thus a fairly typical Khandalar seaport. Barnlike store-sheds lined the seafront. The streets were lively with busy merchants, and steeple-high ships dotted the quiet blue waters of the harbor. Earth's share of the splash-port traffic was based a long mile outside the town

walls to the south, with concrete-block buildings, and massive half-hoop floating docks heaving alongside, ready to chug out and grapple a ship once it had come down in the sea out there.

"This is a good example of how to arrive at a compromise," Sixx pointed out, as their baggage was being transferred to a hydrofoil, ready to skim it and them out to where their own ship rested. "We can't use the K-drive principle in our ships, even if we knew how to make it work, which we don't, yet. We know that it involves some kind of oscillating magnetic field effect that interacts with the planetary magnetic field around this sun, and we also know that if we tried using it in our ships it would shake all our instrumentation into ruin in jig time. And it would foul up the Pauli-drive. So we still have to use impulse power, jets and thrust, for close-to-planet work. And for those we prefer land-and-launch pads. But the K-people have a thing about wasting fine land by smothering it in thick concrete. They design a ship so that it can sit down in the sea like a bird. So they don't bother with landing sites. And we have to go along with that. Our pilots have to learn a new technique: how to tail-down into the sea and stay upright until a collar can take hold. And it works. And it is such a good and simple idea that it is beginning to catch on back home, too. Which just goes to show that ideas can and do diffuse both ways. But that K-drive is really something. One of these days our experts will crack it wide open and we'll be able to use it."

"That's just one of a whole lot of things I don't understand," she admitted as they went down into the hydrofoil. "I mean, if this culture had interplanetary travel all that long ago—and they did, way back when our ancestors were still living in caves—then why didn't they go on to interstellar travel like we did?"

"Hindsight is a great thing," Lowry murmured. "When you have a system that works, and works well, you have

no incentive to toss it away and look for something different. When your workable system reaches its limits, it's a lot easier to say, 'That is as far as it is possible to go' than, 'We need a new and different method altogether.' It's easy to overlook the fact that we were hog-tied by the rocket principle for a whole century or more, simply because it was the one way we knew for sure that space travel would work. It wasn't easy for us to throw it out and try for something different, to think into a new pattern. And that was us, a people-type that has always been on the lookout for new ways. So, for the K-people it was just about impossible, until they saw our ships. Until they saw what could be done."

"That's the way it always is," Sixx agreed. "A certain thing is just not possible. How do we know? Because nobody ever did it. Then along comes some oddball who doesn't know how impossible it is, and tries it his way, and does it . . . and, all at once, it's not impossible anymore. It's happening to the K-people right now. You'll find Khandalar crewmen all over the place, in our ships, learning the tricks. Some of them are pretty good, too, from what I hear. More than a few of them are engineers by now."

"That's us, over there!" Lowry pointed and Miss Stame looked. Her disappointment was plain. Sixx chuckled at it.

"Sure, it's little, and ugly too, you don't have to be tactful, sweetheart. The Clipper isn't meant to *look* impressive. But, like these uniform-suits of ours, she packs quite a lot of talent. I know I'm going to feel a whole lot easier in my mind once we are aboard and buttoned up."

To her further surprise neither of them made any move to enter the ship until all their baggage had been off-loaded on to the weathered surface of the docking girdle and the hydrofoil was safely away, heading back inshore. Only then did Sixx position himself in front of the hatch.

"All right, Joe," he said, "you can open her up. We're home!"

With only a moment for the sensor mechanisms inside to scan their memory banks and compare, the hatch began to wheel open and eject a telescopic gangway. Miss Stame stared. Sixx grinned but offered no explanation. There were several things it was better that outsiders shouldn't know. For instance that the computer, familiarly called Joe, *was* the ship, in effect, and that it was so designed and programmed as to have nothing whatever to do with anyone at all except himself and Lowry. Some unsung wag back in I.S. Research had coined the acronym Comparator-Loop Integrated Personality-Profile Examiner and Recorder, and from that moment it had been the Clipper ships. Sixx patted the gangway.

"On in, and welcome aboard!" he said to her briskly. "Make yourself at home. Be our guest," and she was not to know that the key word was noted and filed, that from now on Joe would extend to her the facilities proper to a guest, but no more than that. It was a very useful and practical arrangement. Even in the highly unlikely event that undesirable intruders got into the ship, there wasn't, a lot they could do with it, or that it would do for them in return. He grabbed up Quema's box and followed, pointing her straight ahead to the lounge space, which was roomy enough, and comfortable in a well-worn way.

"Cook-nook over there," he pointed, "with a standard auto-chef. The wash-and-brush facilities over that way. There's the bar if you need it. You just stay here and worry about Quema while we get the stuff inboard and stowed away. There's quite a bit to do but we can manage it a lot faster on our own. You just take things easy. We'll show you the guest cabins later."

Quema came out of her box and started on a snuffing, suspicious tour around this new environment. Sixx eyed her dubiously. She certainly was big and bloated around

her girth. He had a momentary inner flash of what it could mean if they landed back home with one highly precious Royal pet—improperly gravid! He pushed the horrifying thought hurriedly away, but his common sense assured him that it would have to be dealt with sometime. And soon, by the look of that bulging middle.

VII

Fifteen busy minutes later he came back to her where she sat disconsolately on the long couch. If only she didn't look so delectable, he thought, it would make life a lot simpler. On the other hand it seemed natural to put his arm around her for comfort, so he did and composed his thoughts.

"There are just a few odd things you need to know, Elleen," he said, "so listen. Up top, Roger is busy trying to check us into a flight caravan. If we were traveling on our own we would stay suited, lift off and jet out to the C.G.I. limit—that's the critical gravity intensity limit, as I expect you already know, and the Pauli-drive won't work within it—and then we would warp out direct for Sol and Luna Base. On our own power. But that is quite a rough experience. A small warp unit gives a bumpy ride. Nothing can be done about that. It's a function of size, and field strength, and the involved stresses. It's something like trying to push a small rowboat at forty knots over a big sea. It is not pleasant. We could do it. We have done it, lots of times. But that's because these suits of ours have built-in mechanisms that help to ease the shocks. And, that way, we could be home in something like thirty hours.

"But the way things are, that's out. We have you to think about." He hugged her gently. "And Quema too.

So we have to take the tourist route, like it or not. And that is a different scene altogether. How much do you already know about that? You must have come out here by tourist originally?"

"Yes. Uncle Bernard gave me a run-down on it, but I didn't understand any of it very much. You have a warp-master ship, and all the other ships cluster around it and get grappled up . . . and then the warp-master ship puts out a big field, and they all go together."

"That's good enough to pass."

"Uncle Bernard said it was like in the old days when they had steam trains that ran on railway lines. They had one thing that was all engine and it pulled all the other things along. Carriages and trucks and things. Whatever that might mean. What's a steam train?"

"A steam engine, you mean? Never mind that now. Ask Joe sometime. The point is, we should have a comfortable ride, even if it is a bit slow. We may have to wait awhile before take-off, until a cluster is made up. When we do go, we will make stop-overs. With a lot of luck we should raise Sol inside two weeks. Meantime we can't do anything at all except sit tight and be careful."

"Careful?" she turned to frown at him temptingly. "What could happen to us, in space?"

He thought it right to kiss her gently, and then, "If it was just us, just me talking to you, I would say nothing at all. It could be two very nice weeks. But this," he touched the glitter-gold insignia on his arm, "says different. This means security, but only because we make it that way. We take no chances. In theory, nothing can happen to us in space. In fact . . . we play a different hand. Listen. Once we are under the warp master we will be inside a small self-contained universe all our own. You could step outside the ship and drift around if you wanted to. People do. They get a kick out of the new sensations. Like being able to fly. To go visiting other ships. To play far-out weird games with a ball. Stuff

like that. Lots of fun. Maybe we will watch some of it, through our instruments. But we won't join in. This ship stays sealed, and with all of us inside, you and Quema and me and Roger. Got it? We've had one shock, one warning, already, just getting this far."

He saw the pout of protest start to form on her face but before he could deal with it Lowry came tramping it. He was already de-suited down to a dark, close-fitting jersey-knit one-piece and managed to look more massive than ever inside it.

"Maybe our luck has changed," he announced. "There's a warper up there in orbit right now, making up a cluster, and he should have room for us. Due out in an hour. Three stops. One small one, almost local, then Polaris, and Vega, and home. I've registered us in there."

"That's good news, Roger. Look, show Elleen her cabin and stuff, make her at home, while I get out of this monkey suit and get freshed up. As soon as we're in warp we'll let Joe have a look at the problem of Quema. Maybe he can come up with something."

"Joe?" Her eyes went wide again.

"That's our computer. He is not nearly as pretty as you are, but he is a whole lot smarter, you'll see."

Getting into warp train was nothing at all. At the ready signal from the Clipper, shore control obligingly parted the girdle-docking and Sixx stood the lumpy little ship on a tail of fire and steam and took it straight up into the blue, following a marker beam. Miss Stame, who had slipped easily into the role of highly privileged friend, sat in the spare seat between the two men, in the control room, and watched the land and sea fall away, to become a bowl, and then a bulge as the horizon sank down, and the bright blue sky faded slowly into indigo and then black, pinpointed with stars. It looked like the easiest thing in the world to do, especially when Sixx moved one small lever and then sat back negligently.

"Nice ride, Joe," he said. "Now go find him, boy. He's

not far away." He swiveled to her curiously. Now that the secure sense of being inside the tried-and-true defenses of the Clipper had taken off some of the pressure, he could look at her more as a person, past the exquisite contours so fetchingly revealed, past even the freak talent, to wonder what sort of person she was under all that. He couldn't help being impressed by the ready way she could accept new situations. Right now, for instance, with one eye-worthy leg crossed over the other, she seemed completely at home. "If I have you figured right, for just once," he hazarded, "you're the sort that has to see anything and everything new, at least once. So, on your way out, did you go aboard the warp ship?"

"I wanted to," she admitted, "but there wasn't time before we actually went into warp, and then . . . well . . . Uncle Bernard took me part of the way, but when everything started going fuzzy and molten around the edges I got scared and we came back aboard our own ship again."

"You don't have to apologize for anything," Lowry soothed her. "I tried that stunt once, and it scared the pants off me, too. Funny thing is, it has no effect at all on some people. Like being tone deaf or color blind, I suppose. They just haven't got whatever it is."

"I learned the theory breakdown of it once," she said, and began to recite: "The Pauli-drive generator creates a partial-reality field that is at variance with the possible states of real-time matter-energy. By a process of virtually instantaneously selecting and rejecting possible coordinates, it enables anything within the field to evade the limitations and restrictions that are inherent in the Einsteinean space-time framework—"

"And so on," Sixx interrupted, grinning. "Don't tell me you don't know what it means. You don't have to. I doubt if anybody does, not fully. All that matters to us is that it works, that somehow it manages to winkle a way in and out between the real stuff. But it's that split-sec-

ond selection and rejection that does the damage. The theory boys will tell you it has to do with subjective sensory frequencies, but there's an easier way to look at it than that. When you watch a television screen you see a moving picture. What is presented to your eye is a sequence of still pictures which change slightly, and you have a thing called 'image retentivity' which smoothes over the gaps . . . if the timing is right. But if the changes happen too fast, your images start to overlap, and you see a blurred edge. That's just with a picture. When whole realities happen to change that fast, everything goes blurred. As you said, molten. You don't know which way is up anymore. They tell me a drug trip can sometimes turn on the same kind of nightmare. And yet, as Roger said, there are some people who are immune to that. And they are the warp masters. That's a hierarchy that McLaren didn't think of. An elite, chosen by the machine. No others need apply. And that sounds like him now."

He reached out to cancel a plaintive bleating from the panel and wound up the magnification until the warp ship was a discernable object on the screen. It was nothing at all to look at, just a massive dark hull, squashed-orange shape, about a hundred meters through at the major axis, with no protuberances at all to interrupt the outline of its twenty-meter-thick skin. Not until they were comparatively close could they see the small bosses that were the grapple-cable roots. One cable came snaking out to meet them now. Other cables were already holding ships securely in small orbit about the master. The radio gave off a sudden subdued hum.

"Warp-master to Clipper IV. Accept my grapple and stabilize, please."

"Clipper to warp master. Come ahead with the grapple. We are stable." Seconds later there came through the hull the clack of magnets striking home, and Sixx was able to add, "Contact. It's all yours."

"Thank you, Clipper IV. Warp out in seven minutes. Our next de-warp will be in six hours seventeen minutes. There will be a thirty minute warning."

"And that's all there is to that," Sixx announced, punching the figures into his panel. "We have a little under six hours and some spoiled sleep to catch up on, but as it's a long while since breakfast I suggest we eat first. If I may have your orders, ladies and gents, I claim to be one of the best auto-chef button-pushers in the business. What'll it be?"

"You ought to let me do that," she protested. "I feel useless."

"Oh no you don't." Lowry took her arm gently. "You have something else to do. I'm going to show you how to talk to Joe. We have questions to ask him. You can give us a buzz when the table is set, Rex."

Fifteen minutes later, with the split-second nausea of warp long past, with the lounge table spread and the platters hot from the machine, Sixx saw the other two appear, Lowry with a slow grin, Miss Stame looking like Lady Macbeth.

"The Royal madame is undeniably gravid," Lowry announced. "Joe settled it without warming up a circuit."

"How come?"

"Simple logic. When you get an impossible answer, you have a wrong datum in there some place. So we checked and found it. Item: the Royal sorki is not, repeat *not*, a different species from the common, or wild, bassorki. It is just a highly selected strain, an artificial breed. And the Palace and grounds are thick with the wild ones, the original stock. So that's it!"

"That is *not* it!" Miss Stame wailed, threatening to weep into her plate. "Oh it's the right answer, yes. But now I don't know anything at all! There isn't a thing in all the records about the bassorki, apart from the name. Nor is there anything about cross-breeding, or reversion, or anything. I don't even know whether Quema can de-

liver cross-breed whelps, or how many, or when . . . or anything!"

Sixx stared at her and then at Quema, who had her muzzle deep in a bowl of crunchy bits but was still able to create the illusion of staring straight at him, balefully. And she seemed to be bulging now more than ever. He moved his gaze to Lowry.

"We really drew one, this time," he sighed. "To quote from our illustrious superior, Mr. Jason blasted Horn: 'We of I.S. have never yet lost a consignment. We always deliver.' Oh brother, would that he were here now to eat those words, plus a few well-chosen ones from me!"

Miss Stame sniffled, then began to howl aloud. Lowry patted her shoulder.

"Don't you worry none, Elleen," he soothed. "It's going to be all right. Nature has a way with such things."

"Hark at you!" Sixx snorted. "Come on, now! You realize, don't you, that even if that pop-eyed female manages to deliver . . . hah! Deliver! There's a word, now! Even if she manages that, and survives, we are going to be stuck with the offspring! How do we explain those? What do we do with them?"

There was no answer forthcoming, and by the time the meal was over and he could seek his couch he was in a very sour mood. Sleep was slow to come. I.S. training was intended to equip operators with the resource to cope with virtually any extreme, but it was hardly surprising that the program had not included anything quite so far-out as playing midwife to a rare, delicate and pure-bred alien animal, particularly one pregnant with illegitimate offspring. And their given expert was worse than useless in the circumstances. Deliver! Stand and deliver. Establish a record. Become the first agent of I.S. to report a flat failure. His fitful sleep was peopled with horrible dreams of being pursued by a horde of hideous whistling monsters, each with a startling resemblance to

Jason Horn, and he couldn't be sure whether they were grinning, snarling or just showing their teeth.

He woke violently and precipitately to the yammer of alarms, grabbing for and scrambling into his safety suit almost by reflex, slapping it together before his eyes were properly open and long before his conscious mind could ask, coherently, what the hell had gone wrong *this* time? He galloped into the control room, still slapping fastenings, in time to see Lowry come storming in from the opposite side, looking equally distrait. One fast glance at the screens was enough to make his hair lift.

They were in real-space, with star images etching lines on the screen as the ship tumbled end-over-end. Of the steel-gray enigma of warp-space, and the warp ship, and all their fellow travelers, there was no sign whatever. He fell into his chair and jabbed at the controls to kill the tumble, straining against the wayward impulse-thrusts, nursing the studs until the star images were steady. Then Lowry, from the other panel, gave a grunt.

"We have company. A big one. Left twenty-two, high twenty-six five."

"I see him." Sixx twirled the verniers to bring that other ship into screen center. At extreme magnification he could just make out a profile. And now he could also see a red flare, not too far away beyond that ship. A fast scan of his sensors told him they were in the vicinity of a small star-system.

"Hmm!" he murmured. "That ship there looks like nothing I ever saw before. What d'you think, Roger?"

"New to me, too. And Joe. Doesn't match anything in the store. For sure it isn't one of ours. I'll try and raise him on radio, though it wouldn't surprise me if he isn't as shook as we are. And what the hell happened to our caravan?" There was no answer forthcoming to that. He thumbed a stud and spoke into a microphone.

"Hello. What ship? This is Clipper IV. Do you read? What ship?"

They had an answer of sorts within five seconds. A yellow eye winked in the forward end of that ship, and at the same instant the Clipper bucked as if it had run into a rubber wall, the hull fabric creaking to the stress. Sixx headed back into his chair, sucked in a breath and said,

"Well well! Now we know, don't we? A punch beam. They want to play."

"Easy on, Rex," Lowry warned. "He can't do us any real damage with a pressor beam, except maybe push us around a bit. And we have fragile cargo. If we irritate him he may turn on something else."

"I suppose," Sixx sighed. "And we don't know what other little goodies he may have tucked away in that hull of his. What I would like to know, all the same, is how? How the hell did they winkle us out of Pauli-space? In all the theory books I ever read, that is just plain impossible. And yet, here we are. And there he is, whoever he is!"

"Let's see if we can find out." Lowry thumbed the radio-stud again. "All right," he said evenly, "so now we know you have muscles. What do you want us to do? And who are you, anyway?"

Both men braced for another thrust of that pressor beam but instead the radio started a loud sizzle. Sixx had an irrelevant moment of wonder as he recognized the type of noise. Khandalar! It was part of the oddness of it all that a culture that could play fantastic tricks with magnetism had yet to develop a reasonably noise-free radio system. Over and out of that awful crackle came a strongly accented voice.

"This is Lorian!" The tone, the rich arrogance of it, made it sound like some password of power. "You are my prisoners. If you attempt to resist I shall cut your ship into slices. Do you understand?"

"We understand." Lowry was still calm. "What do

you want us to do? And would you mind telling us just how you managed to knock us out of warp?"

"It was very simple. I have men who are skilled in such matters. A number of them were traveling with your caravan. They were able to surprise the warp master and render him unconscious. It is a simple matter, when one knows how, to distort a warp field for just a moment. That was all that was needed. When the warp master recovers consciousness he will not know what happened, or when, or where. I am telling you this to impress on you that no one will come to your aid, because no one knows where you are. Except myself. This is Lorian. Do you understand?"

Sixx heard a clatter at his back and here came Miss Stame, sleepy-eyed, tousle-haired and clutching a brief robe about herself.

"What's happening?" she demanded. "What's going on?"

Sixx rose urgently and took her in his arms. "You are going to be a good girl, Elleen. You are to go right back to your cabin, taking Quema with you, and stay there. Tuck up safe and prepare for a few bumps, maybe. Both of you. We have just been captured by pirates."

"What?" she goggled at him blankly, and he grinned.

"No fooling. Pirates. We have just been captured. At least, that is what they think. We may feel it necessary to argue a little. It could get a bit lively, so you hop it, right now, back to your cabin. And stay there until one of us tells you to come out. Not before. All right?"

She stared at him curiously. "This is all a kind of game for you."

"That's right, but only so long as we can feel sure no one is going to get hurt. On our side, that is. So tuck up safe and behave. Please?"

"All right." She made a baffled smile and went away without further argument, for which he was profoundly

grateful. He got back to his seat just in time to hear Lorian once more.

"We are about to put tractors on you. You will take no action. You will not resist. We will take you to our base, where you will be dealt with. Do you understand?"

"We understand. Proceed. Out!" Lowry shut off the radio and shook his head in quiet thought. "That's a pretty smart laddie. Used to dealing with thickheads. You'll notice how he keeps repeating his name, and the 'do you understand' bit?"

"I had noticed. I am a lot more impressed by the fact that they have pressors *and* tractors. They have really been doing their homework, over there."

"Right. And they have themselves a base, too. You know, maybe this would be one time to scream for help?"

"Huh?" Sixx looked indignantly at his partner, and then frowned and thought it through a little. "I suppose," he agreed grudgingly. "This is something King Emperor Lagas ought to be informed about. But let's not rush into that. Let's see a little of what they've got first, eh?"

He grabbed quickly at his seat arms as the ship lurched again, even more violently than the first time, and shivered a time or two before becoming stable.

"That boy has a heavy hand on the levers. Whereabouts are we anyway?"

"Joe's working on that right now. We were only two hours and eight minutes in warp, which gives us a rough estimate to start from, but this region is none too well-charted. It could take a while."

"Which we can use," Sixx decided. "Why should we let friend Lorian have everything all his own way? Let's gather some data, huh? I'll take the ship, you work on that star-system, see what kind of a planet they've found for themselves and their base. I wonder how big a fleet they have."

The two were quietly and busily intent for the better part of half an hour, during which time that red flare

had grown huge, but now it blazed somewhere off their screens to the right. In its place grew the three-quarter disc of a planet strewn with cloud-masses through which they could see, fleetingly, the glitter of seas and the rolling green-brown of land-masses.

"It's pretty wild," Lowry estimated, "and warm. Livable but primitive. Gee is about seven-tenths Earth-normal. Daylight temperature averages about thirty-five centigrade, which is pretty hot, call it almost tropical, but our suits can handle that easy. Surface chemistry is near enough the same as ours. And I am getting radio frequencies, but garbled. I think I could point at their base, and it's not all that big. What have you got?"

"That is quite a ship. Home-grown, by the look. In mass it matches any our Space Navy can show. Plenty of armor, of the sheet-metal kind. We know he has pressors and tractors, so he has power reserves. By the look he also has projectile weapons of some kind, either mass-conversion torpedoes or corrodors, something like that. But they don't seem to know anything about screens, so we don't need to lose any sleep over it. Yet. Hah! Joe's got something."

They studied the read-out together. "Twenty light-years away from the K-system, and uncharted. And that means, my Roger, that Lorian must have his own warp ship. Got to. The K-drive would take a lifetime to jump this far. He really thinks big, doesn't he? And comprehensively, too. If he has many more ships like that we could be in real trouble!"

VIII

"I don't think he has any more ships than this one, Rex. No fleet."

"You sound confident. You're usually a good guesser. Expound!"

"You have only to listen to him talk. All the time it's, 'This is Lorian.' Only him. He does all the talking himself. And he was here to meet us."

"Cogent, so far. But I am not sold. He thinks big!"

"But he doesn't have to. And he is smart, we know that much. With the power he has in just that one ship, he doesn't need any fleet. Apart from all the problems of manning and command of other ships, he doesn't need them. K-ships are neither armed nor armored, you know that. A whole flock of them would still be a pushover for him, in just that one ship."

Sixx thought it through, then shook his head regretfully. "It looks as if you have just graduated to the top of the class, all right. In a way, it's a shame. A man who can think as far-out as that is exactly the type the K-culture needs to steer it out of the rut it is now in. It's a pity he's on the other side."

"There'll be plenty of others to take his place. Right now it's about time he turned us loose, unless he means to take us all the way down to the surface. I can't say I fancy that. Besides which, it will really soak up his power reserves . . . hold it . . . here he comes now!"

The radio snarled once more. "This is Lorian. I am now releasing you from traction. You will follow me down and land. You will not try to do anything else, or you will be destroyed. Do you understand?"

"We understand. Proceed on down. We will follow." Lowry canceled the transmission and switched to inter-com. "Elleen? This is your cue to couch down and hold on tight. We are going in to land. It could be bumpy. Nothing to be worried about, but it's easier if you're lying down. All right?"

"I'm all right," her voice came worriedly, "but I don't know about poor Quema. She is real sick now. She's howling. I don't know what to do!"

"If you look in the wall-cabinet over your bunk you'll find a first-aid kit. If things get too bad, you give her a sedation shot. Out!" He snorted loudly. "As if we didn't have enough trouble already!"

"Hey!" Sixx had a sudden inrush of inspiration. "Look! Down there! That's their base, isn't it? On that coastline by the river-mouth?"

"Looks that way." Lowry agreed, watching the pirate ship go sliding down ahead. "What's on your mind?"

"Habit patterns. How much would you be prepared to bet that Lorian will go right over it and for a splash-down . . . in the sea?"

"Of course he will!" Lowry stated, then scowled to himself, and then lit up with a great big grin. "Say! That's right, isn't it? And that's not such a big base, when you come to look at it. We ought to be able to make quite an impression on it."

"That is about what I had in mind myself."

"Very well. Mr. Sixx, would you take us down, please?"

"Roger! Roger." Sixx performed a snappy salute, then grasped the controls eagerly, settling himself into partnership with the machinery. For this one particular landing he could afford to discard Joe's expert but much too considerate services. This one he wanted to do himself, personally. He caressed his jet controls, his eyes roving restlessly from the alien ship on his screen to the dials on his board. As expected, Lorian's ship went down in a tight curve, as smooth and graceful as a swan, striking a flight-path that would take him close over that base and down into the river-mouth, the kind of soft splashdown that K-ships had been performing routinely for a score of centuries. For them it was the only way. Sixx was about to show them another.

He was careful to make it appear as if his trajectory were strictly follow-the-leader, so that only he knew by what small fraction it was off. The wailing scream of ruptured atmosphere came now and the screen picture

shimmered into ionic disturbance, but was clear enough to show a range of small, low hills, well-wooded, a shallow gorge between them, and the slope down to the shoreline. There was a small, shingle-edged river-mouth. A scattered array of timber shacks on either side of that river would be the troops' living quarters. There were radio masts pointing to the sky. Lorian was well ahead now and just settling down into the water.

Sixx had been merely tickling his jets so far. Now he leaned on them hard, grunting as savage deceleration shoved him deep into his seat. The Clipper bellowed down . . . and down . . . and washed that scatter of shacks with searing blue-and-white flames laced with shock diamonds. Some of that terrific thunder came back through the hull as the squat ship slowed to a hovering halt, hung on its devastating tail for an undecided moment . . . then lifted . . . and drifted along . . . started to go down once more . . . changed its mind once more . . . slid away in another direction . . . and now there was nothing visible at all on the screen but dirty steam and black, roiling smoke.

"We have about thirty seconds of fuel left in that tank," Lowry read it off. "Better leave us the other one for getting back up, Rex."

"Check. This time does it. There can't be an awful lot left standing by now, anyway. Here we go!"

His proximity sensors helped him to go all the way down now, not quite as lightly as a feather, but with nothing more than a solid thump. And for a moment there was an echoing silence, until Lowry flipped on the outside pickups. Then there came bedlam, a roaring and crackling . . . and some distant and frantic yelling . . . and Sixx said,

"It sounds as if some of them were nippy enough to make a run for it. D'you reckon they'll be crazy enough to come back and check up?"

"They might," Lowry calculated. "They almost cer-

tainly would if we sort of stepped outside for a quick look around and they saw us."

"We will debate that." Sixx rose and started swiftly setting up the ship for safety. "Take no chances, that is the motto and watchword, check? And we are absolutely safe so long as we stay inside, check again?"

"I agree with both. But," Lowry suggested, equally busy with his panel systems, "we should hardly be doing what is right if we went away and left a job half-done, check?"

"Agreed. And as this is Lorian's base, and as he is a threat to our security and the performance of our assignment, it is up to us to delete that threat as much as possible."

"On the other hand, of course, there is always the outside possibility that he will take off in that ship of his, when he sees what we have done, and come sailing over here with blood in his eye."

"But that is highly unlikely. His thinking patterns are all against it. Furthermore he will be very upset about the damage to his base. He will want to take a close-up look-see, even maybe extend his organizing power to start repairs—"

"Which will take him all of half an hour, to disembark and get ashore by boat, with an armed party."

"By which time we should be able to put in a few very useful finishing-off bits, tie up a few loose ends, and take a close-up look at the layout."

"That's the proposition before the meeting," Lowry declared. "All in favor will signify in the usual way." He elevated his right hand and grinned. Both men were jocular, but there was nothing humorous about their decision. A calculated risk was part of their business. As Jason Horn had often expounded to his staff, "Take no chances, but don't miss any either. The harder you clobber any opposition, the more respect they'll have for you afterwards."

"You're fully recharged, of course?" Sixx hinted, and Lowry snorted.

"Do me a favor! I'd be more likely to forget my head!"

To maintain his suit at full charge was part of the drill that every agent could do in his sleep but would never have to, because its care came before sleep or anything else. That suit was tailormade to fit him and no one else, and its efficient function could, and often did, mean the difference between life and death. By habit they both ran through a last-minute check and were just turning away into the exit passage when the intercom bleated. Sixx reached for it.

"Elleen? Sorry to keep you suspended. We are down on the floor and stable. No more bumps. Me and Roger are going out for a quick walk around, just to see what gives. We won't be long. You'll be all right so long as you stay put where you are."

"I'm all right," she said, "I think."

"How is our expectant mother?"

"I wish I knew. I'm afraid she is due to deliver any minute now!"

"Hmm!" He frowned into the middle distance. "Look, you know how to talk to Joe by this time. He is pretty smart. He has yards of information on just about anything, guaranteed accurate. Why not ask him for help and advice. And name the first one for me, huh?"

He broke the link, and paused to chuckle at a thought. That would really compound confusion, to call the first one Sixx! Then he slapped his helmet tight, flicked on his suit-to-suit radio and hurried along, in time to hear Lowry's muttered comment,

"It would never occur to her that she has the entire reputation of I.S. in her hands . . . and if she did know it, it would only scare her worse than she is right now!"

"Forget it!" Sixx triggered the hatch switch. "All I'm concentrating on right now is my skin. We want to get these fellers discouraged, Roger, but they are by no

means peasants like those others we met. So we hit them hard, right away, all right?"

"Check!" They moved inside the airlock, waited for the outer door. "I figure we ought to work our way towards Lorian, sort of go to meet him. And that will be downriver, so we find the river first. And we won't need the gangway." Lowry canceled that as the outer door cycled open. He moved lightly to the edge, took one fast look, and went out and down in a flying leap into the swirling smoke. Sixx, closing up, saw him plummet twenty feet into ashes and sparks, and trot away. Peering into the smoke clouds he caught a fugitive flash of something, and fell back fast against the airlock wall. A wrist-thick beam of intense red light scorched past his visor and warmed the indifferent metal inside.

"Well well!" he murmured. "So we have laser rifles too, do we? But we have no more sense than to use them in this kind of obscuration! Such a waste of time. What's it like down there?"

"Dusty, but the visibility's not too bad, close to the ground. Looks like the river is away over to the left of here."

"Go man, I'll be right down." He landed on the hatch-close and murmured, "Keep an eye on things, Joe, and mind you don't buy anything over the doorstep!" Then he went out and down as Lowry had done, landing and falling forward on his hands as cushions, not too heavily. In full gee the suit could be just a little bit cumbersome, but in this reduced pull it was no trouble at all. The coiling smoke was indeed patchy at this level. He saw Lowry going away, weaving and crouching, skirting past the burning shells of shacks. He followed, choosing a path a little more to the left, and within twenty yards he could make out the braced metal walls and upspringing girders of what had to be a radio antenna of some kind. It was scorched but seemingly intact.

Soon alter that, he thought, and groped into an under-

arm pocket to bring out two tiny pellets, no bigger than peas, from a stock there. Taking careful aim, he crushed one in his fingers and threw it, and then the other, lobbing them both through a window frame that had lost its glaze. He ran on, counting the seconds up to five, and there came two hammering explosions, in close succession. Then there was a great crackle and squeal of tortured metal as the antenna leaned, creaked and fell in a thunder of ashes and sparks.

"In case you are bothered," he reported, "that was me. A couple of detonite pills to take care of what looked like a radio installation. And would you believe, here's a couple more shacks I missed! Careless of me!"

He lobbed detonite pills freely and ran on. Lowry called back.

"I think maybe I got that laddie with the lasser rifle, Rex. Two of 'em, in fact. Just came out of the river, by the way they squished. Little guys, in a kind of blue tunic with the Lorian patch. Their rifles won't be any good anymore. I think I can see the river now."

"How far away?"

"I'd say it's about a hundred-fifty yards direct from the ship. I'll stick around here awhile. There's three-four laddies over the other side think they can burn a hole in me at that range. No harm in letting them try."

"You're having all the excitement," Sixx complained. "I haven't seen a single member of the opposition yet. I bearing away to your left. Have fun!"

He galloped on, stirring up clouds of smoke and soot until, quite abruptly, he found himself ploughing into a knee-deep stretch of coarse reeds that had somehow escaped his baptism of fire. It was a moment for taking stock. At his back was a fiery confusion of ruin and coiling wreaths of smoke. On ahead and down lay the river, a good twenty-five yards or so wide. On the far side of that were more high-leaping flames, more boiling masses of smoke, but no visible sign of people, hostile or

otherwise. But here, right in front of him, was something much more important. A large, crudely made but effective raft surged and lifted in the river-ripple alongside a wooden jetty that stood out into the water at the far end of a path beaten by many feet through the reed-bed.

"I think," he announced, "that I have just found the spot that Lorian will be heading for," and he described it briefly. "Now why don't I just stay here and wait for him to show?"

"Better still," Lowry suggested, "why don't I make my way along to that point, while you carry on down-river and meet him before he gets this far . . . and let him get by, and that way we'll have him in a box? It's gone dull in this area now."

"Dull for you, maybe, but I'll bet Lorian's private army didn't think so while it was happening. How many did you get?"

"Call it ten. There were a few I couldn't be sure of, in the smoke."

"Can't be all that many left. A base this size wouldn't hold much more than a couple of hundred. All the same, though," Sixx cast a keen eye around, "I'll keep an eye out for stragglers. Moving along now." He wheeled left, debating whether to stick to the reeds, which were tall and a drag on his movement, or get nearer the river and be on shingle, which was noisy, or to veer the other way and be in the outskirts of the trees, which would give possible cover to those who might resent his presence. And then the decision had to be postponed for a moment as something clamped onto his left foot. His right hand was full of needle-gun, so he brushed the reeds carefully aside with his left, crouching to see what it was. Then he chuckled gently.

"You won't get a lot of nourishment out of that, brother," he murmured, reaching to grab the scaly horror that had its jaws on his boot. Its twin brother slid out of the reed-roots and seized his hand with enough biting

power to make him open his eyes in respect. He saw now, from close up, that the reeds were aswarm with the things, in all sizes from two inches to twelve. It was one of the twelve-inch brand that gnawed vigorously on his glove as he stood up, and when he saw the indentations those needle-teeth were making he whistled softly.

"That is quite a bite you have there!" he said, tucking the pistol under one arm and taking the thing by its neck, which was halfway along its body. The front half was all gape and teeth. He squeezed, but it merely lashed its tail and showed no inclination to let go. Even when he squeezed harder, then harder still, until it went into spasm and hung still with a broken spine, those jaws still clung, and it took him some time and effort to prize them apart. Others were nuzzling at his toes by now, not in play.

"Hey, Roger!" he called. "Keep an eye out for lizards, greenish-yellow boys like land-going piranhas. They know how to bite!"

"You don't have to tell me, I've already met some. The place is alive with 'em. Best bet is to stomp a few, then the others will eat the bodies right off you. Keeps 'em busy awhile. Looks like Lorian had bad luck with his choice of a base, if this is a sample."

"Let's hope they don't come any bigger!"

Sixx stomped vigorously, crushing the more persistent from one foot, then the other, stared a moment at the resulting cannibal turmoil and decided to angle himself in towards the trees. Within a few minutes he was clear of the reeds and the lizards and could move forward with care. This now was the edge of the campsite and the most likely spot to meet anyone who might have been lucky enough to dodge the fire-bath. Somebody out cutting wood, maybe, or just plain foraging. There was enough drifting smoke here to make seeing unreliable, and he was self-consciously aware of his own visibility. He was debating with himself whether it would be worth-

while breaking out his black-out suit when he caught just a flicker of movement ahead and to his left, and dived promptly for the shelter of a tree-bole.

A bush beyond him charred into ruin. He drew a mind's-eye line from that past the tree where he stood, settled his pistol firmly into his right hand, poised a moment, put out his left hand prominently, waved it, snatched it back and sprang out from the other side, aiming and firing all in one movement. The man over there started a hurried swing but never made it. Sixx ran cautiously forward, alert for possible others, but none showed. This man was no peasant, he found, but a uniformed youngster, his blue tunic bearing the crescents and daggers of Lorian. Sixx expended a moment or two examining the weapon to try it out, and to frown at the result.

"Hey, Roger!" he said thoughtfully, "I've just knocked off one of the opposition's playmates, in that uniform tunic you mentioned, complete with the great man's trademark. And this feller had a homemade laser rifle that feels a shade clumsy by our standards, but it packs a hell of a punch. Half as good again as anything I've seen on our side. The sooner this Lorian feller is put away the happier I will feel. He is far too clever for my peace of mind."

"That checks with me too, Rex. Those laddies across the river were all of thirty-five yards away from me but they warmed me up pretty good. Those beamers could be real uncomfortable, up close. See anything on the river yet?"

"Only ripples. I'll give it another five. If Lorian doesn't show up by then he won't be coming, and we'd be better off back home."

"Check. We can always let him come and get us. Maybe he has a can-opener!"

"That will be the day. Stand fast by that jetty. If he doesn't show in five I'll call you back."

Sixx dropped the laser rifle, stamped it into ruin and prowled on. By straining his ears he thought he heard motor noises and veered back towards the river, but if there had been any real noise it had stopped by the time he saw the reeds again. The river was still clear. Only ripples. He shook his head thoughtfully, wondering whether or not he had guessed Lorian all wrong, swung around to continue on his way . . . and an invisible hand closed on him, shook him into a blur of breath-catching agony, rattled the very teeth in his head, seemed to melt every bone in his body. Through the shivering nightmare he knew, by the feel, that all his suit-systems had gone dead. For ten long seconds he floated in a fuzzy-edged sea of nerve-knotting pain, totally helpless . . . and then, as suddenly as it had struck, the invisible hand went away. He staggered, almost fell with the relief. Gasping, half-blind, he saw several figures closing in. He felt stiff and heavy . . . and helpless . . . and had a sudden conviction that his immunity-suit was very soon to become his shroud.

IX

Noises from the outside world came faintly to him through the rigid carapace of his helmet. Everything else was gone. Just getting his breath back seemed a great effort. Imagination tried to tell him, already, that his internal atmosphere was foul. He felt suddenly very small inside a big shell. Then a familiar and arrogant voice came, faintly but distinctly, like a far-off piping.

"Stand! This is Lorian. Stand! Do not move, or I will shake you all to pieces!"

Sixx had not the faintest intention of moving, just then. He wasn't sure, even, whether he could or not. His

whole body shivered from the retroactive shock of that strange blast, and it was largely the stiffness of his suit that held him erect. Most prominent in his mind was wonder. What kind of a beam-weapon was that? By the time he had dragged in a breath or two he had another concern and made himself calm enough to be able to say,

"Roger! If you read at all, which I doubt, better blow. Get lost, and do it real fast. I have just encountered Lorian and his bodyguard, and he is loaded, but good! Some kind of beam-weapon, probably some magnetic field gadget or other, and it hurts. It just about jarred my teeth loose, and it seems to have killed my suit stone-dead, so I doubt if this talk is doing any good at all, but if you do hear me boy, go! Far away!"

There came no reply, not a sound, not even the hitherto unnoticed but now sadly missed quiet purr of power-assists and system-supports. Nothing at all. As there was no smell of burned-out insulation or similar damage it was logical to assume that his trouble was power failure, that the mystery weapon, whatever it was, had instantly drained all his power-packs. And it was therefore a safe bet that the magnet-pistol in his hand was also dead. So his only effective striking weapon was scratched. Lorian gave tongue again, and Sixx could identify him this time. He was the little one in the middle, thick-set, richly garbed, black hair drawn away from a high forehead, black-bar eyebrows and an imperious stare. Three armed men flanked him on either side.

"You there! You in that white suit. If you hear me, raise your left hand! Do it very slowly—now!"

Sixx had a moment of confusion trying to remember which was his left hand, and that moment shocked him. Then he needed to apply deliberate effort to move his arm, and that shocked him more, helping to clear away the wool from his thoughts. He used muscles and hoisted his arm. *Slowly!* he thought. *Oh brother, if you only*

knew! His wits were starting to spin again now. Reacting from his total disarmament he began weighing what possibilities he had, and the most obvious thing he could think of was that somehow he had to get out of his armored handicap.

"Good!" Lorian crowed. "Then you *can* hear me. Move forward! March!"

Sixx tramped forward, heavily and unsteadily, more thankful than ever now for the reduced gravity. His effort made him sweat, but it completed the process of mental clarification, helped to wash away the demoralizing sense of utter helplessness. It wasn't true, he decided, not while he could still stand up. If only he could somehow shed this suit! He made a great performance out of swinging his arms and was thus able to slap the needle-gun safely back into its pouch without anyone noticing. He gave thought to possibilities. Lorian was fond of the sound of his own voice. He would have been badly hurt at the damage done to his only base, but he was a Royal, with "face" to maintain. He couldn't afford anything petty. Here he was, in person, to deal with the malefactor, and, to produce the proper effect, that would have to be "seen" by his armed guard. Furthermore, he was a gloater by the sound of his voice, and gloating is a lot more fun when the victim can be seen to squirm a little. So the chances were better than good that Lorian would want him out in the open. And that offered quite a few interesting possibilities.

Sixx tramped steadily on, gathering resolution with every step, with the six armed men respectfully alert and keeping stations on him on either side. In a while they broke from the tree cover and on to a slow slope of shingle, where the reeds were tall on either side. There, dead ahead, was a bobbing blow-up dinghy lolling against the run of the river. Lorian yapped for a halt, then made imperious gestures to instruct Sixx to back up against a tree and stand. Two of the armed guard

slung their curiously clumsy weapons and came at him, gingerly but with intent. Small men, about the five-foot-six Khanadalar average, and in the standard blue tunic with blazon, they were obviously in doubt as to how to set about opening up that suit.

Sixx stood quite still, watching them, listening to the cross-talk, and used the pause as a time to breathe and catch up on his energies. Was Lorian really as smart as he thought he was? He was! After a minute or two of futile probings and rappings, and some acid comment, he raised his voice again in the language Sixx could be expected to understand.

"You in there! You hear me. You will remove your protective suit, at once, or I will shake you to pieces with my oscillators. Do you understand?"

"I understand!" Sixx muttered, even though he couldn't be heard, and levered his arms up to press his hands to his helmet and release the catches. In a moment it was swiveled and tipped back clear. And now, suddenly, he could hear noises, many of them, the distant roar and crackle of fire, the slap of water against the balloon-boat, the dry-stone grating of things down there at ground level—probably those lizards—and he could breathe fresh air. What with the fires to help, that air was quite hot, not doing any good for his sweating, and it was heavily laden with smoke and the acrid stink of burning . . . but it was real air, and fresh, to him. He could see better, too. The helmet filters had saved his sight more than once, but that kind of protection had to be paid for by a certain loss of quality and color. Lorian, he now saw, was really resplendent, his cloak heavy with color and his fingers thick with jeweled rings. There was a matching glitter in his dark eyes as he edged curiously closer to watch.

Sixx took his time, making a slow and deliberate job of it. Lorian might be smart, but it would take a smarter man than he would ever be to grasp all the subtleties of

that suit at one run-through. Freeing himself to the waist, he could now withdraw his hands and arms out the gloves and sleeves and thus collect, right under all their watchful eyes, two lethal pills, one in each hand. They might come in extremely handy, if and when the opportunity offered. Keeping his boots on, he stepped cautiously out of the rest of it, laid it aside, and stood, apparently defenseless in his one-piece jersey-knit bodysuit and belt. He felt considerably cooler, but knew that he looked what he was, foul with sweat. Deliberately, he tried to assume a hang-dog stance.

"That's the strip act," he muttered, "as far as I go until I get a round of applause and some better music!"

Lorian dared to come closer now, holding his head high and back in order to maintain his down-the-nose sneer.

"Your sensible cooperation, your meekness, is a trifle late," he said. "You have caused immense damage, cost me much valuable material and very precious lives. For that you will pay, but the reckoning will come later, at my discretion. For now you will march. You will lead us to your ship, where you will produce and turn over to me this woman, Elleen Stame. Do not be foolish and waste time trying to pretend she is not with you. My sources of information are good."

"They certainly are!" Sixx was impressed and a little curious. "I have to admit you surprise me a little. I wouldn't have thought she was your type. Somehow I can't see a man like you jeopardizing an entire revolutionary movement, risking the chance of winning the throne over the entire Khandalar empire . . . for the sake of an Earth woman!"

Lorian went back a step and glared, his black-bar eyebrows coming down in fury. "You think I want her as a woman?" he shouted. "In *that* tone of voice? You insult me!" and he lunged forward, sweeping the back of his hand savagely across Sixx's face. The glittering

rings on that hand didn't soften the blow any. Sixx swallowed some blood along with his rage and stowed the act away for later reckoning. "You! Earthman! Do you realize who I am?"

"I know exactly who you are," Sixx mumbled. "You are Lorian, third son of Teltor, who is brother to King Rimas of Loges South. Is my information as good as yours?"

"It is too good!" Lorian swallowed his rage abruptly and was now grimly intent. "Where did you learn so much?"

"From the same woman. Elleen Stame."

"Ah-hah! Then you cannot be such a fool as to think that I, Lorian, of the blood Royal, would desire such a female as that for myself? By Khand, she is even more fat, more grossly overblown, than any peasant woman . . . I have seen pictures enough to know that much. Gross!" His disgust was patently real.

"Then what the hell *do* you want her for?" Sixx demanded, honestly baffled. Lorian scowled at him, shook his head.

"Incredible! It seems that you must be a fool, after all. You do not know? That woman is a brain. A memory. A storehouse of information. About us. She is a spy!"

"A what?" Sixx goggled at him. "A spy?" For who? How? You can't be serious, surely?"

"Then you *are* a fool!" Lorian growled. "Listen. I have a brain. I also have information. This much I learned from your Earth culture, among other things. Knowledge is power. I have knowledge, therefore I have power. But that woman . . . incredible that you do not know her background. She was one of a team of skilled scientists, Earth people, who were working on Loges. They were very busy studying and snooping, probing into all our ways, finding out all they could about our people, their ways of life, their habits, their beliefs, even

the very foods that they eat. That kind of knowledge is power, too, so—when I found out about it—I had it stopped!” He made a vicious chopping gesture with one hand. “And then, what did I hear? That woman managed to escape, was saved, rescued somehow. And then transferred to the Royal Palace at Casta. There she was, pretending to minister to the Royal sorkis! So, I had her investigated. Thoroughly! What do I find? She is not any kind of scientist. She has no qualifications of any kind. Except one. She is a freak, a memory, a mnemonic. And I know what that word means. Among other things, it means that she knows much. Far too much!”

“You know,” Sixx told him, “you are perfectly right, in a way. But absolutely wrong in another. You see—”

“Be silent! There is more yet. The next thing I learn is that she is to be smuggled away to Earth on a flimsy pretext! That my distant uncle Lagas has arranged a special escort for her, a security guard. For her . . . and the ridiculous sorki! Back to Earth!” Lorian snorted indignantly. “It is a matter of common knowledge, and a disgrace, that Lagas is hand-in-glove with Earth authorities to introduce changes, to change the ancient ways of Khandalar, the sacred ways. To bring in new ways. Which we do not want. And which I, Lorian, will stop, that I promise you. And this woman is a key figure in that. It is obvious, is it not? Or do you still want to pretend that she is not a spy?”

“Strictly between us,” Sixx sighed, “and don’t quote me—I’m forever damned if I know what to believe, now.”

“It is of no importance anyway, what you believe. You will march, as I have said. To your ship. We will take that woman from you. I will show you just how much such a fat and overdeveloped abomination of a woman means to one of the Royal blood. And I will also show you just how quickly a head full of dangerous knowledge can be emptied!”

He stepped back, and Sixx had to think very quickly indeed. Whether or not Lorian was right about Miss Stame was debatable, but there was no doubt whatever that her future was likely to be very brief in his hands. Sixx's own immediate future wasn't all that rosy, either. The one small ray of good news on his side was that there had been no infiltration of support from the ruined base. He still had only six men, armed with oscillators, to cope with. And Lorian. But he very badly needed some kind of distraction, some way of averting those hard-eyed men with their nervous trigger-fingers—just as long as it would take him to toss his two pellets. He had enough capacity in either hand to make mincemeat of the lot of them. Squeeze and throw and count up to five . . . and that's all, brother! But those beady eyes didn't look like wavering one little bit. He offered a desperate gambit, grinning at Lorian.

"You really believe that stuff, don't you? About the Royal blood?"

"The little man's head came up instantly. "That is something I would not expect a commoner like you to understand. You—you Earth people—you once had your Royal bloodlines, but you polluted them, thinned them out. You and your so-called democracy! A leveling down!"

"Hold on a bit!" Sixx protested. "Not so fast with the 'commoner' bit. If you took a look at my I.D. tag you'd see the name Rex Sixx. It's a swell name, and I like it. I ought to, since I chose it myself. But it is not the whole thing, at all!"

"So?"

"So my real name is Rex Fairfield Villiers the Sixth. A mouthful. And there is a lot more than just a trace of royal blood bubbling about in my veins right at this moment. For what it happens to be worth. In fact it doesn't mean a thing. I found that out a long time ago. It makes no real difference at all who your father was, or even

your grandfather. What really counts is what you have here, right behind your eyeballs!" He used his monologue as an excuse to gesture, and was disheartened by the way those potent muzzles followed his every move. Lorian stepped further back and resumed his sneer.

"You are merely wasting time. Stalling, isn't that what you call it? I have heard of the Fairfield Villiers family. Merchant bankers, very rich. But Royal? I think not. Nor do you look like one of them. However, I know of a way to test this. When I have taken the woman I will feed both of you to the zillik, and compare the blood!" He made a sharp neighing laugh at his own wit, then a gesture and a barked command to the guard on his immediate right . . . and Sixx's world blurred into a vibrating shimmer of agony that lasted only for seconds but left him limp, sweating and straining for breath.

"That," Lorian snapped, "should emphasize that when I say march I mean march! Forthwith!"

Sixx shook his head, not in any kind of argument but in a vain attempt to arrange his mind, to shake down the confusion. His gambit had failed. He drew a deep breath. There was a salt taste on his lip. He saw that the man who had oscillated him was sweating almost as freely as he was. Tension was at snapping point. There was no hope left. He started away from the tree-trunk. And he heard, distantly, the most peculiar sound he had ever imagined, a high, shrilling, tweedling noise. Lorian heard it too, as did the armed guard. And it was obviously just as strange to them. The breeze brought it again, louder and nearer, and it was no longer one sound, but many, a weird chorus that seemed to come from the reeds to Sixx's right. There was a long and breathless moment of stilled bewilderment, then several things happened in quick succession.

The three guards who were backed on to the approaching cacophony swung around in unison and anxiety, peering for a target, and then they went soft and

slumped and fell in quick succession. Sixx added it up like lightning. He didn't know or care just how—but Roger was out there somewhere. That was enough to turn him on. With a squeeze and a quick flick of each wrist he got rid of the two detonite pills, lobbing them away and in front, over Lorian's head and down the slope to the blow-up dinghy. The shrill tweedling was a riot now. Lorian, chin on shoulder, swung to stare at his fallen men and then at the enigmatic reeds. Under the tweedling there grew a mighty clattering clamor of scrabbling and scraping. The reeds tossed in violent agitation.

The two detonite pills let go in a deafening *blam-blam* that sprayed shingle and water and chunks of dinghy high in the air. Lorian spun further.

Sixx tramped forward eagerly, hungrily, chopped him hard to left and right of his thick neck, grabbed him, hugged him close and whirled him as a shield against the remaining three guards . . . only to see them, also, droop and fold and fall limply. He hauled Lorian's unconscious weight all the way around to the right again, to face those reeds and wonder just what the hell was about to emerge from them. He was uneasily aware of his defenseless position. He *knew* Roger was there somewhere, but that weird clamor was unsettling. And then he saw. The first sight was a struggling, scrambling crazy horde of the hard-biting lizards—obviously Lorian's zil-likes—their stumpy legs churning the shingle frantically in their efforts to get away from something, making Sixx wonder whether or not his recent encounter with the oscillators had unhinged his mind permanently. It—they—were sorki-shaped, but lean and streamlined, and the very tiny vest-pocket size. They were shimmering silver-blue all over, their sailplane ears enormously out of proportion but immensely useful as they scurried, hopped, ran, swooped in the air, and avidly gnashed their needle-teeth at the soft neck and jaw flaps of the slow-by-comparison lizards. They were ruthless, diving in from all

directions, biting and leaping away again, ripping off fragments of leathery scales and coming back for more, their bulging pop-eyes agleam with intent . . . and tweedling crazily all the while.

Sixx goggled, held on tight to Lorian, and cringed as the wave of hunted lizards broke over his feet, whirled, swept past and on down to the river, hotly pursued down the slope by the lively cloud of micro-sorkis. And now came Lowry, large and lithe, looking indecently calm and startlingly primitive in nothing but a brief pair of shorts and his boots, a needle-gun in each large hand. As always he came straight to the important point, nodding towards the wreck of the dinghy.

"You make that bang, Rex?"

"Check!" Sixx grinned. "And this is Lorian himself, in person. He will be out for some time. But what the blue coronas are those things? And how did they get out of the ship, if my guess is right?"

"Later." Lowry spun round alertly, and here now came Miss Stame, all in a gloss of sweat, blonde hair blowing wildly, beautiful eyes gleaming, her shins all stained with charcoal, and the rest of her recklessly exposed in just skimpy pants and calf-high boots. Lowry aimed an arm down the beach.

"Call 'em back, Elleen, and let's get back to the ship before we run into any interference. You fit to travel, Rex?"

"I can move, not too fast maybe, but I can move. Especially now. Now I have seen everything—plus!"

"All right. I'll take Lorian. You bring your suit. Let's move. C'mon!"

Sixx dawdled just long enough to grab up one of the all-important new oscillator guns and clutched it under one arm, his precious suit under the other. He saw Miss Stame grin crazily, then stick a finger in her mouth to make a keen whistle-blast. The long-eared pack reversed, swooping like a fantastic cloud, and came scud-

ding up the beach. He picked up his feet and ran, making the best time he could in view of the fact that his legs still had a rubbery feel about them. The lesser gravitation helped a little. The little long-eared ones loved it. Their lean bodies seemed to skim over tiny legs that vanished in a blur of speed, and every so often, seemingly from sheer high spirits, they left the ground altogether and glided, to swoop along and hit the ground again still on the dead run. And there were only six of them, not hundreds as his first amazement had assumed.

The dream-sense was very strong. With his suit and the oscillator to burden him, with Lowry trotting ahead left, Lorian bouncing over a massive shoulder, and Miss Stame dancing delightfully along to his right, the brood-mother of the fantastic pack, nothing seemed real anymore. Then his eye caught a fugitive movement in an overhanging tree just ahead, and alarm sliced through his unbelief.

"Go down!" he bellowed. "Enemy ahead and up!" He saw Lowry hit the ground fast and without question, disappearing among the reeds. Miss Stame ran on two more steps, than half-turned in question, and a bright red rod of light skimmed past her shoulder and struck crackling flames from the reeds. Sixx hurled himself desperately forward and lunged into her bodily to send her sprawling down in a heap.

"Lie still!" he hissed urgently. "You're dead! Don't move. I'll see if I can draw his fire, give Roger a chance." He peered anxiously up into the tree from whence the beam had come, but the leaves were a fine cover and as long as the enemy had the sense to hold still he was invisible.

"Can't see him, Rex, not in that perch," Lowry called. "He has us pinned down."

"Maybe!" Sixx called back, thinking furiously. "See if I can draw him into a move." He wriggled gingerly to get his suit spread over himself as a measure of protec-

tion, then crawled fast on hands and knees through the reeds and fell flat as the green stuff burst into flames about him.

"Got one!" Lowry grunted. "There he goes. But there's another!"

Sixx lay still a moment; he got uncomfortably warm and felt smoke stinging his nostrils, then became aware of the oscillator-gun still in his clutch. "Keep your eyes peeled, Roger," he called. "It's this damned suit they can see. I'm going to leave it here for a moment. Confuse him, maybe." He slid snakelike out from under his armor and wormed away, then got to his feet and ran, and fell and rolled over, clutching the strange weapon. He had seen enough of the action of it to guess what had to be done. On his back, with the clumsy butt cuddled to his shoulder, he watched a lethal red beam sweep from where he had been, coming towards him, and thumbed the stud that made the thing work.

And his head, arms and shoulders wrenched and knotted into agony that made him release that stud at once and lie absolutely still, not caring whether the man with the beamer got him or not. Out of his stunned daze he heard a distant crash, and then Lowry's call.

"He's down. Better keep still awhile, just in case there's more."

Sixx was quite ready to keep still. And breathe hard. And collect his strength. Then he heard Miss Stame.

"I've got to move . . . or get burned!" and then there was the sound of her tramping among the reeds. And then Lowry again.

"Seems to be all clear. Rex, you all right?"

Sixx levered himself to his feet, still holding the oscillator. "I'll live!" he declared sadly. "Although that doesn't seem such a big deal at the moment." He tramped heavily back to collect his suit, and they started to run once again. There was no more interference, for which he was profoundly relieved. Miss Stame hadn't

been exaggerating. Her brief pants, which were of throw-away paper, were scorched brown and she was smothered in soot. Only the micro-sorkis seemed to be unscathed. As they got back to the Clipper Sixx knew he would nevermore forget the sight of them, those six long-eared shrimps, scuttling up the gangway and inboard. Following at a more sedate pace, he dumped his out-of-action suit in the passageway alongside Lowry's, beat at the dust and ashes on his arms and legs, and complained.

"Will somebody please talk now, explain what goes on, before something snaps inside me, like my last tenuous link with sanity?"

X

Lowry ignored him for the moment and looked to Miss Stame where she stood amid a tweedling swarm of little creatures.

"You carry straight on into the lounge and feed 'em, Elleen," he advised her. "They've earned it. Check up on Quema, too. We'll be up in control, getting set to take off. About ten minutes, so don't linger about." He slid Lorian from his shoulder to greater security under one arm and turned to Sixx.

"You bring the suits up, Rex, and you can check out yours while we talk. Oh, and grab some fine wire so we can tie up this character. Just to save him getting into more trouble. He's in eough already, and he's starting to come around, by the feel. C'mon!"

Five minutes later Lorian was conscious, but helpless and blindfolded, made to squat on the hard deck between the two panels while skilled hands dismantled the security circuits that had been set up and readied the ship for lift. Sixx reiterated his request.

"Talk, dammit!" he insisted. "This routine I can do in my sleep. Talk!"

"Not a lot to tell," Lowry disclaimed. "The last time I heard from you I was staked out by the landing stage, waiting for the big men to show, and all set to head back to the ship if he didn't, remember? So . . . the next thing I know is an almighty screech from my radio that bent my eardrums. Just for a second. Then nothing. I tried raising you. Nothing at all. Not even a hum. So it figured that somebody must have hit you with something that had canceled your suit radio. At least. And possibly a whole lot more besides. And we already know that the K-people are smart with magnetics, even if they can't build a decent radio system, so it could be something along those lines." As he talked, Lowry was steadily and methodically shifting switches and watching flux-level meters. Sixx had to grin, wondering if His Royal Highness were making anything out of all this. It was always a treat to hear Roger explaining things in that slow drawl of his as if they were the most obvious conclusions in the world.

"So what did you decide to do?"

"I didn't figure all that out in one hit, mind!" Lowry cautioned. "As soon as I heard that screech I lit out for the ship on the run and let the figuring catch up by itself. By the time I got there I pretty well knew what I wanted to do. First thing was to ditch the suit-armor. If somebody had something could cancel it that fast, it would only get in the way, but there was no sense in losing it altogether, either. Anyway, I got back in, fast, and started peeling down. Then in came Elleen, spouting and squawking, having something pretty close to hysterics. Took me a while to slow her down to the point where I could make out the head and tail of it. Seems that with all the shakes and bumps Quema must have whelped round about the time we were on our way out. That bit is clear enough, but the rest is a trifle hazy. You saw the

brood. Six of them. And they were hopping around lively, all over the place. She has no idea at all whether that's normal or not. Nor me. It could be the result of cross-breeding, or it could be the warp effect. You know yourself they won't let expectant mothers take warp jumps.

"Anyway, I didn't have all that much time for argument. Quema was all right, still under sedation, so no worry there. But the weenies seemed to have imprinted on Elleen as mama, or something like that. See—when she could see that delivery was imminent she started looking around for the right kind of gear, surgical stuff like masks and rubber aprons and stuff. And Joe told her we don't carry anything like that aboard. So, being desperate, and smart too, when you give it a thought, she peeled right down to the minimum, that paper throwaway pants outfit, and handled things that way. And, naturally, the weenies fixated on that image solid. They were following her around. If I had gone off again and left her all alone with them she would have gone clean out of her mind, for sure!"

"Light begins to dawn," Sixx admitted. "I get the picture. You just said to her the way you're always saying to me—c'mon!—and she came, just as she was. The pair of you, practically in the buff! Are you out of your mind?"

"Didn't have a lot of choice, Rex. I had reason to believe armor was no good. And there was no great danger from anything else. I checked that with Joe. He had been running tests on the side. Nothing dangerous around. Strikes me nothing else can get much of a chance the way those damn lizards are everywhere. So that was all right. And I knew there couldn't be a lot of opposition left, except what you had run into. And I figured something else, too. Even if we lost the pups, it wouldn't matter all that much. Quema's the important one, and she was OK. So I said to her, all right, c'mon, stay close by

me, don't take any stupid chances. And the swarm followed right on her heels. You saw what happened. Basorkis are hunting animals. That bunch aren't yet big enough to give anything a fatal bite, but you have to admit they scared the grease out of the lizards!"

"And me!" Sixx endorsed. "But good! What's more they managed to distract Lorian long enough for me to grab him, and that's more than I could do on my own. He is a hard man, believe me. He was all set to use me as a lever to pry Elleen out of this ship, into his hands, and then cross both of us off. You'll never believe it, but according to him our Elleen is a spy and very dangerous. And those oscillators of his are really something. They made it easy. That's why I gathered one in working order. That will go into store for the back-room boys to play with. And work out a shield for, eventually. So . . . and now what do we do?"

Lowry caressed his board thoughtfully. "First thing, I reckon, is to get off the deck, and soon. Lorian's not such a fool as to leave that ship of his empty. There'll be men aboard, maybe enough men to take her up. And that is what they will do, just as soon as they figure out something has busted."

"Check. Let's run her up." Sixx hit the intercom. "Elleen? Hold on to your girdle, we're off again. Lift in ten seconds, all right?"

There was no reply, and in the next breath he saw why. Here she came, up through the hatch and into the control room. Somehow she managed to look more divine than ever, even though she was smothered in soot and ashes and charcoal smears and the scorched pants were on the point of disintegrating any moment.

"Mind the body," he warned, indicating Lorian on the floor, as she made for the spare seat. "You would be wise to lie flat, noble sir, the next few minutes could be rough otherwise. Our propulsion methods are not quite as sophisticated as yours in this department." Miss

Stame settled firmly, Sixx touched the controls, and the Clipper went up, straight up amidst a great cloud of soot, ashes and sparks. But only until they could get a clear screen shot. Then he restrained the thrust and peered as Lowry spun the camera-eyes.

"There he is, Rex. Still sitting in the water. Waiting. A shame to disappoint him, huh?"

"Agreed. And just in case he does get some notion to follow us up, and maybe cause a degree of trouble—" Sixx tickled his controls tenderly and the Clipper tilted fractionally, slid along, climbed at an angle, wobbled as if hesitating. An unwary observer might have assumed it was in some kind of trouble. Lorian's keep-crew didn't take long to overcome that error in judgment. As Sixx righted the stagger and sent the Clipper spouting down, aiming at that ship down there, there came a winking glow and he grunted as the pressor beam struck. But only for the split second it took him to switch in the echo-field defense. Then he grinned at the screen.

"Want to try something else, friends?" he invited. That echo-field was more than just a screen. That pressor-beam generator, overloaded with the whole of its thrust returned to it, would never work again. And the same would go for their tractor-beam generator, if they were foolhardy enough to try it. It was a matter of I.S. policy that the Clipper Ships did not mount any hard offensive weapons as such. Designed as they were to be as immune as wit and technology could make them to virtually any offensive attack, they were beyond criticism. Had they also mounted offensive armament, Space Navy would have felt very unhappy about it. So, no weapons as such. But there were other ways. As now. Sliding down on a spouting column of fire, Sixx held the ship with careful precision no more than twenty feet above the steeple spire of the enemy and held it there, blasting savagely, for a full minute. Then he leaned on the studs and they went up and away, not too fast. In the rearview screen,

dwindling fast, the Khandalar ship had a glow about it and a curiously smooth slickness of outline, as if all the protuberances had been rasped off.

"He won't be any more trouble to anybody," Lowry judged. "So now . . . ?"

"Well," Sixx shook his head regretfully. "I suppose we had better get ourselves into orbit and then scream for help, as we should have done a long time ago."

"Only we didn't. Because it would take forever and a week for anybody to find us. On the other hand you will recall that train of reasoning you had, that Lorian has to have a warp ship all his own?"

"I remember it well. So?"

"So where else would it be except right here? In orbit."

"It's a thought. So all right, we strike orbit and then set Joe to look out for a warper. Which he can do very well, having been trained for that job. And then what?"

"You'll think of something," Lowry assumed cheerfully. "You always do. How about you, Elleen? You all right. You look about beat, *and* kind of messed up too."

"It's funny," she said, "but I really am all right. I've been shot at, scorched a bit, knocked over, scared out of my life . . . I'm a mess . . . but the only thing that worries me . . . I'm hungry. I feel hollow!"

"Me too!" Sixx echoed. "And who's surprised? How long is it since we last ate?"

"Seems like forever to me."

"Right, let's go do something about that and see how your brood is getting along at the same time." He rose and helped her up and over the flat-out helplessness of Lorian. "I'll make that platters for four, but somebody is going to have to feed him. He's a lot too smart to be let loose!"

Somewhat to his surprise, the midget beasts seemed none the worse for the efforts they had expended and were frisking about, plaguing their mother. Quema managed to look very self-satisfied as she lay in her quilted

basket and he could have sworn she was amused when her lively brood deserted her as one, to cluster around Miss Stame as soon as they spotted her.

"Oh no!" she groaned, looking at him in despair. He grinned.

"You need some kind of technique for transferring affection. If I may suggest—the stomach is a good old-fashioned route. That crunchy stuff you feed to Quema—will the kids eat it?"

"Will they?" she shrilled. "They've had a bowlful each already, not ten minutes ago!"

"Fine. So try this. It could be messy, but worth it. Sprinkle her with the stuff. Plenty of it. Let them find it. Let them learn to associate her with food. That shouldn't take long, and then you have it made!"

"I wish I could think of things like that," she said sadly. "So obvious. I'm sure it will work. You must think I'm stupid." She went to her store-pack to break out some more of the crunchy meal. Sixx watched her, noticing that she had already raided the auto-chef for a set of bowls. His thoughts were conflicting. She wasn't dim at all. She could catch and follow simple instructions instantly, which is not such a common trait. She never needed to be told anything twice. And although she was immensely decorative, she seemed not to be aware of it. The whole added up to a picture he couldn't quite understand, but he thought he was close. The voice was an irrelevance and he could ignore it. There was something else, just out of reach.

Pushing the problem to the back of his mind he went to the auto-chef and set up a program for four steak-eggs-and-mush, coffee and apple pie to follow, then thought of a profitable way to pass the waiting time. Going back up to control he collected his suit and the oscillator gun. Lowry said,

"We could be running tight on fuel, Rex. We can make orbit and some over, but not much."

"Then either we find that warper or we scream for help. I'm working on it. Patience!"

In the workshop, on the deck below the control room, he linked Joe in with his probes and gave his suit a fast check-out. Much to his relief, once he had replaced his power-packs the suit-systems showed near-enough normal. It would have to be left to someone else to figure out just how that weird beam could instantly drain a power-pack. He switched his attention to the oscillator gun and puzzled over it for a while but learned very little. The operating controls were obvious enough, but the circuitry, what little of it he could see without doing damage, was way over his head. That was something else that would have to be left for someone else to investigate. Fun for Horn's back-room boys, when they got that far.

He went on down to the lounge just in time to hear the auto-chef ping out its signal of readiness. Also to feel his weight starting to dwindle fast, a sign that they were almost in orbit. It didn't seem to worry the little tweedlers any. They just took it in their stride—or flight—as the whim struck them. It was really something to watch them leap and take off, and swoop about and land, their tiny legs going in a frantic blur of speed. Even Miss Stame had to laugh at them.

"They are cute creatures," she said, "and they don't bother me so much, not now. Thanks to you." She looked at Sixx, sobering. "I owe such a lot to you. This, my rescue before, and my life just now, when you knocked me over. I know it's all part of the job, so far as you are concerned—"

"That's not strictly true, Elleen." He moved a little closer to her. "Fair enough, you are part of the job, and it's our business to get you back to Earth in good shape. But . . . Elleen, didn't anyone ever tell you that you're a very beautiful girl, that any man would run himself into the ground to take good care of you?"

Her blue eyes were very wide now, quite close, gazing

up. "You mean," she whispered, "you *like* me? Just me, as a person?"

"That is hardly the word." He came closer still, and it all seemed to happen by itself. Her warmth and softness close to him, her mouth offering, her arms twining about his neck. After ageless seconds she drew her lips free and said, breathlessly,

"You like me all that much?"

"Is that such a big surprise to you, Elleen?"

"Other people," she whispered, "always seem to laugh at me. Or treat me like a child. Some kind of freak. You know, the way you did when you said you could forgive me all those other things. What other things, Rex?"

"I've completely forgotten," he told her, and it was almost true. There was only her voice, and he had almost grown used to that. He kissed her again lingeringly, then, with regret, he pushed her gently away. "Lunch is not improving by being kept waiting, sweetheart, and we both need to wash our faces and so on before we go back upstairs. Go on, see if you can shower faster than me. And one more thing—Roger helped, didn't he? So you owe him something, too!"

She stared a moment, then broke into a gorgeous grin. "You mean *he* likes me too, just as much?"

"I'd bet on it."

He stepped under the shower feeling good. She was a great girl. He had the missing ingredient to the problem. Nobody had ever shown her that she was nice, attractive, a lovely person in herself . . . and she had been accepting the image given to her by other people. It was that simple. And no sooner had he dismissed that matter than the other, more urgent problem offered itself up complete with solution. He had not planned it that way. It just happened, as it so often did when something came up to distract him from his main worries. He was so pleased with himself that he was slow out of the shower, emerging dry and in a clean bodysuit to see her already

out and in fresh paper-pants, in a blue to match the color of her eyes this time. She had two platters in each hand, ready to transport upstairs.

"Let me take a couple of those," he offered, and she promptly put her freed hand around his neck to demand another kiss.

"Just making sure," she declared, and laughed. "It feels good!"

"That's not the word. But don't let it unhinge your brain now. I'm going to need you in a moment. After you!"

Back in the control room again they saw that Lorian was sitting up, the gag and blindfold removed, and Lowry was dabbing, none too gently, at his bleeding nose.

"I thought you said he was a hard man, Rex? A little dose of gee-force and he bleeds just like anybody else!" He sat back, disposed of the tissue, and grinned at Miss Stame as she scrambled past the outstretched legs and held out his platter. "Looks good." He took it. "So do you, now you're all cleaned up and calm again. You look sort of pleased with yourself. That must mean that all's well with Quema and the family, huh?"

She smiled radiantly, put down her own plate, took his head in her hands and planted her lips on his with hearty abandon, holding the kiss for a long breath. Then Sixx tapped her gently on the nearest and most prominent part of her rounded anatomy.

"That'll do for now. Don't overdo. Plenty of time for that kind of thing later." She let go, straightened up and sat, leaving Lowry speechless in amazement. Sixx grinned at him. "All will be made clear in due course, amigo. For now, let's eat." He sat down and half-turned to look at Lorian. The Khandalar princeling didn't look nearly so regally sure of himself anymore.

"What do you intend to do with me?" he demanded. Sixx settled the plate carefully in his lap and pondered.

"First off," he suggested, "I'm going to untie your

hands so you can use them to feed yourself. If you want to. If not, that's your loss. If you so much as try to do anything else with them I will kick your teeth right down your throat. Is that understood?"

With that taken care of, Sixx found a mouthful, speared it, chewed on it awhile, then resumed. "Here's food for the mind as well as the frame. It's high time you got yourself told a thing or two. You are still Lorian, nothing can alter that. But you are now solo. You have no base. That has been scratched, deleted, written off. We did that. Your establishment, your men and your communications. All gone. Also your only ship. We dealt with that on the way up. Finished. It is my guess that you are the mainspring of your revolutionary movement and that without you it will run down and stop. So much for that. But that really doesn't concern us. None of our business. Our job is to get safely back to Earth, back to our base, with the Royal sorki. And that is what we are going to do. That is the next item on the agenda."

"Bah! You persist in that stupid story?" Lorian growled, choking on a bite and going purple in the face before he could recover his voice. "Do you deny; still, that she is your prize? That woman is your spy!"

"Who, me?" Miss Stame squawked. "Me? A spy? For what? Is there a war on, or something?"

Sixx had to laugh, more at the look on Lorian's face than anything else. He had grown used to her discordant tones and had almost forgotten his own shock at the first hearing. He shrugged at Lorian. "You still think she's a spy? All right, if that doesn't shake you loose nothing will. Nor is it important, one way or the other. What matters is that we are taking her along with the sorki, so that is that. The immediate point now is that we think you have a warp ship here somewhere. And we need it. We want it to shunt us back to Earth. And that is where you come in."

Lorian gaped at him in open astonishment. "You expect me to *help* you?"

"You will. As I said just now you are still Lorian, and that's a name to conjure with. It carries power. But you are our prisoner. We hold you as hostage. Get me?"

Lorian snorted, licked his fingers daintily, snorted again. "Never!" he said with emphasis. "I *help* you?" He made his neighing laugh again. "You forget. I know Earth ways, the soft sensibilities of humans. If the positions were reversed it would be a different matter, but they are not. You cannot compel me to do what I do not wish to. I defy you."

"You are going to be surprised at what I can do," Sixx promised, and meant it. Lorian neighed again, then was suddenly serious.

"Mr. Sixx, you are a competent person. An efficient and resourceful person, you and your large companion. I could use men like you. And the rewards would be great, greater than anything you could imagine. You know only a small fraction of the Khandalar culture. There is much more. With myself as supreme ruler—and your patron—I could really make it worth your while. Think about that."

"Save it. Don't waste your breath on it. You fancy something to drink? We don't have anything vintage, only coffee, orange juice, or milk."

"Coffee will be quite acceptable, I thank you."

"All right, I'll go get it and then we'll talk more."

When he got back carrying four hot cartons, Lowry was sprawled back in his seat, one foot up on the panel, his bland face placidly regarding the deckhead above. Lorian was stretched flat out on the floor on his back and Miss Stame was attending to another nosebleed, not, this time, the result of high acceleration. She looked up hastily, her beautiful bosom agitated with suppressed emotion, her mouth starting to move in explanation, but Sixx shook his head.

"You don't have to tell me, Elleen, I can guess. Help him sit up again." He watched Lorian struggling with emotion, estimating the force it must have taken to squash the Royal nose that badly, and sighed. "You aren't the first, mister, and you probably won't be the last, either, to underestimate Roger. That simple-minded, half-asleep look of his is a con . . . as you now know. Here, swallow some of this, and try to shake loose from some of those high-minded notions of yours. For one thing, you cannot buy us. Not at all. But we can do things for you. We can help you. A lot. Think—for instance—what King Emperor Lagas will do to you when we turn you over to him with a full blow-by-blow record of what you've been up to. You say we humans are soft, and you may have yourself a point. But Lagas isn't, he's one of your own sort. And, by him, you are a traitor. You think about that."

A twitter from the computer drew his head around. Lowry came down from his beam-end slouch and leaned forward to peer at his meters. "That's it, Rex. We guessed right. That is a warper, no doubt about it."

"Check by me, too. Let's close in on him very gently, Roger. If we can detect him it is a safe bet he can detect us, so let's not get too close. You know what I mean?"

Lorian snorted again, angrily now. "You are stuck, Mr. Sixx. Unless you have weapons which can overpower that ship. And I deduce from your feeble wheedling that you have not!"

"You deduce right, mister, and you don't have to tell me anything about overpowering. A smart man with a Pauli-field could turn us inside out, quite literally, or extinguish us like a candle-flame or several other equally not nice things if we got too close. But you are in this thing with us, Lorian. If we go, you go. Try thinking about that."

Lorian glared at him furiously. "Do you think I am

afraid to die, you fool! You commoner! Peasant! I am of the Royal blood, remember? Death does not deter me. Do what you will, Mr. Sixx . . . or what you can. You are stuck . . . and you know it!"

XI

The warp ship was a tiny visible disc on the screen now, one large dot among many lesser ones. Sixx's eyes flickered between it and the distance-readings on the proximeter. Both he and Lowry knew full well the dreadful things that could be done with a deformed Pauli-field in the hands of a skilled—or insane—warp master. It had happened a time or two. That unique power could get to a man and twist his reason just as severely as the field could twist space. There was no need at all for him to murmur,

"Let's make this nice and steady, Roger. Not too close. We know his limits. All right, Prince Lorian, you have your point. By no means can we take that ship, not by force, not if he—whoever you have on there—has any rooted objections. I know it, you know it, and he knows it. But I am not stuck. Not yet. Just now I asked you to think what Lagas will surely do to you, if and when. Now I am asking you to think what we can do *for* you. You're a smart man. You'd never have reached this far otherwise. And there is always room for a man with brains. On Earth. Take that fancy magnetic-field oscillator effect of yours for instance."

As if on some dire cue, he had hardly spoken when he felt his bones buzz and his eyes blur. Thin acid agony scoured every single separate nerve in his body. At the same instant the control-room lights dimmed down to a dull red glow, muted machinery groaned, and

the whole ship sang like a giant violin string. Fighting to make his voice come through his tortured throat and make audible sense, he croaked,

"Don't . . . switch! Roger . . . don't . . . switch . . . to battery. Don't!"

He heard his own voice as a steel-wool rattle inside his skull as he strained against that deadly vibration, trying hard to cringe himself together, resisting the power that tried to dissolve him apart . . . and then, like a snapped wire, the torture was gone and he slumped, dragging in massive, much-needed breaths, blinking away the sudden sweat from his eyes. The lights were still dying-ember red, the panel gauges shivering hysterically.

"We got to switch to battery, Rex!" Lowry snarled through his teeth, his whole body tense and shaking. "We are just about dead right now!"

"It's OK to switch now. And back off, fast. Before he belts us one more of those." His arms had all the palsy of age as he made them obey him, tripped switches, fought the controls, and the Clipper came grudgingly to life, rapidly increasing the distance between her and that death-spot over there. Sixx breathed hard, mastered his voice. "When I checked out my suit," he explained, "there wasn't a thing wrong with it. But the power-packs were flat. Dead. Instantly drained. That field . . . it's some kind of energy-sink. But we should be all right . . . in a minute or two. Hoo! Boy, we can't take any chances with more of that."

"I'll buy that! But how do we know he hasn't the range to shake us apart even here, Rex?"

"I don't. I'm just guessing . . . and adding things up. Look, unless they have somehow suspended all the laws we learned at school, there is no kind of shield for magnetism. None! Right?"

"Right by me." Lowry swiped away a sheen of sweat and nodded. "That's the way I remember it. But . . .

hell . . . if that is still valid, what about the operator? What about the guy who holds one of those guns and fires it?"

"That's one of the things I was adding in. I saw the last man who had the pleasure of pouring one on me, and he was sweating damn near as badly as we are right now. I didn't grab it properly at the time. But then, remember, I used one of those on that guy up the tree? And it tied me into knots. I thought maybe I had done something wrong, but I don't think that anymore. What I think—they can somehow generate and shape and direct that blasted field at an enemy, which is bad enough, but that there has to be some kind of bleed-off, a backlash or halo effect or something. That's what I got. And even if it is only a fraction of the full power, it's enough to discourage the man using it . . . unless he *has* to. You with me?"

"Sounds reasonable. Hope you're right. On that basis they won't dare whomp up their power too much or they'll knock themselves out. How about that, Lorian?"

The Royal person was in very bad shape now. That oscillating nightmare had restarted his nosebleed, and his richly embroidered robe would never be the same again. He looked pale and shaken but just as arrogant as ever.

"You have guessed with commendable accuracy, Mr. Sixx. The information can do you no good whatever, so I will admit it. Yes, there is an unfortunate halo effect from the oscillator, on the order of one tenth of one percent of the field intensity. But it is only a minor objection."

"In your opinion, sure. You don't have to fire the thing. I wonder if your loyal followers feel as casual about it as you do. But you would neither know nor care, about commoners!" He suspended his sarcasm and spun in his seat as Miss Stame let out a low croak and stirred

into life. He saw her sit up, shake her head, and heave a distractingly deep breath.

"What happened?" she demanded unsteadily.

"You have just been exposed to a fancy weapon invented by our Royal hostage here. Mounted on the warp ship. No need to worry, though, they won't do it again. Not at this range. Too painful for them. All the same though, we had better revert to generators now, Roger."

"Can't hurt to try. They've had time to warm up again." The reversion took ten careful and anxious minutes, during which time Miss Stame groaned a time or two but uttered not a word of complaint. When she did move it was to reach for a tissue and pass it to Lorian, then to lever up out of her seat and go away down, out of sight, but only briefly, coming back to announce that the livestock was scared but in good shape. Sixx took note with the periphery of his attention. She was tough in her own way, under that eye-catching epidermis. In fact, he realized, it was her astonishing loveliness that was her principal handicap. It required a distinct effort to see past the creamy velvet skin, the heart-stopping curves, the unconscious poetry of her movements . . . past the shape to the person involved. He was guiltily aware that but for the unusual circumstances that had opened his eyes he would never have seen her, either, as anything more than a beautiful body. And she was very much more. "All what other things?" he recalled her indignant quote and grinned. There were no other things at all, apart from that lamentable voice. She was a great girl. But then he had to let the pleasant thoughts go and bring his attention back to more important matters.

"It's about time we laid a few things on the line," he said, putting a determined eye on their prisoner. "So long as your crew aboard that warper stay hostile, we are stuck. We could warp out on our own unit, which would be rough for me and Roger, and gruesome for you and

Elleen—and quite possibly fatal for the sorkis—so that is out, except as a very last resort. Our job is to deliver, and that is what we are going to do, or bust. So we need that warper. As I said before.”

“And as I have already said,” Lorian dabbed at his nose indifferently, “you are stuck. Your words are empty. And do not think you will sneak up on *my* men by some trick, or catch them asleep. They know better!”

“You know,” Lowry sounded thoughtful, “I hate to say this, but it looks as if maybe he is right. Maybe this is one time we should scream for help?”

“Later. If we have to. I said, this is the time for laying a few things on the line. Give me that radio board.” He reached and adjusted for the frequency favored by Khandalar and switched on.

“Warp ship! Do you read? Anybody read Anglic? This is Clipper IV to warp ship. Anybody read me?” He sat back. In a while there came a crackle that made him wince and glare at the instrument. “Stuck? Me, stuck by a culture that can’t even build a decent radio-transmitter? Never in your life!”

“This is Captain Polanat, of the warp ship.” The speaker had an atrocious accent but his words were perfectly understandable. “Keep your distance, Clipper IV, or you will be destroyed!”

“Not with what you’ve got, Captain. We felt a small tingle just now. If that is the best you can do, save it. We will not come any closer just now, not until we are good and ready.”

“We have other ships, Earthman, and other weapons!”

“Sorry, I’m afraid I have to disagree with that. You did have one other ship, but not anymore. You also had a base once. That’s gone too. If you don’t believe me, try making contact with your base or your ship and see. You are on your own. Think about it. And stay tuned, there are a few surprises coming your way. Nasty ones!”

He flipped the switch and turned to grin at Lorian. "That's cleared the air a little bit, hasn't it? We can't get close to that warper, true . . . but it is virtually helpless on its own, as you well know. And they know. So it is a nice situation, almost a stalemate. But not quite. Now I am *really* going to work on you!"

Lorian snorted disdainfully. "Words!" he said. "Empty words!"

"If you like. Words. Habits of mind. You'll see. Keep an eye on him, Roger, for just a minute." Sixx rose and went away, reeling a little as the after-effect of that oscillator blast lingered in his legs. He went only as far as the workshop and was back in moments, making no secret at all of what he carried. It was a small portable bench-vise. Seating himself again he proceeded to clamp it to the edge of his panel, taking care to choose a spot where it wouldn't interfere with his access to controls. Lorian eyed his actions uneasily. Lowry, too, was unsure.

"What do you have in mind, Rex? Thumb-screws?"

"Nothing so uncivilized . . . so feudal. I'm human, remember? And, being human," he turned a calculating eye on Lorian, "I am naturally sold on the idea that sanity and reason are bound to prevail. So, I will play you one more game the rational way. Like it is none of my business, but I hear things. Like I hear Lagas has it in mind to remodel the Khandalar constitution, to make it more like a democracy. He's had an Earth education, like you. He has big ideas, like you."

"He is a fool!" Lorian stated. "Khandalar has stood fast, a three-world united empire, for more tens of centuries than anyone can count. Long before you humans came down from your trees! And he thinks to change all that? I correct myself, he is not a fool, he is insane!"

"In other words, you don't agree. So he is going to make a few mistakes, so what? Change is on its way, Lorian. Neither of you can stop that. His idea is to ride

with it. Your aim, so far as I can make out, is to stop it flat in its tracks. Really? With more and more of our ships coming in and out of your splash-ports, more and more of your common people joining up, traveling, seeing how the rest of the world lives, then coming back home to talk about it . . . you really think you can stop all that? Which one is the fool, him or you?"

Lorian sneered openly, his favorite expression sitting well on his dark features. "We of the Royal blood of Khandalar can stop anything, and *anyone*, Earthman! We have absolute power, something you cannot understand or appreciate. That power may not fall on me, of course. If that is to be my fate, so be it. But there will be others after me. We will rule!"

"I was just coming to that." Sixx crumpled his coffee carton idly, to toss it aside and settle comfortably in his seat, his fingers toying with the toggle of the vise. "I've heard about this absolute power of yours. Who hasn't, in fact? But suppose it failed? Suppose . . . say it was canceled, or withdrawn? Suppose somebody was smart enough to steal it, even? Then what?"

"I refuse to suppose anything so ridiculous, so impossible!"

"All right. That helps confirm something I had only suspected up to now. I'm a good guesser, you said so yourself. I'll get to that in a minute. But you say ridiculous and impossible. You think so? I used to think the same way about that suit of mine. That is the I.S. special. It is supposed to be proof against just about anything short of heavy battle weapons. You know? Invulnerable? And then you come along and point a new toy at me . . . and I'm dead, just like that! So I do know, I do appreciate just how difficult it is to grab on to the fact that absolute power has suddenly vanished. And when it happens—if it ever happens to you of the Royal blood like it happened to me—you are going to have to do the same as I had to do. You have to forget all about the

gadgets, and start using these!" He tapped his head meaningly.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Rex?" Lowry murmured uneasily, and Sixx gave him a hard grin.

"I know what I'm doing, Roger. I'm using my head, my brains. Wits. You've got those, Lorian. You've had an education. You *know* there is no such thing as absolute power, period. Sooner or later somebody will bob up with a way to beat it, stop it, go around it. You *know* that. So I ask you again, to suppose. If and when your Royal power fails, your Royalty is going to be in a corner. If they are going to stay in office at all it will be by wit, and ability, and talent, and brains. You've got plenty. Use them now, don't let them go to waste. The Royals of Khandalar are going to need men like you, and you are going to need them, too. You and whoever takes on after you!"

"What's all this absolute power you're talking about?" Miss Stame asked wonderingly. "Do you mean all that stuff about the Crown Stones? That's just a lot of superstitious rubbish!"

Bound as he was, Lorian surged off the deck at her. Sixx shoved him back down with an ungentle hand and chuckled.

"And you still think she is a spy, huh? Use your head, just for once, can't you? You know you can't win. Not you, not any smart guy who comes along after you either. So why not cooperate? All you have to do is talk to that crew on the warper—"

"Never!" Lorian blared.

"I know . . . you'd rather die!" Sixx sighed and shook his head. "All right, you can't say I didn't try." He turned back to the vise, and Miss Stame touched his arm gently.

"He is never going to change his mind, Rex."

"Not even if I put his fingers in here, one at a time, and scrunched them up into pulp?"

"Oh don't!" she shivered. "You don't really mean that. I couldn't stand it anyway. I would probably faint or something!"

"Don't do that," he warned. "I'm going to need you in a minute. He is going to talk, to help us, and I need you to monitor what he says, just to be sure he doesn't pull any fast ones. I am not all that fluent at K-talk."

"You fool!" Lorian snarled. "You will never persuade me to help you. My honor forbids it!"

Sixx was completely unimpressed. "You know," he mused, "this thing would be simplified a whole lot if you people were smart enough to have workable television on your ships. Then I could *show* your loyal followers that we do in fact have you on board, and that we were in the process of cracking your knuckle-joints, one at a time, until they got smart. As it is we will have to make do with sound effects and hope that they get the message fast and good. For your sake."

Lorian's eyes glittered and there was now a thick sheen of sweat on his face, but he was still defiant. Lowry stirred uneasily.

"You said a nice long speech, Rex," he murmured, "and I know you well enough to know that you think you have something up your sleeve. But it had better be good!"

"It's good, all right. But it is not up my sleeve, it's in my belt." He dragged at the stiff fastenings, opened the pouch, put his fingers inside, and shook his head at Lorian. "In a way," he admitted, "I have to feel a little sorry for you. You have been wrong all the way down the line. It's a shame, but there it is. We did not travel all the way to Casta from Earth to pick up one spy. Not at all. Nor, really, did we make that trip to collect one very precious Royal sorki. That was just a smokescreen. What we really came for was to steal away your absolute power. I did try to warn you. I did try to persuade you by means of reason and common sense, but you

wouldn't hear it. So I have no choice but to do it the hard way. Like this. Absolute power . . . here in the palm of my hot little hand. Recognize it?"

He held his hand flat, cautiously out of Lorian's reach, but where he could see quite plainly. The control-room lights glittered on that rounded cube and broke tiny spears of red fire from the imprisoned gems inside. And now Lorian was really sweating, his eyes bulging as he stared at the bauble.

"It is not true!" he choked. "It cannot be true! That looks like the Crown Stones . . . but they are always on open view . . . !"

". . . in the Public Cabinet? I know. They are still there, so far as anyone else knows or suspects. Only those are fakes, and these are real!"

"That is impossible! How could *you* have them?"

"Simplest thing in the world. We had a fake duplicate already made up, and we switched 'em. Simple. Even a rank amateur could palm a thing as small as this. It was a walk!"

"It is impossible!" Lorian insisted, clutching at straws. "No one is allowed to touch the Crown Stones, only those of the Royal blood!"

"That's right. And who do you think worked the switch for us? None other than your enemy and our pal, King Emperor Lagas. I watched him do it!"

"It is impossible!" Lorian insisted, but his tone revealed the break in his own belief. "Those are fake! The others are real! You are trying to trick me!"

"Oh, come on, now!" Sixx protested. "I'll agree that I'm smart, but I am not that good. How was I to know that you were going to capture me, or me you, in turn? Do you really believe I was carrying these about just on the off chance? You're not thinking! You've bragged that your information is good. Use it now. You *know* that Lagas hired I.S. for a big job. You *know* that Roger and I went all the way to Casta, straight to the Palace. You

know that we didn't linger long, that we came away again almost at once—with one sorki and a lady handler. A spy? You can't still swallow that, surely. And all that fuss over one Royal sorki? Come on, now, you *know* it won't fit. And least of all will it fit the notion that we went all the way there, and started out to come all the way back, with a fake? Concealed? Come on!"

Lorian's eyes glazed as he thought the unthinkable and stared at the unbelievable. Sixx chuckled.

"Face it. Use your head. These are the Crown Stones of Khandalar, and I have them right here in my hand. Think hard, Lorian. And while you're at it, think also of this. I was not fooling, back there, when I spoke of having a tincture of Royal blood in my veins. That was true. So there's no reason at all why I shouldn't pop one of these little beauties out of the main shell—" he pressed his fingers to the cuboid and experimented a moment, and out came one little pinhead of fire, still secure in its own insulating sheath, to glitter on his palm, "—like that, see? And then all I would need to do is slip it out of the second shell of insulation . . . and hold it in my fingers . . . and then, Lorian, I could *compell* you to co-operate with me. How about that?"

Never before had he seen such utter despair on a man's face. In that moment, with the ridiculously tiny thing in his fingers and Lorian's total demoralization a stark reality before his eyes, he realized for the first time just a little of what such power could mean. Talking about it was one thing, but to see it and actually hold it in his hand was quite different. It was terrifying and yet tempting at the same time. Lorian was as helplessly frozen as a rabbit before a swaying snake. Lowry stirred again.

"You're getting a bit far-out, Rex."

"You don't have to tell me," Sixx shivered. The tiny gem seemed to be hot in his fingers. "Lord Acton was absolutely right. This is no kind of power for a man to

have. Lorian," he turned a hard eye on the stricken princeling, "we are taking this bauble back to Earth, not because it represents anything all that precious to us. It doesn't. This kind of power wouldn't be tolerated for one minute with us. I think you know that much. No . . . it is purely scientific curiosity. Our big brains want to play with it, find out what makes it work, how it's done. And if and when they ever do, you can bet your life *that* secret will go underground and stay there until they also find some way of blocking it off. Which they will. We are that kind of people."

He revolved back to the vise again and twisted the toggle gently to ease the jaws apart. Then, with fingertips, he inserted the tiny gem between the steel jaws and started tightening up. "You see what I'm doing?" he asked. "I get this up tight, like that!" The jaws came up firmly on the small object. "Then I switch on the radio again, raise that captain of yours over there . . . and you talk to him. You tell him that we want a safe and smooth passage back to Earth. You convince him of that, any way you like. But no tricks. Our Elleen will listen real close to everything you say. And you utter just one doubtful word, try just one fast move of any kind, and . . . crunch! Right? Do you understand?"

"You would not!" Lorian was almost weeping. "They are precious . . . sacred . . . unique . . . irreplaceable! You would not!"

"They may be all that to you. To me . . . well now, if it wasn't my job to deliver them intact I would crunch up the whole lot, right now. That kind of power doesn't appeal to me, at all. So don't kid yourself I would not. You just try me, just once, and see! Here's the mike. I'm switching on now . . . and remember . . . just one wrong word, that's all. Elleen, darling, you listen!"

XII

It turned out to be one of the smoothest jumps Sixx had ever known. It was also one of the pleasantest, although neither Lorian nor the gems had anything to do with that aspect. That all-important gem sat snugly between those vise jaws all the way, with either himself or Lowry within easy reach of it at all times just in case Lorian gave trouble. But he didn't. He endured most of the journey securely bound in a corner of the lounge where the micro-sorkis used him as a passive playmate, or securely locked in a cabin during sleep-hours. He had nothing at all to say. The conditions were ideal for a project that both men seized on with alacrity, and which Sixx named "The Education of Elleen."

Sixx laid it on the line for her, with a certain amount of anxiety but determined to do something positive just the same. "It's like this, Elleen," he told her. "You once said to me, 'I'm a memory. It's my only talent.' You remember that?"

"That's right. And it's true, isn't it? What else have I got?"

"We have about seventy-two hours fly-time before we reach Luna, and it could take me that long to list all the other things you have, like you are a gorgeous girl . . . you can learn fast . . . you can be told . . . you don't ask stupid questions . . . you have nerve . . . you can add up . . . you don't get in a panic. . . and a whole lot more than that. But, if you'll let us, Roger and I will do better than that. We can show you!"

"Show me? How?" She was genuinely bewildered but keen, and she came back to her standard phrase: "You two boys really do like me, don't you?"

"That has to be some kind of record," Lowry murmured, "for understatement. Elleen, you also told me you had never heard yourself on a playback. And, by what other things I've seen, I don't think you've ever studied yourself much at all. Have you?"

"Studied myself?" She gazed at him in astonishment. "Why would I do a thing like that?"

"We will show you why," Sixx assured her confidently. "Joe will help. We are going to let you hear yourself, and see yourself in motion, and you are due to find out just what a wonderful person you are. All those other things, remember? This is where we can put some of them right. If you want to."

She did, without a moment's hesitation. And she really was a fast and fluent learner. So the trip passed very pleasantly indeed.

Just before the final moments of warp-out and approach to Armstrong Base, they suspended lessons and frog-marched Lorian back to the control room where he could see the treasured Crown Stone, just as a reminder to him to be good. And that tiny stone stayed there until I.S. men had come and gone, in relays, to collect and take care of the warp ship and its interesting armament and crew. And the hand-oscillator. And Lorian himself, ceremoniously. And the sorkis, all seven of them, to indulgent care. Then Miss Stame herself, with appropriate farewells and promises. Then, and only then, did Sixx let loose that precious gem from its fate, to return it to the cuboid shell, and to take the whole thing with him when they went to report to Horn.

"We had a hairy moment or two," he admitted, as the pair of them relaxed a little in Jason Horn's quiet office, "and we took some notes on that highly interesting planetary system. Lagas might be interested in that as a possible penal colony. He is certainly going to need something of the kind, and soon. Right now it appears to be infested with zilliks, but an importation of healthy bas-

sorki could go a long way to mitigating that. There is the ruin of what was once a base, and a ship full of gimmicks that won't be going anywhere for a long while. Odd ends to be tied up. And of course there's these." He opened up his suit, got out the precious cuboid and laid it on the desk. "I'm a bit surprised, frankly, that McLaren isn't right here, champing at the bit to get his hands on these!"

"On these?" Horn elevated a white eyebrow. "Or the real ones?"

"I guessed that far," Lowry sighed. "I figured even you wouldn't go so far as to crunch up the real stones. But you took a hell of a gamble, Rex. He could've called your bluff!"

"Never in a million years, Roger. You heard Lagas himself admit that he was scared of the things. And you saw Lorian's face. Habits of thinking are pretty hard to change. But that is no kind of power for a man to hold in his hand, believe me!" He wrestled with his boot a moment, then produced the other cuboid and placed it on the desktop discreetly far from the first. "I don't mind admitting—when I was holding that fake—if it had *been* the real one I might have been tempted to use it. Just to see."

"It is quite a thing," Horn nodded, "to trust a man with that much power, especially when you have reason to believe he might run into a jam and be tempted to use it. You know our watchword? Take no chances! It's a good maxim." He reached out and scooped the two cuboids into one palm, juggling them gently. "That's why McLaren isn't here, as you said, champing at the bit. He has had the real Crown Stones for some time now, ever since I turned them over to him, right here. Both of these are fakes. I brought the real ones in my pocket, while everyone was watching you two. Even Lagas didn't know that."

"Now just a minute!" Sixx gave him a bleak stare.

"You mean to tell me we went through all that fun and games for nothing? Just for a blind?"

"Just a minute yourself, Sixx," Horn advised, not loudly but with an edge to his voice. "I run this business. I've been running it a good many years now, with success. If there is any one thing I've learned in all that time it is how to estimate a man's capacity, his value, and how to use it fully. I'll claim that I know to a hair just what you two are capable of. And I wouldn't use you just as distractions, you know that . . . or you ought to!"

"So you say. I think I know my value too. But I just heard you say that we made that trip, stuck our necks out, damn near got killed, and all for the sake of some worthless imitations?"

"Symbols, Sixx. Symbols of power. Habits of mind, as you said. Or call them abstract values, if you like. After a deal of hard thinking I realized that it didn't make any difference in the long run, one way or the other, whether you two were carrying the real thing or not. And I tried to sell that idea to Lagas when he first called me in for consultation about method. 'Save yourself a big fee!' I advised him. 'Let me get a duplicate made. I'll show you how to work the switch. You slip the real one to me. I'll shove it in my pocket and walk off with it, and nobody will be any the wiser. No one would suspect you could do anything like that!' But he wouldn't hear of it."

Horn sat back and sighed. "More hierarchical patterns, you see? To him the Crown Stones are sacred objects, and ultravaluable. He could be civilized enough to realize that they are a curse and a weakness. And smart enough to reason that his only way was to move them out of reach. And he is a ruler, so is well-used to subterfuge, to tricks and deceits and devious ways, so it was right in his pattern to stage a kind of charade, a plot! That was fine. But the idea that I would just dunk them in my pocket and walk away—a flat, plain, non-spec-

tacular chance, with no fuss—that he would not buy. At all. That was too far-out even for him. So I had to go along with the show, just to keep him happy.”

“Well all right.” Sixx was a trifle mollified. “But you could have told *us*! I mean, we damn near got ourselves killed a time or two! For nothing!”

“You weren’t listening. I just said I know your value, what you are worth to me. And you’ve justified that. You were carrying very valuable goods indeed. Believe me. Something a lot more valuable to us than the Crown Stones ever could be.”

“More valuable?” Sixx frowned at him. “Not those sorkis? You are never going to try to sell me on that?”

“No. Although they are valuable, truly, of themselves. And your report on how they handled those lizards can have considerable ecological importance and will increase their value considerably.”

“I told you, didn’t I?” Lowry said, with quiet intensity. “Didn’t I say it? It’s our Elleen. She was the apple in the pie all the time!”

“Check!” Sixx grunted. “So you are a good guesser, an intuitive genius. All right! But what? What has she got? I mean, apart from all those other attributes that every right-minded girl would sell her soul for? What?” The question was for Horn, who leaned even further back, smiling.

“She, boys, is a memory. Complete and total recall. Once seen or heard, never forgotten. That’s what.”

“So?” Sixx challenged. “So what? We already know that much!”

“You do?” Horn came forward in sudden anxiety. “How?”

“She told us herself. Was it supposed to be some kind of secret? Because Lorian also knew, and told us. He had her tagged as a spy! Say . . . don’t tell me he was right, after all?”

“No, no! Not a spy. Not in that sense, anyway.”

"Then what?"

"Well," Horn settled back again and appeared to be arranging his mind. "It's not easy. As you probably know I like to keep abreast of the background in any major assignment, so I have done considerable homework on this one. As I say, not easy, but I think I can simplify it enough to give you the broad picture. Old age is the condition, longevity the dream, gerontology is the study. And the scientists have been chewing away at it for more than a century now without getting very far or coming up with anything very concrete. They know of a few assists. It helps, for instance, if your parents were long-lived. Sensible hygiene, sensible diet, staying slim, avoiding this and that, taking exercise and care—these things all help. But to what? Not to make human lifespan any longer, only to make it possible that more and more people can hope to live to be somewhere between seventy and ninety years old. That seems to be the break-point. What some biologists are calling 'the biological barrier'—on an analogy with the sound-barrier in atmospheric flight, or the Einstein limit in spaceflight. That kind of thing.

"The trick is to break through that barrier. Because it can be broken. That is neither wishful thinking nor biological theory, but hard fact. Far too many people manage to live way past that limit for it to be acceptable as just exceptional accident. But, paradoxically, not nearly enough for science to be able to distill out any hard data. Because, when you come right down to it, this is one of those experimental situations in which your test animals live as long as the people running the test. Sometimes longer. Which makes things a bit difficult.

"So . . . when it became known and established that (a) the K-people are as human as we are in everything that matters, and (b) that the common people have exactly the same lifespan expectancy that we do, in comparable circumstances, but (c) the K-Royalty rou-

tinely expect to live at least one hundred fifty years, often a lot more, and (d) that the K way of life has not altered substantially since who knows when, but is now altering fast . . . you have the whole thing in a nutshell. That is how and why Sir Bernard Monkton was prevailed upon, and financed, to head a gathering of experts, a hand-picked team, to go ahead and investigate the whole thing. Sir Bernard was not only a very smart man, in taking his niece along, but a very hard-headed man. Not given to quick claims or rash generalizations, a man very slow to commit himself on anything. So . . . when he made it obvious from one or two carefully chosen remarks that he thought he had all the necessary data—not the secret itself, mind you, but the data to work it out—that had to mean success. He had the daa. But then his expedition was attacked and all the paperwork destroyed. And all that very precious data is now contained in that young woman's pretty head. And nowhere else! And I shouldn't have to tell you that it is critical stuff. So all right! You brought home a prize. Very satisfactory indeed!"

Such praise from Horn was rare. Sixx chuckled. "That sounds like this is the perfect time to hit you for a raise and a bonus, and a month's leave!"

"You've got it!" Horn said, without hesitation. "You've earned it!"

If he expected them to be immediately jubilant, he was disappointed. Lowry frowned. "Thank you very much," he said, and looked thoughtfully at his colleague. "This kind of changes a thing or two, Rex, huh?"

"Just a little." Sixx looked thoughtful too. "So she is valuable, is she?" He stared at his employer, yet not seeing him, working out something of his own. "You know, sir," he said, all at once, "those experts that I assume are standing by to pick her brains . . .? They are not going to find it all that easy. Not easy at all. You have

to know how. Just what exactly is due to happen to her, anyway?"

"I am finalizing the arrangements right now. She is to be guard-escorted to Earth, eventually to Princeton. The team of experts is already gathering there. She will be under constant protective guard until they get all they can out of her . . . but that needn't concern you. You've done yours."

"I don't know so much," Sixx demurred, swapping glances with Lowry. "It doesn't feel right, somehow, to drop out before the job is all done. I reckon we ought to stay with her all the rest of the way!"

"From here on it's a breeze!" Horn pointed out. "A formality!"

"So?" Sixx came back at him indignantly. "Why can't we have an easy one, just once? We did the hard part, didn't we?"

Horn drew down his jutting white eyebrows like a hedge, squinting up through them at the innocent-faced pair opposite. "So you want to volunteer to escort Miss Stame all the rest of the assignment, right? Volunteer? I'd give something to know what you two are really up to. She's a pretty girl, all right, but not that pretty. Still, as I had already scheduled you two for leave, I don't see how it can hurt." He touched a button in his chair-arm, spoke to his wrist. "Harriet? Delete Woodstock and Kohler from the Stame slot, reinsert Sixx and Lowry. Oh . . . and have Miss Stame come up to my office right away, please." He released the button, stared at the two again. "This I want to see for myself. Volunteers?"

The poker-faced silence endured some three minutes, and then the door slid open to allow Miss Stame to enter. And then Jason Horn began to see why he had a couple of volunteers on his hands. He remembered her as being beautiful, from the Royal Khandalar costume images in his memory, as making an impression even on

his elderly and experienced mind. Now she was clad in something very brief, very simple, seemingly fragile, in pale blue disposable tissue, over an electrostatic body-stocking as sheer as a shadow and fitting like a blush. He could have duplicated that outfit a dozen times within the building. It did everything it was intended to do for her outrageous shape . . . but there was a lot more to it than that. It wasn't just her outlines and strategically arranged tissues that made him come up out of his chair and feel warmed.

"Hello, Mr. Horn," she said, gliding forward. "How nice to see you again, after all this time. Hello Rex . . . Roger!"

The voice completed his enchantment. It was soft yet vibrant, quiet yet completely self-assured. He had to cough a time or two before he could regain enough aplomb to come around his desk and take her hand.

"I'm delighted to see you again, Miss Stame." He meant it sincerely. "Safe and sound and looking none the worse for your adventures."

"That's thanks to Rex and Roger," she smiled daz-
zingly. "They really took very good care of me."

"Yes." He remembered to let go of her hand, coughed again. "In that case you will be pleased to know that they are going to stay along with you for the rest of your trip, keep a close eye on you, see that you don't come to any harm."

"I'm so glad," she said simply. "It's very kind of you to let me have them. I owe them far more than I can ever repay." She glanced at the digital clock on the wall. "I hope we can meet again some time, but we really ought to be going now, boys, the transport is due in a minute or two!"

Lowry offered her his free arm, clamped his helmet under the other. "We're ready now," he declared. "C'mon!"

Horn caught at Sixx's arm to detain him a moment. "How," he demanded, "did you work that miracle?"

"Good, huh? Joe should take most of the credit, though. You made the same mistake everybody else has made, including us, at first. She is a pretty girl, you said. She is a lot more. She is a very nice person. Just that nobody ever took the trouble to tell her that before, or to help her find out. They look at her pretty face, her big blue eyes, her forty-two, twenty-six, thirty-four statistics . . . and then they discover she has a tin-can voice. So she is a freak, some kind of object. And she isn't. She is good, tough, smart, sensible . . . a real nice person. In herself. When we let her hear her own voice on a playback, she was shook. Then we let Joe play her some other, selected voices, from store, and she caught on very fast. And we showed her herself, playback, in motion . . . and others . . . and she caught on again. She is very good indeed."

"I'll endorse that. She is remarkable!"

"But get this, sir. She trusts us two, all the way. We've never sold her anything but the truth. So we wanted to stick with her a bit longer, just to see her over the bumps a bit."

"You know," Horn stared at the door where she had last been visible, "if I was twenty years younger, Sixx, I'd give you a run for your money . . . with her!"

"You think I don't know that? And you just think of all those 'experts' who are gathered to question her. She is going to need protection for sure, now. That is why we wanted to volunteer! Hey . . . Roger! Wait for me!" and he was gone at a brisk trot.

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Togogether the two flaming figures lifted off the ground. In midair they hesitated. Bingle's scream was cut off as the hair and flesh of his head became a torch. All of a sudden the figures flicked from the present and were gone: two brief lights that had been extinguished.

Bingle's body, came hard against his chest, clung. The blossoming dress front sought shoulders of Bingle. The fingers appeared to reach out. They slid beneath the position. They bent, seemed to make ready. The clawed the crouching figure of Arthur Bingle, her arms changed had been digging for himself. Just before Leona arrived at and missed the head of Justice who stood in the grave he speed. Her burning mass swooped across the clearing. She didn't stop drifting. In fact she moved with greater between time and into the present.

The long skirt of Leona's gown abruptly changed color, turned orange, caught fire, scorched and shredded. In a second the girl was engulfed in the fire. One moment, she had been invulnerable in limbo, and in the next moment she had traveled out of the channels between time and into the present.

The air had dropped it an inch or two. Then the air in front of her danced and shuddered. The body jerked as though whatever had been supporting it in looked as if she would remain untouched by the holocaust. Slowly Leona passed through the fire, and it and inhuman. In a moment the rest of the body followed. arms came into view, white and untouched, cold-looking a hand materialized in the middle of the flames. The