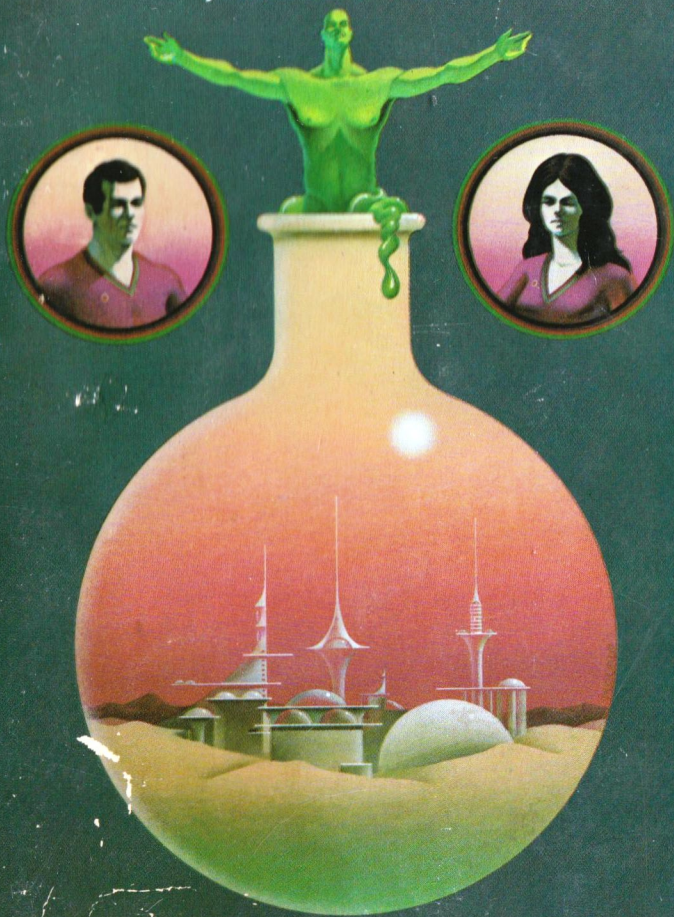


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EARTHSTRINGS

Its prize space-colony had grown
silent—and Earth wanted to know why

JOHN RACKHAM



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ACE BOOKS

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EARTHSTRINGS

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I

The hour-release room was its usual hushed bustle as the master clock on the far wall ticked off the relentless seconds to the noon deadline, and six harried searchers scanned their accumulations of tapes for hot items. Gus Griffiths, up front in the hot seat, needed something to fill in the last three minutes of Solar News . . . every hour, on the hour, news from everywhere . . . and had only ten minutes to find it. The tension was nothing new in that room, but Jeremy had been away from it a long while, and he could feel it. Also, the material on his particular desk was news but dull. He buzzed Griffiths.

"Gus, all I have is drup. How about something from the skin world?"

"Sure, if you can snag something. So far this hour is all yawns. We could use something snappy. What have you?"

"A minute!" Jeremy manipulated buttons, and got a cheekily pretty face on his screen, brash, blue-eyed and bubble-blond. "Hi, Liss. Do you have something worth looking at, for three minutes?"

"Always!" she retorted, catching his feed lines instantly, as he had known she would. "Me, and not just for three minutes, either."

"I'll take a rain check, beautiful. I mean something fit for the masses to gawk at!"

"That's still me, swine. You and your rain checks! When are you ever going to cash one? All right, how about this?" Her impish image went away for a moment and he grinned to himself. He and Lissa Landis had been on this kind of friendly sparring terms ever since he had known her, over some ten years. Whether her candid invitation to have fun with her was more than a gag he didn't know, and didn't want to know, and he suspected she knew that, and was outrageously immodest accordingly.

All in fun. Now came the picture strip she had found, a slim but gorgeous female, in nothing except her skin, but discreetly posed, and conspicuously holding a spray can. Her line, in sugary accents, was that this was the latest in spray cosmetic, not a paint but a metallic suspension, suitably electrified so that it went on and clung intimately . . . she demonstrated by squirting the stuff on various appealing parts of herself . . . and it wouldn't smudge, rub off, wash off, no stains on clothing . . . yet it wiped off instantly with the anti-static cloth supplied with every can . . . and he shook his head at it, wonderingly.

Women! Always convinced they could apply that little extra something, from the outside. No matter how daring, how exhibitionist, how minimal the cover went . . . there had to be that something added, if only a coat of molecules. He cancelled the picture, got Lissa's impudence again.

"Run that again," he said.

"Nice, huh? You should see me in that stuff!"

". . . and I'll split in with Gus. He might just pass it. When did you ever need paint to help out?"

"Compliments yet! Here it comes!"

He buzzed Griffiths again and split the tape so they could both watch. With his sound turned down on the tape he could hear Griffiths murmuring,

"It would take more than a can of paint to make my missus look like that baby. If she turns round . . . it's out!"

Jeremy eased back in his chair with a slight sense of relief. The rush and chatter of the news room was not his regular beat. He had graduated out of that a long time ago, into a special slot all his own, but as he had no special assignment at the moment, he was just helping out. Solar News was that kind of world, where everybody helped out and everybody knew everybody else's business. Jeremy White was a part of that, and yet was not. In his own peculiar way, he managed to keep something of himself apart, as an observer on the sidelines, watching the comedy. The fashion clip ran out. He heard Griffiths declare,

"All right. That does it . . ." and then came the shrill ping-ping they all knew and recognised instantly, and Griffiths emended himself, "... no, hold it. Something on the Mars line."

Jeremy sat forward again, feeling tight, tripping his switch to get it along with everyone else. Mars Centre caught all the news from the far out colonies, sorted it, sent on what was worth a note . . . and, just lately, the news from the colonies had been unrelievedly bad. Dissent, unrest, hardships and minor disasters. Teething troubles, so the official line had it. Here came the shimmering words . . . no pictures . . . STAR STEP MARS. DATELINE TEN HOURS: TWENTYONE DAY: SIX MONTH: TWENTY THIRTY. THE SUB ETHER BEACON SIGNAL FROM STAR COLONY BETA HYDRI HAS NOW BEEN SILENT FORTY HOURS. NO RESPONSE FORTHCOMING TO URGENT HIGH POWER QUERY SIGNALS FROM STAR STEP. TOTAL DISASTER MUST BE ASSUMED. END.

Jeremy watched the laconic words form up again, part of his mind knowing that the three-minute lacuna was certainly filled now, while the rest of his mind filled in the unsaid rest of the message. Although the 'outward-bound' itch had never been his, he knew as much about the star colonies as any good newsman should, and even school children knew about the beacons. Sub-ether transmission were virtually instantaneous over distances vastly greater than any colony had thus far flung itself, but they could only be made in split-second bursts, with enormous power back-up and extremely complex electronics. And then the gadgetry needed a breathing space to normalise itself before the next burst. But maintaining contact with home was deemed important enough to justify the trouble and care. 'The Earthstring' one romantic writer had called it, but ever since that historical first great leap to Centaurus, it had been 'the beacon.' Every colony had one as its most vital bit of equipment, completely self-powered and triple circuited against any possible failure. And

every hour, on the hour, each on its own frequency, each colony beacon screamed its split second burst, packed and loaded with compressed information. Solar News had stolen the slogan and had a vested interest in the colonies, as news; there wasn't one person in the entire building who didn't know, positively, that something very bad must have hit Beta Hydri to silence its scream.

Now comes the field day for the rumourmongers, Jeremy mused, and saw a small red winker flashing him, at the corner of his screen. At his touch there came a picture of a grey-haired, grey-eyebrowed, harrassed old man, a face he knew almost as well as his own. Gavin Cross, the Chief.

"Jerry? Come on up. right away."

Jeremy killed the screen and desk, passed Griffiths on the way out, but had to make do with a gesture, as the copy head was busy intoning his script over the spinning tape pictures. He went on to the elevator and up. Gavin Cross had his office up under the roof, and his home *on* the roof, and he was Solar News, twenty-four hours a day. Jeremy had been in that office many times, and ambled in now with no more than a casual tap on the door, expecting some assignment or other. But then he saw who Cross had for company, and slowed, and sighed.

"Not you again?"

"I'm afraid so, Mr. White." the visitor said, half rising, settling back again. Jeremy knew him as Stephen Morgan, saw him as a small, quiet, deliberately inconspicuous individual, the kind of man to lose himself in a crowd. The rest was surmise. Morgan was somebody big in some organisation referred to only as 'Special Branch.' He could pull strings, big ones, if ever he took an interest in someone suspected of subversive activity. Jeremy didn't like him at all. He had steered clear of politics, and parties, and factions, all his life. But he was a reporter, a man who, by definition, can go almost anywhere, and ask almost any questions. And he was good at it. He had a nose, an instinct . . . a gift for seeing and hearing those things that didn't quite fit right. Gavin Cross knew it,

valued it. And Morgan knew it, and had used Jeremy a time or two before.

"Take a seat, Jerry. I know yours, it's already poured. You ready for a refill, Morgan?"

"I'm all right, thank you." Morgan put a palm over his glass, then sat back and clasped his hands in his lap. "I assume you saw the newsflash from Star Step?"

Beta Hydri? I saw it. Scratch one colony. It had to happen sometime, didn't it?"

"That's the reasonable assumption. And it will be at least six or seven weeks before we will know anything for certain."

"That long?" Jeremy sipped at his glass and stared. "I'm no starman, but surely a fast ship can make it there in what . . . a week?"

"In an ideal world, yes. But the whole colonisation program is under fire at the moment and has been for some time. Allocations have been cut to the bone. There are powerful financial interests opposed to the whole idea. What will probably happen is that the investigation will be held until a full scale second research expedition can be mounted . . . which could take longer still. It is not an ideal world, Mr. White."

"That I already knew." Jeremy took another sip and asked. "So what has this to do with me?"

"You need a little background." Morgan settled more comfortably. "As I said, there are powerful financial interests opposed to the idea of colonial autonomy, who would rather the colonisation program went slowly, carefully, and that the colonies should remain tied to Earth."

"They have a point. Earth is spending money and materials like a stoned millionaire, just to send people by five hundred at a time out there to settle, and grow up, and become independent. You could call that throwing money away, couldn't you?"

"That is not the official line. The current U.N. Administration policy is that the colonies be established with all reasonable speed and encouraged to become independent

states. But that is not the point. Political opposition is one thing, deliberate sabotage is something else. We have very good reason to believe that deliberate sabotage is going on. It is not easy to establish, even harder to prove, and our information has had to be built up piece by piece, over a long time. But it is good. Convincing. And it applies now to Beta Hydri, the latest and the farthest out."

"You're saying that Beta Hydri has been deliberately wiped out, that high-powered interests here on Earth are responsible. It makes sense. The rich want to stay rich, to keep their markets, and the powerful cling to power. You may be right. But you'll never prove it, and you'll never touch them. People like that are too big. They have cat's paws." He turned to Cross and shrugged. "This isn't my kind of line, Chief. It's a waste of time!"

"There's an angle." Cross grunted. "You'll like it. Kit Carew was on Beta Hydri."

Jeremy sat back, gripping his glass, and tried to fit that bombshell into the picture. If there was any one man who could rightly be called the hero figure of the space age, Kit Carew was that man. Anonymous among the first five hundred who had taken the historic hop to Centaurus, he had taken with him a teletape camera, a reporter's instinct, and the heart of a poet. A year later the cassette FAR CENTAURUS had hit the stands, a teletape of picture and comment that told it as it was, with all the excitement, the tension, the hazards and the glamour. An instant best-seller, it was now a classic of its kind. And Kit Carew had found his immortal niche in history. THE TAMING OF TAU CETI followed. Then EXCITEMENT ON ERIDANI, and a steady stream of similar firsts from the far frontiers as they were being hewed out.

Jeremy had viewed them all, more than once. Carew had the style of a ham, all the clichés of the born hack, and an insufferable brashness, but it was perfect corn for the masses, and superb editing saved his stuff from being offensive. It had been said, and with truth, that Kit

Carew had brought the far stars home to the millions of Earth who would never have the chance to see anything like it with their own eyes. There had been imitators, but there was only one Kit Carew. And now . . .

"You're sure?" he queried Cross. "It's common knowledge that nobody knows who Kit Carew really is, nor even what he looks like. Part of his success, that is. A myth, a legend in his own time. How can you be sure?"

"It is more than a fair assumption." Morgan came in again, quietly. "It has been Carew's pattern, to be on every 'first' and report back. The public at large doesn't know him, because he carefully plays it that way. But we have methods, resources, and time and patience. We know. And he was there. And that is important, to us. Like this. The Beta Hydri beacon has failed. Assumption . . . total loss. Nothing less could do that. If we discard alien monsters, invaders, and intelligences—simply because we have never met any yet—then that gives teeth to our belief in sabotage. A total loss is precisely the kind of disaster to kill the colonial program stone dead for years, to underline the opposition theory of danger, the need for support and protection . . . and all that. In our book we call this faceless group the International Cartell, and we think we know who some of them are, but that is another matter, that doesn't concern you just now. What does is that we have very good reason to believe that Kit Carew is—was—working for them!"

"Come on, now!" Jeremy protested. "That's far out, even for you. Kit Carew is the colonial dream. Why would he knock it?"

"I assume you are familiar with some of his works?"

"All of them. I'm no fan of his, but I have to admit he can tell the tale, but good. He has talent, of a kind."

"Quite so. Talent that serves to conceal. Think, Mr. White. Think of the hair raising thrills, the blood stirring hazards, the endurance and fortitude . . . and the large slices of heavy nostalgia for home, and Earth, and how brave they all are, out there. Will you agree that I give the substance of most of the selling quality? Sentiment

and sensationalism? But you are a reporter, Mr. White. You know how easy it is, what pressure there is, and what a temptation it is, to make things sensational, just that bit larger than life. True? And now, did you ever talk to a colonist?"

"Never had the chance. Precious few of them ever get back here."

"Few ever want to, White. But some do, occasionally. And they talk. Not about risk and hazard, or glory, or excitement. Few of them even know of Kit Carew, the legend. Colonial life just isn't like that. It's rough and ready, rugged, short on a few luxuries perhaps, but tedious for the most part. Just plain hard work and the simple life. All colonial planets are thoroughly vetted, you know, before any expedition is approved."

"Oh well!" Jeremy shrugged. "You couldn't sell *that* to the public. No excitement in it."

"Exactly. And that would be Carew's defence, if we ever tackled him on it. If we could find him. But now we have a situation. We have him on Beta Hydri, and we have Beta Hydri wiped out. Cross?"

"It's just a job, Jerry. The flash about Hydri is out now. We can't go any further, officially, on that, until we know for sure. But we can suspect anything we want. Rumours. And we don't *know* that Kit Carew is dead, either, but we can suspect that, too, and more rumours. And your cover, if you need it, is that you're after material for an obit. Dead men have no privacy, you know that. You're after his friends, his private life, who was he, what did he do for kicks . . . you know what to do. Dig. Take as long as you need, get everything you can. Dammit, you don't need to be told!"

"No personal bias, Mr. White." Morgan managed a thin smile. "Believe me, nothing would please my office more than to be proven wrong on this."

"Bias doesn't come into my job at all." Jeremy rose and grinned at Morgan. "Facts, that's all I care about. And you have more than most, so I'll start with you. Kit Carew is a legend, even a myth, to almost everybody."

But you know who he really is, don't you? I mean, Carew is a pseudonym. Obviously. So, give me something to start on."

"You're very shrewd, Mr. White. Yes, I can give you a small start, not much. You will, of course, begin with your own files. I suggest you look up Christopher Carew Crane. And good hunting!"

Solar News records took up the whole of the vast basement, far below street level, and by the time Jeremy had ridden all the way down there he had his mind in order. Wash out all the hokum, the glamour of the farflung stars, the excitement . . . all that. He was now after Kit Carew the man, the flesh and blood behind the legend. As Cross had said, just a job. Material for an obituary, to be got ready ahead of time, just as it had been done for centuries in the news business. The basement was cool and quiet, but even here one was aware of the steady hum of screen readers. Benny Minelli had been the custodian here when Jeremy had started, as a copy boy, and he didn't look much older now than then.

"Mr. White," he said. "You want prints, or just a read?"

"Just a read. Something you haven't got, but you may have the makings."

"It it's news, or ever was news, we have it right here!"

"All right." Jeremy grinned. "Pull me the index code on Kit Carew!"

Benny's hand went out by reflex, then drew back. "You know there ain't any such person, Mr. White!"

"If there ever was, chances are there isn't any more. You caught the flash from Beta Hydri?"

"You don't say! An obit, huh? Well, all we have here is a list of his publications, and you already know them. And digests and crits. You don't want them, either, I guess."

"All I want is a reader and a cue-in. That one over in the corner'll do me nicely, and an open cue. Thanks."

The precious plastic strip Minelli passed to him would open all the miles of files, but he hoped it wouldn't take

that much. Already his intuition had leaped the gap from Morgan's hint, to the assumption of alliteration. Christopher Carew Crane. And Crane Chemical Company, one of the giants, better known to almost everyone as 'Triple-C.' Surely not *that* Crane, he thought, until he had keyed in the full name, and the machine had shuffled through its circuits and found the answer. And it *was* that Crane. The data came up in white lettering across the dark grey: Alexander Crane, born June 10th, 1958, Old Calendar, son of founder, managing director, majority stock holder . . .

II

Jeremy punched the 'hold' button, stared at the words, pinched his nose, shook his head, and sighed. Right away it looked as if Morgan had a lot of solid foundation under his suspicions. Triple-C was a powerful financial interest, in anybody's terms. He released the button and read on.

. . . majority stockholder Crane Chemical Company, q. v., married April 8th, 1988, Old Calendar, Elizabeth Carew, q.v., son born August 5th, 1990, Old Calendar, Christopher Carew Crane. Daughter born 2001, 10day, 3month, Abigail Crane, q.v., Alexander Crane died, coronary, 2011, 9day, 5 month . . .

Jeremy halted again, turned the pages of his memory. 2011. The very first Centaurus colony, on Alpha Centaurus B, had gone and settled in 2020, a date never to be forgotten in human history. And Kit Carew's bombshell best-seller had come out the following year. The same year that Alexander Crane had died. Coincidence? Maybe. But why was there no q.v. after the son's name? There were side references to Crane Chemicals, to Elizabeth Carew, to Abigail Crane . . . but not to Christopher. Still coincidence? Hardly. It looked as if Morgan had called it. Triple-C was right in there with the colonial program, too. If you ever wanted a specially tailored

molecule for some very special purpose, the chances were good that Triple-C could lay it on for you by the ton lot, in powder, solid, liquid or spray.

But it didn't feel right. If Kit Carew was that easy to find, why had Morgan pulled him in on it. Jeremy cleared the screen, buttoned again for Christopher Carew Crane, and got the same answer. He was the son of Alexander, and that was all, nothing else. Jeremy tried Elizabeth Carew, and drew quite a lot, her parentage, a capsule of her life and interests, her marriage, a mention of her son by name, and her daughter. And her death in 2002, very shortly after the birth of her daughter. And again no q.v. on Christopher. It was close to impossible. If he was indeed Kit Carew he had certainly pulled the hole in after him. Jeremy sat back, shook his head. Nobody could be all that good. Reputedly there had never been a picture, or an eyewitness, any personal encounter, nothing. Which was ridiculous. To get published one had to meet a publisher, to do a deal, a contract, an income, royalties . . . taxes! He considered it carefully, put it away as a desperate hope if nothing else came up. Internal Revenue was no place for amateurs to try and open up.

Publisher. Who published Carew's tape cassettes? Jeremy frowned at his own memory. He couldn't recall ever having seen an imprint on those boxes. More craziness. What publisher would miss the chance to advertise his own imprint? He ran Kit Carew and got a list of titles and critical snippets . . . and no publisher's name! It took on the semblance of a challenge now. He reviewed what he had. What next? There was only Abigail Crane, who had to be Kit Carew's sister, if the theory meant anything. He ran her.

Abigail Crane, born 2001, 10day, 3month . . . and he blinked at it. Another coincidence, a pleasant one this time. She was exactly one year his junior, to the day! . . . daughter and legal heir to Alexander Crane, q.v., majority stockholder in Crame Chemical Company, q.v., director, semi-active position as consultant on new developments

and trends, especially in synthetic fibres and cosmetic materials, single, personal interests, naturism, physical efficiency, mental development and intelligence, no known attachments, residence C.C.C. building . . . and that was it. No available picture material. He shook his head at it. A spinster with no attachments, a major stockholder and technical consultant, a health-and-efficiency crank, and she lived in the Triple-C building. Not an exciting prospect. Still, it was just a job, and she was just a woman, and women he could handle.

He cancelled the reader, gave the cue back to Minelli, and rode the elevator up to street level, considering strategy. Lunch time was sometimes a good time to catch people off guard. Would she be a vegetarian? The huge Triple-C building was only four blocks away, time for him to think his way into a health-crank valence while he walked. The Triple-C entrance lobby hit his inner atmosphere hard. It was a whole world away from the Solar News hive of unpretentious scurry and bustle, and nothing less cranky could be imagined. This was all space and calm, faraway music and deep pile carpets, pastel colours and immaculate people who moved rather than strode, who conveyed the impression of having been newly pressed out of skin-colored plastic that very morning. He felt acutely aware of his everybody-wears-one body-suit in common grey knit, and just shoes, and a cloak that was just a cloak, as he approached the goddess in the totally transparent reception booth.

She was ultraperfect from the pale gold aureole of her coiffure all the exuberant see-through way down to her tinted toenails, with every proud curve in between managing to convey her ardent desire to help, simultaneously with her sincere regret that Miss Crane never saw anyone without an appointment and never, never gave anything to the news. Jeremy smiled at her. A kind fate had given him a fine healthy frame and the type of homely good looks that modulated easily into a little-boy-lost air with only just a bit of help from his experience. He turned it on now.

"But I don't want her to give me anything," he said. "I have something *for* her, some personal and private news that she ought to know."

The goddess was thrown. He had lifted her needle right out of its groove and she had no proper responses any more. "Well, I don't know!" she said, and her eye-catching agitation made it obviously true. "I really don't know. You'll have to speak to her personal secretary."

"You're very kind," he told her, completing her destruction. "Show me how to do that, would you?"

"Take the elevator, of course! Seven-oh-seven. Mr. White!" she leaned forward, straining her cobwebs perilously. "How do you come to know something personal and private about Miss Crane? I never knew she had anything like that!"

"Ah, but she does. And now you know, but you won't tell anyone, will you? A secret, between us?"

"Oh yes!" she swore, and he was across the carpet and into the elevator before she could adjust herself to keeping a secret she didn't know. Seven-oh-seven was at the far end of a long quiet corridor, in a different atmosphere altogether, and the personal private secretary was something different too. She was hunched over a typeprinter, at a busy desk, with one ear cocked to the sound of voices from an intercom, and she looked middle-aged and highly competent. She raised a hushing finger as he approached.

"I don't know your face," she said, positively.

"Jeremy White, Solar News, to talk to Miss Crane."

"Without an appointment?" She flicked a glance at the clock. "You're wasting your time, Mr. White. And mine."

"What about hers? This is something private and personal, something she had a right to know." He said it firmly, but his ear was tuned to that voice coming from her intercom. Somebody was laying down the law, not shrill, or bitter, but low and deep-throated, as controlled as a viola yet as scathing as acid. The secretary challenged him.

"You can tell me, and I'll see."

"Would you want her to skin *you* like that? And she would, if you did it wrong, wouldn't she? Just like that."

He had scored a point. Her face gave it away. That voice was almost singing now, fascinating his ear.

"... fact remains, that on your own authority—or shall I say whim?—you chose to reverse a direct order of mine, and without so much as mentioning it to me, before or after. Had it not been for a chance encounter with Dr. Airey, I might never have known that his research funds had been stopped. This is not the first time, Mr. Bowles, that you have resisted my wishes, and that, of course, is your privilege, but only by the proper means. Disagree with me by all means, but not behind my back. I suspect this is not the first time you have interfered. If it happens again I will personally see to it that your employment with us is terminated. Permanently. You may leave!"

"*You* would like some of that?" the secretary demanded, and he smiled.

"I don't peel that easy. Try me. It'll only take a minute."

While she was still making up her mind, the far door hissed open and Bowles emerged. He was tall, lean, impeccable and strained, and Jeremy knew there was a million of him going to lunch this very minute, all over the city. He went away without so much as a glance, and the intercom buzzed.

"Rachel, that's all before lunch, surely?"

"All on the list, Miss Abigail, but there's someone here now"

"Without an appointment? Can he hear me?"

"I can hear you, Miss Crane. I'm Jeremy White, Solar News."

"I never talk to the press, Mr. White."

"Press is an old-fashioned word, and you're already talking to me. But I'm a reporter. I have something to report. To you. Personally. It's about Chris." He waited an agonising moment, as long as he dared, then added. "It will only take a minute."

The silence hung on, became an ache. Then that viola

voice came again. "Mr. White, you sound astute, and discreet. You say one minute. I'll be generous and give you five. Send him in, Rachel."

The secretary looked up in amazement. "You must really know where the body is buried, mister!"

"May you never know how accurate that is," he murmured and made for the door, letting it hiss automatically open before him, and halting just inside while it closed, taking a moment to weigh up the setting. He had seen this kind of thing before. Space and quiet. Discreet lighting. Illuminated holograms on the walls. Thick pile carpet, and the desk right at the far end of the room, to make a man walk and be impressed. Stiffly uncomfortable chairs for him, a big uncluttered glass-topped desk for her. He ambled on, watching her, what he could see of her. From the chin down she was in blue-black, a robe with a cowl, but the cowl thrown back now to reveal a mass of glossy hair that just wasn't ginger, in his opinion. Beneath that hair, a broad brow and placid mouth that looked free of artifice and probably was, but her eyes in secret behind tinted lenses. She made no move at all.

He added the clues swiftly. The long walk, the utter stillness, the screened eyes, all spelled out 'challenge,' with just a hint of contempt, in memory of her voice. That's fine, he thought, I don't mind. Let's see how good you really are, shall we? and he halted, easily, when he was three feet short of her desk. And waited. In a while she moved, to put her hands flat on the desk. Good hands, shapely and strong, unadorned, and quite still.

"Take a seat, Mr. White," she said, and that voice was even more of a delight now, untouched by electronics.

"It might not be worth it, for what I have to say, Miss Crane. In case you haven't yet caught the newsflash, the Beta Hydri beacon has gone silent. The assumption has to be that some disaster has struck the colony, not confirmed until there's been an expedition to check, which could take a while, six or seven weeks, maybe more. That's the official news. Strictly off the record, but a safe

assumption, on confidential information, Kit Carew was there, and must now be presumed dead. That won't be released until we know for sure. Meanwhile, I have the job of researching him, gathering any facts I can about him, his private life. Kit Carew, the man. Obituary. It seemed logical and obvious to start here, with you. And that's it. One minute, as I said. The rest is up to you."

Only her mouth and chin moved. "I've not met the press before, Mr. White. I'm sorry if that is an old-fashioned word. Old habits die slowly. Are you typical?"

"I wouldn't know. I do my job in whichever way my experience indicates. I imagine others do the same."

"Yes. A neat, evasive answer to a rather fatuous question. Tell me, if I ordered you to leave right now, would you go?"

"It's your office, Miss Crane. And your life. You can make your own decisions, and accept the consequences."

"I can. I do. And I accept your warning. One more question. Are you an admirer, what they call a 'fan,' of my brother's?"

"I have viewed all Kit Carew's publications, some more than once. In my opinion some of them are very good, others not so. Of their class. Good reporting. Competent, maybe a little more than that. I don't know a thing about your brother."

"Ah!" She moved now, to take her hands away and fold them in her lap. "I think you had better sit, Mr. White. This could take some time."

"It's still your office," he selected a chair to the left of her desk and sat, "and your lunch hour."

"And yours too, of course."

"My life doesn't run in grooves like that."

"I can believe that. Give me just one good reason why I would want to tell you anything about my brother."

He shrugged gently. "There's a reason. It's good by me. Whether it will be good in your estimation is something else again. It goes like this. If Kit Carew is dead, and that's a safe assumption until we know different, he will be big news. A dead man has no private life, par-

ticularly not a famous dead man. There'll be features, articles, possibly a whole tape book or two about him. There already is a vast public ready to lap it all up. That public would rather be thrilled than told the truth, would rather have sin, smut and sex than simple straightforward sanity, will believe anything they think wicked, but will yawn over simple facts. Kit Carew was a glamour figure, a legend . . . and a total enigma . . . so the field is wide open to any and every kind of speculation, the spicier the better!"

"You malign your own profession?"

"Not really. It's a job, like any other, like yours. Supply and demand is the god, but there are many sects. My part is just to gather the facts, all that I can, and label them. Also to collect rumours, and label those too. Somebody else will whip it all together into a package, done up with purple ribbon and flavours. I can't help it. I can't stop it. Nor can you."

"But I can refuse to talk to you, and you haven't yet given me reason why I should."

"Because it will all come out anyway. There is no such thing as an invisible man, you know. It will all slop out, plus the fact that you didn't want it to. That you had something to hide."

She stirred, got up, came around her desk to hitch her hip on the corner nearest him and peer down, still calm.

"That sounds like a subtle threat."

"Not by me. That's not it. I was just spelling it out for you. I don't dig dirt. I'm not twisting your arm. Others will do that." He made motions as if to rise, and she slipped from her perch. He stood and was about two inches taller than she, making her about five ten. "Don't put it on me," he told her. "It's your bad luck having that kind of brother. Nothing anybody can do about it now, except the one thing that makes my reason good. Only one thing can kill rumours and scandal, and that's the truth, the whole truth . . . in there first! But you can reject that, if you like."

This close she had a peculiar quality, the ability to

keep absolutely still. Her cloak fell to within inches of the floor, made a complete mystery of the body within, and it didn't move at all. He thought he had never met anyone quite so difficult to read. She gave no cues whatever. Quite willing to admit defeat, he moved to step past and leave, and she said,

"Wait. A moment, please." Her left hand emerged from the folds, to reach and remove her glasses. Her eyes were as grey as a summer morning, and as clear, with just a lurking hint of sparkle. "It was a good reason, Mr. White. Like you, I prefer fact to fantasy, truth to tattle-tale, however unpalatable. Will you take lunch with me?"

"I can always come back later."

"No no! We can talk and eat. I would prefer it. I so seldom have the chance to converse with one so careful over words and meanings. I like good conversation. Please accept!"

"All right, thank you. It's still your office."

"Oh, but we can't eat here! A moment." She circled her desk again, and she seemed to glide as if skimming over the floor. She touched a switch. "Rachel? Go to lunch. I am not to be disturbed under any circumstances, until further orders." She flipped the switch without waiting for reply, then beckoned him. "This way, Mr. White." 'This way' led into a tiny private elevator with barely room for the two of them as it purred skyward. This close there should have been something to smell, but he couldn't detect anything. It seemed that her skin was all her own too. He was impressed more than he cared to admit. But she *was* human, as he learned when the elevator stopped and the doors slid open. She stepped out and turned, watching his face, and there was mischief in her eyes, as well there might be.

He stood and looked out on a semitropical garden, complete with tamed stream, a leaping fountain, riotous flowering bushes and plants, drooping trees and the quick rush of hot, moist, scented air. The sky, that deep blue vault up there, had to be fake, but the rest was

either real, or a perfect illusion. She smiled and her face lit up like a girl's.

"Admit it!" she challenged. "You're surprised."

"And impressed. I never expected anything like this. It's the real thing, too. Real grass, and flowers."

"Yes indeed." She moved ahead of him now, along a tiled path. "All real and growing, every bit of it."

"It's wonderful. One might be miles away from city smells and concrete, in some tropical paradise. I envy you this." He said it quite sincerely, and she turned to look at him sharply.

"Over there, out of sight," she said, "is a perfectly modern and airconditioned penthouse apartment. We can have lunch there. Or we can have it here, in the open, under the trees, by the fountain, on the grass. It is entirely up to you. It's no extra bother either way."

"I'd prefer here," he said, "only it's so warm! I'm not dressed for it. I wish I was. The idea of a picnic appeals to me enormously."

"There's a simple and obvious remedy to that, Mr. White!"

III

Her meaning was instantly obvious to him, but for the sake of appearances he pretended to be a shade slow, and asked,

"You mean, peel off? Undress?"

"The air is natural body heat, or rather, just a little below. Quite comfortable. Deliberately designed that way. There is a little ultraviolet, not enough to burn you. And no insects or pests. Well, Mr. White?"

So she was back on the challenge again. He kept his grin on the inside.

"It sounds too good to be true, so I'll take it, before you reverse the spell, or whatever it is. Here?"

"By the fountain." She pointed and went ahead, twirl-

ing out of her dark cloak to reveal herself in a simple, brief slip of white jersey. "There's a button here, see, to summon my mechanical." She was deliberately not looking at him, being tactful, and he was grateful for that, as there is no dignified way to scramble out of a body-suit, especially if it happens to be a little clammy with sudden perspiration. He tossed his cloak beside hers on the grass, watched her skin out of her slip with a lithe wriggle, and smiled. If this was her challenge, she was well equipped for it. Nudity was nothing strange or eccentric, not nowadays, but nudity without so much as a hint of self-conscious exhibitionism was so rare that he appreciated it all the more now. She had a natural grace and self-sufficiency that made her seem utterly at home and natural as she settled on the grass and waved him down by her side.

"The explanation is probably superfluous," she said, "but I so seldom get the chance to make it that you'll have to bear with me. You see, I'm one of those people—you probably call them cranks—who believe that humanity has moved too far away from its origins."

"That doctrine is a fallacy," he corrected, "if you pursue it logically to its conclusion." She sat up and stared at him, her face all alive now and vibrant, her whole form somehow vitalised and dynamic.

"A fallacy? Strong words!"

"Not really." He included the tropical garden with a generous arm. "This is a fair approximation of the primitive unspoiled life you are suggesting is our natural heritage. And here we are, naked and unashamed as the Book has it, and it doesn't matter, now, whether you accept the Garden of Eden idea or the evolutionary theory of Darwin, that's a trivial matter. We began in some such way as this, right?"

"Yes. You are arguing my case!"

"No, I'm not. Miss Crane, we are human. And we are human simply because we moved away from this. The moving away is the whole point. I'll admit it is very pleasant to be able to drop back, consciously and de-

liberately, like this, but it *is* pleasant simply because we are conscious of the other picture, because we *are* human, with all that it entails. If we had never moved away from this idyllic kind of existence . . . if it really was all that idyllic . . . the whole human story would never have been written!"

"Would that have been such a terrible loss? Is it such a wonderful story, looking back?"

"I can't answer that question."

"Of course you can't!" she pounced in glee. "People don't ask that kind of question. And they should!"

"No they shouldn't!" he retorted, grinning at her. "I can't answer it, nor can anyone else, because it isn't a question."

"I don't follow you. Expound!"

"By analogy, if I can." He stared at her, wondering at her flame, at the dancing light in her eyes. She did well to keep them covered, they gave away the surging life in her mind. "Childhood," he said, groping for words. "The childhood of humanity. This. Bernard Shaw once said 'Youth is such a wonderful thing, what a shame to waste it on children!' You know?"

"Good Heavens!" Her eyes were wide in wonder. "I haven't encountered Shaw. I'd always believed him to be full of stuffy ideas about social reform, out of the dated past. Wasted on children. You know . . . that's very profound. And it's true! It takes a mature mind to appreciate simple things. You're very clever, aren't you?"

"Not me," he disowned with a grin. "I stand on the shoulders of giants, as Isaac Newton said. Childhood is a wonderful thing. Sometimes, anyway. You were a child once. Suppose I ask you, why did you grow up? Why didn't you stay the way you were? Why did you have to go and spoil it? You see? It's not a question. It's no use asking would it be better not to grow up, to ask is it worth it? We don't have a choice. Humanity never had a choice. Growing up and away from our origins was one of those things we had to do. It just happened. Whether or not it was worth it . . . doesn't arise. That's the way it

is. But there is this to it. . . .”

“Yes?”

“I’ll go all the way with you in saying that we owe it to ourselves to be responsible for *how* we grow up. I mean . . .” he grinned at her again, “it may be a shame that *you* had to grow up, but the result has been well worth it. In your case. That’s not always true. Some—perhaps most—people grow up ugly. And that’s wrong, if you like. Humanity didn’t have to grow up ugly.”

She drew away from him now, only an inch or so, but a veil seemed to come down over her eyes, and there was a suspicion of colour in her cheeks. He sensed he was on uncertain ground and wondered at it, then he heard a low and quiet purring and here came a mechanical servitor on its cushioned treads, patiently following the tiled path. She turned over and came up on her knees to arrest it.

“What would you like?” she asked. “Unless it’s something really outré, you can have whatever you fancy.”

“What about you?” he wondered. “Are you a vegetarian?”

“Hah!” She put back her head and shook with laughter, so spontaneously that he had to laugh with her. It altered completely the atmosphere between them, as if she had finally discarded her on-guard challenging role. “I’m not a fool!” she giggled, when she could speak again. “See? I have teeth like a cat. I’m carnivore. More accurately, omnivore. Vegetarian? Oh dear!”

“You see?” he said. “I’m not so clever. I can say stupid things!”

“Don’t spoil it. I think,” and she was suddenly serious, “that we are two of a kind, you and I. Don’t ask me what I mean, just yet. I need time. And food. I’m going to have a steak, with onions and mushrooms and green peas, and french fries. And apple pie and cream!” She slanted a mischievous grin at him, a different kind of challenge now.

“Make it two,” he said. “I don’t believe you can eat all that, not the shape you’re in.”

"We shall see!" She set the instructions and sent the mechanical on its way, then let herself fall flat back on the grass. "This is fun! I've not laughed like that in years! Seriously, though," she came up on an elbow to stare at him again, "you're probably right, about humanity having to grow up, and make a foul mess of things, to pollute more and more of the environment and despoil, and waste . . . and then, ironically, to finally learn how to put it all back the way it was. We have ruined the face of our Earth, but we now have the skill and the technology to repair it. Every bit of this, the soil humus, the plants, grass, shrubs, everything, was grown right here, on the spot, and is maintained and kept, by chemistry and technology. I'm just a little proud of it. Someday, in fact, I may sum it all up in a manual and put it on the market. A how-to, for anyone who wants to do the same. I expect my fellow directors will oppose it, of course, even if it does promote our own products."

"They'd probably be right," he said. "Back to nature would suit some, a few, but not many. Not like this. A few people go out to the colonies because they fancy nature in the raw, but most people prefer their wilderness with modern conveniences."

"You're a cynic. You tear down all my dreams!"

"Not deliberately!" he denied. "But I suppose I am a cynic." It was the first time he had ever admitted such a thing out loud to someone else. This woman had her own magic to marvel at, unlike any other he had met. She seemed totally unselfconscious, totally natural, and had a needle-sharp mind. Not a beauty, somehow. She lacked that fire that would transform her into real radiance. Intuition told him what it was. "You're a cynic too, surely?"

"I try not to be, but life makes it very difficult." She surveyed her garden, brought her attention back to him and smiled. "This is fun. This is the first time I've ever had a guest here."

"First? Surely you entertain people sometimes. As business?"

"Not often. I play only a small part in Triple-C. And

when I do have guests they pass through this bit hurriedly and go on to the sun lounge that I told you of, over there. It's a pleasant room with a picture window, and it overlooks another part of the garden." She paused and sighed. "They come out of the elevator. They stop and look around, and say something conventional, and then they start looking for the furniture, for walls, for somewhere civilised. Defences. But you didn't react that way. So here you are. And you look comfortable."

"I feel at home," he said, and it was true. "The Garden of Eden, but with modern conveniences."

"Exactly. That's what I meant when I said putting things back as they were. The pleasant way. The way we would like it to be. When the poet said 'Nearer to God in a garden than anywhere else on earth' that's what he meant. A garden isn't a wilderness."

"What about Omar?" he asked. "This sorry scheme of things. Would we not shatter it to bits and then remould it nearer to the heart's desire?"

"I'm not too fond of Omar. His ideas are good, but he's just a bit too fond of the everlasting grape. Drink. Alcohol. Not that I'm against it in toto, but there are other things in life besides being permanently tipsy."

Jeremy grinned. "He probably needed the anaesthetic of it. Life was nasty, brutal and short in those days. We've stretched it a little, but it's still pretty foul at times. Too many fools about."

She went quite still for a moment, and he wondered if he'd said the wrong thing. Then she glowed, and fire came to her eyes. "You feel that too, that hopeless helpless itch to get them by the scruff of the neck, and shake, and rub their silly noses in the so obvious things they seem to miss?"

"I still get that occasionally, but not often. I've had to learn to stand on the sidelines and just watch. And wonder. And accept the fact that I can't change the way the world is. In my job I get to see more of it than most people. It could get depressing if I let it, so I *have* to stand off."

The mechanical came purring back now and they were busy for a while unloading the hot covers and spreading the low table between them on the grass. He became more and more fascinated with her every movement. She moved like a cat, with equal grace. Fine spray from the fountain hung on one side of her hair like microscopic diamonds and put a sheen on her left shoulder and breast. She seemed as happy as a small child playing house, as she set out knives and forks and plates and squatted opposite him to begin. She ate quickly, precisely, with no wasted movements.

"I'd always thought," she said, "that I was odd, somehow different from other people, possibly some kind of mutant—hah!—because I've always had that feeling, too, of being somehow off to one side, watching. Not really part of the scene. It's refreshing to meet someone else who feels the same. I think that's what I meant when I said we were two of a kind. But it can be a terrifying feeling, to be utterly alone."

"Alone? In your position?"

"Wealth and power, you mean?" She smiled wryly and stretched out her hand impulsively to grip his wrist. "Money can't buy everything. That old adage is still true, even now. Although my father never quite believed it. Nor Chris. You know, I find it hard to accept that he is dead. Or indeed to feel very much about him at all, one way or the other. No reaction. He was much more of a stranger to me than you are, in many ways."

"But he was your brother, and you knew him. That's a lot more than everyone else did. At least, almost everyone else."

She went still again. That trick of hers intrigued him immensely. It was as if she had switched everything off except her mind, for a moment. Then she stirred, sighed, withdrew her grip on his wrist.

"Yes, I knew him," she said, and picked up the last morsel with her fork, tossed her plate into the receptacle, and sat back, clasping her hands behind her head. "I knew him. I never understood him. I'm sure there are

others who knew him far better than I did, who *could* understand him. He was always a stranger to me, as a person."

Jeremy finished eating, discarded his plate, and she stirred, rose to help him return the damage to the mechanical. Then she stretched herself out flat on the grass again, cushioning her head on her hands, and he came to squat by her, looking down at her face.

"Of course," she said, "when I was small he was my big brother, and inevitably a kind of hero figure. He came to my parents late in their lives. The first-born son. Their pride and joy. Triple-C was just then beginning to grow into something huge. It was almost all my father's life. He named his son Christopher Carew deliberately, seizing the coincidence of my mother's maiden name, and single-mindedly certain that Chris would follow in his footsteps and be a big man in the company. I suppose many fathers have the same kind of dream. And ambition. I doubt if many can have been so shockingly disappointed, though.

"I remember it quite vividly, even when I was tiny. Realising that Chris was a liar, a cheat, an arrant coward, an idler . . . all the wrong things. I didn't know why. There was no understanding. I just knew, that he lied, stole things, broke things, idled and dodged, and all the tricks . . . he just was amoral . . . he *used* people, quite unscrupulously."

"That's a far cry from the image of Kit Carew. He must have changed as he grew up and matured."

"That is really the crux of the matter," she came up on an elbow to look at him, "and it makes your point. That I would rather the world knew the truth about Chris than a mess of scandalous surmise and infamous gossip. Spice and sin and intrigue, versus the truth. You were quite wrong. The truth is much more unpalatable than anything any gossip writer could invent. Chris never changed at all. He was always a cheat, a liar, a coward; but he learned to be glib, and charming and facile, able and willing to dupe and hoodwink and mesmerize people

into doing what he wanted. As I said, he was utterly without scruples. He *used* people! Are you shocked?"

Jeremy wondered what was going on inside her head, behind those great grey eyes so close to his now. She was difficult to read. In a way, her total nakedness was a far better screen than any amount of clothing could be. He had to be honest.

"Shook would be a better word," he said quietly. "You said all that as if you meant it. You look as if you meant it. The truth as you see it. But it doesn't square with the Kit Carew I know from his works, that the public knows. So there's something cockeyed somewhere. Something doesn't add up."

"It must be difficult for you. Please understand, it isn't exactly easy for me. It never was. I've said, he was my big brother, my hero. Boys can do things that girls can't. Envy. All that. But take another viewpoint. My father. Chris was the light of his life. He never wanted any more offspring after Chris. I happened along simply because my mother wanted me. *She* saw through Chris almost from the start, and she felt responsible, somehow. She died when I was just a baby, but I will always believe she knew, and blamed herself. I know there were rows between my parents over Chris. I managed to unearth some of them, later. Heartbreak for her. My father's heartbreak took longer, took almost twenty years. Twenty years of hushing up one impossible scandal after another, of inventing excuses, buying off mistakes, turning a blind eye, deluding himself. I suppose a man is allowed to be something of a fool over his own son. My father was a hard man in many ways. A driving, ambitious man, a stern man. But a just man. If he valued one quality above others, it was integrity. And, in the end, it was that quality which broke the spell Chris had on him.

"Father drew a line. I was there and heard the ultimatum. He threw Chris out. 'Out' he said, 'and stay out of my life until, by your own work, sweat, talent, effort, anything . . . whatever you have, if you have anything at all . . . until you have achieved something worthwhile,

something to show, something good and honest! And that was that. I'll never forget it!"

Animation stirred her now, showed in her small gestures, the fire in her eyes, the quick rise and fall of her breast.

"A black moment, for you."

"That is exactly the word. A black moment. I was nine years old. The only two men in my life, the only two adults in fact, were fighting with each other. My world was a shambles. But I learned something from it that I have never forgotten. You see, I knew what a rogue and swine Chris was, but it didn't mean anything, because he could always charm his way out of things. And that was good, to me. Until father blew up. That completely changed the picture. It showed me that complete self-honesty was worth more than any amount of anything else, more than any suffering, or charm. The outburst hurt my father terribly. In the long run, in fact, it killed him. But it was worthwhile. He could deceive himself just so far. It had to stop somewhere."

"I know that one." Jeremy agreed quietly. "You have to draw a line somewhere, and stick to it, or you're nothing from then on."

"Yes. You would understand. Chris didn't. He had been getting away with it for so long, you see. He went, of course. And the two of them never met again. Father died before Chris came back."

IV

"That's life." Jeremy shook his head regretfully. "He went away, he did what he had to do, he came back . . . and it was too late!"

"Not like that," she denied. "You're a romantic, under your cynicism. It wasn't like that at all. We know now—we didn't know then—that Chris went with the First Centaurus Colony. Only one person knew about that,

other than Chris himself. I didn't know. Father never knew. He died in May, twenty-eleven, a month before that first cassette came out and swamped the stands. I didn't even know then. I don't view tapes. I prefer books. Father was dead. He had made a will," her voice trembled a little, as if the player had struck a bad string, "leaving everything to me, nothing at all to Chris. You may think that unkind. I didn't. I still don't. I was bitter. I had been fond of my father. I respected and admired him. Chris helped to kill him. I tried not to look at it that way, but one cannot ignore facts altogether. And then Chris came here."

She went still again, not breathing nor moving a muscle, like a perfect statue. Jeremy tried to imagine it, and failed. She went on, very quietly now, that wonderful voice a low thrum in her throat.

"It was a shocking scene. I would have been willing to do some kind of a deal with him. I was ten years old. I knew my legal position, because I had checked it, but I was willing to meet him part of the way. I had decided that much earlier. But he came in like a wounded lion, raging and indignant. 'I've done my part!' he said, and kept saying it, waving the cassette box at me. 'I've done it. Nine months of hell and sweat and danger, and I've brought it all back, here. An eyewitness account, something nobody ever did before. I'm famous! Why the hell did he have to die?' It was an awful moment, as if he was accusing father of having died simply to get out of having to admit that he was wrong. To dodge an apology. And Chris was drunk, of course. And savage. I've said, I tried my best to do a deal, to offer him a chance with the business, if he wanted to work at it, do his bit along with the rest. It was an impossible situation for both of us, me a child trying to turn the screws on a grown man. And he sneered at me. 'The hell with you, you and the business! Me a slave to a machine and a bank-roll, a desk squatter? Me? I'm Kit Carew! You can take your business . . .' I will not repeat his actual words. I don't think I need to."

"That's all right. But, you know, he had a point. He certainly made it for himself. That tape was a smash hit right from the first day. Fame and fortune—and he made it himself."

"That's what I thought," she reached and took hold of his wrist again, holding it, her eyes appealing to him. "I thought he had reformed. In a queer way, I felt proud of him. But I do have intelligence, and I refuse to insult it. I found it a little hard to believe the leopard could change his spots quite so dramatically. I tried to make enquiries. And then he removed the need. He came back here. It was only a few weeks later. He had obviously been enjoying the full fruits of his fame. He was rolling drunk and with a woman in tow who was as stewed as he was, barely able to walk, and she passed out completely as soon as they arrived. Happily he did have the wit to arrive by the back entrance, a private way. He was bursting to talk to someone. To brag. And it all came out, all the rotten little details. A publisher—an old friend of my father's—had subsidised his trip in the first place, had suggested he get away to the colonies and try to make good. Do all publishers think in clichés? I suppose they must. Anyway, he also provided the equipment. And the original hint. Get some picture material if you can. Anything, so long as it's authentic from Centaurus. It will be news, and saleable. You know? And Chris—I keep telling you—was a charmer. He charmed other people into showing him how to take good shots . . . even into taking risks to get him good material . . . and then he just collected the whole mess and brought it back home. He even swindled his way back home, but he wouldn't tell me how."

"Come on, now!" Jeremy objected gently. "I've *seen* that tape. It is no mess, no casual hodge-podge. It's a bit crude in spots, and it's hokum in others, but it's first class stuff!"

"First class editing!" she corrected, and it rang a bell. He had said the same thing to Morgan. "The publisher did that part. And took most of the earnings. Quite a bit

of the rest went on hush money and bribes to those who had really done the work—debts that Chris had run up. Believe me!” she gripped his wrist tight now, leaning close to him. “I can see him now, sitting there, giggling over it, spilling the whole nastiness of it all over me, gloating at his cleverness. I told you, he hadn’t changed a bit. The great, the famous, the legendary Kit Carew, is a fake. A tissue of lies. Will that make a good headline?”

Jeremy took time to look at it, his eyes full of her nearness but his mind full of doubt. Shorn of frills, allowing for her natural exaggeration and involvement, it worked out at a slightly nastier than usual case of mere poaching. Any reporter could quote similar cases, perhaps not so gross, but similar in principle. It made Kit Carew out a rogue and liar . . . but not yet a saboteur or a subverter. Would such a man hate his father, and his father’s business enough to—risk his neck and reputation to *save* its dividends? There were a host of questions he wanted to ask and didn’t dare, because she *was* Triple-C. She owned it, controlled it financially, and no matter how candidly appealing and defenceless she might appear, right now, he didn’t dare forget that. So he temporised.

“I don’t know about headlines,” he admitted. “That’s not for me. I’m very grateful to you for the confidence, the inside story. It will have to be checked out as far as possible, of course, but that is just routine. The final decisions on what to do with it will be made by my Chief, and that is routine, too. But I can say this, on my behalf and I can pledge Solar News on it, because it is that kind of business: that nothing you’ve told me will be released in any form until you’ve had the chance to see and approve. That’s the kind of boss I work for.”

She gave his wrist a final squeeze and took her hand away, leaned on it and rose to her feet smoothly. “All very business-like and ethical,” she approved. “I appreciate it. You’ve earned a drink. I want one too. I haven’t talked so much to anyone in years. What will it be? Nothing too exotic, I hope? I have a fair cellar, but nothing extravagant.”

"For me," he looked up at her grinning, "you dial one of sherry, one of whisky, two of lime, and shake."

"It sounds intriguing. I'll join you." She went to the mechanical, to dial, and he was all at once aware of her as a woman, a highly attractive woman at that. It disturbed him in a way he had thought no longer possible. A cynic. A natural born bystander at the comedy of life. Not involved. Except once, in a moment of weakness and sentiment. Ten years ago he had met and married a beautiful girl. Less than a year later she was on her way to Delta Pavonis with a rugged colonist who had managed to put stars in her eyes where Jeremy had looked for brains in her head, and found none. One mistake. In his book a man was allowed one mistake, but he was condemned as a fool if he made the same mistake twice. And yet this woman was getting to him without trying, possibly *because* she wasn't trying. She came back with his drink and settled companionably on the grass beside him, shoulder to shoulder, and unwittingly broke right into his train of thought.

"Tell me something about yourself, Jeremy White, reporter."

"That's about all there is," he evaded. "One who stands on the sidelines watching the comedy."

"Not a tragedy?"

"Only if you get involved, and you can't study and report on people if you get involved with them."

"That sounds like a kind of defence."

"I'd prefer to call it caution. Like keeping out of harm's way? I prefer to get involved in ideas. At least *they* don't turn on you, or get whimsical, or start demanding things."

"I like you!" she said, without affection. "You say all the things I think but have never crystallised into words. Don't you ever feel the need to share your ideas with someone else? I mean, when you get a wonderful new thing, just an idea or a new way of looking at something, and you itch all over inside with excitement, and you long to tell somebody?"

"I know," he said, and smiled, and she rubbed her shoulder against his impulsively. "But where do you find people like that? Most people are either completely wrapped up in themselves, or in somebody else . . . or what somebody else will think of them, or can do for them. Or *to* them."

"I know! I run into it all the time. Triple-C is really very well organised and efficiently run by competent people. There's virtually not a thing I can do . . . except sometimes I spot an important or promising new idea. And I push it. And I do mean push! Only last year, for instance, one of our researchers turned up something, a new plycol ether that had a fantastically destructive effect on almost any kind of paint or protective covering. Just a curiosity. But I pushed the idea that it might become a useful paint stripper. Doesn't that sound obvious? Yet it was violently resisted by the department that already manufactures a paint stripper. And now one of our competitors is marketing a commercial brand of the same stuff!"

"That can be frustrating. I feel like that when I look at some of the slush we put out in lieu of real news. There was an item only this noon, about cosmetics. . . ." He went on to tell her about the aborted three minute slice of allure, and she listened intently.

"Metallure! It's one of ours. And it's silly!"

"To you, maybe. You don't need it!"

"I don't mean that!" She shrugged aside the compliment without even noticing it. "The idea is wrong. Look, just before you came, I had to speak rather severely to one of our executive staff, Gordon Bowles, of our Cosmetic Division, on this very subject. Three months ago Dr. Airey, a researcher in that division, came to me with something he'd found, something quite new in cosmetic colouring. I authorised him to go ahead. Bowles cancelled it off his own bat, simply because it was something so new he couldn't understand it. Silly man!"

"Can there be anything all that new in cosmetics, after five thousand years or so?"

"Oh yes, indeed. Look, "she stretched out her arm for him, "look at it. Really look, I mean. Skin is amazing stuff, you know. It's all one stuff, no joins anywhere, and yet it is different all over the body. Here," she used her other hand and finger to point to her palm, "and here," her arm, "and here, and here," touching her breast and then her face, "the texture is quite different in each place. Identifiably different, under a microscope. But it has at least one common characteristic. It's almost transparent! It has no colour at all. The colour is on the inside! That's why no cosmetic that you pat on, spray on, rub on or in any other way apply from the outside, can look completely natural. No matter how skillfully it is done, it must look artificial, in the final analysis."

"I hadn't realised that before. So?"

"Airey has something quite new, a suspension that penetrates the outer layer and sets the pigment from the inside. At the moment it is slightly toxic and may have side effects. Those will have to be investigated, of course. And it's expensive, just now. But those are minor matters. It's a new idea and worth pursuing. It could be a great success!"

"I hope you don't mind," Jeremy shook his head regretfully, "but you could be wrong on this. Especially you, as it happens."

"Come on, now!" she deliberately mocked his pet expression, making him grin. "Don't tell me *you* can't see a new ideal!"

"It's not that. I can see it all right. And I'm willing to assume it can be made to work. But it won't work, if you'll excuse the Chinese. Not with women. You don't use make up, do you? At all."

"No." Without looking at her, he knew she had gone 'still' again.

"You don't need to." He turned his head to look, and her eyes were wide, yet somehow veiled and neutral. "You're completely sure of yourself. You don't need help, or reassurance. And that's rare." She was quite still, and it rattled him a little, but he ploughed on. "I don't claim

to be any expert on female psychology, but I do watch. And think. And it seems obvious to me that ever since humans first started taking notice of each other, women have felt that itch to add a little something. To make alterations. To stick something on, somewhere. To change. To put their own little bit into it. The finishing touch. Even if it's just a coat of paint, so long as they've done something. Whether it's defense, or just the feeling that they've contributed something, I don't know. Why do they always want to add frills, or a string of beads, or a bow? I don't know. But that's the pattern. And you'll try to sell them something that is so completely natural it won't show. To look as if they hadn't done a thing!"

"Your reasons are always very good ones." Her voice was away down in her throat again. "Why didn't I see that?"

"Because you don't need it. You're not trying to prove anything."

Colour came soft and warm to her cheeks and spread down . . . and he had never realised a person could blush all over. She looked away, and her voice was unsteady as she said, "What a shame. And I thought it was a good idea."

"It still is. If you sell it right. You'll have to be devious."

"How?" her eyes swung back on him, afire now. "Devious?"

"Well, I recall a campaign, a long while back, that sold a hair tint preparation. It claimed to colour hair so naturally that no one could tell the difference. It sounds like the same thing. But whoever ran the advertising side knew a thing or two. Mystery and intrigue. The line was run as a question. Does she? And the hint was . . . no-one really knows, except her and her hairdresser. That's devious. It suggests, but doesn't tell."

She went still again, like a purring dynamo that looks as if it is motionless. Then she smiled and put her hand on his knee.

"I like you. That's wonderful! Just right. You see what I mean about sharing ideas? Oh . . . I could use a man

like you. . . ." She caught up the rest of the sentence but it was too late. It was precisely the wrong thing to say, and she knew it as fast as he did. He eased her hand away from his knee and stood up.

"You're welcome to the idea, any time. I'm glad to have been of some small help, and I hope it works out fine. Also I have to thank you for your hospitality, and all the confidential information. As I've said, none of it will be used until you've passed it. There's only a couple of items more, and I'll be on my way. You spoke of the publisher who gave your brother his original start. Friend of the family, you said. Would you give me his name?"

She came up to her feet much more gracefully than he had done, and stood facing him, quite close, but there was no mistaking the gulf between them. She had reverted to being cool and controlled, challenging. Neutral.

"His name? Barnaby Green. I don't know him at all well, but I can call him if you like, and pave the way for you?"

"Thank you, but I can manage that on my own, I think. I've heard of Barnaby Green." He was thankful for the long practice that enabled him to keep a straight face. There was no need for her to say she didn't know much about Mr. Green. She wouldn't. He filed that away. "The other thing. You mentioned a woman. One assumes your brother had women friends. It would be more surprising if he didn't. Do you know any names?"

"Only one. Chris was promiscuous, of course, but there is one woman who had a greater hold on him than the rest. So far as I know, that is. You will have heard of her. Frances Allen."

Jeremy made no attempt to mask his reaction. "Nothing but the best for Kit Carew. We have a saying, in our profession, Miss Crane. If the Allen family don't own it, it ain't worth much. Well, thanks again, Miss Crane, it has been a pleasure." He stooped and took up his discarded clothing and began putting it on, feeling acutely awkward, and glad when it was tugged and settled into neatness. She went ahead of him to the elevator bower.

"It's been a pleasure for me too, Mr. White." She offered her hand. "You must promise me that if and when there is material to be presented for my approval you'll bring it yourself, in person."

"I can't promise that. It will be up to my boss. But I'll certainly mention it to him. Goodbye!"

The elevator was cool by contrast, but that wasn't all the reason for his shivers, which persisted even when he was outside on the street in the June sunshine. Under strain, he headed for a bar he knew, and sought a far booth where he could be alone with his miseries. Fool! he told himself. Fool! She is Abigail Cranel! So all right, you have at last met a woman who has a brain as well as a body, who thinks the way you do, who 'likes' you . . . so? She fires people who disagree with her, remember? She uses people like you . . . and probably throws them away when empty. For sanity's sake get your brain back in gear, and get on with the job!

It wasn't easy, but the shivers went away eventually, and he made for a visor booth, got Gavin Cross on the screen. "Bits and pieces, Chief. Not a lot, yet. Seems our hero wasn't a hero after all, not to his sister anyway. The financial side of that could stand a look, but that's more your line than mine, when you have a moment."

"Already doing it, Jerry. What's your next move?"

"One Barnaby Green, publisher. Can you maybe open a door for me?"

"You don't say! Old Bawdy-Books himself! Well I will be everlastingly damned, *there's* a story! All right, I'll call him, ask him to treat you with professional courtesy. Call in here on your way back, I may have something more for you. Luck!"

V

It took an auto cab half an hour to get Jeremy to the headquarters of Titus Tapes, a publishing house that was the despair of the law and the legitimate publishers alike. The one thing that everyone agreed on was that Barnaby Green was smart. Jeremy had never met him, didn't even think about him as he rode the cab. His mind was full of another old man, Gavin Cross. Jeremy had never known a father, only a frail and wraithlike mother in his early years and then the care of a well-meaning but limited aunt and uncle of Quaker disposition. So Gavin Cross was the nearest thing he had to a father image. A rough, tough hard-driving man who nevertheless carried a great deal of solid commonsense and had the rare knack of being very understanding when it was called for. A grand old man.

But not a father, Jeremy mused. I couldn't go to him and say look I've fallen in love with a millionairess, and what the hell ought I to do? Because I know what he would say. Don't be a bloody fool. And I already know that much!

Titus Tapes had their home in a building that needed more than a coat of paint to make it respectable, that wasn't one tenth the size of Triple-C, and had an air of not caring about it much. The lobby needed sweeping, the 'reception desk' was a machine on which almost half the lights were dead. Not the latest model, at all, but there was enough life in it for Jeremy to identify the call number for Barnaby Green's office. The taped response had fuzzy overtones, probably needed rewiring.

"Barnaby Green's sanctum. State your name, clearly." Jeremy stated his name clearly, and waited, thankful that he had asked Cross to pave the way for him. He would have had a hard time charming his way past this cerberus.

"Jeremy White. You are expected. Take elevator C."

He had to dodge, quick and nimble, past two high-piled hand trucks full of packaged cassettes, to make the elevator before its doors slammed shut again. It, too, needed sweeping. Its walls, like the walls of the lobby, were decorated with glowing hologram mobiles depicting scenes from various 'classics,' and this was part of Barnaby Green's 'smartness,' because they *were* classics, and therefore untouchable by the law. Here was a scene from Petronius' *Satyricon*, and that was Ovid, at a guess. And Rabelais, too. Not that Titus Tapes did nothing but classics, that was only part of it. The whole realm of previously printed books was available for conversion into visual terms, but where an older generation had preserved the fine difference between words and visual imagery, Titus Tapes blithely went ahead and depicted it all, to the letter, just as the author had written it. And there was a vast public for the stuff, a public that could safely pretend it wasn't 'just pornography,' but real stories. Historical, you know! Literature, even!

The tenth floor, when he reached it, was a galloping clatter of activity, where two sweating men were steadily unloading a moving belt of brown-paper cartons of cassettes, hundred-packs with punch-card tags, and feeding them into the maw of a noisy machine that sorted them and placed them in a set of shelves along one wall. The girl in front of those shelves was too skinny to have been wearing a body stocking quite so sheer, or so black, but she was too busy to care. Jeremy watched her for a moment in awe. To one side of her desk was a screen that carried what looked like lists of names and addresses. On the other side was a mechanical labeller-dispatcher. She would peer at a reading, spin round and grab from the appropriate shelf one or more cartons, dump them on the metal plate in the middle of her desk, hit the switches of the labeller and the reader together, and an arm would emerge and slam down, imprinting the address on the cartons, split seconds before the metal plate slid aside to drop the batch into some nether region . . . and then

she would do it all over again with another lot. And again. And then she caught sight of him and halted, straightening up, instinctively inflating her meagre curves for his benefit.

"Hi!" she greeted. "You must have an in to get this far, but I don't know whether Greeney can see you or not. Hang on!" She spun around and leaned on a buzzer, revolved again to ask, "What's your name, handsome."

"No, that's not it," he said. "I'm White."

"So am I, underneath. So?"

"Jeremy White, Solar News."

"Oh!" She rotated again, told an intercom. It said,

"Shoot him in, Grace." She shrugged and aimed an arm at a door.

"I get off at five," she volunteered, not very hopefully.

"I don't deserve anyone like you," he told her, "I'm too old!" then went across to the door and on in. Green's office was a fair match for the activity outside, but the man himself was different, deliberately so. He wore an old-fashioned shirt, open at the neck, and baggy trousers, and he looked gross and overhung. An unlit cigar dragged down one side of his mouth and there were rimless glasses perched on his bulbous nose. A character. It took Jeremy a moment to identify it as the typical 'editor' of a thousand old pictorial dramas. At this moment Green was in two-way conversation with someone on the other end of an intercom, while studying the dance of light and movement on a small desk reader.

". . . coming up . . . the other bit I was talking about . . . there, that's the sequence. It's all wrong, Jud. Look, I'm telling you, right? Sure it's a wedding, I know that, but this is the dark ages, remember? Pre-nineteen-fifty. They didn't have nude weddings then. I *know* the author doesn't say one way or the other, but we have to stay in period. You'll have to shoot it again. No, not beads and flowers, dammit! Get some pants on that boy, and something white on her. Sure a see-through mini-dress . . . just so long as she has something on. It's only ninety seconds, dammit, and then cut straight in to the bedroom

bit. That part is fine. All right?" He switched off the intercom and reader together and looked up in resignation. "They won't do their homework, you know. Bush fires, floods, earthquakes, runaway volcanoes, plane crashes—those we can do straight from stock, no problems. But when it comes to close-in detail and dialogue . . . like that shot now. A wedding. The best man taking the ring out of his pocket. The bride looking pretty in her veil . . . the groom awkward and uncomfortable in his best gear . . . that you can feel. It lends something. Contrast with what follows, get me? And that clown has to go and make it full nudes all through. I've told them. I've told them a thousand times! Contrast! Change of pace! Cut and cut, move the action, don't linger, don't give too much, let the viewer itch for more . . . it's an art. And you need the authentic touch. No rubbish."

"I suppose so." Jeremy murmured. "But they didn't have see-through fashions in nineteen-fifty, as I recall."

"That's different," Green waved it aside. "You have to put in a little sex, you know, here and there, just to keep them warmed up. Let's see now. White? Ah yes, old Cross vided me about you. Reporter for Solar News. And what have I done lately that's news with you, eh?"

"I think you're going to be surprised, Mr. Green." Jeremy moved a torn carton from a chair and sat. "You are sitting right on top of the hottest news story in a decade, and you don't know it yet. Incidentally, you also own one of this century's hottest literary properties, and yet you don't advertise it. Curious, that is. Tell me, Mr. Green, why don't you put your imprint on the Kit Carew tapes?"

The change in Green was all the more remarkable in that it didn't involve any particular feature, but seemed to be a general all-over hardening effect, as if the fat had congealed into armour. He moved one pudgy hand to flip a switch on his desk, then frowned at Jeremy.

"This," he said, "is my inspiration switch. When I close it, nobody interrupts me on any account. Very useful. Like now. You're a slick article, Mr. White. Old Cross

wouldn't go to bat for any run-of-the-mill reporter, I know that much, and you've just proved it. Very slick. It took me a lot of time, and trouble, and hard work, to break the trail between me, the Titus Press, and Kit Carew. And you don't get away from here until you tell me how you got on to it. If there's a hole in that cover, I want to know it."

"Why is the secrecy so important to you?"

"Be your age! Kit Carew's stuff is good. It's quality! Why, FAR CENTAURUS is a classic! And I know what they all say about me and the Titus Press. Bawdy Barnaby. Filth! Pornography! Cheap smut! I know. It sells, but since when has that been a criterion? And it's all authentic, too. You should read some of those old books, sometime. Have you seen our Decameron? Or Chaucer? Or Hemingway, even? All accurate down to the last detail. And we are doing a full series of the ancient Greek legends . . . but what does that matter, if people want to call it dirt, they will. So I have the last laugh, don't I? When Kit gives me the all-clear, I'll break that story myself . . . and laugh. And gloat over all those pat-on-the-back criticisms. Old Barnaby Green, smut peddler . . . who published Kit Carew! If that's your story, White, forget it. You can't touch it. You do, and I'll sue!"

"On what grounds?" Jeremy was genuinely curious now.

"Plenty." Green chewed on his cigar. "Injury to property, loss of income, breach of privacy, professional malice and misconduct . . . you want some more?"

"All right." Jeremy grinned. "You got me. But you can relax. That is not the story. And I did not crack your secret defences, at all. I had it straight from the top, from Miss Abigail Crane herself."

"I'm not sure but what that's worse. How did you get on to her? What's this all about, White? How come Kit Carew is important to Solar News, all at once?"

"Don't you ever view the news?"

"Maybe once, of an evening, when I get home. If I have time. As a rule I have better things to do. What?"

It took Jeremy a while to adjust to the fact that there were normal people who *didn't* watch new flashes. Then he had to smooth out his face.

"It's not good, Mr. Green. Maybe a shock for you. I won't wrap it up any more. As of noon today the Beta Hydri beacon had been silent for some forty hours. That's official. You know what that means. We have to assume the colony is a total loss, a disaster of some kind. We won't know the grisly details for a long while, maybe months, but that's good enough. *Un* official, but pretty well certain . . . Kit Carew was there. Right?"

There was no need for Green to confirm it, his face did it for him. He removed the cigar from a mouth suddenly unsteady and laid it aside.

"You're not sure, of course."

"Not one hundred percent, no. But you know it as well as I do. If the beacon's gone, that's it!"

Green sagged back in his chair, took off his archaic glasses, and he looked an old, old man. "It's a blow. A hell of a blow. I liked the young devil, you know. Oh, he had his faults, but I liked him. And he saw this coming. Saw it a mile off. Sat right there where you are now, and told me. 'One of these fine days' he said, 'my luck will run out. I'll be the pitcher that went once too often to the well, you'll see!' Stoned out of his mind at the time, mark you, but you can't blame him for that, can you? Work hard, play hard, that was Kit. God knows he didn't get a lot of time among the bright lights. He never gave a damn about tomorrow, you know. Not a damn! He was a man! They don't make them like that any more!"

Jeremy gagged a little but kept it private. He had to ask his questions, although he suspected that all he was going to get would be further shopworn cliches and rose-coloured reminiscences.

"That's what I want," he said, trying to sound eager. "What kind of a man was he? What did he do for relaxation? Where did he hide himself? Who were his friends? You know the kind of stuff!"

"Obituary, eh? A few well-chosen paragraphs about

Kit Carew, the man who brought the stars to Earth! You'll never do it, White. Not your way. It will take a book. And, by God, what a book that will be!" Green was on his feet now, pacing, belly wabbling over his belt. "The legend of Kit Carew! The whole thing. I'll do the voice-over myself. I can just see it! And it will be mine, White, all mine! I gave him his start, set him on the road. I was his only friend when he had nothing, a homeless outcast, when old Alec threw him out on the street. Did you know that? Did that ice-maiden sister of his tell you that, eh?"

"Ice-Maiden?"

"That was his name for her. And what she is, and always was. Just like her father. A hard and high-minded pair, there. Never had any time for ordinary people. Not that Kit was ordinary, far from it. But he was human. Old Alex would have tied him to a desk, but he wouldn't have it. He wanted to live. I tried to tell the old fool that he was crushing the life out of a high-spirited boy, and got cursed for my pains. You know, old Alex Crane and me were boys together, grew up together. He inherited the Crane business, I inherited this. He made a success of his, I made a success of mine. Even Stephen, you might think. But no, he always had to look down his nose at me like a poor relation. Tolerated. Watched like a hawk in case I perverted his offspring. Hah!"

Green stamped back to his desk and sat, making his chair squeak in protest. "I watched that lad grow up. He was wild, White. I don't deny it. But since when has that been a crime? He had talent. Genius! You expect a lad like that to be different, don't you? But it wasn't anything old Alex could understand. All he knew was work and slave, grind and slog. Kit had personality . . . charm . . . he could get along with anybody. Except his father, who had only one god, money, and one discipline, hard work. Towards the end he even tried to forbid Kit my company. He used to come along and watch the tapes being shot occasionally, and the old fool tried to forbid him. So

what could be more natural than he should turn to me in his hour of need?"

Jeremy swallowed hard and turned his smile up a bit. "You say you gave him his start, Mr. Green?"

"I paid his fare and provided him with the telecamera gear. I told him what to do, how to work it. You know they wouldn't give ship-room to real newsmen, remember that? There are times when I think this damned administration doesn't *want* people to know what it's like out there!"

"I've viewed all those tapes. For an amateur he certainly did a fine job, very professional!"

"Ah! Now you are talking about me." Green replaced his glasses and straightened up a little. "Not that I want to steal any thunder from Kit, not at all. But credit where it's due. I did all the editing on that first tape, and on every one since. Kit didn't have a clue about style, contrast, sequences, structure, pace, nothing like that. He could talk. The voice-over is all his, and good. But the assembly and cutting is mine! He'd just dump it on me, you know, a sackfull of cassettes, any old how, and let me do the hard work of making a thing out of it. I called him on it, just once." Green chuckled loudly and violently.

"I think it was DEADLY DRACONIS. 'Damn your eyes!' I said, 'you might at least arrange the stuff into some kind of order!' He just laughed. Sitting right there, he was. 'You're an editor,' he said. 'Bloody well edit, then, or I'll take it somewhere else!' And he had me, you know. He was famous by then. He could have sold the stuff to any one of a hundred other houses, and he knew it. Oh, he had spirit, all right. A man, I tell you. A legend, now." A faraway look came into his eyes and a slow shake to his head as he murmured it like a lullaby "The Legend of Kit Carew!" But then that old face sharpened and grew cunning again.

"See here, White, a fair crack of the whip from you. No dirt. No character assassinations. I don't know what you

got from *her*, but I'll lay it was nothing good. She loathed his guts!"

"Do you *know* that?"

"You bet I do. Damn your eyes, didn't she talk her old man into rewriting his will in her favour as soon as Kit was out of the way? You ought to see that will, sometime, White. It's in the public domain. So, you mind what I say. Kit Carew dead is property, my property, and that includes his name and reputation."

"Don't wave any club at me, Mr. Green. I just gather facts. It's not for me to say what will be done with them. I gathered already that Kit led a gay life when he was on Earth. You've confirmed that. I'm not in any position to moralise. A man's private life is his own affair . . . until he's dead . . . and famous. That makes it public. Facts of life. I don't write those rules, Mr. Green, the public does. Maybe if I was as rich and famous as Kit Carew, I'd want to whoop it up a little, too!"

"Rich?" Green stared. "You're putting me on! When does a writer get rich? Or a publisher, come to that?"

"Oh come, now. Author of nine, no, ten, bestselling tapes? And you have to have machinery to get all the orders out? I should be so poor!"

"Who said poor? But not rich, sonny. Do I look like a rich man? A lot of credit passes through my hands, sure, but very little of it sticks. Cassettes cost money. So do artistes, studio space, rentals, overheads. I won't starve, but I work for what I get, believe me."

"But Kit Carew's stuff was ready-made!"

"Right. And he got fifty percent of the deal, too. You know what a regular author gets? Ten! So he did a lot better out of it than ever I did. But rich he never was. He spent it faster than he could get it. I told you, he didn't care about tomorrow. Rich? You make me smile, White. I will bet you that Miss Abigail's secretary makes more in a year than Kit ever made out of a tape. Rich?"

"But he could afford to live it up, when he was home."

"So could you, if you had all the money in the world

wrapped up in a luscious little package called Fanny Allen, hanging on your elbow!"

VII

"Now you've really shook me!" Jeremy admitted, and it was true. This was an aspect of being famous that had never occurred to him. "You mean she was keeping him?"

"And glad to do it, White. I told you, he was a man! Not like some of the droops you see in society. Not that I know a lot about that angle of it, except the occasional hint he would drop now and then. But didn't you ever wonder how it was that nobody ever saw Kit, or knew him? No publicity? No headline stories, no pictures, nothing? Didn't you ever wonder?"

"Frankly, I would love to know how he was able to get back from the colonies every time, never mind anything else."

"And if I knew, I wouldn't tell you. The emigration office would give their ears to know that trick. And he knew it. Used to laugh over it. I never knew when he was going to turn up, you know. That's what makes it so hard to believe, even now that he's really dead. Suppose he isn't? Just suppose he has finally decided to drop out of the game? You'd never know. Nor would I. The little lady who is keeping his bed warm for him can buy that kind of thing easily. When you talk about rich people, those are the ones you should mean. People who can buy silence. Anonymity. Invisibility, even. Oh yes, you hear about them now and then, but only when it suits them. Any other time, nothing! For instance, Fanny Allen has been keeping Kit, to my knowledge, ever since he came back and struck it big, the first time. And he was famous, and still is. But you never knew that until you were told. You never saw it in any press release, or newflash. That's money, White. That's what it can buy."

"It could even buy Kit Carew!"

"That's no way to look at it, sonny. She admired him, loved him . . . and she'll be broken up when she finds out. But you'll never know. You'll never get anywhere near *her*. Money can buy that, too."

"You may be right." Jeremy readied himself to depart, feeling he had squeezed the lemon dry. "You wouldn't happen to know, offhand, whether Kit had any political slants, anything like that?"

"Forget it. Kit never had any time for that stuff, and neither have I. If I had my way I'd shoot the pack of them. You mind what I say, now, about fair deals. You tell old Cross, too."

"I certainly will," Jeremy rose, "but I don't think he will pay a lot of attention to me. A dead hero is in the public domain, and you know it. You talk about a fair deal, how about this? If you turn up anything else in the way of facts, and pass it along, we might just manage to include a puff about your forthcoming tape on the Legend of Kit Carew. That's one side. But if you leak one word about Kit Carew being dead before the official release . . . well now . . . we could paint a quite different picture, couldn't we? You say the Allen family can buy silence. How would it be if they bought you, and threw you away! Think about it."

The brisk afternoon breeze on the street helped him feel a little less unclean. He decided to walk a while, in order to arrange his mind. There was very little left of the Carew legend now. Miss Abigail had called it pretty close, allowing for a certain amount of bias. Brother Chris had been a bad actor all the way down. A con man par excellence. A legend. But still not a criminal, not a saboteur. Not yet. It came as a small wrench to Jeremy to realise just how thin his evidence was for condemning Chris. Morgan's word, nothing more than that. Government and official reports on the colonies were sparse and unremittingly dull. So Chris had whooped it up a little, made it sensational? Was that a crime? And anyway, old Barnaby Green had contributed quite a fair percentage of that. Jeremy cast his mind back over those cassettes

again, remembering them in a new light. HOW THEY WON OPHIUCHI, DAWN ON DELTA PAVONIS, and the others, and now that he had been tipped off, he could see the showmanship touches of Barnaby Green showing through. But it was still a far cry from that to Kit Carew, saboteur and tool of the International Cartel.

He decided to call in at another bar he knew, dialled his favourite dust killer, and then used the visor booth to talk to Cross.

"You were right about Green," he said. "Very dirty. And pathetic, too. I feel I need a shower and change."

"Anything on the subject?"

"Nothing for us, yet. Nothing good, either. Our boy was all fake, all the way through. Maybe he shot some of the stuff himself, but it looks as if he conned most of it out of other people, and left it all to Barnaby to cut and arrange, and juice up."

"That figures, all right. It was always in my mind there was an old and expert hand behind those masterpieces. All right, have your shower, and come on in. I think I have something for you."

"I'll be there. About half an hour. Oh, Chief, just an idea . . . it might make an article for somebody . . . what life is *really* like in the colonies, huh? It would run very nicely alongside the big news, when it breaks."

"I'm the editor around here, Jerry. Don't get too smart!"

"That will be the day! One more thing—there's a will that ought to be interesting. According to Green . . ."

"Will you quit trying to outsmart me?" Cross roared. "I'm already on to that. Come on in and I'll *show* it to you!"

Jeremy saved his grin until the connection broke, then he let it spread. Any time anybody tries to outsmart the Old Man, he thought, it won't be me! and took himself to the establishment next door, where a bored young man took his credit card and ran it through his machine.

"All the lot?"

"Just a suit and boots, this time. The cloak is good

for a while longer, I reckon. Same size and colour as last time."

"Check. Door Four. Don't forget to empty your pockets into the bin."

He must have said it a hundred times a day. Jeremy thought he would hate to be in a job like that, although, he supposed, a man could always dream on the job. There was nothing else to do except push a button once in a while. He went in, cleared his pockets and dropped his small personal things into the travelling bin, along with his cloak. Everything else he took off and dropped into the discard and moved on, to be steamed and warmed, sprayed and soaped, massaged and depilated, manicured, pedicured, dried in hot air, and ionized for one minute. There was a fresh and new one piece all-over ready for him, plus boots, and his cloak and personal stuff. He felt almost as good as new.

Technically, Cross's private apartment, at the top of the Solar News building, could have been called a penthouse, but the Old Man had been known to snort at the term. All he ever called it was 'my place,' and Jeremy, who knew it well, could appreciate the innuendo. There were four large rooms all giving on to a central square, reminiscent of a Roman villa. Doors had been removed, the doorways enlarged into arches, and the whole was in that astonishing state of utter confusion only a bachelor can achieve and still know where everything is.

"You know," Jeremy surveyed this comfortable chaos with a critical eye, "I was in a penthouse only today, and anything less like this you just couldn't believe! It was an honest for real garden, semitropical, like a back lot in Paradise. You ought to be ashamed of this!"

"I like it." Cross growled, standing arrogantly to greet him in faded, once gaudy pyjamas. "What the hell would I do with a garden? Real flowers, and stuff growing, and you have to keep after it all the time, or hire a small army of staff! I have other things to do!"

"No army, Chief. All done with chemicals. Abigail Crane showed me, told me all about it. How to put the

world back the way it was before we humans started messing it up. I'll put the word in for you, if you ever fancy the notion. She's going to write a book about it. A how-to book. All done with Crane Chemicals, of course."

Cross frowned at him, and he had the eyebrows to make it an impressive expression. "Miss Abigail Crane has the reputation of being a recluse, hard to get on with, a mystery woman. You ought to be made to tell how you ever got in to see her in the first place. Garden! You have to watch those back-to-nature types, all healthy exercise, fresh air and vegetables. Here, you need to take a look at this before you go running around in her garden again." He stalked over to an overstuffed couch and sat, switching on a reader that stood handy on a stand. "This is the will you mentioned. It's a dinger, believe me."

Jeremy perched on the couch arm where he could see the unrolling lines of legal jargon. "You've had a chance to study it," he said. "Give me the gist. It would take me all day to untangle that stuff!"

"All right, what it amounts to is: Alex Crane owned sixty-five percent of the stock. He left it all to her. The lot. On condition she stays single. If she marries, at any time, she loses the whole shoot."

"That's great!" Jeremy gasped. "That's just great! Could he *do* that?"

"He did it, didn't he? This thing is watertight legal."

"So who gets the millions, if and when she does get married?"

"Well now, that's a little complex, but what it adds up to, the stock reverts to brother Chris, but in trust only. He draws an income from it but can't touch the capital. *That* goes to his legal issue."

"Funny the way a man's mind will work, isn't it? Old Crane hated his son, but was willing to provide for his grandchildren. Not Chris's wife?"

"Nothing at all. Legal issue only. Same applies if she dies, of course. Chris gets the trust, the issue get the cash."

"I see. But we are in a position to presume him dead."

What happens now? She gets to keep it?"

"No sir. She has it until she marries. If Chris is dead and without legal issue, the bulk passes to the remaining stockholders on a pro-rata basis. And that's about it, apart from a technicality or two."

Jeremy thought it over and was more appalled the more he thought about it. "I hope nobody ever leaves me a legacy like that. Hell, that is almost a license to kill!"

"Calm down, Jerry. People don't do things like that!"

"You say! Look, if Chris is dead—and once that's known—she is standing between a few well-heeled people and an awful lot of money and power!"

"So? That's true of thousands of well-off people with heirs. You are suffering from an overdose of imagination, son. All we can draw from this is that old Crane hated his son, and you had already dug that up from Miss Abigail. Thing is, does it give us any kind of lead?"

Jeremy rose, walked away to a battered old chair and settled into it disgustedly. "It's a mess whichever way you look at it. I like a case I can draw a line around, a single line, a domain to work in. This business runs off in all directions as fast as you look at any part of it. Take Kit Carew. If he's really dead you get one set of possibilities; if he isn't you have a whole different set. Or here's another bite. If he was a saboteur, deliberately working for the International Cartel, then he was doing Triple-C a hell of a favour, trade-wise, and why would he do that? And if his tapes were deliberately slanted, as Morgan claims, then how come Barnaby Green was doing all the real work on them? But if Kit Carew wasn't bent, was just a strike-lucky amateur with help from Barnaby Green, then how come he was in Fanny Allen's pocket? And so on and so on."

"Frances Allen?"

"The way I hear, from two sources, Kit Carew was living with her, and off her bounty. Being kept for the sake of his glamour, if you can believe that. Look, Chief, we are never going to get the data Morgan wants here on Earth. Kit Carew was too smart to leave any trail

here. The only sane way to find out anything is to do some hard digging on the colonies themselves, where Kit Carew actually did his thing. That's a job for Morgan's boys, not for a reporter."

"Do you think he doesn't know that? What d'you think he's been doing all this time? But it's not that easy to get a spare man in there, and out again. Colony expeditions are measured out to the last ounce of manpower and materials that are to go out there, and stay there. It all costs money, tax money, and the program is watched all the time."

"And yet Kit Carew managed to go, and come back. And not just once, but nine or ten times over!"

"Sure!" Cross agreed. "And you just think about that awhile. There are quite a few officials who would dearly love to know how that trick is being worked. But I can tell you this much: it is costing money. Big money. And Carew had to come back here to collect, or arrange, or something. And he met people. You mentioned one, just now."

"Fanny Allen, you mean? I suppose you could call her a lead, but if it's one to follow you'll have to put somebody else on it. I'm not in that class."

Cross did his frown again. "What do you know about her?"

"What most other people know, I suppose. Youngest of the Allen clan, the darling daughter who can do no wrong. The Allens between them own more than a part of just about everything. Alaskan oil, Australian nickel, coal, oil, minerals, transport—you name it, they own it. And, of course, I know all the other stuff that doesn't get released, that she is nympho, dipso, a hophead, that she uses up men by the six-pack, and all the rest of it. She probably kept Kit Carew like a pet, to amuse her. Or maybe she was the go-between for him and the Cartel, who knows? All I'm saying is that she is away out of my class. I'm not that kind of a reporter."

"You're a fool." Cross said it flatly, without any intent to offend. "There are times when I just don't understand

you at all. Why do you suppose you are sitting there right now? Why do I always pick you when I want something special? Why does Morgan always suggest you when he wants something for this organisation?"

"I didn't know that last bit." Jeremy frowned for himself now. "I don't know any of those answers, Chief. I'm nothing special. I don't do visuals. I have no patter-line, no special knowledge. I've often wondered, myself, why you seem to think I'm something extra. Not that I'm arguing you out of anything, don't think that. On the contrary, if you think I'm all that good, how about a raise at the end of the month?"

"Ask me again at the end of the month and I'll let you know. But for the record, possibly it is just as well you don't know how you do it, on the old principle of the goose and the aureate eggs . . . but somehow people just take to you and talk to you. They confide in you. Even Morgan. When he comes here he talks *at* me, he talks *to* you. I don't know what it is, and I don't propose to say any more about it, except that I will gamble Frances Allen will break down and unburden to you just like anyone else. The trick is going to be getting you into contact with her."

"That's what I really mean about not being in the same class, Chief. In any other respect she's just blood and bones and a hangover, same as anybody else." Jeremy said it glibly but Cross had hit him a little, had made him think back to the garden, and Miss Crane. Some kind of empathy? And it had worked on her, but only to the extent she had designs on his capacities, could *use* him. He recoiled from that line of thought and watched as Cross used his visor.

"Pecket? Who's that featherbrained blonde who does our society and rag-trade slush? Landis . . . that's her. Switch me through to her. Jerry, come over here and sit in."

Jeremy perched himself on the couch arm again, wondering what was in the offing this time. He saw the

bubbling grin materialise and straighten itself out hastily as Miss Landis said,

"Mrs. Cross. You wanted something?"

"Your expert services, for Mr. White here."

"Hah?" Jeremy thought he had never seen blank astonishment so graphically portrayed. He strangled his grin and spoke up, quickly.

"I think what Mr. Cross means is he wants information from you about Miss Frances Allen. For me."

"You're a lousy mind reader." Cross growled. "That's not what I want. Look, Miss Landis, you would know where Miss Allen hangs out, what dumps she patronises, where to find her. Right?"

"When she's in town. And she is right now."

"Fine. So now, you and Jerry here will work together on it. Do whatever you have to, whichever way you like, but you are to get him close enough to her to talk to, to find out things."

"D'you want pictures?"

"If you get any they'll be useful, sure. Can you fix it?"

"I can try. He has to do whatever I tell him, mind?"

"That's understood. You're the expert here."

"Come on, now, Chief, I know Miss Landis . . ." Jeremy started to protest, catching the devilish glint in her eye, but he was too late.

"What are you hanging around here for?" Cross growled. "Get down there and start working it out. You heard what she said? Miss Allen is in town right now. No time to waste. Go on!"

"All right." Jeremy shrugged. To the screen he said, "I'll be right down. Don't go away."

"You can bet on that, handsome. I'll be waiting."

VII

Lissa Landis was more than just a pretty face. If that saying hadn't been old long before Jeremy was born he would have had to invent it. She took charge of him

efficiently. She knew exactly where Miss Allen was going to be that evening. As one good reporter to another he didn't ask how she knew but applied himself to her instructions. They attended an all-day tog store that she knew of, one which specialised in the fancier extremes of garb. He resisted the temptation to make a play on words like garbage, and encouraged her to talk about the target for tonight.

"I don't mind you gunning for Fanny Allen," she told him, with a very attractive leer, "because she is miles away out of your reach, and when you bounce back, as you will, you might just have time to notice little me."

"I can't imagine you in any situation where you'd be overlooked," he told her. "Except maybe a blind school. What sort of a freakery is this place you're taking me to?"

"You'll see when we get there. First you have to learn about the gadgets, because they had better work. See, Fan Allen is kinky about the occult. She just loves omens, lucky charms, horoscopes and spooks. And the place we are going is just the spot for that."

A little after eight-thirty that evening found him in the 'spot,' and he had to admit that she was right. Calling itself the Erebus, he had heard of it but had never enjoyed its particular attractions before, and a sharp and shocking glance at the cover charges assured him he never would again. At least not by his own choice. But he also had to admit that it well done. The overall effect was unreal in the extreme.

The tabletop itself, where he sat, was . . . it felt like . . . glass, but self-lit in a peculiar writhing green that seemed like a deep, deep sea. He and the other patrons were waited on by girl attendants (no mechanicals here) of chosen, eye-arresting shape, and clad only in weird-glow blue paint, apart from their eyes, which shone, with some cunning radiance, a catlike yellow . . . and yet they had tails, those girls, long and sinuous and fork-ended. He felt sure there was something wrong with the mythology there.

The tableware, the cups, bowls, platters and other

pieces were all recognisable constructs of bone—skulls and jaws, teeth and knuckles—all startlingly lifelike. The half-seen bats which swooped and shrilled through the gloom every now and then were, he told himself firmly, almost certainly faked. But they looked real enough. The restless lighting made it hard to tell for sure. That light came from everywhere and nowhere, was constantly shifting from blue to green and back, with the odd wash of blood red. The tables were arrayed on the stepped sides of a volcano and the miniscule 'dance floor' in the middle was a sea of shimmering red. Music came from somewhere, appropriately rich in eldritch overtones and tingling rhythm, and the walls all around were one endless hologram of leaping fire.

As an entertainment, he thought, it would have been worth an hour of study. As a place to eat and drink he couldn't recommend it at all. The food was assumed to be edible, possibly even nutritious, but it was served deliberately to simulate spiders and worms, finger and eyeballs . . . there was even blood soup . . . and he shifted his attention back to his companion.

"I see her," Miss Landis murmured. "Take it easy, aim directly across the pit from us but on the next tier down. The girl in silver-cloud hair."

He swivelled sedately and looked and murmured in reply. "That one with the sparklers for a vest?"

"That vest, darling, is a corselet. And the sparklers are emeralds, real ones. Lord only knows what they are worth!"

"So she's rich. I already knew that. Who's the black patch with her?"

"That's Miguel Santana. Playboy and more. Also rich. Rumour has it that he is connected with Negocio-Brazilia, who are reputed to own half of South America, but you know as much about that as I do. Owns his own space yacht, I believe."

"How the hell can you identify him at that range in this murk? I can barely see him from here."

"Simple enough, darling. The patch is for real, not get-up. He wears it all the time."

"How long has he been . . . enjoying her favours?"

"You quaint old-fashioned think! Miguel has been dancing around Fan Allen for years now, off and on. We don't see him all that often. Spends a lot of time away, jaunting around the Solar System in that yacht of his. Anyway, that's enough chat, time we got to work. You want another rundown on the trickery?"

"No, I'll manage. You're going to tune me in now, right?"

"Right. Check your switches. I'll be about five minutes."

She rose and drifted away in the multicoloured gloom, circling and strolling along the ledges. He had no trouble following her. From her waist on down she was wreathed in baggy but filmy pantaloons, but from her slim middle on up she was only spray-on glitter-gold paint, picked out here and there with self-luminous stickers that pretended to be buttons. A scattered handful more of the tiny lights gleamed in her riotous hairdo. He, on her careful advice and assistance, was wearing a satanic headpiece of horns and mask, complete with caprine beard, the rest of him, down to black skin-tight pants, covered in a thick layer of rubbery blue solution. He had felt a conspicuous fool when putting it on, but now, with a chance to see some of the others, he didn't mind so much, and in any case it was all necessary to carry the complex electronics. The master control sat on his wrist pretending to be a watch. Earpieces were built into his head gear, a throat mike into his beard, and the goatlike horns were the most important part of all. Miss Landis had explained it all to him very carefully.

"It's an advanced form of para-mike. We use them a lot. Properly aimed, you can pick out a solitary voice, or the talk of a small group, over any kind of intervening row, up to about fifty yards if necessary. To talk back needs just that little bit extra at the other end. Something metallic as a resonator. And range is highly critical, so watch it."

She had come already prepared to plant something small, a pin or button, on Miss Allen, but the silver-spray hairdo would serve quite well, far better, in fact. He watched until Lissa was over there, directly behind Miss Allen and in a straight line with him. Which was *that* range. He made the switch on his wrist and altered the adjustment until he got a rapid tick-tick. *That* range. He had to come down just a little.

"Got you," he murmured, and the throat mike picked up his murmur, passed it to the twin horns, and beamed it over to her. "I'm shortening in a fraction. Come on back." He turned the setting down delicately and said,

"Kit Carew is dead! Did you know? Kit Carew is dead. What will you do now?" He intoned it, slowly and passionately, knowing that his voice was now resonating around Miss Allen's head, whispering in her ear. He could see it work, saw her head snap up and back, and then twitch from side to side. A flip of the switch brought him her voice.

"... fooling about, Miguel? Something in my glass, damn you? God, it was creepy. Like a ghost whispering in my ear. Of course it wasn't a ghost, you bloody fool. Somebody playing tricks!"

Somewhat disconcerted, Jeremy switched over again, aimed his horns. "Kit Carew is dead," he repeated. "Now you know. He is dead. Dead. Do you want to know how?"

Over went the switch again and he listened intently.

"... again! Some poker keeps telling me Kit is dead" The voice faded and blurred as she leaned forward in urgent colloquy with her table companion. He could catch only the odd word 'no sense,' but the general tone of the male voice was one of amusement, hers getting more and more shrill.

"A trick?" She had leaned back into range now. "Of course it's a trick. Damn you, I know Kit is alive. We both know. And who ever heard of a spirit voice being wrong?"

"Only you can hear me," he told her sonorously. "Only you."

"... right inside my head, I tell you. There it is again! Some trick! Am I coming unscrewed, or what?" Lissa got back to the table and Jeremy hushed her down into her seat with a wave, still listening. "Sure, it's all right for you. You don't hear it."

"Only you. I am permitted to speak only to you. And true. Carew . . . is dead. Your lover . . . is dead. True. Believe me."

He flipped the switch again and muttered. "This is one for the book. She won't have it. She *knows* he isn't dead. We're on to something." He listened again intently.

"A trick, you keep saying. Look, I know when I hear a spirit voice. It's trying to tell me something, but it's got its lines crossed. Kit is alive, we know that. How can he be dead?"

"How?" Jeremy seized his chance. "How is Kit Carew dead? I am not permitted to tell you how. That is forbidden me. But there are those here, all unaware, who can help you. If you so desire."

Lissa giggled, and he glared at her as he reversed the switch, to hear.

"... anything. Whatever, just to get you out of my head. What do I do? Who are you? Can you hear me? What do I do?"

"Shut up and listen, for one thing." Jeremy muttered, before he went over to transmission. And then, "There are two here who carry the secret. Be warned. They do not know of themselves. They are simply my chosen instruments. But they know the secret."

Back came her shrill voice again, impatient now. "All right, all right . . . who? How do I find them, in this push?"

"Find the man who wears the image of the Master, and his golden companion who sees all things. Farewell!" He switched out and sighed. "That should do it. We better start eating. The surprise bit. All set? Hey, get your cameras on, quick!"

"She's getting up," Lissa muttered, hauling a contraption from her bag and struggling into its jewelled straps.

"They'll never let me use this, you know!"

"It's only for identification." Jeremy watched her in fascination. She had already shown him this equipment once. Twin tiny cameras perched on her shoulder blades, secured there by slim straps like braces before and behind, the two front ones opening out to loop about her full breasts and join to a circling band that held everything tight. It needed only for her to inhale and tense her pectoral muscles for the cameras to spin their reels. If ever there was a way to get a man's complete attention *and* take pictures without him noticing it, this was the way. He sighed, and tackled his so-called 'Beetle Biscuits' doggedly. He had been in a few tense situations in his time, but none of them quite like the five or six minutes he had to wait before a gentle finger touched his shoulder and a tenor voice with an affected drawl sounded over the music.

"Mephistopheles, dear old boy, do you mind if we join you?"

It was no effort at all for him to feign surprise as he looked up. He hadn't expected a voice quite like that, not quite so hauntingly familiar. The face he saw, too, was familiar, but in a totally different way. The lazy smile, the casual stance, the black eyepatch and glowing tan, one bright blue eye, a cocked eyebrow, pencil-slim moustache and chin-stay beard . . . all added up to a perfect impersonation of the piratical, the corsair, the laughing buccaneer of a thousand hokum dramas. Complete with yellow silk shirt, cummerbund, pants and high boots. Jeremy brought his amazed stare back to that cynically smiling face again.

"I beg your pardon," he muttered. "Join us? You mean, you want to sit here? At this table?"

"That is the general idea, unholy sir. If you have no objection?"

Jeremy swapped glances with Lissa, shrugged, looked up again. "All right, whoever you are. I don't see why not. If you want to."

He half rose out of courtesy to the jewelled shape of

Miss Allen, then settled back again. "I'm Jeremy White. This is Miss Lissa Landis."

"And I'm Miguel Da Cost Santana. Miss Frances Allen. As if you didn't already know." He pronounced his name M'gel, but that didn't mean much, and there was nothing else in his accent to betray any Latin origin, nor to satisfy Jeremy's strange sense of recognition. That helped him to be and sound indignant.

"Come on, now, mister. I don't like that tone. I can't say I'm all that pleased to meet either of you. What's it all about? What d'you want?"

"Easy now, Jerry!" Miss Landis demonstrated excited embarrassment. "Didn't you hear? This is Frances Allen. *The* Frances Allen!"

"So?" he demanded stubbornly, and swivelled to take a good look at her expensively half-clad form. The emeralds were hung on a diamond lattice of golden chains and offered virtually no obstacle between the eye and her outrageously prominent curves. Lissa had prepared him for this.

"She's twenty-eight," Miss Landis had said, "and no girl that age can bulge the way she does without some kind of help, so don't be fooled!"

He wasn't fooled, but he was incredulous. And the mask didn't help any, so he put hands to his head, tugged, and lifted the whole thing off and shoved it down on the floor by his feet.

"Feel like a clown with that on," he said. "Not my kind of thing. Nor is this dump. Who needs it? I've heard of you, Miss Allen. Who hasn't?" He eyed her clinically then shifted his bellicose stare back to Santana. "And if you're with her, you must be somebody. But not to me. Now, what d'you want? What's the pitch?"

Santana frowned, looking a little disconcerted. Miss Allen spoke.

"I warned you, Miguel, didn't I? The voice told me they didn't know anything about . . . anything. Let me do the talking. Jeremy White . . . that's what you said, wasn't it? White?" Jeremy turned back to her as she

leaned close, staring at him from glitter-circled brown eyes. At this range he had to revise his first estimation. She did have something, a crude kind of animal heat that he had met a time or two before.

"That's my name," he admitted. "What of it?"

"White!" she murmured. "That must mean something. Who are you? What are you, a shaman, a wizard . . . a person of power?"

"Who, me?" He twisted his head again to stare at Santana. "Is she always like this, mister?" He brought his eyes back to her again, and smiled uncertainly. "Look . . . Miss Allen . . . I don't know what this is all about. I told you, I'm Jeremy White, reporter, Solar News. Not right now, as it happens. I'm off beat. On my own time. This is Lissa Landis, also of Solar News, but she is the society and fashion hawk. This is her patch. She was just showing me her kind of life, just for curiosity. And we were just sitting here, minding our own business. Right? Now it's your turn."

The brown eyes held his for a long time. There were little fires in them, liquid depths. She sighed, sat back, took a deep and proud breath.

"He's got something, Miguel. I don't know what, but something. I can feel it."

Santana's one blue eye narrowed in thought, a lean and aristocratic hand tapping the table top. All at once it moved away, fingers snapping to attract a glowing blue nymph.

"My call," he said. "Have you tried Dragon's Breath? Specialite du maison . . . no? Make that four, ma petite." The hand came back, lay still, the one good eye keen on Jeremy. "Reporter, eh? Then you do know things."

"You could say that."

"Yes. Your profession. Tell me, White, what do you think of . . . Kit Carew?"

"Just like that? Too hot for me, mister. I don't give opinions, not off the cuff like that. Who wants to know, anyway?"

"I do. I'll narrow it down a little for you, if you like.

What's your opinion of his work, his product, his . . . masterpieces?"

"I'd like to know your angle, Santana. Still, all right, which do you want, professional or personal?"

"There's a difference?"

"All the difference in the world. Professionally he is a slick and competent craftsman. Knows his stuff. His editing is great. His formula is standard but good. Plenty of action and tension, sentiment and sensation in equal proportions. It's not the documentary it claims to be, but then it never is. It's hotted up and high-powered hokum. But good. Of its kind."

"Backhanded flattery, White. Damned with faint praise, in fact. But now, what's your personal version?"

"Strictly personal, not for quotation . . . there is no such person as Kit Carew, and never was!"

VIII

Jeremy had deliberately aimed for reaction, and he got what he wanted. Miss Allen gasped and said, "But that's stupid! Ridiculous! No such person? Of course there is! Who would know better than . . ."

"Fanny, my sweet, hold it! Mr. White has something up his sleeve, I fancy. Haven't you, White? Like good reasons for what you've just said?"

"No sleeves." Jeremy raised his blue-painted arms to show. "But I do have reasons, sure. My own. Private and personal. Not for quotation."

"Let us not be childish. I'm not likely to run off to some editor and slander you. Nor is Fanny. But you can't just make a statement like that without foundations of some kind."

"All right. Just between us. You add this up. I'm in the same line of business, sort of, so I know. In the first place, nobody has ever *seen* Kit Carew. That doesn't mean a thing by itself, of course. He has to keep his incognito

to preserve his story beat, fine. But you study those cassettes of his and what do you find? No publisher's imprint. All right, you say, it is just to help his incognito again. But I won't buy that. A publisher discarding publicity? Never in your life! He could stick his name on there and *then* refuse to tell who his author is—and there's no law can make him. So that smells, right? And then this. Kit Carew has to come back to Earth to deliver his material, and collect his income—but nobody has ever seen him do it. And it is not so easy to get back from the colonies anyway. Those who do have to go through immigration, and a reporter would have been spotted long ago. You do your own addition. My way it comes out to just one answer: the whole thing is phoney. All right?"

"I'm not sure," Santana spoke slowly now, "but I think you've just come very close to defamation. Slander?"

"That I would like to see." Jeremy grinned cheerfully. "By whom? Will the real Kit Carew please stand up? Come on, now, mister. Let us not be childish. Your words."

"You're playing a very dangerous game, White."

"Oh cut it, Miguel!" Miss Allen sounded harsh now. "The man's a reporter, isn't he? He knows things. You said that yourself. So let's get at it, find out what he knows. Let me do it. Mr. White . . . what do you hear about Kit Carew being . . . dead?"

Jeremy masked his face, gave her a bleak eye. "No comment."

Santana snorted. "You're inconsistent, man. First you say there is no such person, then when you're asked if you've heard about him being dead you say no comment! Are you a fool, or do you think we are?"

The blue nude nymph came now with a tray and four flacons of cut crystal, each half full of smoky-red fire, only it was liquid. Jeremy took his and eyed it warily. The liquid glowed back at him. He sipped it with care, let it bloom in his mouth, and the flavour was merely very good brandy. He sipped again, set the glass down.

"I'm not fooling," he protested mildly. "You asked for my private opinion and you got it. Free. But when it comes to news stories . . . I'm a reporter. I collect them. I don't give them away. No comment!"

"Jerry!" Lissa spoke up anxiously. "I think you are making a boob here. These are important people, good people to be in right with. They wouldn't steal a story from you, for heaven's sake. Why, they might even be able to help, to tell *you* things."

"You're very wise, Miss Landis." The corsair smile for her was a dazzle of white teeth. "As wise as you are beautiful. Now, White." The smile went abruptly away. "I will come part of the way to meet you. Like this. I know there is such a person as Kit Carew. I know it very well. I know him. So does Miss Allen. Personally. His incognito is no more than a professional necessity. You yourself have explained that. You can't explain the other things, and I don't propose to, but I do assure you he exists, is real, and alive. And yet . . . we have heard . . . from sources that do not concern you, a silly story to the effect that Kit Carew is dead. Nonsense, of course!"

"You don't know that for sure!"

"Ah!" Santana sat back. "Then you do know something. There is such a story in existence. All we are asking is that you tell us whatever it is that you've heard."

"Maybe," Jeremy retorted, unimpressed. "How do I know you're giving me the straight wire? You say you're friends of his. How do I know that?"

"You don't know it." Miss Allen leaned forward again, reaching to take his hand and hold it. Her touch was hot and dry, her voice slurred at the edges from too many drinks. "You'll just have to believe us. Believe me, Mr. White. Why would I want to lie to you? I know Kit, very well. So it is important to me to know all about this stupid rumour, and who is putting it out, and why. And, maybe, to put it straight. Wouldn't you like that?"

Her smile, the whole surgent heat of her was suggesting he might like something else a lot better. "All right," he surrendered, praying inwardly that he could play his

fish properly, now that he had them hooked. "I don't know where you got your rumour from. We have been sitting on ours, over at Solar, waiting for something concrete to come up. You've heard about the Beta Hydri beacon, of course? That's where it all starts. It is just about one hundred percent certain that Beta Hydri is wiped out. God knows how. Alien diseases, germs, even monsters, who knows?"

"Ridiculous!" Santana scoffed. "Beta Hydri is the eighth sun system on which we have found Earth type planets, and no monsters so far."

"There has to be a first time, mister. How else does a beacon go off the air? That's the Earthstring, and you know it. Anyway, we are assuming that Hydri is lost, until we know different. *And* we have the word, but we can't tell you where from, that Kit Carew was there. Which is no great strain on the credulity, when you come to think of it. He has been there on every colony-first so far, if you believe everything it says on those tapes, that is. You say there is such a person. I have my own opinions, but that is the rumour . . . that he was on Beta Hydri . . . and he's dead. As I said, we are sitting on it, but can't do it for ever. Already the roots are beginning to grow into wild flowers."

"You mean the rumour is spreading, already?"

"That's the nature of the beasts, isn't it?"

"What sort of rumours?" Miss Allen tightened her grip on him.

"Pick your own. Sample—Kit Carew was invented by a well-known publishing house, and they are now going to have to admit he was a fake all the time. I fancy that one. Or this—Carew was a nut, propagandising against the way the colony program is being run, and is he going to go to town on this one, a disaster! Or, for a wild one, Carew was really the inside agent for a secret group of saboteurs who are trying to blow the colony program, and this time they really did it, and the question is, will 'they' now kill him off, or will he miraculously escape and live to tell the tale? Or what about this—really far

out—Carew is an agent again, only this time working for the UN specials, on the trail of that other crowd who are trying to blow the colony program, and they got on to him, and that is why Beta Hydri blew up, or whatever happened to it. There are more, but those are about the best. Pick your own.”

“They are all incredible nonsense, of course.”

“To you, maybe. You say Kit Carew is a pal of yours? He won’t be for very much longer.”

“What do you mean by that?” Miss Allen demanded instantly.

“Look, Miss Allen, use your head, eh? Kit Carew was . . . is . . . a big public figure. You don’t just wipe a man like that off the slate and forget it. The public won’t stand for that. They will want to know how, and why, and what happened.”

“The official investigation will settle that,” Santana said airily, and Jeremy grinned at him.

“You don’t say? When? Two months? Three? Do you really think we can sit on rumours that long? You’ve already heard one yourself. I’ve told you a few more. There’ll be a thousand in a week.”

“They wouldn’t dare publish stories like that!” Miss Allen cried.

“Come on, now! When a man goes out of his way to become a legend, a mystery man, anything can happen. You can’t blame people for guessing, nor can you stop them. And when enough people start clamouring, authority has to do something about it. To investigate. You’re his friends. They will dig that up. They will investigate you, Miss Allen. Yes, I know you’re a rich woman, and you can buy privacy, immunity . . . but not this time. Kit Carew is a public figure. You’re going to get investigated, whether you like it or not. And you, Mr. Santana.”

“I’ve nothing to hide,” Santana snapped, but his face said otherwise. “This is infamous. Is there no way of strangling these pernicious stories?”

“Only one that I ever heard of.” Jeremy freed his wrist

from her hold and reached for his glass again. The liquid was still glowing. He had a moment of wondering what it would do to his inside, but that was minor. The rest of the patrons didn't seem to mind. He was playing this business by ear now. He had hoped for reactions, but not quite like this. So far as he could figure, there was only one way they could know for sure that Carew was still alive . . . and that was that he had never been on Beta Hydri . . . and that made Morgan wrong. Santana bit, as he had to.

"One way, you say. What way is that?"

"Simple to say, not so easy to do. Speaking professionally, now, the only way to slay a rumour stone dead is to get in there first, with the hard truth, with facts and figures."

That stopped both of them cold. Over the rim of his glass he saw Santana exchange meaningful glances with Miss Allen, and then shake his head.

"I'm afraid that doesn't make sense, White. As you said just now, will the real Kit Carew please stand up! But how can he? No one knows him. How does he prove it? Good God, man, I could say to you, now, I am Kit Carew! What would that prove?"

Jeremy kept a straight face, wearing a proper expression of sympathy. "Don't look at me, mister. I don't make the rules. It's your problem, not mine. I can't help it."

Lissa Landis came in again. She didn't know all the story, just enough to be able to keep her end up. "Isn't there another angle?" she wondered. "I mean, it won't settle the business about Kit Carew, but wouldn't it help a bit if someone, someone independent, could investigate Beta Hydri and find out what really happened there?"

"That would help, sure," Jeremy agreed. "At least it would shut the door on the sabotage rumours. At least. Unless there *was* sabotage, of course, which would be something different, wouldn't it? But who's going to pick up that kind of tab? A trip to Beta Hydri isn't exactly a step!"

"You say an official investigation could take seven or

eight weeks?" Miss Allen demanded. "As long as that?"

"Could be more than that. That was the first angle we checked on, as soon as the word came in about the beacon. How soon will we know what happened? Maybe you don't know how it is with public money and a skimpy budget. They can't just send an investigative expedition, like that. They have to make a useful journey out of it. They'll probably hang on and equip a whole new settlement outfit, and then go. That's the word we had."

"And meanwhile the poisonous rumours grow?"

"As you say. In fact an official investigation won't prove all that much, even then. You don't deal with official sources, Miss Allen. We do, often. They let loose of information as if it was diamonds, just as much as they feel inclined to part with, and no more."

She took his hand again, leaned close, and there were depths to her eyes. "You say I can buy privacy and immunity, Mr. White. Perhaps I can also buy the truth."

"What's that mean?"

"I could finance a private expedition to Beta Hydri."

"You'd want independent witnesses, you know."

"Why not . . . you, Mr. White?"

He had seen it coming, but that didn't make it any the less scary. "Me? I'm just a reporter. I go where my boss tells me. I can't just volunteer for a chore like that. The idea is all right, if you can swing it. I don't know where you'll get a deep space ship so easily, but that's your problem, and you have that kind of pull."

"It's no problem, Mr. White. Is it, Miguel?"

"You're being hasty, Fanny. I don't like it. Don't rush at it!"

"Don't you tell me what to do, Miguel, darling. Just don't, that's all. The more time we waste thinking about it, the faster those damned rumours will spread. I don't want that, and neither do you."

"Hey, just a minute!" Jeremy swung his head around. "I know you own some kind of space yacht. I hear those things. But . . . like I said, Beta Hydri isn't exactly just across the way. Twenty light years?"

"Slightly more, I believe," Santana said, and smiled. "You're not too well informed, White. My yacht, the Quest, is quite capable of making such a trip. Additional fuel and power, and, of course, provisions, are all that is required."

"You see?" Miss Allen tugged at his hand, brought him around to her hot eyes again. "It would be simple. And I want you to come along."

"Come along?" he echoed. "You mean . . . you'd be there too?"

"Why not. I'm involved. You've just spent quite a lot of time making that very clear. Of course I shall be along. Miguel myself . . . and you. You'd be there as the independent witness."

Jeremy looked away, glanced helplessly around the table. The idea of a jaunt into the vast dark didn't appeal to him at all, but he couldn't think of a good 'out' except the one he had already tried. Of course Old Man Cross wouldn't stand for it. He'd want to appoint somebody else, somebody more competent in that line. A technical specialist. Then his eyes crossed with Lissa's, and saw frantic appeal in them. It took him a second look to read it properly. He came back to Miss Allen's eager stare.

"Look, I already said I can't promise anything. It's up to my Chief. And in any case, one's no good. Not just me. That would just start a fresh crop of gossip. About me, this time. You'd need more."

Her eyes left his for a moment, flashed to Santana. "Miguel?"

"You're set on it? Very well. It will take a little while to arrange, but I'll see to that. White, you've laid a challenge, and it has been taken up. Quest will be laying off Orbital Station Three by noon, day after tomorrow, ready to jump to Beta Hydri. That's our side of the bargain. Now your side. I understand that Solar News has a reliable reputation?"

"None better."

"Loyalty indeed. Very well. You undertake, on behalf of Solar News, to release none of this to anyone until after

we return? You undertake to publish a full and true account of whatever we discover there, without prejudice and bias to anyone?"

"I'll go along with that, certainly."

"Very well. Then I invite you and two other persons of your choice, however arrived at, responsible persons, to board Quest by the noon shuttle, day after tomorrow. To be my guests, but utterly independent otherwise. Is that quite clear. Will that suffice to slay a rumour or two?"

"I can't see anything wrong with it except my part. That will be up to Mr. Cross. The rest is O.K." Miss Allen gave his wrist a final squeeze and stood up, inflating herself arrogantly.

"I want you," she said, and there was no attempt at innuendo, just a blatant statement of intent. Santana rose too, debonair and rakehell in every line, right down to the courtly bow and heel click to Miss Landis.

"Hold!" Jeremy caught him. "I'd like a number where I can reach you, let you know how it goes."

"Of course!" Santana recited the digits and bowed again. "I look forward to our next meeting, Mr. White. Miss Landis. Good night!"

Jeremy watched the pair disappear in the gloom, and turned to see Lissa staring at him wide-eyed. "You did it," she breathed. "You really did it!"

"I'm not at all sure just what I've done," he muttered. "What are *you* referring to?"

"You put the high sign on Fanny Allen. You had her eating right out of your hand!"

"That is the least of my worries." He tugged at an earlobe, reached for his glass and swirled the dregs of his Dragon's Breath moodily before draining the glass. "There's something creepy here, somewhere."

"Creepy?" Lissa was shrilly indignant. "You have just got yourself invited for a free ride aboard a millionaire's space yacht, with the promise of something I'm too lady-like to mention thrown in . . . Fanny Allen hanging on your every word . . . and you call it creepy?"

"That's right, creepy. Those two seem hellbent on proving something. I wish I knew what. Drink up, and let's go and tell the Chief all about it, see what he makes of it."

"Jeremy," she took his arm anxiously as they made their way out into the cold night air, "you're not going to wriggle out of it, are you?"

"I was never in it," he protested. "If anybody has to go take a look at a disaster area, it won't be me. You'll see. The Old Man will have his own ideas on that."

"Yes, but . . ." she groaned, "oh, what's the use? I was just kidding myself, I suppose. That kind of thing doesn't happen to me."

"Close on eleven-thirty," Jeremy murmured, "and I'd better call him and warn him we're on our way." But not to Beta Hydri, he added, silently, not if I have any say in it!

IX

Gavin Cross had on an old and faded dressing gown, but that was his only concession to the hour. He was busily hunched over his visor as they tramped in, interrupting himself only long enough to nod and wave them to the drink cabinet.

"Analysis of what the Beta Hydri disaster is doing to the market, that's it. Only don't call it disaster yet, we don't officially know that. Just a breakdown of who makes and who loses. First thing in the morning. Right. Pecket? I'm out, gone away, for at least half an hour, right?" He shut off the machine and swung round, to stare and shake his head. "Is that what they are wearing now? Get it off, kids. There's nothing so urgent I have to listen to it with you in that getup. Shower through there."

"You go, Jerry. This stuff comes off with a cloth, remember? I've some tape you might want to look at, Chief."

Jeremy trudged away to the shower stall and used paint remover and then hot water, and felt a lot better. He got back into the room in time to hear the old man concluding one of his favourite dissertations.

"... commonplace to hear people say the kids of today never had it so good. They were saying that when Rome was a village. Kids never have it good anytime. They have to grow up, and that isn't easy, any time, anywhere. Never intended to be. A creature can only grow against resistance. They proved that with all those zero-gee experiments. Seeds won't even germinate unless they have some kind of gravitational drag on them. The real sign of old age is when you quit struggling and think you have it made. You start to die, right there. Come on in, Jerry, it's already poured."

Jeremy sagged into the opposite end of the couch, with Lissa seated wearily but at ease in a stuffed chair across from them. With her bright blonde hair free of ornament, her pink skin free of paint and a glass in her hand she managed to look quite at home. "She's told you all about it, Chief?"

"Not a word, son. It's your story, isn't it? Give."

So Jeremy told him the gist, which didn't take long, and wound it all up by repeating what he had said to Lissa. "Those two are obviously out to prove something. I don't know what, and I imagine certain parties would be very interested to find out. That's up to you. As it stands, we—this agency—has an invitation to send three selected persons along on a fact-finding tour. That can't be bad. But it doesn't get us a great deal closer to Kit Carew I'm afraid. And I don't see how I can do anything more with it, either. The trail stops at Santana and Miss Allen, and I can't investigate them. I already told you—out of my class!"

"You're doing it again," Cross pointed out. "I've been watching bits of tape that this young lady took. She says you had the Allen girl eating out of your hand. I wouldn't put it like that, but I would mean the same."

"That's just imagination. Anyway, I couldn't make her talk!"

"Mata Hari lived in vain, so far as you are concerned. Talk? You could make her jump through hoops if you'd a mind to. All right, forget that for the minute. Forget Carew, too. And the certain party you mentioned. Because this is a different ball game now. This is a privately financed fact-finding tour to discover just what *has* happened on Beta Hydri . . . and that is *news*, son! *And* we have the exclusive on it. Jerry, if you ever did want to hit me for a raise, now is the time to do it. In fact, you've got it. Ten percent?"

"I don't know what to say. I wasn't looking for anything like that!"

"That is exactly why you got it. I don't know anybody else inside this organisation who could have pulled that trick the way you did. So, the next thing I want from you is . . . who do you want to go with you?"

"Huh?" Jeremy goggled, felt the chill drip of drink on his lap and started, dabbing foolishly. "Go with . . . ? You mean, you want *me* to go on that damned yacht trip?"

"Who else? You set it up, didn't you? What's the matter with you? It's your story, isn't it? Since when did you ever run out on a story half-way through?"

Put like that, of course, it sounded inevitable, but Jeremy tried one last feeble protest. "I've never even been as far as the Moon, Chief! There's a thousand places right here on Earth I've never been!"

"So what? Name one!"

"Anchorage, Alaska." Jeremy caught at the first thought that came.

"All right, you've never been there. Why not?"

"Because there hasn't come up a story break"

"That's right. Now . . . who do you want along with you?"

Jeremy sagged, started looking around for escape just as he had done before, and, as before, he met that imploring look from Lissa.

"You, too?" he groaned. "And I thought I knew who

my friends were. All right, Chief, I'm pretty sure Liss wants to go along. To take pictures!"

"All right with me. Miss Lanais, you any objections?"

"Objections?" Jerry howled. "You didn't ask me that, did you?"

"You were conned, son!" Cross chuckled unashamedly. "If you had any real obstacles to going, you'd have named them. You just need a little bit of a push, now and then. You'll be all right. Room for one more."

Jeremy took off his rage and thought hard. There was a deadly serious purpose here, for all the badinage. "I'll ride that one, Chief, for the moment," he said. "I want to think about it. Let you know in the morning. Will that be all right?"

"Whatever you say. It's your party."

"And about that other certain party? Who ought to be informed?"

"I'll take care of all that. Look, you take this little lady home, and I don't want to see either of you until noon tomorrow. Lie in, huh?"

Lissa had her apartment on the other side of the river, and she made token objection to taking him out of his way, but it was only a gesture, and they both knew it. As the autocab rolled on its way she snuggled up alongside him and hugged his arm.

"This is the first time you've ever taken me anywhere, Jerry, and it's been a wonderful evening. I wish I'd thought of it sooner."

"Come on, now," he reproved. "You've been thinking along this kind of line for years. I've been too smart for you, that's all."

"Until now. Got you! And got you even more once we get aboard that yacht. Abandon all hope, Jerry. I shall have you all to myself!"

"Oh sure. Apart from the crew, and Santana, and maybe a few guests of his. And Miss Allen, of course."

"What do you think of her, really?"

"Unstable, neurotic, and she'll be in a padded cell inside five years if she doesn't let up."

"Wow! But I think you could be right, at that. She certainly isn't happy, for all her money."

"And what about you, Liss? Are you happy?"

"I could be," she said, "if you'd stop running away from me, and let me catch up with you just once. Why are you so scared of women, Jerry?"

"Not scared, Liss, just careful. Don't get analytical on me, eh?"

"Why not? I'd like to know what goes on inside you. Seriously."

"All right. For what it's worth, I'm a black and white person. By that I mean, either I'm *not* involved, just watching . . . or I *am* involved, all the way. I can't just play around. Never have been able to. And I bruise easily, know what I mean?"

She was silent a while, then sighed. "I know. Me too. Fun and games, a merry quip and a giggle, but that is as far as I go. I'm a coward, and I know it. If and when I find the man I fall for, I shall fall hard, go all to pieces. And if he doesn't pick me up and put me back together again . . . I'll just die, that's all. Isn't it awful?"

The autocab clucked to its standstil outside her apartment block, and she stirred to get out. He gave her a hug. "I've a lot to thank you for," he said, "and not all of it in the line of duty. Maybe when we get old and past it we'll live together and swap stories, huh?"

"I should be so lucky." She turned her face to him and brushed his cheek with her lips. "Some designing female will have snapped you up long before then. And you have nothing on me in gratitude. Thanks to you I am going to have a luxury trip on a space yacht, free! Now, if you were any other man you'd expect things in return."

"How d'you know I don't?" he challenged, chuckling, and she moved up and out, slammed the door, turned to lean back in the window.

"I know," she said, "but I could be mistaken. Good night!"

He rode the cab back to his own apartment in thoughtful silence, for once driven to analyse his own habits a

little more deeply than usual. She had underlined his laconic words precisely. He had fallen, once before, and he had, indeed, fallen all to pieces. Total surrender. And the putting back together again had been excruciatingly painful. He had said 'careful' where she had said 'scared', but was there a difference, in face? He took the uneasy problem to bed with him and slept on it. Habit pulled his eyes open at seven, and no matter how he tried to roll over and go back to sleep again, it wouldn't work. Last night was a blur in places, the mood impossible to recapture, but some stark facts lingered. He was committed to a space flight, a hop to Beta Hydri. Just like that!

By merely turning his head he could see the three latest Kit Carew tapes on his shelf. He gloomed at them, recalling their spine-tingling, pulse-pounding details. The space cafard of overpacked holds full of humanity. Space sickness and nerves. The uneasy thrill of stepping out on to alien soil, not knowing what to expect . . . strange beasts, queer plants, improbable insects . . . that long-way-from-home feeling that Carew managed to get across so vividly. And even if more than half of it *was* hokum, it didn't help at all to know that he was about to do all that, *and* on the heels of some enigmatic disaster. Damn Carew! Jeremy sat up, rolled over and out to sit with his bare feet on the composition floor . . . and saw the small red star on his screen that said someone had tried to call him.

"Now what?" he mumbled, and punched the accept. The screen shimmered and showed Gavin Cross, whose voice said, "You'll get this whenever you wake up. No rush, but call me when you're ready."

So much for "I don't want to see you 'till noon!" "There must be an easier way to earn bread," he growled, and the words triggered a recall of Frances Allen that made him cringe. Not that way. He buttoned Cross's number and had the old man himself within seconds.

"I didn't want to disturb you, Jerry. No rush."

"I was awake anyway. What's the itch?"

"A certain party—guess who?—was very interested in

what I had to tell him last night, wants to see you this morning, has maybe some further information. But he won't be here until ten-thirty, maybe later, so don't upset yourself. You look like you could do with another couple of hours."

"I could use a whole day, but I don't have that kind of machinery. I'll be there around ten-thirty. Just one thing, you don't suppose he wants to cancel that trip, do you?"

"Over my dead body! Why d'you ask?"

"It would be a blow for Lissa. She's looking for it, and she earned it, whichever way you look at it."

"She's a good hand with a camera. You'll see some of the stuff when you come in. Don't worry about a thing."

Don't worry. Jeremy watched the screen go dark. Don't worry. People jump to and fro all the time. The Moon, Mars, Ganymede, the holiday satellites—nothing to it! He glanced at the clock and saw eight-fifteen. All morning to kill. With what? And then an idea came to him as pleasantly as a long drink of cold spring water, and he rose and started robing himself for the day while the auto-chef clucked over his routine breakfast.

The same blonde goddess sat in the same transparent cage as he entered the Triple-C foyer. She recognised him as he went over.

"Hello!" he said and smiled. "You've been very good. You didn't tell anybody our little secret. You know, about Miss Crane's personal affairs? I'm very grateful to you for that. She'll appreciate it when I tell her, too. Which elevator do I take this time?"

She was lost again. Her board indicated Number One, so that's what she had to say, and smile, and feel special somehow, without knowing just why. He rode up to the seventh floor without a second thought about that kind of magic. Nor did he expect any trouble with Miss Stannard.

"You can go right in, Mr. White," she said, and pushed her intercom button three times, slowly. "Passwords, yet! I wish I knew your angle."

"It wouldn't be any good to you. You're too honest!"

And that was all right, too, a little fencing, but as the door hissed open and shut to let him into the presence of Miss Crane all his levity went away and tension came in its place. This was the stronghold of the enemy, in more way than one. She came out from behind her desk and a good way down the carpeted stretch to meet him, removing her glasses and offering her hand in cordial greeting. Her grip was firm, her fingers cool, her smile quite friendly, if wary.

"Very good of you to come, Mr. White. I hope your prompt return implies some kind of good news?"

"That could be a matter of opinion. But news, anyway. Something you have a right to know about."

"Thank Heaven for someone who can come straight to the point. Come and sit, and tell me about it. Or is this antoher 'just one minute affair?"

"It could take a little longer," he admitted, following her, and aiming for the chair he had used before. She shook her head at that.

"Bring it around here, please. I'd rather not talk across a desk at you. Yes, there. Now . . ."

"Well," he was close enough to her to have reached out and touched her arm, and he wanted to, but pushed the silly urge away, "I followed up the two leads you gave me. Barnaby Green first . . ." and he sketched in as much as he thought necessary to cover the basic information, and would have gone on, but she made an objection.

"I'm not quite clear as to why Mr. Green went to such lengths to hide his connection with Chris and his works. Surely any publisher needs that kind of publicity?"

"You don't view tapes much, do you? You're a reader. Regular books. Let's see now . . . have you read Forever Amber? Or the Decameron?"

"Yes indeed, both. Why?"

"Could you imagine those translated into visual terms, in every last detail, nothing skipped over? That's the kind of publisher Barnaby Green is. Famous, or notorious, depending on your viewpoint. His imprint on Kit

Carew's stuff would have moved it straight into the pornography slot. That's why."

"I see. Thank you. That's very clear. Reputations are hard to make, easy to lose. Go on. After Mr. Green."

He recounted the incidents at the Erebus in similar shorthand, and again she showed a small frown, but let him finish. "So we achieved some kind of action. The ship will depart at noon tomorrow, and at least we'll know what actually happened out there. That's something. It isn't really anything to do with Kit Carew, but it's hot news, so my editor is all for it. And I'm booked, whether I like it or not."

"I gather you don't." She made a faint smile. "There are several points here that I do not understand at all. For instance it seems to be important to Mr. Santana and Miss Allen that my brother is alive. I suppose she cares for Chris. Would you venture an opinion on that?"

Jeremy looked at it cautiously. This was getting near the explosive area. If Chris *was* operating for the financial giants they certainly had an interest in keeping him alive, but he couldn't tell her that. "Just a guess," he said, "but I would have thought that Miss Allen couldn't care, honestly, about anyone else in the world outside herself. The way I heard it, she was keeping Chris, like a pet. A tame lion, if you like. That's no help."

"But surely Chris was rich in his own right, with all those famous publications behind him?"

"According to Barnaby Green it doesn't work out that way at all."

"You surprise me. Very well, possibly she was keeping Chris, and fond of him. But I do not see your fulcrum for leverage with Mr. Santana."

"That's easier. He's something in *Negocio Brazilia*. They are big, as you know. Public opinion, focussing on a key figure like Kit Carew and boiling with rumour, could bring pressure, could start an official investigation into allegations. Santana wouldn't like that. Nor would Miss Allen and her family. You wouldn't like it either, Miss Crane. There can be very few people who haven't

got a skeleton or two somewhere, and an official investigation is impertinent, sometimes insufferable . . . and it thrives on any kind of evasion or opposition."

"Yes indeed," she sighed. "I wouldn't exactly enjoy having our dirty linen put on public view. And that was your lever?"

"Santana is smart. This investigation trip to Beta Hydri, with the Solar Press along to observe—and we have a name for impartiality and integrity—will go a long way to establishing him as public-spirited and having nothing to hide. That will get him off one hook, and by the time we get back he will have figured out some other ploy to deal with the Kit Carew business. I don't know what, but he definitely knows something, and he is a smart man. I'll stay after him as tight as I can, that's all I can do. And that is about it. I thought I'd let you know."

"Thank you again. I must say it's all rather complicated, though. I have the feeling there are deeper issues involved than simply the fate of my unfortunate brother."

"Could be. Anyway, I'll see you when I get back." He started to rise and she checked him, putting her hand on his arm in a way that was very familiar and very disturbing.

X

For a long moment they were both still. He knew, intuitively, that the same disturbing electricity tingled in her as gripped him. He sat back, after a while, cleared his throat of a sudden obstruction.

"There was something else?"

"Yes." Her voice was a low murmur, her eyes slipping away to stare towards the far end of the room. "Yes. It is my understanding that Miss Allen will be financing Mr. Santana's expedition. Generous of her. But rational, if, as you say, it will help to clear the air. I can't help the thought that several interests will be served in finding out

exactly what the situation is on Beta Hydri. And Triple-C is certainly one of the involved concerns, you agree?"

"No argument there. Your firm makes a big thing out of colonial outfitting and equipment."

"Quite so." She pulled her hand back now, folded it with the other in the lap of her dark robe. "And you said Mr. Santana had extended his hospitality to three persons. Yourself . . . and?"

"Miss Landis. That's the society reporter I mentioned. She is also a skilled photographer. The third . . . well, the decision was left open to me, and I hadn't decided anything. Now you come to mention it, I suppose it's natural you'd want somebody responsible from this firm to go along."

"Would you mind that?"

"Not at all." Jeremy was all professional now, his personal reactions pulled well back out of the way. "I should have thought of it myself. There is just one angle, though. This will establish a connection of a kind between you and Kit Carew. Do you want that?"

"The association will be very tenuous, surely? Triple-C has a legitimate interest in Beta Hydri, and that is all that need be known, for now. If the whole unpleasant story has to come out sooner or later, well, it may count as a useful step ahead of time. There is, of course, Mr. Santana's agreement with your suggestion. He may demur."

Jeremy glanced aside at her reader. "Can I get an outside hook-up on that? Yes? Then, if you've no objection, we can settle that right away."

She rose from her chair immediately to let him sit in her place. It was still warm from her body. It seemed to burn him, threatening to unsettle his calm. He commanded himself to stop being a fool and coded in the number Santana had given him, watching the screen split and tear in slivers of colour as the circuits hunted for a connection. She stood beside him, her hand lightly on his shoulder, and that contact burned too. Maybe, he told himself, it is just as well I am going away. Far away. I

can't take a lot more of this! The screen swam clearer, became a reasonable picture, but was still shot through with spits of interference. It showed a grimly stolid face, square in shape, topped with gold-braided cap.

"Space yacht Quest. Captain Broz. Who is calling, please?"

He somehow managed to say it without moving any of the usual facial muscles. Jeremy made a faint gesture to Miss Crane.

"Maybe it would be better if you kept out of range." She moved at once and he said to the screen.

"I'm Jeremy White, Solar News. I met Mr. Santana last night. I need to speak to him, about guests?"

"One moment, please." Broz moved out of camera range, and Jeremy looked up to see that Miss Crane had circled and was now standing beyond the reader, looking down over it at him with an oddly wondering expression on her face. Then a familiar eyepatch came into focus and he paid attention. The picture was still tearing a little.

"Mr. White. Good morning. Some trouble, perhaps? With your Chief?"

"No. Nothing like that. He's agreeable, enthusiastic in fact. I'm still your guest. It's about the others. You said three persons. I've asked for Miss Landis. You met her last night. She is keen, and she is a first class photographer. Is that all right?"

"Splendid. I remember her well. The beautiful blonde cherub. You have excellent taste." Santana's grin was devilish and Jeremy frowned.

"She's a reporter. Anyway the cherubim were male, as I recall. It's about the third that I wanted to ask most specifically. Triple-C has suggested they ought to have a responsible member of their staff along. And will be prepared to meet a fair share of the expenses, of course."

"Triple-C? You mean . . . Crane Chemicals? How the devil did they become interested in this? I thought I imposed a confidential ban on this trip, Mr. Whitel"

Either the surprise was genuine or Santana was a con-

summate actor. Jeremy shrugged at him. "You'll remember I did tell you about the rumours, and how they spread so fast. Crane Chemicals does have a massive financial interest in the colony program. You're not the only one under pressure in this business. And you did offer a third berth. It seemed the logical thing. Of course, if you have objections . . .?"

"Not at all. A competent person from Triple-C, you, Miss Landis, Miss Allen and myself . . . yes, we should amount to an impressive testimony. Very well. Catch the noon shuttle tomorrow. We depart at thirteen-thirty hours. I look forward to seeing you."

The connection went in a rainbow explosion and he looked up again. She was smiling now. "Devious and diplomatic Mr. White," she said, and took his hand as he stood up. "You're a man of many talents. I'm very grateful to you."

"I don't see it," he murmured awkwardly, wishing she would let go. "The gratitude, I mean. It isn't costing me anything. You'll have to excuse me now, I have a lot to do."

He managed to get away from her without being either rude or violent, without being quite sure how. The cool street air was welcome, as was the brisk walk to the Solar News building. He couldn't think straight, at all, and didn't try, but just let the whole thing bubble in his head until he was once more in Cross's office. There he saw the quietly unimposing figure of Stephen Morgan placidly waiting for him, and that sight, somehow, brought it all to a head.

"I've got nothing to thank you for," he declared bitterly. "See what you got me into this time? I'm bound for Beta Hydri. Tomorrow. At noon! Yesterday I was just a commonplace reporter, happily minding other people's business, and now look at it. Tycoons to left, right and centre!"

"You have done very well, Mr. White, very well. My department is highly interested in your reports so far."

"I'll bet. It's a pity one of your tame dogs couldn't go along on this trip in my place!"

"Not in your place, Mr. White. That wouldn't work. By your side, though, we hope to manage."

"What's that mean?"

"To entertain guests on a yauch, Mr. White, one needs staff. One calls them stewards, I believe. Mr. Santana has one. He is about to be taken suddenly and seriously ill, and will have to be replaced. It's an old stunt, very old, but still workable. You will not be alone, Mr. White."

"Yes, well" Jeremy hunched his shoulders and found a seat close to the glass Cross had already poured out for him. "You're pretty slick at some things, I'll give you that."

"We try, but let me not take too much credit. We have had an eye on Mr. Santana, among several others, for some time. Anyone closely involved with the Allen family is naturally an object of interest to us. Mr. Cross has told me of your exploits last night, but there was little meat in it for us. We knew Santana was employed by Negocio Brazilia. We would very much like to know just what he does to earn his considerable salary, but that is not for you, I think. He made one interesting point—I saw the tape—about the difficulty of identifying Carew should he ever decide to drop his incognito."

"I've been thinking about that." Jeremy admitted. "How about the family files?"

"No. Apparently Alexander Crane destroyed all records of his son. We do, of course, have his fingerprints available, but they are hardly of value in instant recognition. But we do, now, have this. A drawing put together by a skilled artist from bits and pieces of various eyewitnesses' accounts of probabilities. It may not be accurate. One could hardly hope for that. But it must be a close resemblance. Here!"

Morgan spun a sheet of paper across to Jeremy, who caught it and gave it a hard look. And then another.

"You have other copies of this?"

"Yes. That's a photostat. Why?"

"You say you saw those tapes Lissa took last night?"

"I did. I've told you. Interesting, but not informative."

"And you had this in your pocket all the time you were watching?"

"What are you driving at, White?"

Jeremy rose, grabbed a thick black pencil from Cross's desk, spread the photostat flat and started in on it. He added a fringe of beard, made the hair a little more profuse and wavy, drew in a slim moustache, added two lines and a black patch, and Morgan swore.

"Damn it, why didn't I see that?" he complained.

"You might well say that." Jeremy sighed. "I've been recognising the voice all this while without being able to name it. I've heard it often enough, over the tapes. It looks like I am going to need somebody by my side, doesn't it?"

"Give him credit for nerve." Cross grawled. "He as good as told you, to your face, who he was."

"No wonder Fanny Allen wasn't scared at the ghost voice. Kit Carew is dead! She knew better. God, what a fool play that was!"

"But it worked, Mr. White, that's what counts. Results. Although I must say this new item throws the entire picture into a state of confusion."

"It might be news to you, mister, but I've been confused right from the first ten minutes!"

The following twenty-four hours did nothing to abate that confusion. Jeremy was to find that space travel is not just a matter of purchasing a ticket and departing. So far as the authorities were concerned he was only going as far, by the shuttle, as Orbital Station Three, and thence to Quest, a private yacht, as the guest of the owner. But that was enough to involve him in a full-scale medical check-out, plus certain shots. Then there was a thorough, not to say impertinent, enquiry into his financial and political status and had he made a proper will? Was he taking with him more than so much in the way of currency or credit card availability? Or any one of a dismayingly long list of frowned-upon articles? Did he

have a valid passport to leave Earth? By the time he had finished satisfying all the requirements he was depressingly aware of his stick-in-the-mud status. In all the crazy run-around he bumped into Miss Landis only once, and she was bound on a shopping spree, almost oblivious to anything else.

"Don't you have to do all this chase-me routine?" he demanded, and she laughed it off.

"Years ago. Jerry, you haven't lived! Why, I get to Mars Dome at least once a year. That's where it's all happening these days!"

"It is?" he muttered, watching her skip away on the trail of threads. "I thought it was all happening here. To me!"

By the time he was ready to stand in line for the noon shuttle it was almost anticlimax. Physically he was fit and ready but mentally it was as if he had opened a wrong door somewhere two days ago and had been wandering in a wonderland ever since. Lissa, ahead of him on the treadmill, was in charge of everything. "Nothing to worry about," she reassured him for the tenth time. "Just follow me, do what I do. Look at all the other people, do they act scared?"

"Paralysed with fear." he grumbled. "Like me."

In fact he couldn't see many, as the conveyor-belt was narrow and boxed in so that he had a fine view of the back of Lissa's head but not much more. Then, as the belt reached its crest and dipped sharply to a platform, he lost interest and slavishly followed instructions. Sit here. Fasten belt. The seat climbed startlingly straight up a long way, then slid aside and hooked itself on to something insecure, so that it swung gently.

"There!" Lissa announced cheerfully. "That's all there is to it until we reach the station."

He watched steady streams of other helpless people rising up past him, presumably to be hooked and dangled. Then that stopped. Noises started, and then vibrations. Then weight came on, making him feel fat and old. It went away again until he didn't weigh any-

thing at all, which was unpleasant. Food came, brought by smiling angels who could actually fly, without wings, and wore the blue and white skin-tights of the Shuttle Service. Food in toothpaste tubes and drink in squeeze bottles . . . and it was all over rather soon, with only minor uneasinesses as they matched orbit with the station.

"Now what do we do?" he demanded uneasily.

"Nothing. Just sit. We have one-fourth gee here, so you can unfasten your belt." By itself the seat unhooked and slid out, in its turn, and down they went to that same platform and step. This time, though, as they quit the seat, along came another, very like a ski-lift chair. "We're together." Lissa said, and the bored attendant nodded.

"Very well, madam. Stand just here. Sir? Thank you!"

The chair caught him under the knees and scooped him away, the attendant helping with a gentle push that engaged the overhead hook into some gear or other in the slots in the roof. Lissa giggled by his side.

"Madam . . . me? He thought we were married, Jerry!"

"Or he was being polite. It amounts to the same thing." Jeremy craned his head back, peering. "Have you seen anyone who looks like a Triple-C official?"

"Would I know him if I saw him?"

"I suppose not. I hope he hasn't missed it."

"You really move among the big brass, don't you? Triple-C *and* the Allens. I'm dazzled."

"That will be the day. What's that?"

They were sliding swiftly along a tunnel liberally decorated with glow-mobile advertisements but now, ahead, came a flame-red sign.

"Destination check-point in ten seconds. When you see this sign . . ." a flaming cross with four arrowhead arms, "state your destination as printed on your journey slip." He started groping, but she handed him hers. Up came the arrow sign and he sang out, loudly, "Rim-dock, seven A."

There came a chime, and overhead he saw an amazing

orderly confusion of slotted tracks strongly resembling a spider's web gone wrong, but their hook dodged smoothly among the confusion and drew them away to another tunnel. It picked up speed, sweeping them along. He felt weight coming on. Memory started to work for him, fitfully. Rim-dock. The great wheel of the Orbital Station. Spinning. Creating an artificial gravity.

"I've never been this way before," she said. "The Mars ships always go from the centre dock. We must be nearly there, by the weight."

The ski-lift chair slowed now as it approached a step-down platform, and stopped. They got off. He felt something like a captive balloon in the lesser gravity field, but tried to overcome it.

"You're sure our baggage is all right?"

"Of course, silly. It will probably be aboard by now. They don't have to be as careful with that as they do with us. Look, there's an arrow. Come on."

The arrow was rather superfluous, as there was nowhere else they could go but forward. In a moment or two they saw an armoured hatch, over it a glowing sign 'Seven A', and beside it a man in white jersey and peaked cap who raised a hand to wave to them. Jeremy tried to walk as if he had done this all his life, but it wasn't easy. There was a tendency to bounce.

"Mr. White? Miss Landis? Welcome aboard. This way, please."

"Thank you. One more to come, I think?"

"No sir. Already aboard. And your baggage. All in order, sir. Just go straight ahead and wait while I shut the hatch." It was a concertina-tube, and then another hatch, but this one was an airlock. The other side of that got them into a circular space with nine-foot headroom and a silent array of human-like shapes. Spacesuits! Equipment lockers! Jeremy felt a tingle. White-suit led them to the central stairway.

"Up is to the Captain's quarters, Mr. Santana's suite, the control and observation rooms and so on. Down this way to the lounge, please. Mr. Santana will be down to

greet you in a little while. Then I'll show you to your cabins, on the deck below that."

The lounge had even more headroom and was greater in diameter, but still circular, with cushioned seats around its periphery, a scatter of chairs, two tables, a reader, an auto-bar, a musicon, a black robe laid aside on one of the couches, and a solitary, tall, slim figure in severely plain, black, hip-length tunic over a shadow-sheer stocking suit . . . turning now with a careful smile and an outstretched hand. Jeremy caught his breath.

"Miss Cranel You?"

She held his hand firmly. "You said a responsible person. I think I can claim to be that. Yet I doubt if there's one other person in the whole organisation less likely to be missed. So why not?"

XI

Jeremy could think of several reasons why not, but none he dared mention here. He fell back on convention, waved to Lissa.

"Miss Crane, this is Lissa Landis, also of Solar News. Visuals and up-to-date reports on the social and fashion scene."

"Hello." Miss Crane extended her hand cordially. "I'm sure I've seen your byline a time or two. I watch cosmetic news a lot. Professionally interested, you know. We make the stuff. Mr. White has told me a lot about you, and I'm sure you can teach me something about my own product. At least how to make use of it. I'm a fool at it, myself."

"Gosh!" Lissa gasped. "I'd be happy to, but really, I couldn't . . . you just don't need . . ." A step on the stair rescued her from the very first confusion Jeremy had ever seen fall on her. He turned, along with the others, to see Miguel Santana come down, still with that rakehell smile and swagger, garbed for the part in a gleaming

white jacket and pants, living the part as he doffed his cap and bowed to Jeremy.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. White. And the so beautiful Miss Landis, very walcome. And . . . ?"

"Miss Abigail Crane, of the Crane Chemical Company. Miguel Santana." Jeremy watched her face intently, saw the momentary lift and twist of an eyebrow, a ghost of a frown, and then that careful smile and the wonderfully controlled voice as she said,

"I have to thank you for this invitation, Mr. Santana, and the opportunity to investigate this dreadful disaster in person."

"A disaster, possibly, but there will be time to think of unpleasant affairs later. For now I must say this is indeed an honour. When Mr. White said someone responsible from your organisation I had no idea he meant one so important. Or attractive. I hope my humble craft will meet with your approval in every way."

"I'm sure it will. Really, the journey is the thing, isn't it? I hope it will be fruitful in some way. When do we start?"

"Immediately. You will excuse me? We jet at once, out to the critical limit, and then twist. That will be in about an hour. There will be an alarm five minutes early, to warn you, because you should all be couched down for the twist moment. It is only for a moment, I assure you. There will be no further discomfort after that."

"Will we sustain this reduced gravitation throughout?"

"Not quite, no. At the moment we have half-gee, in harmony with the Station periphery. Once we are free and clear that will reduce slightly to one-third. That is the economical setting. It is quite acceptable, once one gets accustomed to it. Cartier will show you to your cabins now." He snapped a finger at the white-jerseyed one. "You have the arrangements all there, Cartier?"

"Yes, sir. This way, please."

The steward led the way down the winding stair, with Lissa at his heels, then Miss Crane, and Jeremy bringing

up the rear, itching for the chance to get by himself and think. Miss Crane said, over her shoulder.

"Silly the way they still call this kind of thing a spiral stair when it is really a helix. You'd think everyone would know what a helix looks like by now. And this is a double helix, in fact."

He couldn't think of any suitable comment to that. Instead, in an urgent whisper, he asked, "What did you think of Mr. Santana?"

"I couldn't possibly give an opinion at such slight acquaintance."

"But did he look like anyone you know?"

She stepped off the stairway on to spongy carpeting and turned to wait for him, frowning slightly. "He looked like Chris playing a part. Is that what you mean? Because so would any other tall, lean, suntanned man with wavy hair, blue eyes and a swagger. It's a pose, and Chris used to play it very well. A type. I suppose thousands of others play it too."

"You're probably right." Jeremy felt foolish, moved with her to hear Cartier explaining.

"Observe," he said. "Where the opposing spirals of the ladder meet this level are bathrooms. You will find them completely equipped. This is bathroom 'A'. Observe the numbers, moving to the right, are A 1 which is yours, Miss Landis; A 2 for you, Mr. White, and A 3 is yours Miss Crane . . . and we have come half-circle to bathroom B. And there we have B 1, B 2, and B 3, and that's is all there is to it. It's really very simple. I have only been aboard one day and I know it already."

"Who are the other three guests?" Jeremy asked, taking a better look at Cartier. A possible ally. The steward was tall, youngish, deliberately inconspicuous, bland of countenance as he answered,

"B 1 is Dr. Burton, resident medical officer. B 2 is not in use, is locked, due for refitting I believe. B 3 is Miss Allen's. The decks below this are stores and baggage, more stores, crew's quarters, engine rooms, fuel tanks and so on. I understand this is your first space flight, sir.

Would you like me to show you the various cabin fittings?"

"I would be obliged, yes." Jeremy felt a touch on his arm.

"Then you can show me." Miss Crane said, adding in a whisper. "We have things to talk over, soon."

He nodded, then followed Cartier into the cabin as Miss Landis announced her intention to try out the bathroom and freshen up a little. With the door shut Jeremy asked. "Can we be sure we're not overheard?"

"Not here." Cartier grinned, looking youthful suddenly. "I've checked for that. Too much metal for a radio bug, and a wired one would show. I'll show you the tricks while we talk. The complement, first. Santana runs the ship along with Broz, nominal captain, and first officer Haskell. They live up top. Chief engineer Braden and three power men down below. That's all." He was busy opening and shutting various cabinets and fall-down fittings; then he sat on the couch, which had clicked solidly into place. "That," he pointed, "communicates with A 3, and the other with A 1. Very handy in case of private conferences. Locked on both sides. You'd better explain to the ladies, if you trust them, that is."

"I'll bet on Lissa, any time. I don't know about Miss Crane."

"Nor me." Cartier frowned. "I had the word on Kit Carew being equal to Santana, and I damn near died when she walked up to the hatch ahead of you. I thought the fat was burnt. But she didn't seem to know him."

"Shook me too. She says the resemblance is no more than two men striking a similar attitude. It could be."

"Why is she here anyway, did she tell you that?"

"Nothing to explain." Jeremy admitted. "All logical. But I wish she wasn't all the same. She could be in danger. You know about the will?"

"Yes, I've been told. Anything happens to her, Carew hooks the lot. And if they have Carew sewed up, she is at risk, as you say. But add this into the picture, White. I was watching him when they met, up there. And I will

swear Santana has never met her before, nor did her name ring any bells of doom for her in his mind. And how do you like that? If you're as confused as I am, you have my sympathy. Buzz if you want me for anything."

Jeremy sat a while after he had gone, and the more he thought the less he understood. At last he moved, went out and along, rapped gently on A 3, and went in to her call. She had her couch down and was sitting on it. She had discarded her tunic and freed her hair. To her wrists and throat she was clad only in shadow-sheer stocking, and as she rose to welcome him the lesser gravity did things for her hair and shape, and to his self-control. Twenty-four hours ago he would have claimed to be cynically immune to physical stimulus, but this woman was different in some dangerous way, possibly because she was so utterly indifferent to her appearance. He felt defensive.

"Come and sit," she invited, "we have some talking to do. First I've a confession. You intrigue me. I've thought about you a lot. The idea of an obituary is plausible only at first glance. The guess that Chris would be in at the founding of yet another new colony was reasonable enough. But not your attitude, nor yet the way you so easily went to the heart of the matter. A large corporation like mine has resources. I used them. I had you looked up. With all due respect for your modesty, you are rather special, Mr. White. So why are you chosen to investigate the background of one who was, let's face it, only a hack? A popular hack, admittedly. Why you? And what leverage did you use to stir Miss Allen, and Mr. Santana into this extremity? In fact, why has such a trivial affair bloomed into this?"

"Can I ask one? You're a recluse, someone who keeps out of the light, a mystery woman. So, truly, why did you suddenly decide to come along on this trip in person. Why you?"

He felt warm. Glancing aside at her he saw why. She had gone rosy red again, all over. Through the wispy

black shadow material her skin glowed hot and dark, but her faint smile was as steady as her eyes.

"Time to stop fencing with each other. I thought we had established some kind of rapport. Two of a kind, you and I? I found it pleasant, and I thought you did. Was that just an illusion?"

"I'm sorry." He had to fight for calm against the subtle magic of her appeal, especially her voice. "You're asking for things that aren't mine to give away. Unlike you, I'm not my own boss."

"Then there is something more than just curiosity about Chris." She rose to stand and look at him. "Please, I wouldn't ask you to betray any secrets, but how can it be something I shouldn't know? If there is anything . . . unwholesome connected with Chris . . . I won't like it, possibly, but I won't reject it. I won't run away from it. And I could possibly help!"

She put out her hand to touch his shoulder. He looked up at her and then away, thinking hard. "We're on our way," he said slowly. "In a little while we will be in null space. Out of touch. All in this together. And I believe you to be in danger. For that reason alone, I wish you hadn't come."

"In danger? Me?"

"That's right." He made himself look at her. "I need to know one or two things. About you. You're on the board of Triple-C, have a controlling interest. Triple-C makes a big thing out of the colonial program. How do you feel about that? Should the colonies go ahead and become independent as quickly as possible, or would you rather they stayed tied to Earth's apron-strings? How do *you* feel about it?"

"Oh, dear!" She drew her hand back and stood away from him a pace. "I don't understand . . . but still . . . there are three answers, really. As an industrial unit we support U.N. policy, of course. Certain members of the board aren't too happy about it. For myself, I think the U.N. program is a mistake, but that is purely personal."

"What have you got against it?"

"Simple logic, no more. Independence leads only to nationalism . . . thence to competition, then conflict. Division. War. Is that enough?"

"I don't know." He shook his head at her. "None of this comes out right." He stood up, turned away from her, took a chance. "Miss Crane, there are other people who also object to the colonial program, not for your reasons. People who want to keep the colonies tied and dependent, because it means money and power to them. Wealthy people. Secretly supporting and financing an organisation known as the Interstellar Cartel. An organisation devoted to subtle propaganda and constant if small sabotage, the fomenting of unrest and dissension, discomfort, breakdowns, accidents and rumours . . . even to the total destruction of an entire colony, just to threaten the official program and to ensure that the colonies remain dependent."

Her touch came on his shoulder and he turned. She was very close, urgent, eyes widely appealing to him. "You don't really believe I could be part of such a group? Initiating violence? Direct action? I'm a bystander like you. Remember?"

"All right," he mumbled, "I'll believe that. But your brother was in it. Working for it. Loading his stuff with propaganda on their side. Paid by them. Kept by them. Helped by them. That's the underside of it, Miss Crane. That's what I have to find out—whether or not that belief is true. I can't tell you any more than that. It's just a belief at the moment, on good grounds, but I have to underline it, if I can. Or prove it false, of course, if it is."

Her glow had gone. She was very pale, very still, and only the quick swell of her bosom to indicated agitation. "I find it hard to accept. That even Chris could sink so low. I would want very good proof of that. But you said I was in danger. How is that?"

"A string of ifs." He had himself in hand now, was watching her very carefully. "If Kit Carew is actually in with the Cartel, working for them—and if you aren't in it, as you say and I have to believe—then it is very much

in their interest that he stays alive. That could be why Santana and Miss Allen are so insistent that he is alive. And why it would be very very convenient for them if something fatal happened to you. Because of your father's will, Miss Crane."

She went quite still now, barely whispering. "What do you know about that, Mr. White. My father's will?"

"I looked you up," he said flatly. "If anything happens to you, Chris gets everything. A controlling interest in Triple-C. And wouldn't they like that! With those millions added to what they already have, they could kill the colony program dead, anytime! So you could be in grave danger."

"I don't believe it. Any of it. That Chris would deliberately connive at the destruction of a colony. Five hundred people! Or that he would want to have any hand in killing me! You can't believe that!"

"I don't know what to believe," he confessed, and her stillness broke suddenly into heaving agitation as she ran close to him, caught his hands and pressed them to her breast. "Look . . . you're rich and powerful, and not stupid, and yet you tell me you never even heard of the Cartel. Kit Carew is your own brother, and you claim you know nothing about him, either. I have good reasons for believing that he is or was in with Miss Allen, and Santana, and others, a bunch of saboteurs. I'm following that trail . . . and now here you are . . . and I don't know what to believe. Except this. That if I have read you wrong then I've delivered myself into your hands."

Her eyes held his for a long while. He could feel the steady bump of her heart against his hands. Then colour came to her cheeks again and she smiled. "How dramatic. Delivered into my hands! It's nothing like that. I'm not that sort of person. But I am on your side. I do want to help. Please tell me what I can do?"

He freed himself clumsily and stood away from the heat that threatened to melt him. "Nothing much we can do, right now, except play it straight off the top. Nobody so far is admitting any connexion between you and Kit

Carew, so we'll let it run like that until something happens."

Something happened. A chime came to destroy the moment by saying, "Five minutes to twist. Passengers will please couch down. Five minutes . . ."

"That's it," he said. "We can talk again some other time. Just one more thing. That door communicates with my cabin. It's unlocked on my side. Just in case, any time, you feel we ought to talk without advertising it."

She went to it, tried the handle, and swung it open, turned to him with a smile. "I feel like a conspirator. An agent. More drama. It will be unlocked on my side too. In fact, why not use it now?"

He moved to pass her, and she touched his arm gently. "Thank you for trusting me inside your secrets. We are still two of a kind, yes?"

"I didn't want to get you involved."

"But I am, like it or not. And I feel safer, now."

He went on through, closed the door after him and fell on his couch, just to lie there and not even try to arrange his feelings. The minutes went away, there came another chime, and then an utterly impossible sensation of suddenly contracting in on himself and spinning down into a hole . . . that was gone almost before he was properly aware of it. Twist. Into an impossible kind of space-time that broke all the rules of existence. He found a weird parallel between that and his own inner turmoil, and lay there thinking about it until Cartier came to rap on his door and announce that there would be an informal meal, in the lounge, in fifteen minutes. That stirred him to move, to shower and change, and get back into something like a normal frame of mind. The table in the lounge was set for six, with five places already filled, and one vacant between Miss Crane and Lissa. *There* was a contrast, right away. Lissa, imbued with the yachting spirit, had on a blue-and-white striped shirt that she wouldn't have been seen dead in, otherwise. Abigail Crane managed to look regal in a simple sleeveless white tunic cut square at the neck.

"I'd better do the introductions," she said, waving a hand, "Captain Broz." Jeremy remembered the wooden face, nodded. "Dr. Burton." A small scanty-haired, harassed looking man who made a five second smile and shut it off abruptly. "And of course, you've met Miss Allen."

XII

She looked sullen and smouldering in a Cretan style bodice crusted with diamonds that were probably real and which gave free play to her breasts, which, in this reduced gravity, were almost embarrassingly prominent, and almost certainly unreal, almost ridiculously large. She didn't seem to think so. She lifted them arrogantly at Jeremy and made a smile for him.

"I remember you," she said, as if that was something special. "I'm glad you came. I get so damned bored, cooped up on this tub with nothing to do. Cartier . . . can you whip up something to settle this head of mine? Not too foul, mind. Hair of the dog and something else, you know what I mean?"

Jeremy, seeking something to break the awful atmosphere, aimed a direct question at Broz, and the Captain took his stolid time about it.

"Not seven days, Mr. White. You are thinking in terms of large mass freight, perhaps? At a rough estimate I would say our twist duration will be forty hours. The exact time will have to wait until we can make some in-flight refinements to the calculations. Compared with a colony freighter our moss is quite small, but of course we are carrying extra fuel, so that introduces complications which have to be calculated. Mr. Santana is doing that at the moment."

"Oh, I didn't realise that he was qualified."

"Yes indeed." Broz remained imperturbable. "Mr. Santana is a fully qualified master pilot. In fact he com-

manded a section of the relay flight to the very first colony, Centaurus. You must get him to tell you about it, sometime." Lissa broke in to ask.

"Would he mind if I took pictures, tapes of the ship? Interiors, crew, control rooms, things like that?"

"I can see no reason why not, but of course you must ask him yourself!"

"Not me!" Burton snapped. "No pictures of me, please! For professional reasons. I'm sure you understand!" There was finality in the tone.

"Nor me, darling." Miss Allen declared. "Not just yet, anyway. I feel an absolute wreck! Later on, perhaps."

"Oh, no!" Jeremy winced inwardly at the way Lissa poured on the syrup. "You look just wonderful to me, right now. And that bolero is just right, it's you, exactly. Greek, isn't it?"

"Cretan, darling. A perfect copy of a goddess garment. D'you like it, really? I had it specially made. I like off-the-bosom styles. They're so free and flattering, don't you think. My God, Cartier! What the hell's in this brew? Fission fuel?"

"Milk, vitamin B complex, tomato juice . . . and just a dash of Scotch, Miss. I think you'll find it effective."

She eyed the glass, shuddered hugely, then gulped down the rest of it and made a face. Then she inhaled enormously and nodded. "You may be right. It does something. I think I could look at some solid food."

"Yes, Miss. May I suggest scrambled eggs as being not too demanding?"

"That's good. Not too demanding is about right. You ever have that fragile feeling, Mr. White? Jeremy?"

"Only once." Jeremy admitted. "Years ago. Never again!"

"Something you could learn, to your advantage." Burton snapped, and Miss Allen turned on him with a smile that had no mirth in it at all.

"When I need your opinion, on anything, I'll ask!"

Jeremy surprised a faint flicker of amusement across Broz's wooden features and wondered at it. Abigail came

into the painful silence with a neutral comment about strange chemical effects, and the conversation lost its strain by slow degrees. He was surprised to discover that Abigail knew more than a little basic chemistry . . . and wondered why he was surprised . . . but most of his attention was gone into wondering what it was that Broz had said that had made his mind itch. He couldn't find it.

After lunch the word came down from Santana that it was in order to take pictures, so Lissa went and unpacked her teletape cameras, and Miss Allen recovered enough of her spirits to prove herself a thorough camera-hog. What with her utterly uninhibited posturing at every possible opportunity, and her equally uninhibited assault on Jeremy's senses, plus the fact that she was not at all accustomed to failing to have her own way, he was profoundly thankful when Ship's 'time' indicated an hour that he could reasonably describe as late.

"It's been a big day for me," he said, with absolute truth. "I need to catch up on sleep. There'll be another day tomorrow."

"If you get lonesome and want someone to talk to," Miss Allen murmured, with all the subtlety of a meat axe, "my cabin's B 3. You won't find it locked, and you won't disturb me one little bit. Any time!"

He had stretched out on his couch and was beginning to order his mind when a tap on his door brought him sighing to his feet again. But it was Cartier, this time, thoughtfully carrying two glasses.

"Steward is the ideal job for snooping," he said. "I've been feeling out moods. Bits and pieces. This is a curious ship."

"How?" Jeremy demanded, patience wearing thin.

"There's a lot more capacity than you'd think. Not for passengers. Storage. Down there. Extra fuel is only part of it, and she has carried that before. And recently."

"How do you know that?" Jeremy grew curious now.

"Recent marks on paint. Pipelines free of dust. Valve settings. I checked it out. Got Braden well-lubricated and talking. They don't see a damn thing down there, you

know. Who'd be an engineer? No screens, no portholes, nothing. Don't know what goes on."

"Spare me the build-up. What did you find out?"

"It's like this. Braden's gang isn't any too chipper right now. They don't have a thing to do down there, you know, except polish brass and watch the gauges. Except during twist. Which is usually brief. Then minutes to the Moon. Half-hour to Mars. An hour to Ganymede. That's the sort of thing they are used to. So forty hour stretch it 'work' for them. Constant watch. And they have only just done that stretch, twice over!"

"They what?" Jeremy was all attention now. Cartier nodded.

"They took on extra fuel and did a forty *to* somewhere. They hung about doing some jet-mass manoeuvres for an hour or two. Then they did another forty *back*. And they were all set, confidently expecting some shore time after the routine shakedown and secure. And then, up comes more fuel and now this. They are not pleased!"

Jeremy stared at him. "That sounds like a trip to Beta Hydri and back again. Doesn't it?"

"Don't jump at it." Cartier warned. "The times are approximate. It could just as easily be Delta Pavonis. Or 82 Eridani. There's only a light-year or two in it."

"Any clue as to why they stopped and messed about?"

"Nothing on that. I told you, the store space down there is huge, and it's all remote-controlled from the bridge. It could have been supplies, or even contraband of some kind."

"Contraband? In this day and age?"

"It happens. All the colonies have hot laws about importing weirdo drugs, for instance, or unapproved seeds . . ."

"No!" Jeremy interrupted. He had found his itch now. "Forty hours. Of course! It was Beta Hydri, Cartier. I'll bet on it. Remember the news flash? The beacon had been silent forty hours when we got it. And the whole thing adds up, doesn't it?"

Cartier suddenly looked very grim and not at all youth-

ful. "I'll buy that," he said. "That's too many coincidences in a row for me. And Santana is taking us back there to look, so he is either very confident, or he doesn't give a damn. We could be in bad trouble."

"That I already knew. At least, though, we now know who . . ."

"Don't jump at that, either, White. With all the money involved in this caper I don't even trust you *all* the way, and nobody else at all"

When he had gone Jeremy slid himself inside the sleeping bag of his couch and commanded his brain to switch off and sleep. And it did, but he had dreams . . . funny frightening dreams in which Lissa Landis had somehow grown herself an enormous pair of balloon-breasts and was pursuing him, pushing the immense globes in front of her and calling, 'All for you, darling Jeremy, I did it all for you!' At breakfast he was quite relieved to see no discernible alteration in Lissa's already generous contours, even if they were modestly hidden. Abigail was her usual placid self, wreathed in her white tunic. He deduced that the two had made some mutual agreement to leave the overblown display all to Miss Allen.

Santana didn't show his face at all until late 'lunchtime' that day. Apparently he was working 'tricks' with the other two, and Jeremy took that as a cue into some questions. Burton had skipped the meal and there were only the three women and Miguel present as he said,

"I owe you something of an apology, Mr. Santana. Going by gossip I had you marked as some kind of play-boy. Captain Mroz told us you're really a fully qualified master pilot, that you were actually on the first Centaurus run. That was quite a historical occasion!"

"Not quite true, unfortunately." Santana made a fake-modest gesture perfectly in keeping with his pose. "You must have misunderstood Broz. No, I was with the second relay, the follow-up supply ships. A very small part, really. There had been the original research team, you know, and then the actual colony party. We were just

bringing in the second wave of material. Nothing spectacular, except that it gave me the chance to meet Kit Carew!"

"Nothing spectacular?" Abigail queried. "But that is an adventure all by itself, surely? Do tell us about it, Mr. Santana!"

"Be careful, Miguel!" Miss Allen warned, and he smiled at her.

"My dear Fanny, of course I will. Fanny is afraid I might betray Kit Carew's secrets. You all know, of course, that secrecy is vital to his work. I have to respect that. However, since I have made some rather positive remarks about him, largely as the result of which we are all here, it is perhaps as well that I explain a little. Mr. White and Miss Landis are in the same kind of profession and will, I am sure, respect this confidence. I think I can say the same for you, Miss Crane?"

"I shan't gossip, certainly, but I am interested, still."

"Very well." Santana cocked his head on one side reflectively. "We were landed, and almost completely unloaded. Just outside the main settlement. The third planet of Alpha Centaurus B is a beautiful place, quite unspoiled. I believe there is some plan in progress for naming it New Eden. All the colonies have this problem. One can't go on naming them for their parent stars, after all. Well, it was around midday and we were, as I say, almost unloaded. I was taking a breath by the gangway just before lunch, when I was accosted by a colonist. It happened regularly. Many of them were keen to talk, to gossip about home. But this chap was different. For just one thing he was remarkably like me! Indeed! Apart, of course, from this." Santana flicked a delicate gesture to his eyepatch. "And a highly amusing rogue to talk to. Oh yes, a rogue!"

Santana chuckled reminiscently. "He tried spinning me the most outrageous yarn about struggle and hardship and so on. I listened. I could tell he was a gentleman. One can. Also he was an arrant liar. But he certainly could tell the tale. I liked him. In fact I may even claim

to have been his inspiration, you know. You see, I said to him, 'If you could only catch the flavour of that on tape, it would make excellent fiction!' And then he confided that he had already done something of the kind, and that what he was really after was some way of getting back to Earth, to sell it!"

"So that's how he did it!" Jeremy grinned. "That's always been the puzzle. It's one thing getting to a colony. It is something quite different and a lot harder, getting back, what with immigration and all that."

"I hope I haven't given too much away. Of course, Carew has been working some similar kind of dodge ever since. And we have remained friends. I must say I was rather astonished when he produced his first work . . . and passed it off as truth! Because, of course, colonial life isn't at all like that. But there you are, that's his business, and he's doing very well. I only wish to make the point, Mr. White, that I do know him."

"And now you've spoiled it," Lissa complained. "You're saying it's all lies, all of it!"

"Not quite, my dear Miss Landis. Dramatised a little, possibly a trifle exaggerated. Literary license . . . eh, Mr. White?"

"But just a moment." Abigail came in quietly. "Isn't that tantamount to saying there is no danger at all in setting up a colony on an alien planet?"

"Of course! That is surely obvious. In your position you must know, as I do, that Earth type planets are very carefully and thoroughly researched before any colony program is arranged and agreed on. There is no real prospect of danger, no alien monsters or weird intelligences, or anything like that."

"Quite so. Except that the Beta Hydri beacon is silent, and the whole purpose of this trip of ours is to find out why, isn't it?"

Santana shrugged delicately. "You have a point, certainly. But for my part, once I had heard just some of the ridiculous rumours that Mr. White had heard, and realised the intolerable nuisance an official enquiry might

bring, I was prepared to perform this trip . . . simply because I am quite sure all we will find . . . is a defect. Some mischance. Something quite rational and sane. I shall be exceedingly surprised if it is anything more."

"I think we all hope that," Jeremy agreed. "Even if that makes the whole journey a waste of time, at least it will clear the air!"

"Not a waste of time, for me!" Santana made candid eyes at Lissa. "My pleasure, believe me. It is my regret only that we do not have more facilities for entertainment. However, perhaps you would be interested to see around the bridge and control machinery. And take pictures, Miss Landis? It would be my pleasure to conduct you in person."

Jeremy wasn't all that interested, especially as there was almost nothing to see except mysterious panels, flickering lights, and steely blank screens. He did meet first officer Haskell for the first time, but it was no great thrill, as Haskell was as wooden as Broz. A little taller, and leaner, but just as uncommunicative outside his professional duties. Santana, on the other hand, was in his element.

"This is where it all happens," he declared, embracing the instrumentation with a sweeping arm. "The rule book says we must have engineers, so we have them; a doctor, so we have one . . . archaic nonsense! One man, here, can do everything. And, when there is something to see, he can see everything. That screen forward, this one aft, others for periphery . . . a mobile camera for searching. Detectors. Remote controls. Everything!"

Jeremy listened and looked, and wondered, juggling pieces in his head and trying to make them fit. Whatever it was between Santana and Frances Allen, it was more than physical, for Santana was obviously making a big play for Lissa, and right under Miss Allen's nose . . . while she made no secret at all of her designs on himself. And he was growing a trifle weary of fending those off. Something had to come to a head soon . . . but he hadn't the ghost of a clue as to just what it was going to be.

They passed the long afternoon in viewing the tapes Lissa had already taken, on the reader in the lounge. Ostensibly this was merely a check on technique, camera performance and lighting, but it was distinctly disturbing to him to sit back and see himself from the outside. A new viewpoint also showed him things he had missed, like the occasional unguarded glances in his direction from Frances . . . and a time or two from Abigail. She seemed to have been watching him with wonder and some bafflement.

"We'll cut a lot of that!" Lissa declared. "And just keep the more factual, documentary bits. The register is fine. The sound was a bit off, but that's always the way in a confined space. Echoes. The technical boys can filter a lot of that. Otherwise . . . tomorrow's the big day, isn't it? You know, I just can't get the feeling that we are hurrying towards a big tragedy. Maybe Mr. Santana was right!"

Jeremy wished he had the same blithe innocence. He could feel tension winding up like a watch-spring. But then, before he could devise some harmless comment, here came Cartier with apologetic news.

"Mr. Santana's compliments. There will be an adjustment in the ship-time, effective immediately. E.T.A. of twist-out is eight hours and fifteen minutes from now. That will now be eight A.M., which makes the present time fifteen minutes to midnight. Mr. Santana suggests everyone should get a good night's sleep. The twist-out warning will be at seven forty-five, new time."

With which, he proceeded to take orders for last drinks, and Jeremy felt a sense of letdown. Routine. As if there was nothing at all abnormal anywhere. And, on the cold hard facts, that was true. The rest of it was all a tissue of guesswork, assumptions and suspicions. He was so engrossed in reviewing it all in his mind that it was a shock to come to and see that he was all alone in the lounge, except for Cartier, busy clearing away the signs of revelry. Jeremy drained his glass and stood.

"We'll soon know," he said gloomily.

"Right. And a tip, White. If you do happen to see anything at all suspicious, not the way it ought to be . . . anything at all . . . for your life, keep shut about it. Save it until we get back. If Santana is laying some charade on for us—and we see through it—and he sees we do—that's the last thing we'll ever see."

"As bad as that?"

"Don't you have any nerves?" Cartier demanded. "I can feel mine like piano wires. And count the opposition, will you? The Allen empire and the Triple-C empire and Negocio Brazilia!"

"But somebody will ask questions if anything happens to us."

"And that kind of money can buy some very fancy answers, afterwards, long after we have ceased to care one way or the other. Get scared, White, it's healthier that way. And don't talk too much!"

That advice, Jeremy thought, as he made his way down the helical stair, was a trifle late. He had already talked too much, in one sense. As he came to the last step and turned to his cabin a hiss at his back made him turn, to see Frances Allen in the half-open door of her room, waving.

"We have to talk," she said throatily. "Come on, it's quiet!"

He had no way to dodge, now. She waved again, impatiently. He saw no help for it, shrugged, and went to her. She stood aside to let him pass, into her cabin, and closed the door after herself.

XIII

Take away the abundant frills on everything, and the cloying perfume, and this cabin was the mirror of his own. Except that it seemed obvious she had occupied it for some considerable time. No sleeping bag on her couch, but a billow of pale green sheets and more frills.

She brushed past him, took his arm, drew him with her to the couch, pushed him down on it and settled herself before him on a low blow-up stool. She was, he judged, very solidly drunk, in that super-serious, owl-eyed state that comes somewhere between the staggers and the total blackout. She was draped in something shapeless and green-blue transparent that was already half-fallen from her shoulders.

"What do we talk about?" he asked, and she lowered one heavy eyelid.

"That blowhard Santana! Hear him talk. He gave Kit his start, hah! Friendship? You want a snake for a friend, you pick Miguel."

"It wasn't true, then?"

"Part of it was. He gets Kit home. That's all right. They can look alike, see, when they want to. Cover identity. But not for friendship. He does it because I tell him to, see?"

"You tell him? What is Kit Carew to you?"

She swayed on the stool, became grotesquely sad. "My man. My Kit! The only real man I ever met, damn him! Mine. I keep him, care for him. I give him a home and love. Myself! My bed! Everything! You understand that? That's what I do for a man, a real man. I could do a lot for a man like you, Jeremy. You're a real man, too."

"You're not married to him, are you?" He ignored her advances, her sliding robes. "Are you?"

"What the hell for? He gets everything else he wants. When he's home, damn him! Always off to some damn colony or other. Home! That's more than his relatives ever gave him, hey?"

"Relatives? You mean Kit Carew's family. You know them?"

"Ah!" she looked cunning now. "I know. I'm not stupid. You think I'm stupid, Jeremy? I'm not. I like you."

"If he's your man, what do you want with me?" He knew he had a lot of possible keys right here in his hand, but he was too disgusted to place them in any

locks. He wanted to get out. "How many men *do* you want?"

"Only one, right now. You! God . . . when is Kit ever home? He's my man, but when is he ever home? Right now he. . . ." She halted herself, put on that cunning look again. "You'd be surprised where he is, right now. But let's not talk about him. Let's us have fun, Jeremy. Just us!"

She heaved up from the stool and right out of the transparent wrapper, blatantly exhibiting herself to him, and he did a fast wriggle aside and away, to back against the communicating door. A way out? It felt unlocked, but then he remembered that it was locked on the outside. She rotated unsteadily and stared at him, opening her arms and inviting him.

"Come and get me, darling," she mumbled. "All yours. . . ." He put out a hand to fend her off and slid past again, to the outside door this time. She reeled and fell clumsily on her couch, rolled over to the floor, and got up, with an effort. She shook her head then peered at him through a tangle of wild hair. "You're giving me the brush-off!" she said incredulously. "Me! You can't do that! What are you, some kind of queer?"

"Not in your sense, no. I'm no pet poodle, either."

"You're stuck on somebody else? That baby-faced Landis? What can she do for you? My God, she can't be any more than eighteen! An innocent! You're a mature man. You need a real woman. Like me. I've forgotten more tricks than she will ever know. Take a look, darling. . . ."

"I'm looking!" Jeremy began to sweat, and rage inside. "I'm not impressed. You may be rich, Miss Allen, but you're not wearing your money at the moment, and that could be your big mistake. You have very little else. For your information, Miss Landis is one year younger than you. If you look old enough to be her mother that's because she has forgotten a few tricks that *you* never knew. Like when to stop. Again for your information, she is a good friend and professional colleague. Nothing more."

She was breathing heavily now, and rage contorted her face, making it positively ugly, but his cold insults hadn't shifted the bee in her bonnet. "If it's not the baby-doll then it has to be the Ice Maiden. Abigail! Hah! There's a laugh. For God's sake . . . Abigail!" She stood there and laughed, shaking all over. He endured the revolting experience for just thirty seconds, then strode forward and used the palm of his hand to stinging effect, so that she staggered and fell back on to her couch again, a hand to her face.

"You hit me!" she gasped. "You *hit* me!"

"You are drunk, possibly doped, certainly hysterical, quite possibly all three. Get yourself to bed and sleep it off. And forget about trying anything like that on me again. I'm not your type!"

"Forget?" she mumbled, past her hand. "I won't forget. You'll pay for this, pretty boy. You'll pay. You and the Ice Maiden. Think you have a catch there, do you? You'll find out, damn you all to hell!"

He slipped the door open and went out, closing it gently, to cross the cabin flat and into his own door, to flop on his couch and sweat. And revile himself for a fool. A reporter? He had an inside witness right in the palm of his hand, loose-tongued and ready to spill all sorts of things, and what did he do? He rolled over and sat disconsolately with his feet on the floor. "I blew it!" he said aloud and bitterly. "I came all over delicate and blew it. And when we get back I am going straight to the Old Man and resign. I'm no good at all!"

"I wouldn't go *that* far!" a perky voice declared, and he whirled around to see Lissa standing in the communicating door. "Handy, this door," she went on, coming all the way in and leaving it open behind her.

"Meant to tell you about it," he mumbled. "Just in case you had need to pop in and talk to me about anything."

"That is the nearest you've ever come to making an interesting proposition to me. Must be the yacht atmosphere."

"Don't you start," he muttered, looking up at her. In

her negligibly brief night attire she looked wholesome enough to eat, compared with what he had just left. But there was astonishment on her face and he repaired his tone. "I'm sorry, Liss. Didn't mean to snap at you. Come and sit." She settled beside him and on impulse he put his arm around her affectionately. "What's on your mind?"

"You, mostly." She snuggled close. "You're worried about something, I can tell. There's something queer about this whole trip. I know I'm not supposed to ask questions, but it would help if I knew a little about what is going on. I know I'm supposed to be along as eyes and ears and take pix, and that's about all. But the atmosphere is thick. I can feel it."

"You're dead right, Liss. I wish you weren't here . . . nothing personal, not like that . . . but there's danger. It could be nasty."

"But how can that all be involved with a man like Kit Carew? That's the bit I don't get. Why all this fuss, over a few tape cassettes?"

"It's more than that, Liss, a lot more. Kit Carew was involved in big business. Dirty big business. Remember saying that Santana had spoiled all the romance in Kit Carew by pointing out the *real* side of colony life, that it isn't dangerous, just dull hard work, and that Carew had hotted it all up just to make it sell? Well, it seems to have been more than that. He was being paid—not necessarily in money—to paint that kind of picture, to make colony life sound dangerous and dependent on Earth's help and good will. Because a lot of wealthy people get a lot of their wealth—and their power—from supplying the captive market of the colonies. Government contracts, Liss. Real *big* money. Big people, too. Like the Allen family . . . and Negocio Brazilia. And Triple-C. To name just a few."

He felt her shiver and snuggle even closer. "So that was the screw you were turning on Santana. And her. They couldn't stand an enquiry."

"Right. That's why they jumped at this chance to have

us personally investigate Beta Hydri, see for ourselves there's nothing wrong."

"But if there's nothing wrong your story all falls apart, doesn't it?"

"Which also makes this whole affair ridiculous. Which can only mean there is something very plausible and convincing laid on for us . . . that we are not supposed to see through. Because if we do . . . we aren't likely to get the chance to tell anybody about it. So, Liss, if you do happen to see anything anywhere out of line . . . don't shout about it, eh? That's how stupid this whole affair is. Double bluff."

"Most of life is stupid," she murmured, "if you look real hard at it. Like now. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow, who knows." She wriggled and turned her face up to him, caught his lips in a savage kiss, held it a long breath, then said, unsteadily, "We couldn't want a better excuse for forgetting what nice people we are, right?"

"Right. But we're stupid too, in our own way. Sorry about that."

"I know. A couple of fools. I'd like to try another . . ." She helped herself generously, with his cooperation, and sighed again. "This could be habit-forming. As I was saying, a couple of fools, but you're a bigger one than I am. You just said *all* the big money is on the other side."

"Until we know different, that's the safe assumption."

"Safe, maybe. But I'm female, Jerry. I have eyes. I've seen her looking at you, and not as an enemy, believe me!"

"Who . . . Fanny Allen? That doesn't mean a thing. She owns Kit Carew, and she would like to own me. I'd sooner be dead!"

"No, not her!" Lissa almost spat. "That tramp! She makes me ashamed of my own sex! Not her . . . Miss Cranel!"

"Don't be a fool!" He took his arm away swiftly and she chuckled.

"Who are you trying to fool, reacting like that? It's true!"

"Even if it was . . . she's a million years away from me, Liss."

"Now you're really crazy, Jerry. She's just a woman. Like me."

"No she isn't." Jerry sighed and put his arm back where it had been. "Something else you didn't know, Liss. I'm after Kit Carew, to expose him as a traitor and a saboteur, hooked in with the big money . . . and there's not much doubt about that, now. So I could be the instrument that blackens his name, ruins him for good and all. And Kit Carew just happens to be her own kin, her brother. That's how it is."

"Oh God!" Lissa slid out from his arm and stood, all in one angry movement, her cherubic face twisted in distress. "Why does life always have to serve up a stinking mess for the nice people?"

"It's all right." He stood up and faced her, held her close, smiled down at her. "Don't worry about it. I'll survive it . . . or not, as the case may be." Her lips were tempting, and willing, and the kiss was a long one. Breaking free at last he whispered, "You better go, Liss, before I forget I'm supposed to be a good guy."

"If I thought there was any danger of that, I'd stay. One for the road, huh?" She had one for the road, long enough to take his breath, and then she was gone, leaving him to his thoughts. A stinking mess, she had called it, and he had to agree as he peeled out of his suit and down to his skin, and sat again, shaking his head at the tangle. In that moment his own personal survival seemed to matter very little. It was as if tomorrow was an edge, and as he tried to see beyond it, there was nothing to look at. In no way, no possible permutation, could the future hold any allure. It's me, he mused. I'm all wrong. Whatever happens, I can't win!

The clock on the bulkhead showed fourteen minutes to one, and morning was already here, but never had he felt less like sleep. As he was dropping his head again, de-

jectedly, there came a gentle tapping sound and he looked up in astonishment to see Abigail Crane, her head cautiously around the half-open interconnecting door.

"May I come in, please? I wanted to talk."

"Why not?" he muttered. "It's getting to be a habit. You'll excuse my not being dressed for it. I wasn't expecting you."

"Oh, *that's* all right," she said, closing the door after her and coming across to him, loosing the cords of her plain white robe, twirling out of it, discarding it, and standing before him to look down and smile. "This is so pleasant, just as we were before. I feel closer to you like this, with nothing between us." He looked up at her nakedness and was unmoved. All her magic was gone, somehow, under the label of perfection. Perfection equals ideal equals unattainable.

"What did you want to talk about?"

"A confession, first. I overheard . . . just now . . . only odd words, not in any detail. I mean . . . I had my door a little way open, so that I would know when you were alone. I didn't want to intrude. One respects other people's conventions, even if one finds them trivial."

"If convention was worrying you, wouldn't it have been smarter to come in while she was here?"

"Oh!" she sounded startled. "I hadn't thought of that. I thought . . ." He waited in silence, deliberately not helping. "I didn't want to intrude," she said lamely.

"You wouldn't have. Liss is a good friend, a professional colleague, and sensitive. She was worried. I had to tell her a little of the true situation. She's more worried now, but at least she knows what about. Now, what's on your mind?"

"It's difficult to put in words. I feel rather a fool!"

"That's my line. What have you got to feel foolish about?"

"You sound angry . . . about something. Won't you ask me to sit?"

"I'm short on chairs. You're welcome to half my couch."

"Thank you." She moved, settled by his side but not

touching him. "I said I feel . . . foolish. I just wanted to be with you, to hear you. I feel suddenly alone. I don't know how else to put it. I have never before felt as close to anyone as I do to you . . . and everything is so . . . odd . . . on this ship. The people, the whole atmosphere, feels wrong. You're the only person I feel I can understand . . . so I wanted to talk to you . . . but now you seem angry about something. Different. Perhaps I'd better go?"

"That's up to you, isn't it?"

In some uncanny way, without looking, he knew she had gone 'still', in that peculiar way of hers. "There is something wrong," she said, very quietly, cello-soft, "isn't there? Please tell me. Please let me help."

"I'll tell you," he said deliberately, suddenly feeling the-hell-with-it reckless, "but whether or not you can help is something else." He turned his head now, to see her face very close, her eyes huge and steady. "But let's make a slight adjustment, first. Let's be really close to each other." He moved his arm, put it around her waist, and drew her closer, until her thigh lay alongside his and the warmth of her flesh tingled against his arm. She wriggled with his hold, her eyes still steady, the pupils dilating into hugeness, and then, slowly, slid her arm around him in her turn.

"Morituri te salutant," he murmured. "It changes things."

"We who are about to die?" she translated wonderingly. "Whatever do you mean by that? What have you found out?"

"Quite a lot. Too much for comfort. How's your arithmetic?" He gave her, briefly, the forty hour sequences he and Cartier had worked out, and she hung on his every word intently.

"You're sure of this?" she whispered, finding his hand where it lay flat on her stomach, and gripping it tightly. "Quite sure?"

"Sure. And something else. Now we know how Kit Carew manages to get away from the colonies each time.

Now we know why Santana is so certain Kit Carew is alive. Because he went and got him, and brought him back, after he had done what he had to do. On Beta Hydri."

All at once she moved, strongly, twisting away from him to rise and stand and stare down, shivering and panting with emotion. "That is not true. I can't believe it. It's too horrible. Chris wouldn't have any part in destroying a whole colony. He's a swine . . . but not a monster!"

"All right." He looked up at her and shrugged indifferently. "Your arithmetic is different from mine, that's all. I finish my sums this way. I don't know what charade Santana has laid on for us, but I do know that either it will fool us into believing all is well, and we will so report back to Earth, to get him and Fanny Allen off the hook . . . or we will see the holes in it, and he will arrange for something accidental and fatal to happen to us that will take care of it. By 'us' I mean Liss and me. Not you. You are Abigail Crane. In the big league. You're a different proposition."

To his slight surprise she got angry. Setting her feet firmly apart, fists on hips, she glared down at him with eyes like beacons. "You will explain that last remark. At once!"

"All you need is a whip," he said quietly. "All right, like this. They will try to do a deal with you. They know too much, you see? They can twist your arm. They know about the will. They will remind you that if anything happens to you, brother Chris gets Triple-C. And she's got him, in the worst way. In her pocket . . . in her bed . . . in the palm of her hand. That is simple fact. I had it from the lady herself, while she was trying to add me to her collection. And if you add Triple-C to the Allen empire, *and* Negocio Brazilia, the colonial program is finished, you know that. You wouldn't like that. You'd hate the thought of Chris taking over and selling out . . . so you could buy your life by playing sensible and co-operating with them. And you would keep your mouth

shut because they could always blow the big stink about Kit Carew being your brother. That's how they would twist your arm, Abigail. You can't win. Like me. They've got you, coming and going."

All her anger had gone as fast as it had blown up. "They wouldn't dare to kill me," she said, but not as if she believed it. He laughed at a sudden irreverent thought.

"They might not have to. If they could fix it so that you had to get married. That would do just as well. Maybe better!"

XIV

"Married?" she echoed, saying it as if it was a foreign word.

"That's right, married. It would serve the same purpose. Chris would get Triple-C, and that would be it." He felt reckless again, rose to his feet to face her, smiling cynically. "You talk about feeling close to me. If you felt about me the way I feel about you . . . but that would make you a pauper, wouldn't it? And you wouldn't want that, would you? And you said you wanted to help. And to be with me, hahl!"

"Marry!" she said again, almost to herself.

"That's right!" he threw it at her savagely. "Marry! It's fantastic, isn't it, that a slob like me, a nobody-nothing, might have persistent dreams about marrying you? Isn't it?" And then his fire died into resignation. "Of course it is. You probably spend more on one of your fancy plants than I earn in a year! Stupid, isn't it? Me, I mean. A fool. My line, that."

She did that 'still as a statue' trick of hers again, only no statue could ever colour itself all over a glow-rose pink as she did. Then her breast heaved in sudden agitation.

"Oh, Jeremy! I've wanted to call you Jeremy for so long . . . why are you so bitter?"

"Bitter . . . stupid . . . what's the difference?"

She came forward in fluid motion, throwing her arms about him, holding him, straining herself close to him. "Please listen," she breathed, and now all her fiery magic struck at him, unsettling him, "while I confess again. I haven't thought about marriage in ages. Because of that will, and something my father told me. I've done you harm, he said, by being rich . . . and by making you rich. You'll never know, now, whether a man is in love with you, or your money. And after he had explained it, we worked out the will between us." She laughed unsteadily and he felt the shake of it, the trembling of her body as she clung close. "It worked. There have been men, one or two, who might have interested me . . . but as soon as they learned of the will, they lost interest. So I have been saved. But I learned not to think much about marriage. Or men. Can you blame me for that?"

"No," he sighed, and it seemed right for him to put his arms around her, and for them just to stand there, happily, in silence, for a long time. "I'm sorry," he said, at last, "I know how you must have thought. About men, I mean. I've had similar thoughts about women. I've been married, once."

"Yes, I know. I had you looked up, remember?"

That seemed to take care of that. For a while. Then she stirred, wriggled against him. "Jeremy . . . if I marry I become a pauper . . . you knew that . . . was that why . . . you didn't say anything, or do anything . . . like this . . . before? Did it matter?"

"Never gave it a thought, Abigail. It just never occurred to me that someone like you could have a second thought about someone like me. Never! And now that I have thought of it . . . it's even more ridiculous. Why would you give up everything you have, for somebody like me? What have I got to offer you?"

"Something," she whispered, and there was a subtle change in her face, as if an inner veil had lowered itself, shutting him out of her secrets. "You have something . . . something you can do for me. Listen, please. This is a

ship, isn't it? And the old law holds good, doesn't it? The captain can perform marriages?" He didn't get it for a moment. She hurried on, a little breathlessly now. "Captain Broz, first thing in the morning. With Mr. Santana and Miss Allen as witnesses, and Miss Landis as bridesmaid!"

"You've flipped!" he chuckled, hugging her tight. "There never was any such old law. Sure a captain of a vessel can perform a marriage ceremony, just like a minister in church, or a Justice of the Peace, but it doesn't mean anything. On a ship, in a church, or over an anvil, as they used to do it once, none of it means anything without the official document, the license. That's the bit that matters. I thought everybody knew that."

"Oh!" she blinked a moment. "Never mind, the ceremony will do just as well. It will serve as a declaration of intent, before witnesses."

"Come on, now. What's on your mind?"

"Don't you see?" She pressed close to him, all aquiver and eager. "It will be public. Witnesses. Everyone will know. I will be a pauper . . . out of it! It will save my life. Wouldn't it?"

Jeremy prayed, suddenly, that his face would obey him and maintain a calm and approving expression, that his voice would be steady as he said,

"That's smart. Very smart. You have a point!"

"And it would save your life too. Don't you see? A public contract, before witnesses . . . they would have to let you live, to get back to Earth and ratify it, to make it legal. Wouldn't that solve everything?"

"It certainly would," he agreed steadily. "Smart girl."

The inner mask was still there as she stared up at him. "And you? You won't mind . . . that I am using you?"

"Why should I mind? It will be a privilege. An honour!"

"Yes," she said, and seemed to dwindle somehow, to draw away from him without moving. Then she did move, easing out of his hold and standing away. "Well . . . I'd better go. We have to be up early, don't we?"

Goodnight, and thank you . . . Jeremy!"

It lacked something, that ceremony. Haskell had the watch, but Broz had just turned out when the conspiring pair presented themselves to him. It was less than half an hour to twist-out. Very properly, Broz pointed out the true position, but once he realised they knew, that they merely wanted a ceremony, he was so far moved as to smile stiffly.

"It will be a new experience for me, too," he admitted, and touched a button to summon Cartier. Stonily calm, the steward proceeded to organise everything with smooth efficiency. All except Miss Allen.

"Sorry, sir," he said, "but Miss Allen begs off. She's not well, and Dr. Burton is with her now. I'd be happy to stand in as a witness myself, so as not to deprive Miss Landis of her moment as bridesmaid."

Lissa was in a panic of excitement. "I don't know what to do!" she wailed, "and I'm sure this dress is all wrong!"

It was a close-fitting brevity in wet-white plastic, and Jeremy took a moment to assure her she would look right in anything. "You have nothing to do except offer moral support to the bride," he told her, and managed to smile, all the while he wondered what they were all thinking. Santana, flurried and suspicious but gallante. Broz wooden-faced. And Abigail, pale and quiet in white wool. And a farcical moment over the ring. Abigail said,

"We don't really need one. It's just a symbol, after all." But Lissa wailed again, scurried away and produced one of her dress rings. And so, with Broz reading slowly and carefully from the Shipmaster's Manual, opened to a hitherto unused page, there was a wedding.

As Cartier produced appropriate drinks, Santana drew Jeremy aside.

"I wonder, White," he said meaningfully, "if you realise just what a lucky man you are? Or is it a case of if you can't beat 'em, join 'em, eh?"

"I don't know what you mean," Jeremy protested, but Santana had already moved away and Lissa was twittering near.

"I feel guilty," she muttered. "As if I talked you into it."

"Not you, Liss. I talked myself into this, and I'm not sure, now, if I'm glad or not." That didn't comfort her at all. She moved away and Cartier came close enough to murmur,

"Congratulations, sir. A change of allegiance?"

"Now *you're* jumping at it. This was meant to be a rescue operation. Remember the will? This was to get her out from under."

"Smart move, if she's an innocent party. If!"

"She is. My life on it. But I'm not so sure, now, that it was such a smart move, not by what Santana just said"

He never got the chance to explain, because Broz spoke next, over the P.A. system. "Five minutes to twist-out. You will please couch down right away. Five minutes only. You are requested to remain couched down while we execute the necessary manoeuvres to strike orbit. Approximately half an hour. You will be given the all clear as soon as possible."

Jeremy recalled that phrase as he lay stretched out, feeling the ship lurch and thrum to the thrust of her jets. All clear? What sort of state was that? He had been juggling probabilities in his mind so long that he just couldn't imagine anything being *all* clear, ever again.

The control room now was a startlingly different place. Banks of instruments that had been silent before were now lively and clicking. The screens glowed with sun-glare and star images. A small thrill of excitement spread over him despite his unease. Into his mind came the ringing phrases from Kit Carew's first and classic tape, and he recited them gently.

"And now, before our wondering eyes, a new and virgin planet, as yet but a dark disc against the black of space, one edge cutting the jewels of the stars, the other kissed by the bright light of its mother star"

Abigail, by his side, took his hand gently in hers. "You were quoting?" she murmured, and he smiled down at her in wonder.

"Your brother. From his first work. And there it is, not the same planet, but the same image, just as it has been on all the tapes."

"I hope it won't be an anticlimax for you, this virgin planet."

"We are one thousand miles out and nearing," Santana announced, obviously relishing the role of guide and explainer. "As soon as we are close enough to detect useful details we will run our cameras. No need, my dear Miss Landis, for you to bother at this stage."

"Shouldn't we be getting some kind of radio signal?" Jeremy wondered.

"We are within range," Haskell admitted, "but all the bands are quite silent. There is nothing to hear." He was off to one side, by a separate panel. Broz, in command, aimed a thick finger at the main screen.

"That should be the colony site, just beyond the terminator. It is dawn, down there."

The planet filled the screen now, swelling rapidly, brightening as they circled into the sunlit side. Broz counted aloud the altitude in hundreds of miles as they fell in a swift spiral, until Santana snapped,

"Level us at one-fifty, Broz, and cut in the cameras. We will have full magnification on the main screen."

It was black below, with nothing more than shadowy suggestions of seas and continents rolling past. Everyone was silent, waiting. And here came the edge of day, ragged at first, and the mountains down there were capped in snow. A winter dawn, Jeremy thought, and shivered, so that she tightened her grip on his hand. Mountains, and a gorge that gave way to a broad and lazy river, a valley, a great plain of green dusted with frost, the perfect setting for a settlement. And . . . there it was.

"Oh nol" Jeremy groaned, for it was abundantly plain that something was terribly wrong down there. In one comprehensive glance he saw the cluster that had been the main township on one side of the river, and the neat chessboard layout of cultivated acreage spreading away

from that focal centre, and the roads that linked everything like arteries—but there were no neat buildings, no structures. Instead, like some foul plague, there was a sick yellow-green slime, streaks and blobs of it, where all the human habitations should have been. It was, his shocked mind told him, as if some enormous crawling creature had come up from the sea, there, up the river, and had then slithered and spat its evil ichor over everything alive. The image was so immediate and revolting that he had to move his eyes away, to look at the still peaceful land, the winter-locked soil . . . and he saw something, away to the edge of the picture and slipping from view. And Abigail saw it too.

“But that . . . surely . . .” she started to point and he gripped her hand fiercely to hush her.

“Oh, the poor people!” Lissa wailed. “Something awful has happened to them! Something horrible!”

“It seems to have emerged from the sea.” Santana growled. “I never saw anything like that before!”

The horrible scene slid away out of the screen and there was now only the sparkling, featureless sea, and a stunned silence in the control room, until Santana said, “We will run that again, Broz. Slowly . . . on the stern screen. Perhaps we can make some kind of sense out of it. There must be *some* explanation, even if we are forced to postulate alien intelligence.”

“Intelligence, beyond all doubt.” Abigail declared, as the tape ran the terrible scene again for them. She was savagely calm. Jeremy could feel her tension, but he would never have known it from her voice. “Please notice how the slime, or whatever it is, has carefully selected each and every structure that would house people. Or power. The roads and fields are not touched, but every possible place where people would be . . .”

“And that would be the beacon,” Jeremy pointed, “under that big blob. It was deliberate, all right. Intelligence.”

“An alien monster?” Lissa gasped, and looked as if she

was about to faint. "But that only happens in books! It can't be real!"

"That is very real," Broz declared. "No radio, no beacon, no houses. Just death. Very real indeed!"

"I don't know what to say. I am confounded!" Santana cried. "It's obviously the work of something intelligent and hostile. But it is equally obvious that there is nothing we can do. We are too late!"

"It's your ship, Mr. Santana," Abigail's voice was still steely calm, "and it is certainly not my place to tell you what to do, but as we came here expressly to find out what was wrong—and as there is very little we can achieve from altitude, except take pictures—I suggest we should go down there and conduct a closer examination."

"And get what they got? Are you mad?"

"Angry, perhaps, but not insane. We owe something to those unfortunate people, and to those who may follow. And we need take no unnecessary risks. There is no visible sign of anything alive, nothing monstrous!"

"I'll second that," Jeremy spoke up. "We came for information. We aren't getting a lot here. I'd like a closer look."

"Of course," Santana nodded. "You are a reporter. Very well. So long as it is thoroughly understood that I am in charge and responsible, and that everyone obeys orders precisely. Yes? Very well. We will go down, Broz. Select a spot as close to the settlement as possible. Mr. Haskell, as soon as we are down you will take Cartier and break out atmosphere suits. Let me see now. Myself . . . you . . . Mr. White . . . Miss Crane . . ."

"And me!" Lissa gasped. "Me . . . and my cameras. Please!"

"Very well, pretty one. All right, Haskell?"

"Atmosphere suits?" Abigail queried. "Is that really necessary? The atmosphere can't be harmful, surely?"

"Merely a precaution, Miss Crane. Remember, we agree that I am in command. Also . . . it is winter down there. And now . . . couch down, please, until we are grounded, and then we assemble in the airlock."

In the cabin flat Jeremy caught at Abigail's arm. "You saw it? That was the scorch mark of a jet landing, or I never saw one on tape."

"I thought so too, Jeremy. Thank you for restraining me. I'm afraid I'm not much good at being devious."

"Better learn fast. We are in this up to the armpits now."

The atmosphere suit was a stiff and clumsy creation in green rubberised material with a back-pack 'lung' and a box helmet with a window. As they gathered in the air-lock Lissa complained sadly about the difficulty of operating her camera buttons with the heavy gloves but Jeremy was too tense to appreciate her attempt to work up humour. Santana went ahead, opening the lock and running the gangway out. Following, Jeremy noticed the side arm strapped to his leg, but made no comment, although he couldn't foresee anything that would need such defences. He took his first step on to alien soil over a crackle of carbonised grass and scorched soil, then turned to lend an arm to Abigail, at his heels. Then came Lissa, her cameras dangling, and last of all Haskell, also with a side arm.

"We are in radio link," Santana's voice came in Jeremy's ear, "but it will be best to keep talk to a minimum, to avoid confusion. No need to speak unless we see something dangerous . . . or important."

They started off over rocky, stubbly ground, towards the township, no more than a quarter of a mile away. The farmspreads were higher up the valley, where the soil was better. It was an eerie scene, almost beautiful with the hoar frost melting into diamonds over everything . . . had it not been for that evil yellow-green stuff ahead. Strange stuff, Jeremy thought, like so much solidified foam. What manner of beast could have disgorged this, and in such quantities? The solitary moving figures were somehow intruders into this deathly peace. There couldn't be anyone alive, not under all that hideous slime . . . not after a week of it. As if reading his thoughts, Santana's voice came again.

"There may just be someone left alive. We had better split up. I will take to the left; Haskell, you go right; Mr. White, you had better go straight through the centre, with the ladies in between us. Make for the town centre, the beacon. And keep to the roadways. They seem to be clear."

And they were. The slime, whatever it was—and it looked even more like crusted, hardened foam, at close range—seemed to be neatly, almost carefully, concentrated on the buildings. Jeremy plodded on, awed by the stillness, the silence broken only by the faint whisper of breeze past his suit, keeping well away from that sickly yellow-green death. Santana was right. The centre road led directly to the beacon tower, conspicuously the heart and focal point of the pathetic township. The link with home, the string that couldn't break, because it was built over its own power supply, and three times circuited. Kit Carew had explained it often. Yet there it was, a great bulging excrescence of evil slime, and silent. Jeremy stared at it fearfully, then turned to see where the others were . . . and nearly died of shock, there and then!

XV

There, just across and down the street from him, stood Abigail. She was close to a smothered building. Too close. And she had her gloves off and dangling by their cords, while she held a rough lump of the slime-stuff in her bare hands. And what choked his breath and brought his heart into his throat was that she was sniffing at it . . . with her face plate swung open and her red-gold hair escaping in wisps in the chilly sunlight.

"Are you out of your mind?" he gasped, galloping across to her, to reach and drag her away, but she turned to him quite unconcernedly, so that he felt momentarily foolish. "For God's sake!" he said. "I hope you know what you're doing?"

"I think so," she said, quite calmly, but with a fizz in her voice that brought him up sharp. "I am, after all, a chemist. And a good one, too. Good enough to know that there's nothing particularly deadly about this stuff. Not now, that is."

"What do you mean? How can you tell?"

"I can't name the precise molecule, that would take laboratory analysis, but the type is quite distinctive in structural characteristics. It is used for lowgrade ore, metal reclamation. A foaming spray which attacks and sequesters metallic fractions—almost any metal—and then one treats the resulting sludge with other reagents, and one has the pure metal as a residue. That's the commercial use. Of course it is much too late for that, here. The reaction has gone too far. These structures will all collapse quite soon. In fact I am surprised they haven't already. Very ingenious."

"But that just destroys the metal," he mumbled, "what about the people?" The keen wind had whipped roses into her cheeks but her stare was as bleak as a rapier's edge.

"A foaming spray. An aerosol. And the volatile suspension is lethal. Violently so. Whoever breathed that vapour is dead, long ago. Very swift, very efficient . . . and in six or seven weeks time there would be nothing left at all, only voiceless dust. An enigma. And fear. Fear of the unknown!"

"Very clever, Miss Crane. A little too clever, alas." The voice was Santana's, and Jeremy wheeled around to see him, standing no more than twenty feet away where he had emerged from the lee of a foam-smothered house. "So you reject the idea of an alien creature from the sea, Miss Crane?" The voice mocked, but the pistol in his hand was rock-steady.

"I might just believe in a sea monster, Mr. Santana, but not one with caterpillar treads. You were careless there. And careless, or reckless, to bring eyewitnesses too soon, much too soon."

"Someone will regret that blunder," he said savagely.

"I was assured that three days were ample to reduce everything to dust."

"But not in winter. Elementary chemistry, that. Temperature affects the speed of a reaction. Like all over-eager amateurs, Mr. Santana, you fumble on details. You shouldn't have left traces of your landing for all to see. Very careless of you."

Santana came forward now, step by step. "You are in no position to take that tone with me, Miss Crane. I control this situation. Your immediate need is to arrive at some sensible decisions. In case you are not au courant with the total situation, let me explain. What you have just seen is part, an extreme part, of a general plan. A plan to delay and finally to put a halt to the present colonial policy. You should be interested in that, Miss Crane, since a considerable part of your personal fortune derives from the colonial plan, but is threatened by the policy which insists that the colonies be made free and autonomous as rapidly as possible. Our intention is to keep them dependent. That means a great deal to you, in money. You might even say, we are working to your benefit."

"And by sensible decisions would be?"

"To be discreet. To forget, conveniently, what you have just seen and so correctly deduced. To corroborate the story we shall take back to Earth. It would be worth a great deal of money to you, Miss Crane."

"And if I am not minded to be discreet?"

"It will cost you even more. Your life. I regret it, but things are too far gone to be remedied by small measures."

"What about me?" Jeremy asked, feeling detached from it all.

"I dismiss you, White. You're clever. Clever enough to have married into money when you saw which way the mind was blowing. Clever enough, then, to know when to hold your tongue, I think." Santana came still closer, and Jeremy didn't want to turn his head away, but he had to, to meet her eyes.

"We did it all wrong," he said. "He doesn't know, obviously."

"Yes," she murmured, with a faint smile, "it's all wrong. I tried to buy your life. I thought I had achieved something, but I never was any good at being devious. What now, shall we tell him?"

"The hell with it," he said wearily, hoping he had read aright the look in her eyes. "Tell him the truth. I couldn't live with this on my conscience anyway."

"Nor me." She smiled again and turned to their enemy. "You're wrong on a detail again, Mr. Santana. You forget, I am no longer Miss Crane."

"Your marriage . . . a pleasant conceit. I hadn't forgotten."

"But you didn't know that by the terms of my father's will, on my marriage all my holdings in Triple-C pass to my next of kin. I'm a poor woman now, you see. No wealth or power. That all belongs to my brother now. My brother . . . Kit Carew?"

He obviously had not known. Even this close Jeremy couldn't see much of his face through the helmet window but the sudden start and tension was visible in the twitch of the clumsy suit. And his voice.

"Kit Carew . . . your brother? That bitch! So that's why she hung herself out for him, fawned on him! All this time! And she knew! Triple-C is all his now, is it?" Savage rage distorted his control, but then, with an effort, he regained his stinging cynicism. "At least, that simplifies a few angles." Jeremy caught a flicker of movement from his left and saw another suit emerge from shelter, also holding a small arm. Santana saw his eye movement and half turned tigerishly, then relaxed. "Haskell," he said, "you'd better take care of the beautiful blonde. Not lethally, yet. We may be able to persuade her . . . Haskell!" That other suit came steadily on, the pistol coming up, aiming, but not at the prisoners . . . at Santanal

"Not Haskell. He's back there in my cabin, tied up." The voice was Cartier's, and that news released Jeremy

into angry reaction. He threw himself forward, striking out at the hand holding the gun. Santana swung back hurriedly. Jeremy felt an acute agony as the hard metal hammered his elbow, and then he was grappling clumsily, struggling, going down in a gasping heap with the other man, hitting out, being hit, rolling over and over on the frost-hard roadway with fragmented flashes of vision . . . Santana's smart up close through glass, dazzles of sunlight, the crazy whirl of yellow-green masses, and standing, staring figures . . . and then a shocking flame of pain in his foot and an ear-hurting bang . . . and another, only he didn't feel that one at all, but Santana's body became a limp and heavy bulk on top of him, and his foot still hurt. Then rough hands . . . the limp heaviness rolling off . . . faces coming to peer . . . Abigail with wide eyes and a cloud of red-gold hair . . . Cartier with sweat streaming down his face and asking, "Are you all right? I had to shoot . . . are you all right?"

"My right foot. I think he nicked me. I can sit up."

And then sitting up, feeling foolish, with the chill of the ground now beginning to seep through to his buttocks, while Abigail tore at the leg zippers of his suit and uncovered his foot. Blood, and pain, and his own wild memory making him say, "There should be a first aid pack on my back, alongside the lung pack. It's mentioned in one of the tapes." And then Lissa's shaking, shrill voice.

"I heard all that, over my suit radio. They were going to kill us all! Do you want me to take pictures of this, as evidence?"

"Good old Liss," he muttered, feeling light-headed, "professional to the last. What a bloody mess!"

"It's only a scratch." That was Abigail, straightening up from putting a tight bandage on his foot. "You'll be able to hobble along, if you lean on me."

Then Cartier, to say, "Shut up, everybody, for a minute. Mr. Broz. Captain Broz. If you are monitoring this, and I'm sure you are, let me hear you. It would be better, Broz. Your neck hangs on it."

"I hear you, whoever you are. Speak."

"Sensible of you. This is Geoffrey Cartier, officer of the United Nations Special Branch. Listen very carefully. Mr. Santana is dead. I shot him. I have three witnesses to everything he said, out here . . . and more where you are. Mr. Haskell is unconscious and tied up, in my cabin. Before you get any wild notions about turning him loose you'd better know that chief engineer Braden and all his three staff are armed, and listening. Are you there, Mr. Braden?"

"Large as life, laddie. Heard every word. The murdering scum. You know we had no part in any of that."

"I know. You heard, Captain? You have a choice. Either you play ball with us, and possibly do yourself a little favour . . . reduce your responsibility a little . . . or you can be awkward, in which case nobody goes anywhere, and we just wait here until somebody gets curious and comes to find out. It won't take all that long, either. Miss Crane and Miss Allen won't stay on the missing list for very long, you may be sure . . . and my superiors know exactly where I am. You can't win, Broz. Santana tried a gamble. He's dead. Now it's your throw."

It was all over. Jeremy sat on the cold ground and felt defeated, deflated, out of it, listening dully to the interchange, to Broz in tactful surrender, to Cartier asking one of the power men to come and lend a hand, never mind a suit, just wrap up warm, and then the long, slow, painful hobble back to the ship, with the hideous yellow-green blobs beginning to collapse in silent puffs of choking dust behind them. Lissa everywhere, aiming her cameras, cursing over the awkwardness of changing tapes. The labouring up the gangway. Abigail a strong warmth against him, half carrying him. A small, black-bearded man in the entry flat, grinning like a demon and making himself known as chief engineer Braden. Abigail saying,

"We must get you to your cabin right away, Jeremy." And then the drawn and serious face of Dr. Burton to interrupt.

"Miss Crane. I think you should come this way. I have sad news for you. This way, please."

The slow dot-and-carry down the stair and into that 'unused' cabin. Frances Allen sitting there beside the couch, stunned into a world of her own, one hand still clutching the hand of the man who lay on that couch . . . and Jeremy saw, at once, the resemblance between this man, and Santana. And he knew, and put his arm around Abigail in sympathy.

"It's Chris!" she breathed. "In here all the time. Is he . . . ?"

"I'm afraid so." Burton sighed. "I did everything I could to save him but it wasn't enough. I'm not permitted to know too many details, so all I can say is that he somehow inhaled a large dose of some highly toxic corrosive substance, and was very far gone when I reached him. Perhaps if I could have got at him sooner . . . who knows?"

"He's dead!" Frances Allen said it, abruptly, in a strained, harsh voice, not talking to anyone except the creatures of her mind. "Dead! My Chris, my cavalier of the stars! I wanted to marry him. I wanted to. We must have babies, he said, over and over again. We must have children . . . *then* we can get married. When you're pregnant. Don't you see? She can't stay single for ever. She'll have to get married sometime. And our kids will be rich! Our children! I tried. God knows, I tried . . . but it's too late now. He's dead. Kit Carew . . . is dead!"

"Sterile as boiled water, the pair of them!" Burton muttered. "They have plagued the life out of me these past five years seeking some kind of fertility nostrum. I'm sorry, Miss Crane, to speak harshly, but I do have some principles left. I've made my mistakes, and the Allens knew of them, and have had me over a barrel ever since, but a man has to draw a line somewhere. I'm through with it all, thank God!"

Cartier, at the back, said, "You'll get your chance to testify, Dr. Burton. This ought to crack quite a few holes in the Allen empire."

"That poor girl," Abigail breathed. "Isn't there anything we can do for her, Dr. Burton?"

"I'm afraid not, Miss Crane. Sedation is the only easement for her, now, and I can take care of that. Would you prefer to leave everything in my hands until we get back to Earth?"

"Of course. There's nothing left for me. He was my brother, and now he is dead, and that's an end to it. Poor Chris, how he must have hated everyone. Come along, Jeremy, bed for you. Dr. Burton, would you spare a moment to look at the dressing I've put on Mr. White's foot? It is rather crude, but the best I could do in the circumstances."

An hour later, with the foot at peace, with lift-off and twist-in all accomplished, with Quest speeding back to Earth, Jeremy lay on his bunk and tried to put himself back together. This time it *was* all over. Kit Carew unmasked, the massive conspiracy broken. Cartier triumphant. Solar News . . . the exclusive story, with pictures! He should have been feeling happy, especially as Lissa had just been in, with Cartier, to rejoice over her super-scoop, and his professional coup . . . and more than a friendly attachment between them, as was obvious to any eye. But they were gone now, leaving him to his thoughts. Not happy ones. He stirred and sat up, wondering what he was lying down for anyway.

"I'm not an invalid," he told the empty cabin irritably. "I'm not a lot of anything, in fact, except a fool. I could do with a drink." And he thought, maliciously, of buzzing for Cartier. At that moment, as if reading his unspoken thought, the door opened and Abigail appeared, complete with a tray and two glasses.

"I thought you'd need this," she said, and then, "What are you doing out of bed. Get back in there at once!"

"I'm all right!" he protested, but slid himself back into the sleeping bag. "Anyone would think I was sick, or something!"

"It's a wife's duty," she said, handing him the glass and

sitting on the couch to sip at her own, "to cherish and care for her husband."

"Joke over! It seemed a good idea at the time but, as you say, we're no good at being devious. And it's no longer necessary now."

"To save my life, Jeremy?"

"That's right. Worth it, at the time. All safe now."

"Before witnesses, that was. There's no one here now."

"Right. We can drop the pretence. As I told you, it's not legal in any way without the official document."

"Just a technicality," she said, draining her glass and getting up to move to the door. He swallowed his too, and put the glass aside, watching her. She had stopped by the door, was slipping the lock on it, then turning to him with a curiously intent look on her face. "I'm not going to be put off by a technicality," she said, and put fingers to her throat to slip her dark cloak and let it fall. Out went one long naked arm to shut off the light. He heard the slap of her sandals, then her bare feet, then felt the warm touch of her hand, and her unsteady whisper. "Come on, now. Move over and make room for me."

"But you can't . . ." he breathed, as she shoved him aside and slid into the sleeping bag beside him, reaching for him, snuggling close.

"Oh, but I can. And I am. Don't quote technicalities at me."

"But . . . Abigail . . . with Chris dead . . . and you married . . . there it all goes again! You're throwing everything away!"

"Does that matter so much to you? The money, I mean?"

"Not to me. I don't give a damn about it!"

"Good! Shouldn't you . . . kiss me? We've been married all this time, and you haven't even kissed me yet. Come on, now!"

With that omission remedied thoroughly, and with conviction beginning to overcome his incredulity she came up for air, snuggled even closer, so happily he could almost hear her purring.

"You really don't mind about the money, about me losing everything?"

"I mind, but there doesn't seem to be anything I can do about it now. You're not getting much in exchange, Abigail."

"I'm getting what I want," she said, having trouble with her breathing. "I want you where you can't possibly get away from me." And, after a while, after she was completely wrapped around him and had him completely within her clutches, she giggled like a child. "There . . . now . . ." she whispered, "I can confess. I've got you. You can't escape now. I *am* devious. I admit it."

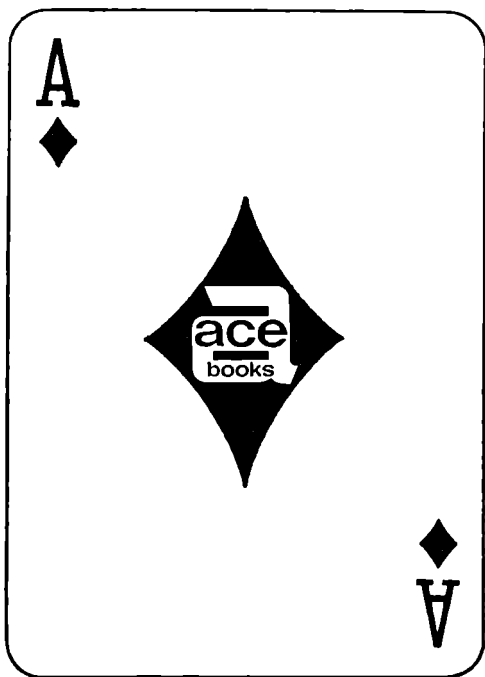
"Now what?"

"About that will. It's a fake. Father and I concocted it especially for the purpose. Lots of men have wanted to be where you are now, Jeremy, but when they discovered about that will, they lost interest. That's what it was for. Even Chris never knew. Father hoped it would pressure him to get married and have a family . . . and settle down. That's all. And that's all I want, too, but it had to be you, Jeremy. I think I knew right from the first moment . . . and it hurt to have to trick you into marrying me, but I felt sure you'd never get around to it any other way. And that's all. No more tricks. Except that I still own Triple-C. Do you mind?"

"Bought, and sold, and used, by a shameless, devious, scheming . . . predatory female . . . and there's nothing I can do about it!"

"Oh yes there is!" she retorted. "Come on, now . . . I've waited a long time for this . . ."

END



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