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TIME TO LIVE

John Rackham



Complete Novel

FUGITIVE ON AN ALIEN WORLD

To the man in the weird bubble-car, its design was only part of the nightmare. He dabbed and pulled frantically at strange things like paddles, saw the winding road swinging and twisting in front of him, tried to turn a corner . . . but didn't make it.

When he awoke the Earthan remembered the madness of that speeding chase—yet he knew the worst of it was his inability to recall who he was, where he was, and why he was being chased.

Then a lulling voice spoke inside his head: "You are on Kalmed; I'm Aporia. Your people say you've killed one of my fellow Kalmedans. . . ."

Somehow the Earthan knew he was no murderer—but he sensed something chillingly unfamiliar in the interaction of his mind and the body it inhabited. . . .

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*Time
To
Live*

by

JOHN RACKHAM

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THE MAN WITHOUT A PLANET

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ONE

THE SPEEDING VEHICLE clung to the road, squeezed down by the slip-stream of its speed over the flat-dish shape of its outlines. On Earth it would have brought stares. Here on Kalmed a few eyebrows were raised at the fury of its pace as it threw the city away behind it, but the design was familiar enough, a hybrid result of the interbreeding of human and Kalmed ingenuity. The body-work was a shallow box, with one wheel in front, one to the rear, and one on either side. The driver sat in an abrupt bubble right on the front edge.

To the man in that bubble this design was only part of the nightmare. He dabbed and pulled frantically at strange things like paddles, saw the winding road swinging and twisting in front of him, and knew that it was only a series of small miracles that kept him from smashing into the built-up wall on one side, or screaming over the steep edges on the other. He had no real idea how to control the thing. He couldn't seem to grasp what made it go so fast, nor any way to stop it.

The road wheeled away into a yawning right-hand turn and he pulled madly at a paddle, screaming soundlessly to himself as the machine slid into the corner. And this was

only a small part of the whole madness. He was as frightened as a man could be and still remain sane. He wasn't even sure of being sane. He didn't know which to fear most, the hurtling helplessness of his speed, or the gibbering demon that rode with him in his skull. He didn't know. That phrase contained the whole.

He didn't know where he was, where he had been, where he was going, or why. He didn't know who he was! All the memories he had were no more than ten minutes.

Running backwards, they were—a struggle—someone holding him hard and firm—an explosion of fire-pain in his skull—breaking free with an animal's instinctive urge to escape—and then falling over and into this mad contraption. Sudden movement. This awful road. Run, get away! Away from something too awful to bear to recall. And that was all. Otherwise his head was as empty as a Halloween pumpkin. Somebody stared out of those terrified eyes of his, but who? Afternoon sunset painted the winding ribbon of road with delicate pink. It ran ahead, twisting and bending insanely along the side of a hill. To where?

He shoved and hauled at the paddle grips, his stomach heaving. The motor—motor?—sizzled somewhere behind him, a noise right out of keeping with the speed he was making. He saw his hands, and they were a stranger's fist and fingers. He couldn't see his face, because the design of the bubble defeated interior reflection.

The road shook itself and wound suddenly to the left. He heaved on the awkward paddles, struggling to get the nose of the machine around. He didn't make it.

Kalmede Aporia reached medium-sized tweezers into the bubbling brown pot that held wood-colored geel, drew out a gob of it and spun it swiftly to break the trailing thread. With small tweezers in her right hand she worked swiftly with the semi-molten mass, pulling and drawing it out into a tiny copy of a gnarled trunk, then tweaking out lesser strands to make branches, and then smaller still for twigs. Glancing from time to time at the tree she was using as model, she completed the trunk and limbs to her satisfaction. She worked fast and sure, with the total concentration of an artist. Now

she took the miniature tree and set it, precisely, into the miniature scene that stood on a table by her right knee. A glade. Bushes and short grass, the smooth bare corner of a slate-blue rock, the twist and leap of a small stream—that was a hollow shell of transparent geel through which real water would flow, eventually, to make the model perfect—and just to back it, the steep slope of the mountain side. The whole thing was only twelve inches each way and had taken her many weeks already, would probably take many more before it was done.

She lifted her head suddenly as an unfamiliar sound intruded on her attention. A wheeler, and going at a furious rate, by the sound of it. She sat still, reaching with her mind to “feel” the person driving. Someone who had dark devils at his heels, and seemed in a fair way to be throwing himself into the arms of the others. An Earthan, obviously. No Kalmed would ever be so foolhardy. And she knew only a few Earthans. Not this one. No personal picture came. But she cringed momentarily at the blast of naked fear in that mind. Fear that was a frantic scream. And something else, something curious. Then she went rigid as ears and mind put together a dreadful picture.

The wheeler flung into the sharp curve immediately over her head, tires screeching on the road. It heeled. The wheels hit the banked-up road edge. It leaped, and turned over, and fell, the motor screaming, just beyond the little glade she was sculpting.

Silence rushed in and echoed. She stood up, pushed her reluctant mind into the disaster over there just in case, and then picked up her feet and ran, fleet and nimble, across the stream, over the slope, through bushes and down to where the wheeler lay, canted over on its side, helpless but whole. The man inside was unconscious, but alive.

He climbed up out of darkness into the immediate conviction that he was dead. If not right now, then soon. He was smashed all to blazes. Had to be, after that crash. That yawning chasm, the vertigo of falling, the spinning scene, the crash. There ought to be pain. Let me die before the pain starts, he prayed. He pulled in a breath, and his chest

and lungs crackled into hurt. He twisted an arm, and it cringed in agony. Lie still, he told himself. The pain of death was at hand and on all sides, but if he kept absolutely still it couldn't touch him. By slow degrees his curiosity grew. He opened his eyes. Someone had hinged them on red-hot needles. The hurt drew a small grunt from him. An angel spoke. It had to be an angel, with that voice like whispering violins.

"You must keep still, very still, until I cancel the pain."

He believed him—her—it?—implicitly, and held motionless. He saw a slim steady hand approach his face from one side. The hand held a glass dropper half-full of violet liquid. It brushed his lip. One finger lifted and ice-cold stuff ran into his mouth, down his throat, and felt like velvet. It spread through him like a warm fog, blurring the edges of tension. The voice came again:

"Not yet, but in a moment, when I tell you to, you may move."

He felt more like going back to sleep. The swirling comfort was so pleasant, a cushion against dreadful things. But the voice told him to move, and he did. A swallow, a cautious breath, a stirring of one arm then another.

"You may sit up, but be careful."

The caution was timely. Each new movement was an effort, as if the crusts of centuries had to crack away from every nerve, muscle and joint. But he managed eventually to sit, and look around, and meet the cool steady gaze of two deep gray eyes watching him.

"You were very fortunate," she told him. "More fortunate than you deserve. Only a fool or a madman would drive like that on this road. You fell more than thirty feet!" She left it at that as if unwilling to rub it in. His first thought was that she was beautiful, his second that she wasn't, and by the third he decided it didn't matter. Her features were as cleanly assembled as a statuesque carving, and almost as impersonal. Thick red tresses, like a banked slow-fire, lay back from her smooth brow, held into loops by a clasp at each temple, and then descended in heavy richness to her shoulders. He was confused by her sublime and artless elegance, by the impersonal stare of her eyes. She looked

away to raise her arm and place a glass pot of the violet stuff on a ledge up above his head.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, finding his voice difficult to manage. "I'm lost, for a moment. I suppose I owe my life to you." His own voice was odd, a deep chesty growl. She looked back at him.

"You may think that, if you wish. I wouldn't agree. I pulled you out of the wheeler because I knew you were still alive. I brought you here. I did what I could to make you comfortable. Anyone would have done as much."

"All the same, though—"

"It was nothing," she interrupted. "You had several minor dislocations which I have corrected. I gave you a stimulant to hasten your recovery, and just now a sedative to restore the balance. I think you will be all right now, but I am not expert. You should get advice and treatment if necessary as soon as possible from your own medical people. If you will tell me who to make contact with I will try to arrange for someone to come and collect you."

He was so fascinated by the grace-movements of her mouth and lips, and the precise but oddly accented tones of her voice that he missed the implication of her words for a moment. Then confusion grew greater in his mind. Contact? Medical people? Send for somebody? His mind ran around in blundering circles, staring at a central hiatus.

"Hold on a second!" he mumbled. "This is going to sound stupid to you, but I can't seem to think of anybody to call. No names at all. Not even my own! Silly, but there it is!" It *was* silly. And then, as he scowled to himself, it wasn't silly at all. It was terrifying! He stared at her. "I've lost my memory. Can't remember my own name. I don't know who I am!"

For one brief moment her gray eyes seemed enormous, with little swirling dust-devils dancing in their depths, and then she said, matter-of-factly, "There will be something in your clothing to identify you."

"My clothes?" He looked down at himself and realized he was as naked as a carrot. Through a roaring in his ears he heard her explain, "I had to strip you to make a proper inspection."

He caught just a tinge of amusement in her voice, but had no time to dwell on it. He was embarrassed, but that was a little thing, too. The big blinding thing was the utter strangeness of this body. A man should surely know his own arms and legs? He looked up and away from lean muscles and large joints to see her stand and reach up to another shelf, to pull down a bundle and hold it out to him. Embarrassment was canceled by her calm indifference, and swallowed by his growing panic.

He swung his legs around so that he was sitting on what he now saw was a low divan, and took the bundle into his lap. A vest, first. It was clean, white, fine cotton treated in some way to make it stretch and cling. No mark. He put it on, feeling the pull and stretch of his shoulder and chest muscles. White cotton drawers, too. He put the rest aside as he climbed into those.

Sanity hung by a ragged edge as he tried to analyze his feelings. Clothes like these were known to him, but not familiar by feel. And before he began to reach for the socks, he noticed and marveled at a rare crop of old scars that seemed to say he had been in a good few scraps and had been hammered a time or two. Scarred and battered knuckles, too, he saw, as he picked up the socks. Plain gray cotton, short and featureless.

"Not a thing, yet," he muttered, looking up to see her gray eyes intent on him, and dispassionately curious. He took up the pants. They were gray-black seamless things, tough but smooth. Hard-wearing and non-glamorous, he estimated, and wondered why. He found pockets, but nothing in them. He wriggled into the pants and knew why the pockets were empty. They hugged him like a skin, were obviously his own. So, too, were the calf-high boots of glossy black plastic. Last of all, a tunic jacket of heavy material but still functionally plain. It hooked at the waist, touch-fastened up the front. It had a double-bar gold ornament on the breast pocket, double-bar flashes on each shoulder, and a gold sunburst on either side of the tunic-collar.

Spaceman! He could identify that much, at any rate, even if he opened nothing further in his head.

He dipped into the breast pocket and the reward was

meager. A battered shiny pack of cigarettes, the self-lighting kind, with a garish red overstamp to say they were tax-free, ship's personnel only. Four left out of thirty. And a pencil-sized flashlight with a dosimeter tube built into it. That was all.

He groped into an inside pocket and struck riches. A black-plastic billfold, first. This yielded a 3-D photograph of a violently blonde girl with a toothy simper and an outrageous shape blatantly revealed in a minimum swimsuit. He turned that over hurriedly, found a credit-card. It bore cryptic numerals and letters, and the printed name "HART, James Arthur" in vivid blue, with a scrawled signature version of the same name immediately below, the whole thing plated with transparent glaze. Next a membership card, current and valid, to declare Jim A. Hart a member of the Spaceman's Guild, endorsed 1st Class status, and "deep-space master." That, too, was signed. There was a ten-credit bill, and three singles. And the billfold held an identi-print, a 3-D picture of a man with a painfully self-conscious stare, rebellious black wavy hair, bright blue eyes and a rough and rugged face that might be attractive in a homely way if and when its owner chose to grin, but in repose it bore all the marks of a man able and willing to get his own way against opposition. A toughie!

"You are James Hart," she said. She had been watching over his shoulder.

"It doesn't ring any bells. Doesn't mean a thing!" He tried to cover his bubbling panic with a layer of flippancy. "Not a thing. Jim Hart!" He pronounced the words hopefully, but they sounded like nothing he had ever heard before. No echoes. Spaceman didn't feel right either. No pictures or values came up. The clothes were a good fit. They were a spaceman's clothes. The jacket fitted perfectly too, when he stood to put it on. But still nothing clicked. He stared at her helplessly.

"It doesn't work. I'm not getting anywhere."

"You move," she pointed out, "in keeping with the clothing. See?"

He snatched a downward glance to see that his hands had retrieved the cigarette pack and were deftly extracting

one white cylinder. He thrust it back hurriedly, and the hand lifted the pack and pushed it into his breast pocket in a way he had to recognize as deft, from habit.

"This is crazy," he said, trying a grin and knowing it was a failure, "isn't it? I mean, if I am Jim Hart, why don't I remember something? Something! My own face, at least!"

She turned and went away from him, her bare feet silent over a glossy wood-panel floor. Following her movements, her precise grace, his vision expanded now to take in the rest of this room, which was large and cool, and to examine her all over again. She flowed, the sinuous rippling movements of a dancer, or an athlete. And yet he knew, intuitively, that she wasn't any of those, or trying to show off. And *her* clothing was even more unlikely than his own. She wore two pieces of a material that hung and draped like heavy silk and gave back to the eye all the colors of the rainbow in muted tints. One strip lay around and over her shoulder like a short cape, elbow-length, with a cord knotted in front and the edges not quite drawn together. The other piece girdled her hips and hung to mid-thigh, also fastened with a cord and not quite meeting on her right hip.

On anyone else such an arrangement would have sparked his mind into adjectives like "barbaric" or "primitive," or even into thinking it provocative. But she turned and came back to him holding a small hand-mirror, and seemed sublimely right and appropriate in everything she did.

He looked into the mirror and his heart sank as he saw the face of the photograph. Jim Hart's face. He glowered at it and it scowled right back at him, just to prove that it was his own face. "It's no good," he sighed. "It still doesn't remind me of anything."

"You would call it amnesia," she said evenly.

"I would call it hell!" he groaned, and sank back on the divan, feeling a sudden resurgence of all-over pain just for a moment. He tried to think, to find some solid point to start from. He recited the "facts." He was James Hart, spaceman. Deep-space master, whatever that meant. 1st class something. It was all just words, noises in his head. He drew out the billfold again, hoping for something. Nothing came of it. He looked up to surprise a brief curiosity in her eyes.

"This is ridiculous!" he said angrily. "There must be something! It can't all be blank. I mean, I can still stand, move, talk, recognize things. I'm sane—I think. I ought to be able to 'feel' something, at least!"

She elevated her shoulders a fraction in a shrug of inability.

"I've said I'm not expert in your medicine. I can guess how you must feel, but there's really nothing I can do."

He caught the subtle inference that there was indeed a lot she could have done, had it been permitted. Through the dull ache of his predicament came a thin stab of contrition and an awareness of debt. And common courtesy.

"I beg your pardon," he mumbled. "I'm so stuck in my own problems that I'm forgetting my manners. I owe you a lot; I've put you to trouble, and I don't even know where this is or who you are. Either!" he added ruefully, and then, with dismay, "Should I? I mean, are you somebody I ought to know?"

She smiled, and the transformation in her classical beauty was a small and breathtaking miracle, as if a statue had suddenly caught fire. "I am Aporia," she said, "and this is my home."

The name didn't mean a thing. It didn't even sound like a name.

"Aporia who?"

"Kalmède Aporia," she elaborated, with a fractional shake of her head. It still didn't sound like a name.

He looked around, searching for inspiration. He saw the room again, in detail this time. Here, where the divan stood, was a nook or alcove off the main space. The walls were a series of upright divisions, panels, every other one transparent, and each opaque one elaborately carved in bas-relief scenes. The floor was octagonal wood blocks, glossy with wear and care. The ceiling was an indefinite pearly haze. He saw a table, and was conscious of knowing what it was. And chairs, severe but recognizable. And this divan, with a thin cushion over it. A room all of one pattern, and it matched her. She was right, here. But like nothing he had ever seen before, of that he was positive. A curious blend of primitive and sophisticated.

His mind pulled back from further strangenesses in panic. He made an effort, calling up a thin hard core of determination.

"Look, Miss Kalmede; I know I'm being a confounded nuisance, but can we tackle this with some sort of system? Let's get a few basics to start with. We've never met; you don't know me—so suppose you start by telling me, slowly and in detail, just how I got here. Your side of it."

She smiled again, but it was not the radiance of before, more a serious acceptance of a challenge. Like taking part in a game. She sat by him in quiet composure.

"Yesterday. Mid-afternoon. I was constructing a scene not far away. The road has a very sharp bend along the mountainside just there. I heard you come in a wheeler, much too fast. Your machine plunged over the edge. I knew you were still alive, so I pulled you out, brought you here, did what I could. It is now near noon." She nodded to herself. "I think that is all, except I am not Miss Kalmede. Not 'Miss' anything. I am Aporia. That is my name. I am Kalmede, as must be obvious."

"Not to me, it isn't!" he retorted, fighting down the impulse to shout. "I remember driving, all right. Something queer about it. That thing, you call it a wheeler. I *can* drive a car!" His hands went of themselves into the proper shape and grip to hold a wheel. Steering-wheel. Power-pedal, brake—all familiar enough. But not that thing that had almost tossed him into an untimely grave.

"I never drove a thing like that before. A wheeler? Now, I recall a struggle of some kind. A fight, I guess. Then something ghastly, I don't know what. And then a bomb-burst of pain in my head. Scared stiff. Running away. Bumping into that thing, falling into it, driving like hell—and the road, coiling and curling like a snake. And coming off! I remember that!" He choked into silence, reliving that screaming horror, the lurching helplessness, the dropping nausea. He started as her slim fingers took his wrist.

"You are still suffering from shock. And hunger too. I will prepare a meal for us."

"But I've hardly started—"

"We can go on talking. Come!" She led him away to a

doorless arch and into a smaller room that had eye-level shelves on three walls. The shelves lay behind what he took to be glass until he saw her thrust her fingers at the transparency and it buckled and broke away into a hole. He watched in awe as the hole grew itself together again after she had finished getting out two small joints of meat and a handful of white roots. He turned to see her dropping the ingredients into a silvery pot, adding bits and dashes from an array of glass jars and canisters. She moved the pot to a black square that clicked like metal. She moved a switch and the contents started to seethe immediately. She took another container, a glass one, spooned brown powder into it.

"This is all foreign to me." He found his voice with an effort. "I'm assuming that you're cooking something. And maybe I wouldn't be familiar with a kitchen, but this isn't even remotely like what I imagine a kitchen to be. Don't recognize a thing. No, wait, yes I do! That's coffee!" He recognized the aroma from the pot where she had mixed water with the brown powder and set it seething alongside the first.

"Yes," she smiled faintly. "Coffee. One of the many things we have gained from your culture. All the rest is Kalmed, and no one would expect you to recognize it unless you were a student of our ways."

He pondered that in silent excitement. Her culture? Kalmed? His tongue formed the obvious words.

"You make that sound as if you're not-human?"

"That's right. I told you. I'm Kalmedel!"

A rust-hinged door creaked open in his mind, blinding him with momentary agony. A rush of information exploded through into pinpoint flares of recognition, each one a concept.

"Kalmed," he repeated, groping carefully. "This is the planet Kalmed, seventy-five light-years from Solar Earth. 'The fairest jewel in Earth's Galactic crown.' That's a quote!"

She snorted, a delightful sound. "It's a lie, typical of the kind of lie you Earthans specialize in. Kalmed belongs to no crown, to no other people of any kind."

"I know," he agreed. And he did know, all at once. "You're quite right. Earthans occupy certain restricted areas on

Kalmed, on sufferance, toleration and by restrictive agreement. The main strictures are that there must be no offensive interference with indigenous culture, no exploitation of Kalmedans, no infiltration beyond certain specified areas, and the Earthan community shall be strictly limited to half a million adults or less, apart from transients and tourists."

He stopped for breath, and to marvel at the way it had all come up into his mind like reading from lecture notes. Her smile was a cool and condescending thing.

"Part of your indoctrination, I expect."

"No," he objected at once; then more slowly: "I don't think so. It feels as if I learned it in school." He followed her as she moved back into the big room and began laying out recognizable platters, bowls, spoons. "I'm sure it was school!"

"There's a difference? I imagine you would go to 'school' in the Space Service, from time to time, wouldn't you?"

"It doesn't feel like that. More like a classroom full of other kids. Youngsters. Collegel Homel" A vague shadow picture of a large old house and grounds hovered just out of focus. A large house. Grounds. Servants. He reached for it, but it went back into gray nothingness, a mist that hung before his eyes for a moment then dispelled. She motioned him to sit opposite her.

"Back to basics," he said, grimly. "I'm on Kalmed. Lord knows how, or why. You're a Kalmedan—"

"No, wait," she interrupted, shaking her head slightly. "You should get it right, if you can. Kalmedan is a crude Earthan form. We say Kalmed, a man or men; Kalmede, a woman or women. I am Kalmede Aporia in the same way as you might be Earthman Jim Hart."

"There's something else," he mused. "Aporia. It didn't mean a thing at first, but it does now. Again from school. It's a name-word for an obscure term in language construction. It means a form that expresses doubt. If I say—and I *do* say—what am I going to do now?—that would be aporia. And the truth. What the devil *am* I going to do now?"

She contemplated her bowl a while, then looked up, her gray eyes smoky in thought. "I know a little about Earthan customs and ways. We all do. I imagine the best thing

to do would be to report back to your ship, tell them what has happened, and leave it to your medical people to decide what to do. They will know. At least, they will take care of you until something is decided, or until your memory comes back."

"Sounds like good sense," he agreed, "on an academic level. But it doesn't mean anything in real terms. What ship? Where?"

"There is only one spaceport on Kalmed. It is fifteen miles back along the road you traveled yesterday, so it is the obvious choice. Wait, I will show you."

She rose abruptly, went away into yet another room and came back to lay something on the table that made his eyes open wide in wonder and intense admiration. Three sides of the base were ruler-straight, about fifteen inches long, the fourth edge being irregular and sparkling with the frozen waves and ripples of a sea. On that base stood a city shrunken to doll-size but exquisitely detailed.

He saw fine broad streets, noble houses, parks and a central square, also the meaner business-like structures of the dock and spaceport area. Harbor. Ship. The landing field. Two delicately observed needle-ships stood as if poised to leap into the sky. Off to a side stood four thick-bodied cargo carriers, close by the storage sheds.

"That's the city," she said quietly, resuming her seat. "Dangelar, the Earthan capital of Kalmed. Usually there are more ships than I have shown, but I chose just four, for symmetry. Here, see, is the road you must have taken out of the city, under this arch gate. It runs directly from the port and harbor offices, along Harbor Street, which is well-known to all spacemen, and then out to the gate."

He was so fascinated by the beautiful detail that again he missed the immediate implication of her words. "I've seen something like this before. A beautiful thing. A scene. Hill-side with trees and a waterfall and pool, and a great mass of blue and purple flowers all down one side of the fall. In the Galaxy Room, at school." Once again he almost had the memory, but it slid away. Then her words caught up on him. "You made this? And that other one?"

"This one, certainly. The other, possibly. It sounds like one

of mine, especially those flowers. I could show you the place. It isn't far from here. But it might not be mine, you know. Several of us do solids."

He gazed at the model again, dazzled by it. "You must have lived there, and really *felt* the city, to get it so beautifully balanced."

"But of course!" She sounded mildly surprised. "That's why I do it. This is my way of getting understanding, of communicating with the world out there."

"Absolutely!" He was suddenly fervent. "That's the whole point of art. Not to portray, in itself, or interpret, but to get in tune and at one with it and then abstract whatever you can and pin it down in some way. I have a little of the gift myself, just enough to be made thoroughly frustrated and envious by this wonderful thing. I'd give my life—I"

"What is your medium?"

"Eh? Oh, nothing like this, alas. Chalk or charcoal, and paper. I've tried color, but I can't handle—" He broke off in amazement as she rose again and went away, bringing back an oblong white block and a shallow box of black sticks to lay on the table before him. He touched the block with a fingertip. If it was paper, it had a wonderful "tooth." And the sticks felt silky, like charcoal, but they were not, had never been wood.

"Go on!" she ordered, quietly insistent. He stared at her, at the white oblong; fingered the chalk, and felt confidence surge into his fingers. He moved his bowl to form a prop, rested the board on it.

"All right!" he said. "You. Sit over there, by the divan. No, not in profile. Look over here, at the city-model. Look at it. Think about it. That is just fine. Hold still."

She was absolutely docile. He studied her features, the clean-cut line of her nose and brow, her cheek and chin, the balance of her head, the light and shade of hair masses. The stick made deliciously black strokes, standing vividly out from the paper. It kept an edge well, too. He picked out the somber black of her shadowed eye, to take from that focal point the main areas of shadow at hairline, chin, and one ear just showing. The lines grew and spread into form. He

touched with a fingertip to smooth a line, leaned on the strong shadow under her chin.

But he felt a twinge of anger with his hands because they were so unexpectedly clumsy and awkward, then dismissed the matter as he labored on the mouth. It was a devil of a challenge. Vivid, sensuous, yet controlled and serene. And no paint. That red was her own.

Had he caught that serenity, that strange mingling of youth and age? How old was she, anyway? Under this critical examination she might have been twenty-three or four. Her skin, her full-bodied maturity argued that figure too. But her eyes were as old as time itself, full of sadness. Or was it dead illusions? He put down the stick.

"I daren't do any more," he said, pushing his shoulders back with a sigh of creaking muscles. "If I go on I'll spoil it. I always do. But it doesn't come anywhere near you, I'm afraid."

She stirred, came across to take up the sketch and look at it. Her face was an enigma. She looked a long time, and then at him.

"You have the eye," she said, very softly. He shrugged.

"Nice of you to say so. I haven't the hands, that's a fact. I feel as if I'm wearing gloves."

"Yes?" She looked back to the sketch again. "But that is good. It is myself as few have ever seen me, nor would I want them to. Will you give me this, to keep?" There was a subtle change in her, a restrained tension.

"Why not? What else would I do with it?"

"Thank you. No more memories?"

"Eh? No, I'm afraid not. Except that I get the feeling this is not my line of work, just a minor passion. I'm not good enough at it to make my living from it. Wish I was."

"Being a spaceman pays more, regularly?"

"I suppose that must be true," he agreed, wondering why it didn't feel that way. His hand went for the cigarettes again, and this time he let it.

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Not if you want to."

He drew the little tube alight, inhaled, and felt an instant relief from an inner itch. And yet, irritatingly, the ac-

tions were unfamiliar, as if he had never smoked a cigarette before. He was really mixed up if a thing as common as that was a novelty.

His left hand went, of itself, to a hip pocket, one he hadn't noticed before. Out came something flat and hard, a key-pack, shiny with much wear. He popped it open. Keys, none of them familiar. One with a stamped inscription on a bronze tag. It read: LOG BOX S.S. TROY. Spaceship something *Troy*, and a log-box, whatever that was. The name *Troy* brought a tickle, a vagrant memory-picture. He waited, hoping for another door to creak open, but he was disappointed. This was just a glimpse, no more.

"Seen that name before," he muttered. "Saw it in big gilt letters, on the bows of a ship. That's obvious, but funnily enough I seem to recall looking down at it, from above!"

"Nothing more than that?"

"Not a thing!" Gloom fell on him, all at once. "Ah well, I've wasted enough of your time. I'd better make tracks of some kind. I suppose the car—the wheeler—is a complete write-off?"

"I don't know. We can go and look at it, if you wish?"

She led him out through a square-cut doorway into the bright sunlight, and he learned, the hard way, how deceptive her smooth easy stride was. She took him across grass and into the bushy hillside as if on a stroll, but leaving him to dodge and duck and scramble at her heels like an oaf. Ten minutes brought them to a steep incline, a rocky rise at the foot of which the machine lay canted and untidily still.

"I was seated there." She raised an arm to point. "You came over there." Her arm went higher, and he blinked up at the ledge.

"Suppose I'd kept on going. Where does the road lead?"

"In ten miles it becomes straight. Sixty miles more and it comes to Gablot, the next major Earthan city." He shook his head. If he had ever known where he was running to, he had forgotten it now. Gablot was just noise.

He pushed through bushes to get close to the wheeler, and stared at it. Weird looking thing, he thought. Not so weird once he had readjusted his mind to the concept of the arrangement of wheels front and back and on each side, in-

stead of two by two. That achieved, it didn't look twisted. In fact it looked to be intact, only scratched a bit, but alien, for all that.

He saw the bubble-canopy door was open, and climbed in, leaning sideways to counteract the tilt. Room enough for two easily. Paddles for steering. Mysterious buttons and switches countersunk into the panel. One was marked "Power." It stood halfway between "On" and "Off," and a tiny red glow-bulb shone there. He moved it all the way to "Off" and the red glow went out. He pulled it all the way down to "On" and a green light lit up; there came a quiet whine of activity that grew rapidly into a steady whistle, not loud, but with enough energy to vibrate the whole chassis. Lights grew into life all over the panel. He moved the switch hurriedly to "Off" and everything relapsed back into silence.

Something still worked, whatever it was. He slid out, saw her seated on a rock a few yards away, watching. Always she seemed to be watching, an observer at life's game.

"I've never seen anything like this," he told her. "To me, a car has two wheels in front, two at the back, a steering wheel and a motor that doesn't make that kind of noise at all!"

She put her head on one side reflectively. "I've never seen one like that. Wheelers are made here. Electro-static drive, based on a Kalmed-type power-generator. I'll show you. I know the basic principles." She came close, touched some kind of catch under the body-work, and lifted up a section of the cover. What he saw looked like the discs of a giant Wimshurst machine, laid on its side.

"Static-wheel"—she pointed—"driven by a motor from a battery. Current picked up by brushes, fed to two separate motors, one of either side. The motors are also rotary converters. What power they do not use is fed back to charge up the battery, so there is no waste."

It sounded remarkably to him like the impossible something-for-nothing of a perpetual motion machine, but he wasn't disposed to argue. The thing worked, which was enough. "It might run, if we could get it back on the road."

"Possibly," she murmured, and then made a sudden quietening gesture. He saw her reach into her skirt and bring out a silver disc about an inch diameter, to press it to her forehead. She stood quite still for some ten or twelve seconds, then put it away again.

"That was Meggin, three miles down the road from here, warning me that your Earthan Police are coming this way."

"The police?"

"They are searching for the wheeler. They know it left Dangelar, and that it has not reached Gablot, so now they are combing the roadway yard by yard. Meggin was irritable. He grows rather special flowering plants, and they upset some of his delicate seedlings. Without meaning to, of course. Earthans are usually well-meaning, but often clumsy."

Anyone else would have added a rider to exclude present company, but she let the indictment stand. He was too worried to bother. Police! Somehow that idea tied in with the awful thing he had been running away from.

She was saying, "We might as well stay here, where they will see us. It will save time—" And then, abruptly, she had that disc out, back to her head, and her eyes closed. He sensed a rapid interchange. She whipped the disc away again, her whole attitude now urgently alert. She scanned the surrounding scene swiftly, then stabbed her finger down at the rock where she had been sitting.

"There, under that flowering thorn. Hidel"

"Eh? What for?"

"Get under that thorn!" she ordered, and the vibrancy in her voice tingled him like the beat of a huge chord.

He went down, gasping as the spines caught and harried him. He felt her strong hand on the small of his back shoving him further into cover, the rock scraping his shoulder, thorns needling through his jacket and pants, and it never once occurred to him to resist. Power to command. He rammed his face against a spine and sucked in a breath.

"Stay there!" she ordered. "Don't move until I tell you!" He could hear her stooping over him, adjusting the thorns. He saw the silk skin of her ankle and calf as she sat herself on the rock and let her leg dangle to cover the only possible leak.

Power of command. The phrase triggered another sudden swelling information, the echo of a lecture.

"From what little the Kalmedans have permitted us to learn of their culture it seems obvious that they have progressed far beyond us in the field of psycho-biology. Unhealthy or unfit individuals are never seen, nor are children. Whatever their system of training and upbringing may be, it is one which produces immense personal magnetism and mental power. There have been a few, but well-documented and observed, instances of a Kalmedan 'compelling' an Earth person to obey some command. They claim, and the instances support, that they have an ethic which forbids this dominance except in cases of self-defense or similar emergency. They are able to sense the presence and emotional state of another person without normal communication. They have a form of telepathy-by-instrument. Unfortunately, in all the century and a half of contact between Earth and Kalmed, the Kalmedans have shown no inclination whatever to reveal their techniques or methods to us. . . ." The voice died away in his mind.

Power to compel. She had it, right enough. And telepathy-by-instrument, too. He'd seen that. But why had she made him hide? As he struggled with the enigma he heard the growing-nearer noise of a jet-helicopter, an unmistakable sputtering roar, and then the sudden heavy thud of boots and a man who panted for breath before speaking.

"Kalmede Aporia?"

"Yes? Can I assist you in any way?"

"Sergeant Bragan, Earthan Law Section. Your permission to search this area, please."

"If you wish, of course! What are you looking for?"

"The man who was driving this wheeler. Your house is back that way?"

"Yes. He isn't in that direction."

"Obliged to you, Kalmede. A moment." There came a faint click and a change of tone. "Bragan to 'copter. Ford, head south and west. He can't have got far, not after piling off like this. Out!" Another click. "I'd be glad, Kalmede, if you'd bear it in mind, just in case. Spaceman, answering the description six foot two, husky, dark-haired, blue-eyed, in

uniform jacket the last time he was seen. By the look of the wheeler he got off light, and he could be dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Her tone indicated mild interest. "What has he done?"

"You've a right to be told." Bragan's voice hovered between shock and sadism. "He's a murderer. Yesterday afternoon. Stabbed two people to death. A young fellow just off the *Hermes*, a passenger—and Kalmede Weseen!"

"Weseen?" Her voice had hardened now. "I know her, not well. You say this man killed her?"

"Yes, ma'am. Stabbed her. Left his knife there to prove it!"

TWO

THE MAN UNDER the bush felt his blood congeal into ice. He pressed to the ground, certain that the sergeant must see him, certain that Aporia would now denounce him, shivering with dread because he couldn't remember, at all, killing anybody. But there *had* been something dreadful. And he had no memory. So it could be true! He felt the wet trickle of blood on his face. The same blood, driven by his bumping heart, roared in his ears. He heard the mumble of further conversation, and shook his head to clear it of thunder.

"If it could be moved," she was saying, "before it settled and makes a permanent mark, I would be grateful."

"Do it right now, Kalmede." The radio came into play again. "Ford, cast off a grapple; let it down here. We'll hoist this wheeler up on to the road again."

He lay still as creaks and crackles indicated the strain going on, and the machine being lifted. Right in front of his face her long slim leg swung casually to and fro, its perfect contours symbolizing total tranquility. The sergeant strode back, heavy boots thudding.

"We'll have to leave it by the roadside up there until I can spare a man to come and pick it up. It won't be in your way. Good evening to you, Kalmede." He went away powerfully. She sat there and waited, her leg still swinging. He

eased himself into a different position, stifling a gasp at the thorns. She moved at last, put her foot to the ground and turned. He felt her touch on his shoulder, gentle but firm.

"Come out. I'm sorry I had to keep you so long, but that sky-machine can see a long way. Here, take my hand!" She had a strong grip. He got to his knees and then stood, not knowing what to say. "How much did you hear?"

"Everything. Enough. I still can't remember, but you don't have to believe that, not now."

"You heard what the sergeant said. I've just learned a little more. The story is that Jim Hart was intoxicated. That is according to the statements made by the two men who were with him. Purser and second mate of *Troy*. He was with Weseen. They were all in a tavern in Dragon Lane." She dropped the items in short doses, watching him. Waiting for a reaction, he guessed. But it was all gibberish to him. "He left them, with Weseen, ostensibly going off to lunch somewhere, probably at her place. They haven't said so, but I can supplement that part, that Weseen was also intoxicated."

"She was a Kalmede. You knew her!"

"Oh yes, I knew her. You have a name for what she was doing. You call it slumming." A breath of steel came into her voice, and he cringed, finding it inconceivable that anyone resembling this pluperfect person could ever sink to being drunk and living with a spaceman.

"Her body was found outside the Green Hole. That's the name of the tavern. It was identified by Kalmed Thral, who is our observer for this region and lives most of the time in Dangelar. The young man's body found with her was identified by clothing and later by other passengers from *Hermes*, as having landed only a short while before. His name was David Rollo Allen."

All at once he felt a blinding headache and utter misery. "Don't rub it in!" he cried. "You can't hit me any harder than I've been hit already. Why the devil didn't you hand me over to that lawman and get it over with?" The hideous visions rattled in his head like marbles in a can, finding nothing to lodge on. Her face was as chill as marble.

"Nothing stirs in your memory? You don't recall sinking in the knife, Jim Hart's knife, and slashing with it?"

His stomach surged up against the back of his throat at the thought. "What the hell are you trying to do?" He choked, and all at once there was a flying sound in his ears and the sunlit scene tilted vertiginously. She came forward in a swooping rush, to catch and support him with her arms.

"Lean on me," she said. "You have had too many shocks for one so sensitive. Can you walk, d'you think?"

"Can manage. Sorry to be such a damned nuisance!"

She shifted her circling arm to a better position and they set off to labor back to her home. His legs were shiveringly unreliable and the sweat spouted from every pore of his body. She assisted him up the two steps indoors, steered him into the place where she had done her cooking, and beyond, to a small tiled room.

"As soon as you have tossed out your boots and jacket, pull that lever. Shower. Rinse your clothes and leave them. Shout when you're ready and I'll bring a towel and cloak for you. Go on!"

The water was fierce, and stingingly cold, but it sent the blood leaping in his veins. He saw her through the doorless opening pottering about in her kitchen concocting a brew. Dried, he clambered into the cloak she brought and was intrigued by the feel of it. Warm as fleece, yet with a glossy surface and no visible thread, it was heavy when held in the hand, yet snugly comfortable when on. It seemed to fit, although how a loose cloak could "fit" he didn't at all understand. It was dark purple on one side, flame red on the other.

"Handsome," he commented as he came out into the kitchen to be with her. "Your own?"

"I have several. It is a Kalmed cloak. You might call it a symbol. In a mild way, I am committing an ethical crime by letting you wear it."

"Committing several crimes," he muttered, taking the glass she handed him and tasting it. The brew was the color of green chartreuse, and the taste was as indescribable as any-

thing Alice ever drank from a bottle. "I can't make you out. Why are you doing things for me?"

"I'm not, not as you mean it. You pose a pretty problem. I'm intrigued. I mean to solve you if it can be done without hurting you."

The green stuff was potent. It spread life through his veins to match the stimulation of the chill shower. He felt strong enough to be irritated.

"Doesn't my opinion count at all? Don't I get a chance?"

Her gray eyes met his calmly, the corner of her mouth lifting in a ghost of a smile. He ventured on: "I mean, I'm in your debt already, for what you have done and I don't want to sound ungrateful. I don't want to ask for help, though lord knows I need it. But if you have no more interest than to see me as some kind of puzzle, then let me off the hook! Just turn me loose and I'll go away and not bother you any more!"

"The tonic is working well. But you're angry. Why?" She lifted her hands suddenly to sweep back her cape as far as her shoulders and then set her hands on her hips. In anyone else, the act would have been an insolent exhibition of sexy arrogance, a flaunting invitation, but somehow she made it seem utterly different. Her stance said, plainer than words, "Come now, let's look at this thing in a rational manner!"

"Why am I angry? I suppose it's because I'm not used to being cold-blooded and impersonal. I'm human!"

"In your mind and by implication, meaning inferior. Hmm!" She shook her head gently. "Tell me, if you left here right now, what would you do?"

"Head for Dangelar," he said, after a moment to think. "What else? I can't run anywhere, can I? I don't know how, or where."

"You would surrender yourself to your police, or the space authorities, as a criminal? A murderer?"

"What else?" he repeated, in some bitterness. "All the evidence says I am Jim Hart. I have his face, his belongings, his clothes. I can't argue with that. I don't feel like Jim Hart, but that doesn't mean much. I don't feel like a murderer either, and that means just as much, or as little. I just

do not know, one way or the other. So what else *can* I do?"

"Well"—she nodded, looking up at him—"whatever else may be wrong with you, there's nothing wrong with your reasoning power. You are as rational as anyone could wish. And that is strange. Come, bring that tonic. We will sit in comfort and think this thing through." She led him to the divan, sat and waved him to sit by her side.

"Here's my side of it. I know—a great deal about life and living things. And about the brain. I know a little of your formalized Earthan medical science. I state, confidently, that an injury so great as to produce the degree of amnesia you show would also impair your faculties in other ways. But you have no trauma, no flaws in your reasoning. You co-ordinate well. And you have no head injuries. I looked!"

"I still don't know who I am," he retorted. "You can argue all around that, but you can't argue it away. Of course," he temporized, "you have only my word for it."

"Ah no!" she corrected him promptly. "I *know* you speak true. I have that power. There's an emotional color that goes with honesty. It's quite impossible to mistake it."

"I've heard about your mental powers. Just bits."

"Yes. You'll have heard that we discourage too much inquiry into our abilities. Why aren't you an artist?"

"Eh?" The unexpected question threw him for a moment. "I suppose it's because I know I'm not that good. Not enough to give up the whole of my life to it, as I would have to, if I wanted to do it properly."

"I don't agree with your estimate," she said. "But you make the point I was after. We don't pass on information about our abilities, simply for that reason. There is no quick way. And you humans are obsessed with quick ways to goals. Are you prepared to work hard?"

"At what?"

"At solving your own problem. At helping me to solve it, if you prefer that version, but you'll have to do the work." She stood suddenly, a lithe confident movement, and stared down at him with challenge in every line of her stance. He was puzzled, and resentful.

"The only problem is getting my memory back, and that's a psychiatric job. Not that it matters a lot."

"You reason well, but you're beginning from the wrong assumption. Now *I* am beginning from the conviction that you are *not* James Hart."

"That's stupid. At least," he temporized, "in a way, I suppose you're right. I'm not anybody."

"That's good enough to start from. Good enough for me. Because, you see, I know something else. I know that you did not, could not possibly, kill Weseen. I am almost as certain that you did not commit the other killing, either, but I can't prove it yet."

"Prove?"

"Not in your legal sense, no. But to satisfy myself. I saw your emotional reaction to the idea of stabbing with a knife—"

"Temporary insanity," he mumbled, and she snorted again.

"Rubbish! Still, there is the one hard fact. You didn't kill Weseen."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I can prove that, at any rate. Stand up!"

He got to his feet sullenly, stood staring down at her, topping her by four or five inches, suddenly very conscious of superior strength and bulk, and only a few inches of space between them. She threw back her cape again, using her thumbs, shaking her hair back, straightening up, letting her hands fall to hang by her sides.

"Now," she said, "touch me. Just touch me. If you can!"

Her gray eyes were pools so deep that he feared to fall in and drown in them. They held slow swirling currents. He hesitated, went to move his right hand, and it was powerless. Fear bloomed in his mind. He struggled harder. In desperation he tore his gaze away from those fathomless eyes, to look down. The twin magnificence of her bosom thrust firmly out at him, the silky hemispheres rising and swelling with her steady breathing. Steady, with not a sign of effort or strain. Yet he couldn't move so much as a finger. He tried. It was waking nightmare, this fighting against invisible paralysis, this refusal of his own body to obey him. He met her eyes again.

"I can't!" he groaned. "I can't move!"

"Yes," she said, with faint regret. "That has probably

ruined what there was of rapport between us, but you had to be shown, to be convinced.

Resentment flared in him for a moment, then died as he mastered it. "I don't take it that way. I've known all the time that you are my superior. If anything, I'm angry with myself for not seeing the obvious." He scowled at his own thoughts. "You said that Weseen would probably have been drinking too, didn't you? Would that make a difference?"

"No. Weseen may be a degenerate creature in some ways, but she's not *that* foolish!"

"All right." He shrugged. "I'll have to take your word. But all the same, she *was* killed. You can't get away from that!"

"Not by you, not either of them. That's the point that matters." She swung away, sweeping her cape over her shoulders and forward, and then raising a hand to her hair as if in some doubt. "You're a strange person. You regard me as superior, yet without resentment. In my small experience of Earthans, that is most unusual."

"Common sense," he argued quietly. "I'm about five inches taller than you, but you don't resent that."

"Meaning that I have some innate gift? That I can't help being the way I am? Suppose—" She wheeled back to him and then hesitated, shook her head. "No, better not. Let me be thankful that we are still friends. And we've done all we can do for the moment. Come, I'll show you how to work with geel. I think you'll find it interesting."

The sun had barely begun to brush the hilltops with crimson as she woke him up from the divan and seated him to a spartan meal before departing for Dangelar. They had agreed that much the previous night, simply because there was no other course open.

He felt despondent, but tried not to show it as he put on the still unfamiliar uniform and then watched her slip out of a sheer white sleeping garment and into a cloak like the one she had loaned him. This one was turquoise on one side, green on the other. An amazing woman, he thought. She gave an impression of total and single-minded preoccupation that was almost terrifying as she wreathed her stark

nudity in sleek turquoise folds. He tried to imagine Jim Hart, spaceman, carrying on an affair with a woman like this, and it was just as inconceivable as the other thing.

The police had left the wheeler by the roadside for them to find as they completed the taxing struggle up the hillside. She nudged him toward it with a casual hand.

"You will drive us. It is a rational system, and quite easy to do if you go steadily, and think."

She was right. She had a way of being right that would have been objectionable in anyone else. She'd shown him last evening how to handle the glass-like geel, molding and twisting it into lovely shapes, and always there had to be perfection, it had to be "right." It was a grueling attitude to live up to, but he found it stimulating.

He learned that the two paddles governed the speed of the two side-wheels in relation to each other, but that pulling back on both increased the all-over speed. Which was why he had been hurtling along in the first place. He took the first few bends with care and then felt confident enough to let out the speed a bit.

A random question bobbed into his mind. "What day is it? Or don't you bother with that kind of thing?"

"Tuesday, May sixth, Reformed Earthan Calendar," she said promptly. "We have neither calendar nor dates, days, weeks or years. But we know yours."

So did he, now. Another clutch of data broke loose in his mind as he "remembered" that the Earthan community here had brought the reform calendar with them because it fitted so perfectly into Kalmed's three hundred sixty-four day year. Four quarters each of ninety-one days. January 1st was always on a Monday. January, April, July and October all had thirty-one days. All the rest had thirty. A four-month table covered the whole year. This, again, was the kind of thing children learned in school. He had plunged into amnesia on May fourth, which was always a Sunday. But there was more coming up now, a lot more.

As the foam-crete road straightened and brought them to a hill crest from which they could look down and across a green plain to Dangelar, a feast of information flooded his mind.

The city was exactly as she had modeled it, but now he saw it through the coloring overtones of history, a century and a half of it. The first ones to put a ship down on Kalmed had been very shrewd and farsighted in their own behalf. They had negotiated a fine deal, even if it had involved humiliation.

"Your thoughts trouble you," she murmured. "Memories?"

"The wrong kind. History. Socio-economic structure. Stuff you'd get from a book." The road ahead was straight now, and he had to be wary of the growing volume of traffic. "I seem to know a lot about it. The Earthan community, I mean. There are the Ten Families, for instance, each one owning an economic empire. They carved this place up like concessionaires. Semple's own the Fur, Feather and Skin trade. Haggidon's have sole rights in all gemstones and rare ores. Woodrow-Myers handle all exports of rare fruits, flowers, spices and taste-chemicals. And so on. Is that the sort of information a spaceman would work up?"

"Never having met any," she said, "I wouldn't know. I suppose it is just possible."

"Sounds crazy to me. None of it has any personal feel."

They came, slowed by the traffic, to a great gateway. She looked up at the arch as they passed under it. "I always think that very fine. We do not have the arch in our architecture. We missed it, somehow."

"That's a Gothic arch," he told her, and was all ready to add that he had noticed camera-lenses in the spandrels and knew them immediately as some form of monitor for automated traffic-control, when it occurred to him that this, too, was curious information for a spaceman to carry in his head. A many-sided argument started up in his mind. One party was glad that memories were coming back at all, another was amazed at the weird content of those memories and wondered where the spaceman memories were.

He was so engrossed in the internal wrangling that he drove past and saw tall buildings and noble streets without really observing them. He was only half-aware that she was guiding him, until he was startled out of his preoccupation by the touch of her hand on his arm and her words.

"Stop here a moment."

He pulled over to the side obediently and then asked why. She told him to look around, and he did. This road had a raffish air, was amply wide but with no pretense at nobility. There were garish neon signs and narrow-shouldered shops with gaudy wares spilling out on to the sidewalks. Groups of loiterers, many of them in uniform. Narrow side roads. A steady growling stream of heavy transporters rumbling to and fro. Down there, at the far end of this road, the distant glint and sparkle of water. The sea?

Understanding rushed in on him but before he could put it into words he heard a distant bellowing of power that grew angrily louder and then suddenly changed tone. She pointed a long slim arm and his gaze followed, up over the rooftops, to see a glittering metal projectile hurl itself into the blue sky on a tail of white fire and shock-diamonds.

"A spaceship! This must be the port, then?"

"This is Harbor Street. Down there"—she swung her arm—"is Dragon Lane. The Green Hole tavern. Where you are supposed to have done murder."

It was pointless to say he didn't remember. He modified that a bit and muttered, "I don't get any reaction at all. Nothing!"

"Bring the wheeler around until it is facing the other way."

He managed to do that, knowing what was in her mind now, but unable to appreciate it until he had completed the maneuver. Then he sat and stared, and felt clammy ghosts touching his spine. "*This* I've seen. This—I ran away—and stumbled into this machine—fell into it—drove—*that* way!" Mists swirled before his eyes and cold sweat broke out on his face as the scene came back with its attendant horror. He jumped in fright as her cool fingers came to touch his wrist.

"There's very little more we can do here. And no more time, I'm afraid. Look there!" He blinked and peered ahead to where a one-wheel machine came at swooping speed down the street and swayed in towards them. The man on it was in vivid yellow, a policeman. The stubby black thing that was cradled in his arms was so obviously a weapon that

there was no need to look further at it. A dark-jowled face softened its grim lines just a shade at sight of Aporia.

"Your pardon, Kalmede. I have to warn you that this man is a dangerous criminal. I hope you'll not interfere?"

"On the contrary, I was bringing him in. Will you precede us to Law Headquarters, please?"

The officer cut off a snappy salute and swayed around in a tight arc, his siren starting up to clear a path for the wheeler to follow. He led them to the great square which was the center of Dangelar and the real economic heart of the whole Earthan community on Kalmed.

Into Dangelar by land and sea came the "crumbs from the rich man's table," all those precious things the Kalmedans had no use for, but which Earthans craved and could sell for vast profit. From Dangelar by ships across the void, went the furs and feathers, the exotic fruits and spices, the strange gems and rare ores. Into Dangelar came the tourists, sightseers, souvenir-hunters. So, in this central square of the capital city there stood all the magnificent offices of every major Earthan enterprise.

His bewildering memory recognized them all, could have recited the names, the capital values, the structure of each. There was the towering Woodrow-Myers building with its garish gilt monogram. Haggidon House. Semple Suppliers. Orlasky Tours Center. The Art Institute, owned by Kelley and Sons. The Bank of Kalmed, owned and governed by five generations of Allens. The name rang a faint bell. Allen—that was the name of the young man who had been killed! She nudged him again to warn him to draw up in front of the imposing façade of the Law House.

The officer, with a single glance to be sure they were really following, ran up the steps before them. They got out of the wheeler. He felt something new, now, an unspoken but positive atmosphere of resentment from the handful of well-dressed citizens who were near enough to take notice. That sullen feeling persisted as they passed through immense double doors, by a stiffly erect guard, into an ostentatious hall where people moved hurriedly. He glanced aside at her, and her face was marble calm, caught in the ghost of a sneer. This was the resentment she had mentioned, that

he did not feel. But he could understand it easily enough from her queenly air.

A far door opened to show their escorting officer making a gesture to call them. As they paced across the hall he got an impression, for the first time, of the dimensions of the gulf between human and Kalmed. She was alone, one among a crowd of Earthans, and side by side with a dangerous criminal, a killer, yet all the attention was on her, not him.

The officer stood aside as they reached the door, followed them in, and closed it after them. She whispered in an aside. "This promises to be interesting. As there are virtually no crimes of violence among you humans here, the law organization is concerned almost entirely with minor offenses and the support of civil actions. I wonder how they will deal with you?"

"You seem to know a lot about us."

"You forget. I lived here for months, making that model."

They were in a small room, luxuriously paneled and carpeted with a large glass-topped desk in one corner, two easy chairs, three lovely "deep" paintings hung on the walls, and the air shimmering with tuned subsonics from some invisible source. Although he had never encountered it before, he knew what it was from description. "Body music" it had been called. A way of exciting the body into strange and sensual reactions, it wasn't quite respectable on Earth, as yet. It made him uneasy.

A far door signed open to admit a tall gray-haired man in severe black with yellow trim to his sleeves and lapels. He advanced as far as the desk and stood, inclining his head stiffly.

"Kalmede Aporia. The report said you were here, involved with this man. I don't understand. Are you?"

"Chief Morgan I believe? It's a long time since we last met. Yes, I am involved. Or shall we say interested?"

"As you please." Morgan sounded gruff. He moved around to stand behind his desk, cleared his throat. "You are James Arthur Hart?"

"I wish I knew, but the fact is I don't. Sorry!"

"What?" Some of Morgan's dignity crumbled. "Are you offering loss of memory at this time?"

"I'm saying I don't know who I am, yes."

"Very well. I now charge you that, on Sunday May fourth, 2153, at fifteen forty hours approximately, you killed, by stabbing with a knife subsequently identified as yours, two persons, namely, the Kalmede Weseen, of this planet, and one David Rollo Allen, of Earth, newly arrived this planet by the passenger ship *Hermes*, and further, that you did this at or near the junction of Harbor Street and Dragon Lane, in this city of Dangelar. It is my duty to warn you that this charge, and anything you may say, is being recorded and may be used at your trial. The charge made by me, Wills Morgan, Chief of Police. Witnesses—"

The officer who had escorted them in spoke now from the door in a thick voice. "Officer Alvin Gregg, witness." Another yellow-coat appeared in the door that Morgan had come in by, to declare: "Officer Howard Schultz, witness."

Morgan cleared his throat, but before he could speak Aporia said, "I will witness too. Kalmede Aporia. I draw attention to the statement this man has made regarding uncertainty of identity. I also testify that during all the time he has been in my company he has maintained that he does not know who he is, and that I believe this to be a true statement."

"I must ask you not to interfere in our judicial processes, Kalmede!"

"Evidence," she corrected, "not interference."

Morgan shrugged, cleared his throat again. "James Hart, you have been charged and I assume you understand the charge. You will be confined. As soon as it is possible, you will be tried. If you wish to call anyone in your defense, or to represent you in any way, you may do so." He dropped the official monotone and asked. "D'you want to get in touch with anybody?"

"I don't know what to do, or who to get. What's the usual thing?"

"It's not my business to tell you." Morgan was frosty. "But since this is a highly unusual case anyway, I suggest you ought to notify your commanding officer, and your guild-man."

That sounded like good sense, apart from the obvious

snag. "I don't know how. Or who they are." The confessions of ignorance were beginning to grow monotonous in his own ears. "Could you do it for me?"

"All right. You don't wish to make any statement at this time? Very well. Kalmede Aporia, I have to ask you to specify just what your interest is in this matter. It's highly irregular."

"I found this man on my property"—she smiled with her lips only—"and I brought him in. To you. I think that merits gratitude, if nothing else."

"It was unnecessary. If you'd sent word, we'd have picked him up and saved you the trouble. Is that all?"

"I find his state of mental confusion intriguing. I wish to be kept informed of everything that happens."

"Ah!" Morgan sounded relieved. "I'll do that, of course. I thought that because of Kalmede Weseen you might want to make it a personal matter. You see, I have been assured by Kalmed Thral that your people will positively not be pressing any charges in the case."

"That's quite in order," she said, and Morgan became human and harassed for a moment.

"This is a shocking mess. First murder we've ever had. Bad enough, without having your people down on our necks." He moved around his desk again to escort her to the door. "Very obliged for your help and interest, Kalmede. I'll see you're kept informed." She swirled out and Morgan with her.

The two officers closed in, gesturing silently. They took him down a zigzag stone stairway to a chill basement cell with a barred door that sounded solid as it closed. His jailer was an elderly man with thinning hair and a sniff.

"Not your first time down here," he remarked, "but I never expected to see you on the big one. Murder! I wouldn't have expected it from you. The odd tavern brawl now, that's nothing. But killing! And one of the mucky high Kalmedans, at that. They'll throw the book at you!"

It was something he hadn't thought of until that moment. "What'll I get, old man? What will they do to me?"

"The name's Clagg," the jailer grunted. "You ought to know that by now. What'll you get? That's a hard one. We never had a murder before. I can find out. What's it worth?"

"Forget it!" He pushed away from the bars and went to sit on the bunk. The old man peered in indignantly.

"You have to make a little on the side in this job!" he protested. "You can't take it with you, mister, so you might as well make something of it when you have the chance. You know me. They treat me like a damned janitor, but I can soften the corners for you a bit, at a price." There was a macabre logic here. He had a few credits in his pocket, and he certainly wasn't going to be spending them in the near future.

He got out a single, offered it through the bars, and the old man grumbled but took it.

"Sing out when you want to eat," he said. "And there'll be the usual in the coffee, all right?"

Clagg went away, leaving him to sit on the bunk again and wrestle with his confused thoughts. The silent well of his mind functioned like some kind of reference storage, yielding up information as he asked for it. The Law. The whole machinery of police, law, justice and punishment was owned outright by the Perlotti and Spier families in partnership, as a concession that exacted a per capita tax from every adult Earthan on Kalmed. He knew that much, and yet he knew nothing at all about police procedure, penalties or actions. He knew, as Aporia had said, that crime was negligible here. But he didn't know that spacemen were regularly slung in jail to cool off after a brawl. Yet the old man had recognized him. The inconsistencies were exasperating.

Clagg came back with a green-paper bound slim volume, passed it through the bars. "Talk up there," he said, "that your C.O. is on his way. Don't see what he can do 'cept bawl you out. Let me have the book back sometime!"

He read the title at one glance: CRIMINAL CODE AND STATUTES, REPUBLIC OF KALMED, *Issued by and for the Supreme Court of Kalmed*. Inside, in fine print, ran the legend: *Property of Perlotti and Spier*. He cast a quick eye down the tabulated contents, and then tried the index, and drew blank in both. Murder as such wasn't even listed. Nor was homicide. He elected for the section marked *Capital of-*

fenses and began to plough through the jargon until he had it clear in his mind.

In essence it stated that all offenders found guilty of "any other major offense not specifically before stated" should be deemed "in need of medical and psychological treatment and/or rehabilitation, and shall become the ward of the Health and Hygiene Commission, who are hereby empowered to perform and exercise such therapy, exercises, treatments and other measures as they shall think fit—" He pondered that a moment, and up came the references again.

This was another of the Ten Families. The Health and Hygiene Commission was the valuable property of Scheff, the family and descendants of old Werner Scheff, who had been medical officer of that first ship down on Kalmed, all those years ago. There was more. The House of Scheff was the black sheep of the Ten, being regarded with disapproval because it discreetly encouraged its staff members to be nosy about Kalmed life-science. Very discreet. No hard evidence of prying. But rumors. And the other financial emperors didn't like it, because they knew they had a good thing going, and that it stood firmly on good will with the Kalmedans. They wanted nothing to upset that. There was even a rumor that Scheff was covertly helping to finance an independent Research Center, a place that called itself a sanatorium but was really a mental home. He asked for the name, like an anxious parent watching a favorite child do tricks, and his mind conjured it up readily. Dr. Zeiger. Dr. Olber Zieger, head of the sanatorium and Research Center.

He put the book down and sat shaking his head in angry bewilderment. For crying out loud, why was it he could remember just about everybody's name except his own? Why?

He started at the sound of activity in the corridor outside his cell. Clagg's voice came. "You know the rules, gents. Fifteen minutes. Don't pass anything to the prisoner."

He stood as three men came in. One was burly, tall, with a dark scowl of irritation, the other two with smothered grins. All were in the same black uniform as himself. And all were total and absolute strangers to him!

THREE

"WELL, MR. HART!" The burly one had a voice that would have scraped paint from the walls, had there been any. "You've got yourself into a right juddy shambles this time, and no error. Two killings, and one of them a high-muck Kal! You shorted your tiny mind, have you?" This man was about forty, exuding rough but efficient authority, and there was affection, deep down under his growl. "Blast my tubes, the number of times I've tried to course you off that juddy Kal woman, and now look at it!"

"Wait a minute," he muttered, staring up. "There's something you ought to know before you go any further."

"Don't try to throw us a story, mister. It's too late for that!"

"But wait! All right, it's going to sound like a story to you—but the fact is—I don't know anything about it. I don't know who *you* are, even. None of you." The weatherburned face cracked open as if its owner was unused to being flabbergasted. The other two lost their sympathetic grins.

"What? You juddy scow-pusher, are you trying to flam me you've lost your charts? You don't know who I am? Save your fuel!"

"But it's true. I can't remember a thing, except that something awful happened, and I ran away, fell into a car, and drove off. Then I crashed off the road, passed out, and was found by a Kalmedan woman. She looked after me for a while, and then brought me here. That's all. I don't even remember my own name! I had to look through these clothes to find out that much, and it still doesn't mean anything to me. I don't know who you are. I'm guessing that you are my commanding officer, but that's all it is, a guess!" He shoved the words at them as firmly and steadily as his mounting panic would let him.

Three darkly suspicious faces stared back at him. The burly one shoved back his cap.

"Well, ground all my switches if I ever heard you throw a twist like this before, Jim. You *look* trim enough. You'll

never get off the pad with a course like that, man! It won't fire. Don't remember your own name?"

"Hold and check!" The warning came from the man on the right, a lean, lively-faced fox of a man, with a long nose and bright eyes. "I smell a bias here, somehow." He furrowed his face in keen thought and the man on the bunk watched him anxiously.

The burly one had two gilt bars on his shoulders, the others one each, but no other marks of distinction. Commanding Officer was an obvious assumption, but what were the other two?

Fox-face muttered, "This might be on-line. We all know what the Kals can do when it comes to brain-bending. And he doesn't sound right to me. Let's try this." The bright eyes swiveled and were sharp. "Jim, you were with me, and Parks here. In the Green Hole. And you had that blonde bunny along, Wesen. All right? And you were toppling, all right. Shot! Remember that much?"

"No. I've heard bits. I suppose it's right, if you say so."

"All right, we'll try something easier. I'm Cal Hapley, second mate. That's Bill Parks, purser. And, as you guessed, this is Captain Franks. That any help?" Three faces stared and waited. He studied them, tasted the names in his mind, and shook his head despairingly.

"It's no good. If you say so, all right, but none of it means anything to me at all. None of it. I'm sorry!"

"Hold thrust!" the burly one grunted. "That's good enough for me. Jim couldn't act *that* good. Clear board and restart. You've been shorted, lad!"

"What d'you mean?"

"Got at. Tampered with. Somebody has been twisting your juddy brains, that's obvious. Blast it, I'm Cal Hapley. Calloway Hapley, captain of *Troy*, and have been for six ob-years. You've been my Number One all that time, too. We commissioned the old bucket out of Luna Yards together. This is Bill Parks"—he indicated the foxy one—"the fastest purser with a percentage in this or any other Galaxy. Smart figuring, Bill. And this is Ben Franks, our second."

Franks shut one lazy blue eye in his moon-face and said, "This is off-chart, skipper. If they've twisted his

noggin, could be they've twisted everything else, too. I don't reckon he did any of it. The more I think, the less I see it. Jim's a juddy basher, we all know that. But can you plot him with a knife? I can't. And why would he slice Weseen? She was laying it right in his lap. And whoever this slug was off the *Hermes*, he never even saw him before. A grounder no more than twenty-two or three, on a nonstop jump from Earth? Jim hasn't been Earthside in fifteen years, you know that. None of us have."

"It stinks of Kal," Parks put in. "I reckon some of their high-mucks got burned because Jim here was plucking her dizzy, so they twisted it to get him burned down for slicing her, and then twisted him so he couldn't talk about it afterwards. He wouldn't have slashed her—"

Captain Hanley made up his mind, visibly and all at once. "Right! The condition is red-emergency. We've got to lift him out of this, and not much time. *Troy's* due to lift off at oh-four hours tomorrow. It's close on noon now. First thing, I'll get on to our guild-man for extradition rights."

"You won't get 'em," Parks stated, with conviction.

"I know that. It'll help to foul their circuits. Guild will bring it to Transport and Communication section. It's their snarl, properly. And they will have to tangle with P. and S. The Law. That should get them all scratching their landing gear. Meantime, we will be casting a course to lift you out of here, Jim." Hapley cast a glance around the bare cell. "It shouldn't take much. Old Clagg has the keys. Never more than four uniformed men here at any one time. So long as they don't catch a smell of our plot, we can coast it."

"Stunners?" Franks murmured, and Parks clicked his tongue.

"Air-suits will handle that, Frankie. I reckon one flat truck, four of the boys, air-suits, and anything solid enough to serve as weapons. Box-wrench, starter handle—a three foot length of plasticized heavy cable makes my favorite dinger. I remember, on Zoltan Four once—"

"All right," Hapley interrupted. "We can trim the course as we go. Set for oh-three hours, grab him out, back to ship and lift off. So long as they all think we're going through

Guild, they won't worry. You keep shut about it, Jim. And don't let them try any stunts on you."

"Wait!" He reached for them in dismay, staggered by this sudden leap into the rarefied strata of jail-breaking. "Please, won't you tell me what did happen? One of you. I don't know. I don't know whether I'm guilty or not!"

Franks turned back, made a slow grin. "You don't even talk like Jim any more. I never heard him say please. What happened? How should we know? You were along of us, in the Green Hole, like always. And Weseen. You were teaching her a new song."

"Wait!" he cried again. "What was a Kalmede doing in—I'm assuming the Green Hole is some kind of dive?"

"It's no class," Franks admitted. "But the drinks are good, and cheap. As for the Kal bunny, I don't know. I always figured she just hung around there waiting for you. That bit about teaching her Earthan songs is just a blind, just an excuse to get you back to her place. You mean, you don't remember that *either*?"

"I can't even believe it's possible!"

"You *have* been bent. It was possible all right when you took off just before noon, back to her place. To eat, you said." His tone conveyed extreme doubt. He grinned, smothered it, went on. "We went off back to the port canteen, never laid eyes on you from then until now."

"This has been going on for some time, the—affair with Weseen?"

"The last eight trips. About three years!" Franks looked worried now. "They really curdled your circuits, didn't they? What burns me is how you got across the young grounder off the *Hermes*. She was just sitting down when we got back to the canteen. That part stinks!"

"Time up!" Clagg's voice broke up the tension. "Have to leave, gents!"

The three departed, taking with them all the aura of vigorous confidence they had brought, leaving him to sag on the bunk again and grapple with his thoughts. He didn't for one moment doubt they would try to do what they had planned. He could see merit in their forthright approach, too, and the small smoke screen of "going through official

channels." That brought up more names. Transport and Communications, owned and administered by the Maurice Mercer Corporation.

After a while of circling around that datum he realized, with dismay, that he didn't want to be rescued. He didn't want to be snatched aboard a ship and whisked away from the planet. Every instinct he had left insisted that the solution to his problem lay here, and if he ran away it would never be solved.

And, although he admired Hapley, and Franks, and Parks, they felt wrong in his mind. Analyzing that hard, he reversed it. Not them. It was he himself who was wrong. They looked and acted like the spacemen they were, shrewd, direct and competent. Nothing fancy. But he couldn't feel that *he* matched that frame. He clenched his hands and stared at them. Strong and scarred, thick-fingered working hands. A slugger, a basher, *not* a knife man. So they had said, but he couldn't feel it at all.

He got up restlessly and paced the narrow cell. He had been "got at," so his shipmates claimed. But why? And how? That last question stirred a quiver of curiosity. They said he'd left with Weseen—a blankly anonymous name, that—to go to her place, to eat. About noon. But he had plunged off that nightmare road much later.

He picked at the memories, forcing himself to relive the horror in order to recapture the whole scene. Fifteen miles at the outside. And he'd been screaming along. Yet it had happened about mid-afternoon. Aporia had said that much. So you could say anything from four to six hours to account for. Nor ever would be now, he gloomed, and groped for the other victim, recalling the name. He could remember names fine now, he told himself bitterly.

Clagg came along with a tray-meal and a canister of hot coffee that had "something" in it, dickered for another reward, and went away again.

David Rollo Allen, that was the name. Almost tediously, up came the string of information again. The Allens, the bankers of Kalmed, and young Rollo was the sole surviving issue in the name. Gardner Allen, a spry eighty-five, had survived two sickly sons, one dead without issue, the other

managing to produce one son before drinking himself into a premature grave. Young Rollo raised and educated on Earth to befit his position, then hurriedly summoned to Kalmed at the abrupt and apoplectic death of his grandfather. Young Rollo, heir to the Allen financial empire of Kalmed, now dead. Murdered in a tavern brawl. By a drunken spaceman. *Me!* he thought and hated himself because he couldn't even feel remorse. Or guilt.

The cell door rattled and he got to his feet as Clagg brought him another trio of visitors. Not spacemen, this time. That was apparent at the first glance. One was short, stout, heavy lenses gleaming over sharp dark eyes, his black hair smoothed back over a dome-head, his manner fidgety-fussy. He trotted into the cell, smiled, and spoke with a hint of accent.

"I am Dr. Zeiger, of the Research Institute and Sanatorium, in Gablot. This is Kalmed Thral. And this is Mr. Paul Garvey, Director-President of the Bank of Kalmed. You are James Hart."

A shiver of irrational dread shook him. At last, familiar sounds and faces. Names he knew. He looked first at Thral, recognizing him. *I've seen you before*, he thought, but the recognition wouldn't go any further, and he sagged back to the realization that he was wrong, fooled by a resemblance. For this tall and handsome man bore an uncanny likeness to Aporia. Not in any one feature but in the flawless line and bone-structure of his face, the aloof perfection and indifference, he was very like her. Six feet tall, poised and well-made, his paper-white cloak added to his air of superior detachment, his thick black hair waved and lay back from a chiseled face, and his steel-gray eyes were a quiet insult.

Garvey was utterly different, so commonplace as to be startling, for all his expensive midnight blue tailoring and his scented grooming. This man was thick, florid, imperious, accustomed to giving orders—but now he had an uneasy, shifty look. "Tell you why I am here," he said, in a thick throaty voice that sounded in a hurry to get it over with. "Represent the house of Allen. Executor to the decedent. We are required by the law to bring charges against you, to prosecute. I'm doing it. Notifying you formally. That's all."

"I see!" And he did see. The law on Kalmed did not recognize a crime against the state, or any anonymous authority, only against some specified person or object. So Garvey, representing the Bank, had to prosecute. That was clear enough. "I understand. Thank you."

"I am here in a similar capacity." Thral spoke now, cool and precise. "I assure you that we of Kalmed will take no oppressive action against you in the matter of the Kalmede Weseen. Do you wish further explanation?"

"Yes, I would. Anything you feel you can tell me."

"Very well. We count ourselves responsible at all times for anything that happens to us. You couldn't possibly have harmed Weseen had she herself not made it possible." The carefully modulated voice hardened just a shade. "It is distressing to me to speak ill of my own people, but truth is precious. Weseen saw fit to associate with you, for diversion, by choice. She must bear responsibility for the outcome."

Disowned by her own kind! He felt a momentary stir of disgust, then pushed it away as irrelevant. "I think I understand. Thank you for coming to tell me, anyway."

"It is part of my function to act as liaison between our people and yours." Thral recited it like a formula. He stepped back. Zeiger coughed.

"My position is a delicate one, Mr. Hart. When you are finally tried and found guilty by the court, you—"

"Just a minute. Aren't you getting a bit ahead? Aren't you all assuming that I am guilty?"

"No!" Garvey jerked out the word. "That's not it at all! See here, your guild people have started proceedings. T and C are barging into it, and there's talk of extradition and lord knows what else. Point is this. If you once ship out, get off-planet, it will cost us a small fortune to carry through with prosecution. It could drag on. Squabbles with Earth jurisdiction, and space-service, and all the rest of it. I'm pressing formal charges now, so that you will be held right here, subject to *our* law. That's all. No prejudice at all! Fair trial. But *here!*"

"If you are found guilty"—Zeiger made the modification with a delicate gesture—"you will be committed to Health

and Hygiene for care. Now, Scheff doesn't have facility for such a case. Routine illnesses, yes. Even small neuroses and nervous debilities. But they can't cope with a full-blown psychopath. Even their violent alcoholics they send to me. I am a specialist in the grosser mental disorders, you see. Of course, I am humble before the far greater skill of our Kalmedan hosts." He slid a greasy grin aside to Thral, who appeared not to have heard. "You will be put in my care. I thought it right to tell you this. You promise to be a most interesting case."

"What will you do with me?" His voice seemed suddenly sandy-dry in his throat, the sense of familiarity tingling his nerves. There was a dreadfully knowing air about this little fat man. "Somebody has already been playing devilish tricks on me. What are *you* going to do?" He strained for the memory that wouldn't come, a memory that ought to have this greasy little man's face on it. Pain lanced through his head suddenly.

Zeiger ducked back, put up his arms in a gesture of defense. "Nothing harmfull Nothing like that! First we will try to find out why you are violent, abnormal, asocial. And then we will put it right. We have ways!"

The prisoner shivered again, rage leaping into fire all at once.

"Get out!" He made a threatening step and Zeiger scuttled away. "Get out of here, all of you! Go and gloat somewhere else! You haven't got me yet, damn you! Out!"

Anger made him aware of his size, his physical superiority, that he was a violet person who had already killed. He squeezed his hands into fists, swung from Zeiger to the other two. Garvey paled and went back. Thral moved not a muscle, nor changed his expression a hair, but his eyes were like twin swords. The man with no name felt that invisible hold once more, that intangible paralysis. He strained until red haze fogged his vision, but he was powerless, stopped dead in his tracks. Then Thral smiled, just the wisp of a twist to his patrician mouth, and it was as if a blinding white fire-bomb burst in the cell.

He came to with a splitting headache and old Clagg's face peering anxiously close. He sat up and groaned.

"You all right? Clagg demanded. "You want me to get a doctor?"

"Never mind. I'm all right now. Leave me alone!" He lay back again on the bunk-bed as the old man grumbled out and secured the door. The headache dwindled away.

It looked as if Parks had been right, he thought. Whatever they'd done to him, it had been Kalmedan. They had bent him somehow. Aporia must have realized that. And Thral must know something about it. But why? He felt the first swellings of a dull anger against the faceless ones who had done this, whatever it was, to him. Kalmedans. It had to be that. Weseen first, involving herself with a common Earthan. And Aporia, too. For all her apparent kindness, she had manipulated him straight into jail. Perhaps he would have ended up here in any case, but she hadn't done anything to avoid that. And now Thral. And Zeiger. And Carvey. All with one idea in mind. To keep him quiet and get him safely out of the way. A frame-up!

He was still fuming at it when Clagg came to warn him about lights-out and lock-up for the night. He stirred out of his anger enough to ask the old man a pertinent question.

"What do I do if I want you for anything during the night?"

"Huh? I hope you won't, young fellow. You'll have to shout mighty hard. I've a little two-room along the end of this passage. But I sleep sound. Have to, sometimes. Ain't sick again, are you?"

"No. I just like to know where everything is, what to do."

"Ho! Well, you just settle down and don't worry me. I always hang the keys just here, should anybody want them in a hurry. Like there was a fire or something. But you'll have to shout mighty hard to rouse me, once I'm down."

The old man hung the keyring in a cabinet on the wall right opposite the cell and went grumbling away down the corridor. Seconds later the lights went out, except for one blue glow in the passage.

Time fell in on itself and crawled along. He sat, kneading his fists and trying to think. Suppose, just suppose, the *Troy* men came and got him? Back to the ship and away.

There, in that familiar environment his memory would be sure to come back. He strove to assure himself, but the attempt was a flat failure. The whole concept of spaceman felt empty and meaningless. He conjured up a vision of wandering through uncountable miles of space, never to know again who he was, and he shivered. *That* wouldn't work.

He came back, helplessly, to the conviction that what the Kalmedans had done, only they could undo. And that meant Aporia as his only hope. He could see her again in his mind quite clearly. Supernally beautiful, powerfully competent—but could he assume her to be on his side? Against her own people? Perhaps, when she had studied the problem as a problem long enough, she would decide not to interfere at all. Wills Morgan, the Chief of Police, had dared to tell her as much—"Don't interfere!"

The laggard minutes dragged by. A dozen times he felt certain it must be close on dawn, and that the men of *Troy* had thought better of their hazardous scheme. It *must* be dawn soon. It *must* be more than three a.m. Or, in their ship-jargon, oh-three hours. It felt like a thousand years! He jerked out of an uneasy doze as a pencil beam tweaked his eyelids, and a stifled voice muttered at him.

"Jim? Hold on, we'll have you out of there in two shakes, once we get the keys off the old man."

"Over there!" he whispered urgently. "Hanging on the wall, see?" The pencil-beam swung and pointed. There was the subdued shuffle of feet and a grunt of scorn as a black hand went to the cabinet.

"Easy as popping a can. Grab those, Hans. I'll just take a check on the old 'un."

The lock creaked. The cell-door sighed open. A strong hand grabbed his arm and steered him along the passage. He could see now that they were all in glossy black skin-fitting suits. Air-suits? Clear plastic made oval windows for their faces. He recognized Franks. At the top of the zigzag stairway they halted a moment before easing out into the ornate hallway. One blue lamp glowed here, filling the far corners with shadow. Three black figures hustled him across to the massive double-doors. One stood half-open and askew.

"Bit late," Franks muttered cheerfully. "Had a hell of a

sweat to get that door off its bearings. Mind your step, one body here. All clear out?"

The assurance came back in a throaty whisper and they eased out into the starlit night, to hurry diagonally down the white steps to where another man waited and waved them on and around the corner. The scene was lifeless apart from themselves. He wished his feet didn't sound so loud in comparison with the rest. Round the corner they came to a low-slung machine with a flat rear and insecure-looking rails around it.

"Made it!" That was Parks. "You all right, Jim?"

"I'm fine. What time is it?"

"Oh-three-fifteen. That juddy door biased us. Cracked its bearings easy enough, but then we couldn't move it. Heavy as hell!"

"Could have walked it!" Franks chuckled. "Thick as lead-moss, that lot. One guard, fast off and snoring, and the keys hung on the juddy wall! All aboard? Blast off, Bill!"

The chunky machine snarled into life and he clung frantically to a rail as it whirled into a fast turn. At the wheel, Parks spoke over his shoulder.

"Memory any better, Jim?"

"I'm afraid not." He hung on desperately as the racing machine flung into another corner. "I had guests after you left. They had it all fixed to put me away in a mental home."

"Just as well we lifted you out, then. They'd have twisted your noggin some more and had you confessing to the whole shoot!"

"What I figure," Franks declared, "is that you fractured some taboo or other, you and that Weseen bunny between you, and this was their way of fixing the score. Bill, you remember we ran into a taboo-thing like that once on Wylorn, in the Deneb sector—whup! Red-red, a juddy gen-darmel!"

The one-wheel machine swooped at them from a side-road, yellow uniform glowing in the gloom, an amplified voice ordering.

"Stop! That machine, stop!"

"We'll give him a run!" Parks grunted, putting his foot down hard. The flat-truck surged into howling speed. "He's

got the legs of us, but we'll con him down a dark alley somewhere and slug him. Keep your head down, Jim, and hold tight, everybody!"

The truck screeched into a corner, straightened out and fled down a long broad street, the one-wheel pursuing valiantly. Left and right again, wheels skidding wildly, and they went into another straight run. He recognized this road now. Harbor Street. He snatched a backward glance at the patrolman. So did Franks, and grunted.

"Watch out, Bill, he's lining up his stunner on us!" As he spoke, there came a metallic clang from the rear of the truck, and instant death to the howling motor. Parks cursed.

"Dirty! Blown our ignition cock-eyed!" He hauled on the wheel of the slowing truck to bring it swooping into a dark side road. "Stand by, Jim. When I say, you flit. Duck into a doorway and let him chase us. We'll handle *him*!"

The truck slowed more and more, and the patrolman came close. Parks gave a shout "Now!" and he leaped clear, stumbled, rolled over, and got up and ran for the roadside and into a dark doorway. Peering out, he saw the crippled truck coast on and the one-wheel wail up to its rear. All at once the truck jerked to a stop and four black shapes scrambled out, two a side.

The patrolman halted too, the stubby weapon in his arms thumped and a long glittering thread lanced out and snapped back with an echoing thump. A stunner, a weapon that spat an electrode on the end of a fine wire, like a chameleon's tongue. But, by cunning electronics, that metal end could deliver a flash-burst of five thousand volts in one total pulse. Enough to knock a man out. Unless he was encased in rubber, of course.

The *Troy* men had anticipated that. They had obviously dealt with a stunner before. He grinned in admiration as he saw one bobbing shape stand cheekily and offer himself as a target. The stun-bolt lashed out, the shape ducked and snatched, catching the wire and jerking on it. The patrolman came off his one-wheel with a shout and a frantic waving of arms. The other dark shapes closed in eagerly. The men of *Troy* knew a few tricks of their own. Then he jumped and whipped around as the door at his back opened to

spill a flood of white light into the street. Someone stared out.

"What in the name of—you!" The complaint cut off in a gasp. Hands reached and grabbed powerfully. He twisted away, striking out, turning to run, and a white fire-bomb exploded in his skull. And then blackness.

He awoke unwillingly, desperately not wanting to, convinced that somebody was rattling red-hot marbles within the empty steel drum that was his head. After an agonized eternity the rattling stopped, leaving pain-echoes and the knowledge that the noise hadn't been inside his head at all, but outside. A machine of some kind. And it had stopped. He dared to open his eyes. Glare-patches of light gradually resolved into edged shapes. Windowpanes and wall. White ceiling. Green rubberized floor. And a smell compounded of ether and ozone and something else. A hospital!

He moved, and found he was bound by wrists and ankles to an almost upright backboard, with a narrow ledge supporting his feet. The pose spelled threat. He heaved, but the fastenings were solid bands, with no promise of yielding. That threw doubt on the hospital notion. And then he had it, with a sudden quake. Restraint! Zeiger!

The details flooded back. That voice in the doorway, the grabbing hands. And the mind-force. Zeiger and Thral, then. He couldn't remember that, not specifically, but there was no other answer that fitted the facts. And that lane, it must have been Dragon Lane, where the whole insane business had begun anyway. What could have happened to the men of *Troy* and their battle with the patrolman?

He heaved at his bonds again. That chattering clatter started up, making him jump. He twisted his head around to see, on a far wall, a widespread panel where pinpoint lights danced in a shifting pattern. A computer! Research. A laboratory. Zeiger's place. The trains and patterns of light flitted across the panel for a few seconds, then ceased, along with the chattering. The machine spat a thin ribbon of punched paper. He twisted his head the other other way, saw something that looked capable of putting out a ray of some sort. Another device had spidery arms with contacts

on the extremities. There were switches and outlets all over the walls.

What was Zeiger going to do to him this time? Sweat started out on his body as he flung himself at his bonds. How long had he been here? By the look of sunlight outside it was going on for noon.

What had happened to the *Troy*? He had a vague suspicion that ship-schedules were sacred things, that one couldn't break. If true, then *Troy* was long since gone into space, and he was all alone.

He made himself be calm, leaning back against the padded board and feeling the sweat evaporate to chill dryness on his body. A fantastic idea insinuated itself into his mind, growing into consciousness before he was properly aware of it. *I am not James Hart*, he told himself. *I'm somebody else!* And he had to fight off a giggle of hysteria at the thought, but it persisted with a skewed logic of its own.

Somebody desperately wanted him to believe he was Jim Hart, for reasons still obscure. So they had fixed it somehow. And it was all screamingly crazy, but it "felt" right. *I'm going mad*, he thought. And maybe that was what Thral and Zeiger really wanted.

A door clicked somewhere out of his field of view, and a white-clad nurse came to stand in front of him and stare. He stared back at her. She was pretty, in a green-eyed doll-faced way. She wore a white cap pinned jauntily to bleach-blond hair, a high-collared white tunic that emphasized her shape and ended breathtakingly short, just at her hips, and the rest was very sheer white hose down to soft white shoes. She looked saucy, sexy, self-assured, and absolutely normal. That was the most devastating thing about her, the air of total normality.

"Well!" she remarked reprovingly. "How long have *you* been conscious? Why didn't you scream out?"

"Where am I?"

"They all say that." She smirked. He thought her voice was as graceless as her face, flat, without life. "This is Dr. Zeiger's Research Center." He saw the blue embroidered Z.R. on her breast as she put her hand to it. There was a

pocket there. She tugged out a compact mini-radio, spoke into it.

"Dr. Zeiger! Nurse Holst to Dr. Zeiger!"

"Yes, Holst, what is it?"

"The new one, the patient in the analysis chamber, is conscious. Do you have any particular orders at this time?"

"Good, good! No, no orders for now. I will be along myself in a while to examine him. You may attend to any immediate needs, whatever he wants. Do *not* release him. He can be violent."

She stuffed the radio away again, making a display of the action, her green eyes raking him candidly. "Violent, eh? I must say you look it, too. Are you hungry?" He realized he was, and nodded. She went away, to come back with a trolley and a bowl on it that steamed. She handled a long-stemmed spoon, dipped some of the thick stuff out of the bowl and put it to his mouth. "It's fortified soup. Good for you. It'll put life into you."

He accepted the stuff greedily. It *was* good, and he needed it. He had assuaged most of his immediate hunger before it grew on him that she was deliberately standing as close to him as she could, that her every move and gesture was an invitation.

"You heard the doctor say 'whatever he wants,' didn't you? And how I'm going to do that without letting you loose I do not know. Isn't it a shame? Isn't it?"

"Could I have a drink of water, please?"

"My, my, polite, aren't you?" But she brought the water for him, and he was grateful for that much. She wiggled whenever she walked. She made the utmost play of her curves in leaning over to reach from the trolley, in handing the spoon, or a beaker, to his mouth. He imagined, sourly, that she must have a wonderful bedside manner with more able patients.

"Would you do something else for me?" he asked, and she smiled like a switched-on beacon instantly. "Tell me—who am I?"

"You must be conning me," she snapped. "You're no amnesiac, not with those eyes!" But she moved past him

to unhook a clipboard from the wall by his head, and read it out to him.

"James Arthur Hart, thirty-four, single, W.A.S.—that's white, Anglo-Saxon—ex-first mate, S.S. Trader Troy. Previous history of instability and aggression, subject to periodic confusions of identity, loss of memory, manic-depressive, may be violent without warning symptoms. Case referred Z.R. by Wills Morgan, Chief of Police, Dangelar, at request Captain C. Hapley, C.O. S.S. Troy. This day, Wednesday, May seventh. Well, what d'you know about that? Loss of memory, eh? You don't look the type, to me."

"What day is this?"

"Thursday, eighth," she said promptly, and he caught back a groan.

A whole day gone. If anybody had been going to challenge that referral it would have been done by now. And who would, anyway? He didn't believe the part that said Hapley had turned him in, but that didn't matter much. Fake signatures would be just as good as real ones, now that *Troy* was light-years away. And there was nobody else. The Earthans had sewn everything up tight. By the time Zeiger was done with him, plus whatever deviltry the Kalmedans had in mind, he would be James Hart—or King Canute—or whatever else they had in store.

A chill aura of evil crept into the aseptically bright room, the breath of despair. Against that evil, this doll-faced hussy was an obscenity simply by being there. He wrenched in futility at the fastenings, then lay back.

"That won't do any good," she told him. "You just leave it to us. We'll have you right in no time, you'll see!"

"Go away!" he said bitterly. "Go away. You haven't the brains to see that you're being used, and you won't believe me because you think I'm mad, so what's the use? Just go away and leave me alone."

"Ah!" She reached out a hand to pat his chest. "You'll feel different before long, don't worry!" And she went away, still giggling cheerfully.

He stared out at the sunshine and felt his spirits sag right down to rock bottom. He had heard the usage "worse than death" many times, but not until now had he appreciated

that such a thing was possible. He felt empty, drained of all purpose and hope, a wall of unanswered questions shutting him away from reality. "They" said he was James Hart. All the evidence agreed with that. And they had some reason for wanting to destroy him. Why? He had not the ghost of a notion. In a sense, they had already succeeded. He was nobody, now. Nobody at all. And nobody cared.

A dim thought stirred to offer contradiction. Aporia. But it was two days now since he had last seen her, and she had done nothing. What right had he to expect that she would do anything, anyway? And what *could* she do? He was buried safely under the red tape of official regulations. She couldn't do anything about that. He let the vision of her loveliness fade from his mind. She had been half-unreal anyway.

There was something about rock bottom, something important. What more could he lose? His life? But he had lost that already. He lived, but he didn't exist, not in any real sense. An insane spark sputtered into life in his mind. They could have killed him, clean and swift. But they hadn't. So they were saving him for something, some experiment or other, no doubt. So, he reasoned grimly, he could defeat that. *I'll die*, he vowed. *I'll make them kill me, somehow. I don't know how, but I'll do it. I'll fight them, fight them!*

The quiet click of the door snapped him out of a blood-red rage into vicious calm. He lay back against the padded board. Zeiger came trotting into view, Zeiger in a long white dust-coat, unctuous, greasy, smiling through his heavy lenses.

"Ah! And how are we feeling now, eh? Rational, I hope?"

"No thanks to you!"

"Ah, good, good!" Zeiger lifted fingers to push his glasses back into place and beamed. "Good. You are rational. But quite wrong, Mr. Hart. Quite wrong. To me you owe your sanity at least, probably more. Had you succeeded in your foolish attempt to escape, you would have ended up quite mad. I assure you of that. I do not know exactly how it would have gone, of course. I would imagine catatonia. Some form of withdrawal from an intolerable situation, anyway. But not now. Not now!"

"Why don't you just kill me and have done with it!"

"Kill you? My dear sir!" Zeiger threw up his hands in protest. "That is the last thing I would do. You are precious to me, Mr. Hart, more precious than a fine jewel. Much more. You are the goose which is going to lay many golden eggs for me. Five long years of patient striving are wrapped up in you, I assure you. I do not intend to waste all that. You are going to make me rich, Mr. Hart. Rich, and famous!"

"But I'm not Jim Hart, damn you! I'm not, and you know it!"

"Aha!" Zieger put a finger to his nose and assumed a crafty smile. "Now I disagree with you. Thral has told me you are no longer James Hart, and I can sympathize with him, because it is his belief. I have studied the Kalmed ways very closely. They have nothing we would class as a religion, but they do have certain beliefs which are as precious to them as any of our avowals of faith. And this is one of them. Thral believes he has deleted from you the personality of James Hart, and substituted another. It is no use to argue with a belief like that. One must bring proof, one way or the other. This I propose to do. I shall prove to him that you are, indeed and still, James Hart. And then—ah, then!" The little doctor relapsed into some glorious vision of his own, nodding in satisfaction.

"I don't understand—how that can be so important. To you?"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand. But it is true! True!"

FOUR

THE LITTLE MAN was a fanatic, undoubtedly. But there was a burning fire of purpose in him that caught the imagination. The mention of Thral was a stimulus, too.

"You make it sound as if you have Kalmed Thral over some kind of a barrel. How can that be?"

"You are shrewd." Zeiger nodded. "Yes, I have Thral like this"—he offered finger and thumb in a dainty grip-gesture—"but only tenuously, a frail hold. The Kalmedans are our superiors; no one would want to argue that. But when a race has such a dedication to honor, and truth, it becomes vul-

nerable. Did you ever think of that? That the reason why there are so few really honest men is because they are so vulnerable? If I make a mistake, I would worry a little about it, yes. But an honest man, so declared, would be forced by his own conviction to admit his mistake completely, would be the helpless victim of his own ethic. You see? When I prove to Thral, as I will, that he is wrong—he will not be angry with me. No. He will be diminished at once, in his own eyes. And through him all the rest of the Kalmed people. Because they worship truth. A dangerous doctrine, that.”

“You’re a scientist. Don’t you worship truth too?”

“Hah!” Zeiger was amused at that. “There speaks the layman. I do not worship anything, Mr. Hart. I do not believe anything, either. I observe. I test. I check. I use impersonal instruments. I doubt myself. I try to find my mistakes. If I prove myself wrong, that is a blow, but it is not fatal; it merely means I am wrong. I have made a mistake!”

“But you’re convinced you’re right and Thral is wrong, aren’t you?”

“That is a different matter entirely.” Zeiger suddenly lost his taste for discussion and his affable smile. “It is something you would not understand at all. Let me say just this. I do not hope to match my small brain against a Kalmedan. I am not that much of a fool. No. What I have here, on my side, is three hundred years of Earth science, every step tried and tested a hundred times. I have methodology. I have instruments. And I have a computer. In some ways it is inferior as a brain, just as I am inferior to Thral. But if I give it the right data it can out-think me a thousand times. And together we can out-think any Kalmede that was ever born!”

“You’re mad! Stark raving mad!”

Zeiger stiffened, stood back, swung one pudgy hand in a vicious swipe that had plenty of steam in it. “You dare to speak to me like that, me, Olber Zeiger? You are a fool. Remember, man without name, you are only a guinea pig to me. It matters nothing what you think!”

“Doesn’t it?” he sneered, piling on the disgust. “You

have to know what I think, or else how are you going to prove anything about my identity?"

"When I want you to talk, you will talk. My machines will tell me if you speak true."

He came forward now, and there was a certain deft delicacy about him as he reached up to pull down a hanging cradle of looping wires and electrodes. His absorption was obvious as he attached tiny contact-pieces to brow and temple and throat, clipped nipping things to ear lobes, stuck cold places to various parts of the body, and all the while constantly glancing over his shoulder to read some subtle change in the display from the computer. Crazy or not, he seemed to know exactly what he was doing.

He straightened up to stand and look at the computer now, nodding his head. "It is strange," he said, "how medical science repeatedly returns to old ideas and finds new truth in them. For instance, I now have your body-image and your mental-image side by side, and they clash. Thral would say that proves his belief, of course. But my medical ancestors would merely say you are deranged. As you indeed are. Sickness, of any kind, is merely a malfunction, something out of step with the whole. So, if the mind is out of step with the body, then you are *mentally* sick. It is no more than that. And we must—"

He halted as an insistent bleat came from his coat pocket. He snatched the radio irritably.

"Zeiger. What?"

"Reception. Kalmed Thral is here to see you."

Zeiger bit off something unfit to be heard. "Very well. Tell him I am busy. I will be perhaps ten minutes!" He stuffed away the radio and swung on his patient, swiftly removing all the clips and contacts he had so carefully placed in position.

"It will not do to let him see too much," he muttered as he thrust the cradle well away, taking the tangle of wires with it. "But I think I have something of a surprise for him."

He trotted away to a wall-cabinet and drew out a shallow tray exactly like the ice cube tray of an ordinary refrigerator except that it had a tight-fitting lid, and held something very precious, judging by the way he fondled it in his hands.

He used his thumbs to pop the lid open, dipped into oily liquid and brought out a wet piece of transparent film about six inches long and two inches wide.

"Not much to look, at," he murmured, almost crooning over it. "You would not believe if I told you just how much work is here. You know about the Kalmed mental powers. You have experienced them. I have seen them demonstrated only a few times. They are secretive about their powers. Only a few times have I seen Thral exert real power. And always on you. That is one of the other reasons why you are precious to me. This is a biochemical thin-film insulator. I apply it to your forehead now." It felt cool just for a moment.

"It covers the frontal lobes, the so-called 'silent' areas of the brain. And there, now, it is quite invisible!" He dabbed delicately with a cotton-wool swab. "There! Now I think I will go and bring Thral up here to see you."

He was gone less than five minutes. He came back with servile tones in his voice. "It is perfectly all right now. We have him secure. Harmless." He trotted busily into view, followed by the tall and casual indifference of Thral.

The Kalmed was as insolently aloof as ever as he stared at the helpless man on the rack. "You are determined to try to make him into James Hart?"

"But of course. It is no offense to you, simply the way of our science. You say he is no longer Hart. That may be true. But I must prove it to my own satisfaction, in my own way."

"You have been working on him already!" There was a quick tension in Thral's voice and a flare of emotion in his steel-gray eyes. Fear? "What have you done? With your crude electronics, you've destroyed his mind entirely!"

"Not so!" Zeiger protested. "He is quite rational, I assure you. Hart, you can hear and understand what we are saying, can't you?"

"I can hear you!"

Thral's eyes narrowed, and there was a definite expression of concern on his partician features now. Zeiger stepped cautiously away to a wall-switch, put his hand on it.

"If you wish, I will release him, so that you can see his bodily coordination is normal—"

"No!" Thral snapped, but he was too late, the switch went over and the shackles clicked open. The Kalmed stepped back.

The man on the rack leaned forward and stepped free, wincing as long-still muscles protested. He brought his hands together, rubbing them, kneading the knuckles, noting the growing fear on Thral's face. He took a cautious step forward, expecting that white-fire bomb in his mind at any moment. But it didn't come. Thral moved back as fascinated as a rabbit watching a snake.

"You see?" Zeiger said innocently. "He is quite normal!"

Thral turned his head just for a moment to look at Zeiger. It was enough. Hours of pain, fear, humility and degradation exploded into one single-minded urge, to lash out and hurt. He twisted his shoulders and threw a left fist hard, rejoicing in the solid shock of contact, in seeing Thral's head snap back, seeing the lordly Kalmed reel aside, right into a smashing right hand that leveled him up and drove him flat against the wall. He stood back, waiting for the snorting man to reel forward again, and hit him again, right and left with all the savage energy he could muster. Thral slammed into the wall again and slid down in a disorder of white cloak and spouting red blood.

The man who was not James Hart stood still, rubbing his knuckles and staring down.

"Get up!" he ordered. "That's just a starter. There's more!"

In reluctant admiration he watched Thral put out a wobbly hand and feel for the floor, then struggle blindly to his feet, only to go down again, for good, at one more roundhouse right. Then the quest for vengeance extended to Zeiger.

"That's quite a trick you have there," he admitted, "but you made a bit of a mistake turning me loose, Doctor. You've got yours to come. This guinea pig bites!" He trod forward.

Zeiger scuttled back, cautious rather than fearful, and reached up for a long slim rod that hung on the wall by the computer. Then he halted his retreat and stood ready, thrusting out with the rod as his vengeful prisoner started forward again. It looked no threat at all, that rod.

He went to brush it aside with an angry forearm, and

screamed uncontrollably as a blast of exquisite agony knotted his muscles and brought him up on his toes. He fell away, retching and jerking, doubled, up with the vicious pain of tortured nerves. Zeiger moved forward, dabbing with the rod, and he screamed senselessly and helplessly each time that thing touched his naked flesh. Zeiger was quite impersonal about it, quite calm.

"You will return to the strait-bed," he said, "or I will keep touching you. You will feel it every time. It causes no physical injury. It is simply a neurone stimulator. Return to the strait-bed. Go back—"

Resistance was impossible, was futile. The instant agony of each touch was enough to paralyze the faculties. He went back. He crept back and let himself be shackled. And he wept from sheer defeat. There were things worse than death, and Zeiger knew how to handle some of them. He sagged against the metal bands and felt the faint bite of a needle in his arm.

"To soothe you." Zeiger's eyes, huge and owl-like behind his lenses, swam into momentary clarity. "You will become drowsy, and sleep, and soon we will make you all one man again."

The reverberations of agony died away and a thin gray fog drifted into the room. Through it he saw Nurse Holst come, and twitter in futile concern over Thral's horrid condition. He had a ridiculous urge to kick her shapely bottom as she stooped over to help drag the unconscious Kalmed out. At any rate, he thought, she would now know for sure that he was violent. And he had marked Thral. He had really put the rigors on Thral. Which was something to feel happy about. But it was little enough, and the rest was gray-grim nightmare, into which he fell slowly and silently.

There was nothing but darkness for what felt like a long time. He came muzzily out of it at one period to learn that there were mufflers over his ears and a small confident voice talking inside his head. It declared: "I am James Arthur Hart. I am thirty-four years old. I am a first class space-man, a deep-space master. I was born on Wednesday, the fifth of June, twenty-one nineteen, in Rochester, New York State. I attended the Institute of Technology there—"

And then he slid away down into the dark again. Then, somehow, although he was asleep, or drugged, or whatever it was, he knew that the steady little voice had stopped its monotonous repetition. That was curious. The curiosity grew into an itch, disturbing him. Then a flicker of bright light, striking through his eyelids, added to the disturbance. A voice hissed:

"Wake up. Come on, wake up!" And it was more than just a voice, it was someone reaching inside his head, shaking his brains alive. He levered his eyes open sullenly and the light slid away. The voice came again.

"Look at me!" The light swiveled, came to rest on white, a tunic and then a face. The face shimmered into focus. Not Nurse Holst, this time. Another one. A redhead. Pretty, too. He worked at his voice, got it going.

"Who are you? "What d'you want?"

"Good! You're rational, at least."

He suppressed a snarl at the word. Everybody in this damned place was obsessed with rationality. "What d'you want?"

"How do I get these blasted bonds loose, do you know? Think!"

"What?" He drove his sluggish wits into some kind of action and stared at her. "Who are you?"

"Later. The shackles! They must be remotely operated. I have to have lights, it can't be helped." She moved away, there came a click, and he screwed up his face as bright glares stung his eyes. She came back on soft feet and the idea oozed through his head that she was trying to set him free.

"Over there," he mumbled. "On the wall. Switch. No. Next one. That's it!" She moved the switch over, the bands clicked away and he slid into a helpless heap on the floor. He felt her fingers under his arms, heaving to turn him over and lay him out flat, and then her quick investigatory touch.

"Soporifics. Hypnotics too, probably. The devils! And you're as weak as a baby. Lie still!" He felt a chuckle stirring inside. What did she think he was going to do, run away? Moments later she was crouching by him and feeding him warm stuff from a spoon. "I don't know exactly what this

is, but it's nourishment of some kind, to judge by the label."

"Fortified soup," he remembered, after the third swallow.

"Whatever you say, only be quick, I daren't have this light showing too long or someone will come to investigate."

Little familiarities ran together in his mind to form a startling whole and he spluttered soup as he said, "Aporial You! What are you doing here?"

"The obvious thing. Rescue. I take it you want that?"

"You're the first to ask my opinion. But how'd you get here?"

"Concentrate on drinking. I'll sketch it for you." She kept the spoon moving between the bowl on the floor and his mouth as she talked. "Leaving you I went seeking Thral, but he evaded me. I went to investigate Weseen's rooms, but they'd been stripped. That apartment block is owned by Allen's. The Bank of Kalmed. But leased to all sorts of people. I learned a little, mostly that Weseen had a few other visitors, as well as Jim Hart. It's difficult to ask questions when everyone freezes up. I got the impression that Thral was more involved than I had imagined. Also a certain Dr. Zeiger."

"I can tell you about them."

"Later. Wednesday I went back to see you in jail, but you'd been taken away. Wild rumors that you'd escaped, which I didn't believe. I followed your pattern. It led me here."

"All this, for me?" He looked up into her face, puzzled. "Why?"

"Because I am interested in what has been done to you." The answer left a bad taste in his mouth. He tried to sit, and made it after a struggle. She crouched by him on one knee, watching. "Will you be able to manage on your own, or do you want my help?"

"If we're going to make a run for it I'm going to need something. How d'you mean, help? Power of some kind?"

"Yes, but only if you ask for it."

Ethics, he thought. Mustn't "compel" anyone except by consent. He tried a deep breath, felt better but not good. "Help me!" he said, and she nodded, stood up. His eyes followed the long grace-curves of her legs in the sheer-white hospital dress, up to where her eyes stared down. Strength surged into him, tingling. He scrambled up.

"Good!" She nodded. "Now come, we haven't much time," and she turned to go before him, but he suddenly remembered something, put a hand to his forehead, and then ran to the wall-cabinet to get that all-important tray.

"Got to take this. Very important. All right now, after you!"

She eased open the door and peered out. He was struck, irrelevantly, by the astonishing difference between her and Nurse Holst. Same uniform and virtually the same ebullient curves, but where one was blatantly sexy, the other baffled description. "Efficient" was the only word he could think of, and it didn't fit at all. They went out, canceling the light, into a long dim-lit corridor as silent as a grave. They scurried along to an elevator shaft and went down with a whispering hum, to ground level. With her finger on the gate-button, she froze.

"Somebody coming. Let me handle it."

Steps outside. Halting. The gate sizzled open. He caught a moment's glimpse of an older woman in a blue head-dress and cape, a wide-eyed expression of alarm—and then she slid senselessly to the floor and they stepped over her.

"Sorry about that, Matron," Aporia murmured. "Come on, lad. We're all right now. No one else is likely to be awake."

She hurried him along the ground floor corridor to a small side room, pushing the door open, leaving him to follow on. It was a rest-room, the wall-hooks decorated with capes and coats, a sideboard holding cups and pots, a plain-topped table, and easy chairs. In one of these sprawled a large red-haired woman, apparently fast asleep, but as Aporia snatched up the turquoise cloak that covered her, she was shown to be stark naked.

"I had to borrow her uniform for a while," Aporia explained. "She can have it back now."

She was wriggling rapidly out of the white tunic and sheer hose as she spoke. Her actions made him look down at himself, to realize for the first time that he was wearing only his own stretch-cotton underpants. It didn't seem to matter as the first fever of thought of escape began to burn. Aporia twirled into her cloak, slid her feet into her sandals and made for the door again, with no wasted motion.

They came to glass double-doors, a tiled foyer, a massive outer door that sighed as they shoved it, and then came the chill touch of breezes. The outside world. He hurried after her, reflecting that a fair proportion of all the life he could remember had been spent either on the run or escaping from somewhere. They halted momentarily at a low wall. The bulk of the building loomed darkly at their backs. He saw it was, in fact, two buildings side by side. She pointed up the side of a low hill, and they hopped the wall and started to climb.

If there could be such a thing as pleasant nightmare, this was it. The delicate fingers of the breeze were cool but refreshing, the starlight bright enough to see by, enough to dodge their way between boulders and bushes. She wasted no time in words. If she was helping him in some way, he couldn't detect it, unless it was the all-over sense of well-being. But it was all unreal, everything except the firm clasp of her fingers in his right hand.

To be resigned to death, to actually count himself as dead, and then to be snatched back to life, was too much for his total sense to grasp, for the moment. He preferred to leave it as a dream, for a while, a dream in which he floated over grass that caressed his feet, through gentle whispers of breeze that cooled his brow, holding hands with an angel of mercy who was also beautiful.

They surmounted that hill, fled on down into the small valley beyond and up the far higher side beyond that. He began to feel weary and breathless. They were almost to the top when she drew him aside from the rough path they had been following, and over on to a rocky strip, a bluff, and then, by a series of panting scrambles, to the mouth of a cave.

"And now, we rest!" she said. "I think we're safe enough." He went on two more steps, put his hand down to a low boulder and lowered himself to sit on it, and breathe hard.

When he had voice, he said, "I ought to say something, but I can't find words to fit. Once again, I'm in your debt, more than I can ever tell you. You don't know what you've saved me from."

"I can guess."

"Perhaps. But I'm worried, too. About you. Do you know what you've let yourself in for? Did you ever hear a term we use, sometimes, to describe something that is far more trouble than it's worth? A white elephant!"

She laughed softly, went away from him a few steps into the cave-mouth and reached up to a ledge to pull down an armful of material. She tossed it to him. It was a cloak. "You see? I came prepared to bend a few rules." He found a secure place to set down the precious tray, put on the cloak, sat down again. He was still troubled.

"Perhaps you don't realize—I can't go back to my own kind, not now. I've been judged, tried, condemned, written off."

"They won't get you back, not now, not until *you* decide. No Earthan would dare to search for you here!"

"But what about your people?"

"Let that be my worry. Now, come and sit by me here, with this bank to support you. Comfortable? Be sure, now because I am going to let go of you."

He wriggled his back against the grass, and all the strength ran out of him like air from a punctured tire, so that he collapsed inside himself. He could barely lift his head, or make his voice work.

"Don't let it terrify you too much," she soothed. "I helped you, but I can't conjure up energy from nothing. I am not a magician! The body has safety-devices to stop it being abused, as I'm sure you know. In an emergency the brain can override them, a man can run himself to death given the right stimulation. But you were under the dulling influence of some drug or other, so *I* did the overriding. I added a little of my own energy, it's true, and I'm feeling it now. But we are free, and that's what matters. The weariness will pass."

At that moment he doubted it. He felt stone-heavy and ready to sink straight into the ground. But, oddly, his mind was very clear.

"Tell me what they were doing to you, in there. I saw ear-pads and a recording device. Some kind of indoctrination?"

"Zeiger's idea. He was trying to make me Jim Hart, es-

tablish the personality in my mind. Aporia, this may sound mad, but I know I'm not Jim Hart."

"It's not mad," she murmured. "It's true. I've known that for some time. Well, let's say I guessed. We of Kalmed know a great deal about life-science, but because our modes of thought differ from yours, there's confusion when it comes to flat statements."

"We have that," he said wryly. "Specialist jargon. An expert will give you an opinion you can understand, but when he comes to explain how—"

"Exactly. I know certain things, but I can't explain *how* I know. For instance, I can feel your mental image. It is individual and unmistakable. And it doesn't match your physical image, at all. How can I put it? Can a weakling think like a strong man? He can imagine, yes, but not think in that pattern, any more than a woman can think like a man, or, better still, a very young girl cannot possibly think like a mature woman."

"You can't paint a color picture with black and white."

"Exactly. That's it precisely."

He pondered a long while, his eyes on the black vastness of the horizon, very much aware of her warm nearness.

"Then," he muttered at last, "if I'm not Jim Hart, who am I?"

She was silent for a time, then her hand came to search for his, to grip and hold tight.

"Can you bear with me just for a while? I think I know who you are, but I dare not tell you, not just yet. For one thing, I'm not sure, and in any case I don't know what it might do to you. Can you accept that without understanding it?"

He pondered that, too. It was all part of the nightmare, the unreality of things. And he was too weak to work up resentment. Not as feeble as he had been, but too far down to have much fight left.

"I don't understand at all. Zeiger said something about clashing patterns, and that it meant sickness, that he could put it right—"

"Dr. Zeiger seems to know too much, and yet not enough!"

"I'd rather trust you, any time."

"Thank you!" She squeezed his hand and sat forward, looking across her shoulder at him. "Look, I can't go on just calling you nothing at all. Let me invent a name for you."

"Your people only bother with a single name, don't you?"

"What more do we need? There are only half a million of us. I'll think of something. Just a moment while I find us a drink. I have a pot here that I brought with me, and there should be a stream not far away." She rustled off into the dark, leaving him to struggle lazily with his thoughts.

All at once he remembered the tray of precious films and struggled up to get it. With it in his hands he was assailed by doubts. He had to trust her, not having any choice. But she was Kalmed, as Thral was. And it had been Kalmed work that had made porridge of his brains, he was convinced of that. She sounded good, sincere, sympathetic, but how could he be sure?

Engrossed in his thinking, he was startled to find his fingers had prized off the lid and he was holding a strip of dripping film. It was tacky on one side. He spread it, applied it to his head the way it had been done before. He didn't feel any different. He covered the tray and put it to one side, plagued by this terrible question of trust. He was so snarled up in that he didn't hear her come back until she was right beside him, holding out the pot.

"Here," she said. "It's cool, and clean!"

He sipped, then drained the pot gratefully. "That's very welcome. Did you think up a name?"

She knelt by his feet and smiled at him. "Oh yes, I've thought of one. I shall call you—Darrol!"

Twin red-hot needles lanced into his brain, driving in from each temple simultaneously. As they met they spat a red spark of agony that snapped his whole body into a rigid arc and sent him rolling and gasping over the grass. The spark repeated and vanished in a series of shattering explosions down a long booming tunnel in his head.

He heard her frantic cry, the impassioned grip of her strong hands as she held him from pitching down the hillside.

"Darrol! Darrol! I'm a stupid fool, forgive me! Darrol! Oh Kal, what have I done? And too late to withdraw now, it

has to go through—Darro! Fight it, fight it. I'm helping!"

The thunderstorm banged and echoed away into shaking stillness. He squinted painfully up at her, as she craned fearfully near and over him. He unlocked his teeth with a choking gasp. "What happened? What did you do?"

"I'm a stupid fool! I tried to be clever, with that name. I'm sorry. Forgive me. Keep still while I try it again, just once more. Darro?"

He stared at her in growing bewilderment and suspicion.

"Does *that* hurt?" she breathed.

"Hurt? No, why should it?"

"Kal be praised, it was only resonancel Darro. You like it?"

"So-so. It feels all right." His anger seethed up suddenly. "Never mind the name. What did you do to me, just then?"

She put her hands on either side of him in the grass and sighed, looking relieved. "I didn't do anything. Except choose a series of sounds that struck some resonating memory in your mind. I was a fool. I'm sorry. But no harm done, and I'm glad of that."

"I don't believe you!"

The expression of relief faded from her face, giving way to a slow frown of bewilderment. She pressed up and away on her arms.

"What's wrong? What's happened to you, Darro?"

She would have drawn clear away from him, but on a sudden impulse, he reached up with his left arm, caught her about the waist and dragged her down. Taking quick advantage of her surprise, he circled with the other arm, and had her caught, hugged her close. Quick success sparked further daring. He shifted his right arm swiftly to circle her neck and drag her face down to his, capturing her mouth before she realized what was happening. For one more breath she was shocked still. Then she jerked, and squirmed, and tried to break his hold, but he clung fiercely, angrily. Her lips were warm, and soft, and sweet.

And, all at once, she stopped fighting and lay quite still. The quick leap of her heart quite distinctly beat against his chest, close and strong. In any other circumstances he would have been thrilled, but now he felt suddenly ashamed of himself. He eased his grip, let his arms slip away from

her. She lifted her face, took her lips away from his but not far. Her breathing was full but steady. Her mouth was dark in the starlight, her teeth gleaming as she asked, "Is that all?"

"It's enough, isn't it?" he muttered.

"Why did you do that?" There was no overtone in her whisper, just a quiet question.

"To prove a point, perhaps."

"And did you? Prove it, I mean?"

"Yes. My turn to say I'm sorry. Sorry for doubting you, for believing you'd done something to me. You didn't, as I now know. But I had to be sure, and it was the only way I could think of. I'm sorry."

She stayed where she was, resting on him. Her eyes were in deep shadow. He couldn't tell even whether they were open or closed, much less what went on behind them. Then she sighed, a deep sigh that pressed hard on him.

"It's done, all over? You're not likely to—do that again?"

"No! I told you, I was proving a point!"

She thrust up and well away, rolled over and lay flat on her back to look up at the stars, apparently indifferent to the fact that her body stood silvery outlined in the faint light. He sat up on an elbow, watching her, thinking that she resembled some unearthly wraith drifting on a turquoise sea. It was incredible to think that he had grabbed her, struggled with her, held her tight and kissed her, like some disreputable courtesan.

"You've proved something," she murmured. "But what? And how? Darro, I don't understand how. Can you tell me that much? All at once, I couldn't touch you. Mentally, you were invisible to me, in a way that I've never known before. Can you account for it? Was it something they did to you, in that foul place down there?" She came up from her sprawl in a single sinuous movement, to stare at him intently. "Was it?"

"No, nothing like that. Something possibly worse. Watch!" He pinched at his forehead with finger and thumb and peeled off the film.

Then he held it and told her all the story, about Zeiger's plot, and how he had thrashed Thral, and then how he had been driven back into his bonds again. She kept absolutely

silent through his recital, as still as a statue until he was done. Then she extended her hand for the film, to examine it.

"A shield. A defense against mental powers. You know what this means. Darro, don't you?"

"I've had time to think. The answer's obvious. This gadget means the end of the Kalmedan people."

"Yes. It comes between us."

"That's an odd way to put it."

"I meant between *us*. You and me, Darro. You can't expect me to sit back and do nothing. Zeiger must be stopped. That's my side of it. You'd naturally take the other side. This gives your people the advantage."

"That's true," he muttered, struggling with his thoughts.

The first pink flush of dawn was staining the sky over there where they had come from, and he saw it as a symbol. Put this defense into the hands of Earthans, and in no time at all the Kalmedans would be a fugitive people. And then no more than a footnote in the books. This planet was rich, desirable, and the people already here had shown no great desire to preserve it in any way. They were milking it as hard as they dared, checked only by Kalmed superiority. This insignificant looking device of Zeiger's could be as potent a leveler as the ancient hand-gun. He rebelled suddenly against his own imaginings.

"It doesn't have to be like that," he said angrily. "We're not *all* predators. Surely there's a compromise solution?"

"We have a silly saying, Darro. There is no quick way to grow old, it takes a long time. We are an old people, older than you can imagine. What we have learned, we have worked for. You're suggesting there may be more moderate elements among you, people who would 'do a deal' with us, on even terms. But it wouldn't work, because we can't deliver."

"Can't—or won't?"

"You should know better!" she cried, and all at once she seemed to glow in the rosy morning sunlight. Before, her nakedness had been an impersonal perfection. In her home, and just recently when changing out of that stolen uniform, she had been absolutely indifferent and unconcerned. Now

her semi-nakedness spun a breath-taking pulse-hammering aura of personal desirability that melted him into speechlessness.

"You should know," she repeated. "If I came to you and said, teach me to draw as you do! Give me your art! Could you? Can I give you the skill and experience that lies in my fingers, my brain, my being? Can you doubt that I would, if it could be done? But I can't. *You* should know that!"

"I think I understand," he mumbled. "But, still, I think there are a few who—well, there are many like me. People who would be willing to sit at your feet and learn, who wouldn't want to commercialize everything—"

"It's no good, Darro. You're sincere, and I know what you mean, but it just isn't any good. Even if a secret like this *could* be kept, and doled out only to those who would treat it properly—and it can't—Zeiger isn't the man to do it. Is he?"

She handed back the frail strip of film and he went to get the tray and put the thing safely away in the spirituous fluid that held another six or seven of the things. She was quite right. He struggled with his loyalties painfully, wishing this choice was for somebody else to make, but knowing that he had no choice at all, really.

And then a distant and familiar but totally unexpected sound made him stir and look up and away at the blue morning sky over there. She came up on her feet in urgent anxiety.

"Into the cave, quickly!" she snapped. "That flying machine may be no more than coincidence, but I'm not willing to chance it!"

They cringed in the shadow until the chattering thing had whirled lazily over the hill and away.

"I don't like that, not one little bit," she muttered. "*We* have no legitimate business with a flying machine"—and he knew she meant "her people"—"so the Earthans are either breaking covenant, or it's worse!" She slid her fingers down the front hem of her cloak and dipped into a tiny pocket to produce that metal disc he had seen once before. "Who do I know in Gablot? Ah, Ferlan!" She put the thing to her head.

He investigated his cloak curiously, and found another disc, the twin of hers. He put it cautiously to his head. He heard a faint far-away voice.

"—some ridiculous story about an Earthan, believed homicidal, who has escaped. The story also goes that he attacked and severely injured Thral, which is a little hard to accept. Garbled version, but that's all I know. What are you doing in this region, Aporia?" He frowned to himself as he realized that he wasn't hearing words at all, but—concepts. He had put the words to them himself, automatically.

He heard her "voice" now, light and casual. "I like your hills. A change from my own. Softer outlines. I want to come and do Gablot sometime. Stay with you?"

"Very glad to have you, any time!"

The voice ceased. He saw her staring at him curiously, and removed the disc self-consciously, with a sense of eaves-dropping. And it was, too. He'd felt something far more personal than just a welcome tone of voice.

"You heard that?" she queried, and he nodded. She put very white teeth hard against her lower lip in furious thought. "Too many things at once. I fancy Thral is behind this move. I don't blame you for what you did to him, not one bit. But he'll be a bad enemy, as is obvious by the fact that he must have authorized this aerial search. You're really in trouble!"

"I'm not an enemy!" He blurted it out awkwardly. "Aporia, what you said about stopping Zeiger, I'm all in favor of it. You have a perfect right to protect your way of life. This is your planet. We're just interlopers, and foul ones, at that."

"Not you, Darrol!"

"Yes, me! You say I couldn't kill anybody. But how do you know? You say I couldn't possibly have done anything to Weseen without her agreement, but is that true—with this?" and he held out the tray of shields. "If I'd been wearing one of these things, and raving mad, she couldn't have stopped me any more than you could stop me just now. There's only one thing for me to do, isn't there?" He thrust the tray of destiny at her. "Take it. Use it to convince your people that Zeiger has to be stopped. I'll go back and

give myself up. It's the only way." He made a stiff grin. "I'm the grit in the wheel, Aporia. I'm dangerous. Homicidal. The Earthans can use that as an excuse to violate your privacy. That's the thin edge, but they lose it if I go back."

She came close to him, raised her arms to clasp his neck and draw his head down, to put her lips gently on his for a breath and then she said, "You're dangerous, but not the way you think. And you'll not give up your life like that. You're one of us now. You're coming with me!"

FIVE

THEY WENT UPHILL again, over the crest and down the other side. All she would tell him, at first, was that this was now a matter for the Kal High Council, and her mind was so obviously full of problems that he let it rest there and slid back into the dream-state nightmare again.

It was pleasant to be striding along with her through the unspoiled countryside. They came to a stand of stately trees. The air was thick with the scents of growing things and the busy song of many birds, but for anything to the contrary they might have been alone on the planet.

By the time his legs began to argue and his stomach growled at him, he felt the need to remark, "Your people aren't very thick on the ground, are they?"

"No. But there are more of us than you'd think, even here. You see, the majority of us have little need to cluster for comfort and self-support. At the most, we find a small village sufficient, those who *need* close contact. The rest of us prefer to live alone. Or in pairs. That's all that's necessary. We're never out of touch, otherwise."

"I learned about Kalmed in school, just bits, and most of them probably wrong in some way. For instance. you have no cities, no industry, no government, nothing like that. And no money. Is that true?"

"Absolutely. Money? What would we do with it?"

"Not symbolized coins," he agreed. "But you *must* have some way of exchanging values, you know, even if it's just barter."

"We must?" There was a mischievous challenge in her tone and he accepted it immediately, with confidence.

"Oh yes, you have to. Unless you're going to tell me you built your own house, spun your own cloak, made your own telepathy disc—and so on. You have skilled people, craftsmen. You're one yourself. You create lovely models in geel. But you can't eat them, can you? Or wear them?"

She strode on a while in some amusement, then: "I should warn you that we have studied Earthan society very thoroughly. We *all* learn your Standard Language, for instance. And very useful it is, too. We are not too superior to learn from you. I'm telling you this so you'll know I'm not just babbling. I do know what I'm talking about. Now, let me put it very simply. Your whole society stands on one basic value. Reward for labor. Right?"

"That's a bit too simple," he demured, "but, yes, if you'll include in 'labor' anything a man may contribute to the general welfare."

"Consider it included. The person contributes what he can, and is in some way rewarded by society. Right this time? All right, *that* is where we differ entirely. Our society does not have that basic."

They skirted a massive tree-bole as he struggled to grasp this meaningless statement.

She tapped his shoulder suddenly and said, "Stand still and put out your hand." As he did so, she seized his wrist, put her foot in his hand and said, "Brace yourself!"

Then, as lithely as any boy, she went up and on to his shoulders, bracing one hand against the trunk while stretching the other to grab at a dangling yellow fruit that looked very like some kind of banana. It struck the ground solidly just beyond them.

"Help me down, now!" she called from over his head, and his composure shattered into breathlessness as she slid down through his clumsy hold in a brief delight of firm warm flesh. Then she shook her cloak into place and went to pick up the prize she had won. Layers of yellow banana shapes stood out from a thick central stem. She broke one away and cracked it to reveal a white nut with a flavor very like walnuts.

They marched on, munching.

"Back to the point that has you baffled," she remarked. "Why does that tree yield this fruit? Purpose, in a tree? Or, put it another way, what reward can it possibly get?"

"Wait now," he tackled the question warily. "You want me to say it is part of the nature of the tree that it produces this. And that's true. But it's a bad argument. The tree doesn't produce for our benefit. It would be all the same if we weren't here!"

"Of course! The tree does what it has to do, regardless. It is being itself, a tree. The argument holds all the way. We Kalmedans do just that. We live, each one as fully as he or she can, in his or her own way. Not for reward, not to earn a living, but because that's what we want to do. Darro, that's not so difficult to understand, is it? You've had people like that. Artists who starve rather than turn away from what they feel they have to do?"

"They starve, you notice!"

"Of course they do, but that's because the society is wrong. The kind of thing I'm talking about will only work if everybody does it. You've had brilliant and advanced people, and you know how hard your society is on them. It's your society that's wrong."

"But wait!" He had his finger instantly on the weakness in her argument. "Your kind of society sounds fine, ideal, but it is wide open to abuse!"

"Oh yes." She nodded. "There is that, and we are aware of it. We try to guard against it."

The dream tore apart all at once. "This is fantastic!" he cried. "Here we are, arguing social theories, economics—"

"And you're a fugitive, a possible murderer on the run, lost in alien territory—and you don't even know who you are!" she supplied the rest, and laughed. "Crazy, isn't it? You should be worried stiff, but you're not. Darro, your mind is as clear as a stream. It's very reassuring!"

Before he could protest about that she put a hand on his arm to halt him. They were almost at the crest of a narrow gully. "There's a small village just over the far side," she said. "I've never been here before and I don't know anyone, but that's a small matter. What is important is that

you are Earthan. This needs care. You had better wait, when we get over the top, and let me go on ahead to explain a few things. I'm getting a vague sense of something amiss, probably the result of that flying machine. Anyway, better be cautious. All right?"

She led him to a quiet mossy ledge where the sun was warm, and he could see over and down into a spreading valley.

"Amuse yourself," she said. "See if you can pick out the houses. There are many more than you think, but you have an artist's eye, you should be able to distinguish them. I will come back for you as soon as I can."

Astonishing woman, he thought, watching her go striding away down the gentle slope. That red hair, not red really, but some indefinable tint that had brown in it, and fire and ripples, should have clashed abominably with the brilliant turquoise cloak. But it didn't. He couldn't think of her clashing with anything, somehow. Competent, and utterly self-possessed, she was. And yet human, too.

He thought back to that disturbing conversation he had overheard, from Ferlan. A male, no mistake about that. And affectionate, with a welcome that carried overtones to make him feel uncomfortable at the memory of them. Yet, he had to be fair, there was nothing furtive about the feeling he had caught. The faint shame, if that's what it was, was his own.

He thought back to the moment of struggle on the hillside. What had he proved, except that the shield worked? And he had known that anyway. With it, he was immune to her power. But, he thought, he had been weak at that time, in a physical sense, and yet he had been able to hold her helpless! Had he? Or had she let him have his way, just to see how far he would go? He went hot at the thought. She had said, "Is that all?" He remembered that.

Damn the shields! He put down the tray, then on afterthought began investigating the cloak. He found another pocket, about chest high, cunningly concealed in the fabric. It was big enough to hold the shallow tray. He put the paradoxical things away out of sight. Had it not been for

that advantage he wouldn't have been able to kiss her. For what that was worth, now.

Darro, he addressed himself in the name she had devised, you're a fool! She isn't for the likes of you. Not for any Earthan, even one in full possession of faculties and status! And then he remembered the reverse of that. As Jim Hart he had been living with just such a woman as this! In total confusion he thrust the whole business out of his mind and fell to studying the view down there.

It was a minute or two before he could separate houses from their camouflage, and then he had his start only because he caught a fugitive glimpse of moving color, a gay cloak or something similar. Once his eye had learned the trick of sorting out regularities from randomness he saw several houses. And a circular green space, a tall gray-stone structure that could have been a natural rock but was just that little bit too right to be unimproved. Clever, he admitted. That thing, whatever it was, fitted into the scene the same way a bird's nest belongs in a tree. Just one more instance of the idealized hedonism Aporia had sketched for him as a way of life.

Suddenly a gossamer touch brushed his mind, and a strong stern voice said: "Be quite still, Earthan!" The menace was unmistakable. He froze. The voice came again. "Be sensible. Get up, slowly. Turn round!"

Obedying, he could now see, on a narrow ledge back and above, a man, a large sun-bronzed man who held in his capable hands a crossbow. A shock of thick black hair framed a strong-boned face on which there was an expression of cautious distaste. His gray-brown cloak was thrown back to hang down in loose folds from a neck-cord. A belt about his waist supported a sheathed knife and a brief leather kilt. He looked like a pagan god of the woods.

"I am Glant," he said. "You must be the Earthan, Hart. I'd like to know how you came by that cloak. Did you take it from one of our people, by force?"

"It was given to me."

"That *sounds* true, but I've heard strange things about you. You kill. You seem to have some sort of immunity to our constraints." He gathered poise, leaped lightly down

from his perch and caught his balance swiftly. "I doubt if you're immune to a bolt from this, but I won't stop you from trying it!"

He made a grin that said how pleased he would be to prove his point. There was nothing to be gained from argument, here. Darro stood still, waiting. After a long pause Glant made a gesture with his weapon.

"Go on, march! You seem sane enough, sensible enough, and harmless, but don't try anything!"

Darro turned and set away to follow the path Aporia had taken. His back itched. This man had heard—what? Obviously, news would spread fast among these people, but what news? Would Thral have told what had been done to him? And what about Aporia? Would she be in trouble because she had aided and given refuge to an Earthan?

He tramped on, following the lazy twists of the path, came to a low stone bridge over a stream, crossed it and found himself on the edge of that circular green space he had noted from above. There, at the far side, he saw the great building that looked so much like a natural standing stone. He wondered if Glant wanted him to go that way, then turned to stare as a girl came running at breathless speed from the left. Her long blonde hair streamed in the breeze of her speed, her green cloak swirling back in fluttering folds to reveal her brief jerkin of garish yellow and orange diamonds. She slid to a halt, her sea-blue eyes widening at sight of the odd couple.

"Glant!" she panted. "I came to tell you a 'thing' has been called, but you already know by the look of it!"

"I didn't, Milla, but it's just as well. I was going to call one myself, as soon as I could free my hands. I found this up there, spying on us. This is the renegade Earthan."

"Not the only renegade." She fell into step by Glant. "The 'thing' was called by an outer, one of us, Aporia. She walked in only a short while ago to ask us for food and shelter for him!"

"She what?" Glant sounded shocked. "One of us aiding an Earthan? And calling a 'thing' about it?"

"She's said she will explain, when we are all gathered. Come on!" They crossed the green open space to the stone-

building and circled it to the far side. Darro could see now a close-clustered audience of about a hundred people. Sporadic chatter died as they came close.

"Straight on, Earthan!" Glant ordered. "Up there on the stand by Habil, where everybody can see you. And don't forget I have a bolt looking right at you all the time!"

Darro shrugged, made his way through the silent knots of villagers and to the platform that formed part of a series of stones steps up to a dark square entrance into the gray rock. Aporia stood there, white-faced and calm, beside an old man, the first *old* Kalmed Darro had ever seen. This man's hair was iron-gray, his face lined with many years, but his voice was steady and strong as he spoke.

"I am Habil. In your terms, I am the chief, or senior, of this group. You are the Earthan, Hart?"

"I don't know. I understand I look like him. I may be him, in fact. But I don't know, one way or the other."

The old man's eyes were deep and very dark, almost as dark as his black cloak. He stood very still in thought as the strange statement sent a whisper through the audience. At length he stirred.

"Very well. Stand at my right. You will be heard. The 'thing' is called and we are all here. Aporia, speak!" Darro felt now an almost tangible resentment from the audience, but if Aporia was aware of it her calm tone gave no indication.

"You will have heard something about this man, possibly about me too. I don't know what you've heard. I ask you to test for yourselves as I speak, and know that I speak true. Five days ago two people were killed in Dangelar, one a young Earthan only just arrived on the planet, the other one of us, Weseen. The bodies showed evidence of death by stabbing, with a knife that was proved to be the property of one James Hart, spaceman, Earthan, who was known to be intimate with Weseen. No one actually saw this thing happen. Hart was seen in flight afterwards. Now, by chance that same day I found an Earthan injured and unconscious near my home. I did as you would have done, and helped him until he was able to manage for himself. When he was able to talk, he had no memory of his identity. We searched

his clothing, found articles which said he was James Hart, but this meant nothing to him. I have since become sure that he is *not* James Hart!"

She let the words die into hushed silence, and then smiled grimly at the muttered uproar that followed.

Someone called out, "That's ridiculous! An Earthan? Are you suggesting that he has been—?"

"Transpersoned? Yes, I am! I know what is implied. This, if true, means that one of us has been guilty of a grave offense against our code, as this couldn't have been done without one of us actively taking part. And that is hard to believe. But is it any harder than believing that this man killed Weseen? Is it any harder than believing what you can see for yourself? I had the chance to study this man. I know that his person fits that frame not at all! I ask you to use the senses you have and discover the same thing. And then decide what other explanation fits the facts!" Her last words were almost lost in a growl of disapproval.

Habil put up a hand for silence, and got it after a while.

"Aporia," he said, and there was no enthusiasm in his voice at all, "we have heard you. We have seen. Now let me tell you what we have heard. We know you're telling the truth, as you see it, but it's much more likely that you've been deceived. Listen. We have been warned about this man. We've been told that he is in some way abnormal, a freak who can somehow evade our power. The facts bear this out. He did kill an Earthan, *and* Weseen. The Earthans were satisfied on that. His colleagues broke him out of confinement, being as little impressed by propriety as he seems to be. Kalmed Thral, by chance, was able to spoil that plan, and have him once more confined, this time in a place devised especially for the purpose of studying his abnormality. All this is fact. He was able to break free again! He broke away from Earthan confinement. He had made a violent and vicious attack on Thral, who was powerless to stop him. I know this, because I spoke with Thral myself. Will you deny it?"

She can't! Darro thought dismally, *because it's true. What a mess!*

"Furthermore," the old man went on sternly, "Thral has

asked that we cooperate with the Earthans in capturing this man. Not only is he dangerous in their terms, he is also incredibly dangerous to us!"

"What does that mean?" she demanded angrily.

"Just this. This man is a freak, is abnormal—but not unique! We have that from the Earthan specialist who was treating him. What he can do, others can do. Once that fact becomes common knowledge, we are in grave danger. And you know it!"

"I know this!" she cried. "*This* man is no danger, to us or anyone else. You've only to look at him to know that!"

"How can we tell? He is Earthan!"

"I tell you he has been transpersoned! I tell you also that there's some filthy scheme behind all this, a scheme in which our own people are involved, and that it should be investigated. The Kal High Council must be called into it!"

"Earthans know nothing about transpersoning!" Habil said sternly. "You do wrong even to mention it in his hearing. As for calling the High Council, that is another matter entirely. I find your story improbable, your actions improper and reprehensible. Yet I find that you speak the truth as you believe it to be. The fault must be in this man, in what he has done to you, that he has somehow contaminated you." He turned to the assembly and asked, "Need we cast on this?"

"No! No!" The response was immediate and emphatic. Habil turned to her

"You see? We are all of a mind. I judge you to be sincere but not responsible, due to some effect induced by this Earthan. I suggest that something of the same sort is at the root of the death of Weseen. I direct that you both be kept safe until such time as the High Council can be called to investigate and decide. You will stay in the 'house'—"

"What about a guard?" someone demanded, out of the crowd. "We can't trust either of them now!"

"I'll stand guard until the night." Glant stood up. Aporia turned a woebegone face to Darro.

"I tried!" she said, and she looked so utterly broken that he had to manufacture a grin of assurance for her.

"It's all right. Not your fault. What happens now?"

Habil stood silently clear, and she reached out, took his hand, and led him up the shallow steps to that dark square doorway.

"This is the house," she told him. "We could call it an assembly room, a temple, anything, but—well, we don't have words for things, as you do, not specialized terms. House is enough for us to know what we mean. You'll have noticed the gathering was called a 'thing,' in the same way." She was talking, he knew, to stop herself from having to think.

The square-topped doorway was about seven feet deep and led into a tall, utterly featureless chamber, perfectly circular and high. It was about twenty feet in diameter, although it was difficult to be certain in the absence of any marking to guide the eye. What light there was came from slit openings in the walls some thirty feet or so up in the slightly in-tapering walls. The door was the only break, and there was nothing to block it. Only a sharp-eyed bowman outside, he corrected.

"I get a feeling of austerity," he murmured, looking about. "Is that intentional? The bleakness?"

"Freedom from distraction," she corrected. "To assist maximum concentration on the matter in hand. But it is bleak. I never realized before just how bleak it is!"

"Stop that!" He gripped her hand strongly. "You can't give up that easily, surely?" She turned to him, her glorious gray eyes clouded and dull.

"You don't know," she said. "You don't know what this means!" All the fire and strength, the self-assurance, had gone out of her like a snuffed lamp. She seemed to sag.

He put his arm about her and that simple action broke the last frail barriers of her control. She clung to him like a weary and frightened child, sobbing quietly, burrowing her head into his chest. He could think of nothing to say. He knew, in any case, that she didn't want soothing noises. And he couldn't offer anything else, certainly not help! There was only one thing he could do, and he did it just as soon as she showed signs of fading grief.

Putting up a hand to stroke her hair, he said, "It's old hat, but it works. Why not tell me all about it? Talk! Get

it all out into the open, off your chest. If nothing else, it will make you feel better. Come on!"

"It's no use. You wouldn't understand."

"Now see here. I like you. More than I should, perhaps. But I tend not to like people who assume they can understand things I can't. You just try me, and see!" She sniffed, and then lifted her head back and away to look up at him. There was no paint or powder here to be ravaged by tears, just a lovely face that was moist and huge eyes with stars in them.

"You're a tremendous person," she whispered. "There's a fierce power, a vitality in you that is far stronger than anything our people have. I knew about Weseen's ways, and I had my own opinions, but now I—I can't really blame her too much."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he lied, trying not to think of her mouth so intoxicatingly close, so inviting. "You're the one with the power. Far more than you realize."

"That's not true. If only the circumstances were otherwise—but it's too late now." She caught her lower lip with her teeth again.

"All right, let's get back to that. Just what is the situation? What's going to happen now?" He released his hold on her and she moved away.

"I don't know, not for sure. It depends what the High Council decides and no one can predict that. One can only guess."

"Suppose the minimum for you. Suppose they find that I've been fooling you all the way through and that you're guilty of nothing but being deceived by me. Then what?"

"I can't suppose that. It's not true!"

"Suppose it! Go on, what?"

"In that case—" she hesitated. "—nothing, except that I would be known as a dimwit, a complete and utter fool!"

"That would be dreadful!" He grinned. "Now, what's the other thing, what if they decided that you did whatever it is you have done deliberately and with intent? And that it's wrong, of course. What then?" He kept the grin, but she couldn't see it. Her eyes fell. "Come on, tell me."

We're only supposing, remember? What will they do to you?"

"I've broken several rules. You'd call them that. Ethical values. A code of living. That's true. I did what I did because I thought it just and right. *That* is what they will decide on. If they decide against me—I will be destroyed."

He caught his breath at the flatness of it. "They would kill you?"

"Not kill, no. It's something quite different, something you can't possibly understand. I'm sorry, but that's true!"

"Fair enough!" He rallied his thoughts. "I don't need to have it done any simpler. We can work this out between us. Nothing to it. All we have to do is convince your council that it was all my doing, that I fooled you all the way along and that everything you did was done with the best of intentions. Put it all on me. I'll do my bit, if you'll give me some idea how to—"

Her wide-eyed gaze halted the words on his lips. "You're serious! You would really try to do that much, for me?"

"Why not? You tried to help me, didn't you? That's how you got into this mess in the first place. So why can't I help you?"

"Knowing what they will do to you? Your own people?"

"What *can* they do to me?" he demanded bitterly. "At the most, they can kill me. So what of it? I'm dead already!"

"You mustn't say that!"

"I just said it. It's true. I'm not Jim Hart. He died five days ago. I'm a thing that walks and talks like him, but I'm nobody. So what does it matter what happens to me? It's better than you being destroyed, isn't it?"

She had backed against the wall, staring at him. He went to her, to stand and stare and ache to convince her that he meant it. The soft scrape of a footstep in the door brought him whirling around, but it was only the girl Milla with a large shallow basket piled with food, and the darkly grim Glant as escort. He stood and watched her put down the basket, waited for her to withdraw, and went out after her. Neither of them spoke.

Darro brought the basket over to the wall where she was. "Let's start again," he suggested. "We're in a mess.

We want to get out of it as best we can. I say put the blame on me. That lets you off the hook. You don't go with that. All right, let's hear *your* ideas!" He sat, resting his back against the wall. In a moment or two she joined him, with the basket between them.

"You have not deceived me," she declared. "You couldn't. Forget that. What I've done, I've done because it was right, because you've been shamefully treated, by us. By Thral I suspect. Probably also by Weseen. But you are not at fault, and I will not go along with any idea that says you are!"

"As a declaration of integrity, that's fine, but it doesn't do a thing to help us get out of here!"

"Get out?" She stopped in the middle of a bite, to stare. "You mean—to escape?"

"What else?" he demanded. "We're not just going to sit here and let the mills grind. You destroyed, me clapped back into a padded cell—not if I know anything about it!"

"But we *can't* escape, not from here!"

"You're not doing it right," he retorted. "I suggest an easy way out for you, and you say 'Oh no, I can't do that!' So I suggest we break out of here, and you do it again. 'Oh no, we can't do that!' How about a bit of positive thinking for a change. Say we do get out, what then?"

She drew breath and opened her mouth to protest but he put up a warning finger and she shook her head. "Oh Darro!" she breathed. "I wish things were different. I wish we had met otherwise. You're so full of life!"

"Better!" he encouraged. "Discontent is a starter. Better than dim resignation. And if you want to push it a bit, perhaps things will be otherwise, once we get out. The point I'm trying to get at, is there any point in *trying* to break out. What can we do afterwards? Is there anywhere we can go, hide, sanctuary—"

That word stirred her. She sat up. He held his tongue, watching the color come to her cheeks.

"There is one place," she whispered. "You're right, my Darro, I am a fool. I've been stuck in a pattern of thinking, and missing the obvious that was right under my nose. Sanctuary. Of course!"

"A good idea?" he encouraged. She nodded very thoughtfully.

"I've broken so many ethical rules already—as you would say, I'm in too deep to be bothered by delicacy—but apart from that I think I have an idea, a truly desperate idea, how all this terrible tangle can be settled. If only we could escape from here."

"Now you're talking!" He grinned, and she smiled back in a way that sent spears right into him and down to his toes. There was only one small snag, and he hadn't a chance of hiding it from those eyes no matter how valiantly he tried. Her glow went away. She extended her hand to take his, and hold it.

"You did well, Darro. But it's hopeless. We can't escape."

"I'll think of something!" he vowed, but he couldn't deceive himself, and she could read the emotions he felt every bit as plainly as he felt them. She kicked the basket away and slid close to him, hugging tight, burying her face in his chest again, not weeping this time, but shaking with futile anger.

"You're so strong, so vital, so brave—it's such a waste that you must die! You who have to snatch at what little life you do have."

"We're not dead yet, Aporial!"

"We have a few hours at most. Darro!" She lifted her head to him all at once and there was no mistaking the invitation now. "This is a poor substitute for what might have been, but let's not waste such a short time!" The fire in her overwhelmed his senses to the point where he hugged her fiercely for a moment. Then he drew back.

"It's not right. I'm sorry. I can't explain. It's just not right!"

"Who cares about right or wrong at a time like this?" She clung harder.

"I do! Hold it a bit, there's something—" He edged away from her and the sharp edges that were gouging his ribs. The tray, in his pocket! The flimsy tail-end of an idea tickled his mind, made him push her away. "Aporia, tell me, why can't we just make a run for it as soon as it's dark?"

"Don't be silly, darling. Dark or light makes no difference to the people who are guarding us."

"That's what I thought. But just how does it work? Say that's Glant out there. Can he detect you as a person, or just an unidentified mind and body, a living thing? Or, better still, think back to when I was wearing that shield. Could you feel my presence in any way?"

"You need no defense against me, Darro. You never did, and never will now. My feelings are yours—"

"No, wait!" He evaded her eager mouth impatiently. "Listen to what I'm saying! When I was wearing that shield, what was the effect? Look, I'm sorry to be ungallant, but this is important!"

She stared at him in the fading light of the chamber, the fire dying out of her eyes. "You—I remember—you were 'not there.' Invisible, in the sense of—what are you thinking, Darro?"

"I'm thinking that we are as good as free, right now. Look, your guards out there can keep track of us without moving a muscle, all the time. They think they have it made. But we have these," and he fumbled in his pocket for the tray, to show her. "As soon as it's dark enough, we disappear, just like that! A shield each for you and me and they can't touch us!"

She sat quite still for a long while, one arm around his neck, her cheek so close that he could feel the gentle tickle of her breathing. Then, in one swift and sinuous wriggle she slipped away, putting a clear two feet of space between them.

"You don't know what you're asking!"

"I think I do. In a way, I'm asking you to make a sacrifice, to put out your eyes. That's what it will mean, won't it?"

"You know that and you can still ask it?"

"I'm asking you to deprive yourself of a sense that I've never had at all. In return I'm offering you a chance to escape from unjust confinement, a chance to reestablish yourself, to escape destruction, which is permanent. This is temporary. For you, anyway. For me it's a life-long condition. I know it's a lot. It's unfair, too. I've got nothing to lose—"

"Don't!" she wailed. "Must you rip away *every* shred of my self-respect? Again and again I've made a fool of my-

self for you to see, and you keep on being so damned humble about it until I can't bear it any longer. I'm not fit to escape with you. I deserve to be left here and take what is coming to me. I don't blame you for—spurning me!”

“For crying out loud!” He scrambled to his feet and glared at her. “Who's spurning you? Aporia, I want you to be free. To get yourself right again with your people. That's all. The way I see it, you want me along to prove a point, and that's fine with me. I don't mind. I'm nobody. I keep telling you that. Nothing humble about it, at all. I know that I could never be fit to—could never mean anything to you. But it just happens that I've the chance to get us out of this, if you'll cooperate. After that it will be up to you again and I'll tag along.”

“Very well, Darro,” she said, very quietly. “I will do whatever you say. What's your plan?”

He squatted down by her side again, and began asking pointed questions. Would they change the guard? Would she know, when they did? Could she put a finger on that one out there, now? Point to him? Then he wanted to know about the village layout, which way to run, where they wanted to head for. And the sunset glowed red, and then purple, as they worked out the details. They made as good a meal as they could from what was left in the basket, because there was no knowing when they would see another meal. And they waited.

“This is almost dark enough,” he muttered as he moved delicately to where he could peer out of the doorway. “There's a slight cloud haze, by the look of things. That helps me, hinders him. Remember now, as soon as the masks are on we go, before he gets to wondering why we're suddenly not there any more and starts screaming for help, and lights. You go right, I go left, circle the house, meet at the back, and then straight into the bushes and up the hill. You have any last minute thoughts?”

“No!” She was still very quiet. “I'm ready.”

“Right! You can't see what I'm doing, so I'll talk. I'm getting out two shields. One for you. Here. Hold it. Don't put it on until I say, give me time to stow the tray away. Now, ready? Let's go!”

He spread the tacky stuff, applied it to his forehead and smoothed it in place, then put out his hand to touch her. They crept for the doorway, felt it. He gave her a nudge to the right and a farewell pat on her shoulder, and hugged the left wall, tracing it with his fingers. A touch of cool breeze told him he was out in the open. The steps were barely visible. He went down them gingerly, struck grass underfoot and swung left, then froze as he heard a noise from over there where the bowman was. And then a stifled gasp from where she ought to be, as if she had stumbled.

He kept absolutely still, straining his ears, and heard the bowman walk. The click and scrape of the bow, the leather belt, the pad of his feet, were quite plain. This man was a hunter, with a hunter's senses. Darro made up his mind fast. Change of plan. He wheeled on bare feet and began stalking the man with the bow.

The guard had heard something. He began to trot. Darro heard it now, a gasping struggle to stifle pain. He heard the click and squeak of the bow and there was just barely enough light to let him see the man leveling it, taking aim—he couldn't stop to think—he hurled himself bodily, but just too late to stop the "whipclick" of the release. Simultaneously as he crashed into the bowman he heard the crunch and clatter of impact, a spit of flint-sparks from the rock-wall of the house, and a stifled cry. The thought that she was hit lent a savage fury to his attack on the bowman. He used knee and elbow, palm-edge and fist with vicious abandon until the man lay still. Then, panting, he ran to where he could see a dark shape huddled on the grass beside the wall of the house.

"Aporia! Are you—are you all right?"

SIX

SHE DIDN'T ANSWER for the space of three breaths. Then: "He hit me in the leg. Give me another moment and I'll be all right."

"Yes. I'll just relieve him of his artillery. I'll be back."

He went back to the inert bowman and stripped him briskly of his bow, quiver of bolts, his belt and knife, and ran back to her.

"Help me up, Darro. I can walk."

"Lean on me. Come on." The stars were beginning to peer down through the dwindling cloud-wrack now, enough for them to see to avoid gross obstacles, to dodge bushes and rocks, to find and cross a small stream and then follow its far bank. She leaned on him, but not heavily, not complaining.

"Still going the right way?" he grunted, and she gripped his shoulder in quick response.

"I told you, we follow the stream. We're almost out of the village by now. Go on! You're lagging because of me."

"That's right. This is far enough. There's enough light to see by. Squat here. I want to take a look at that hurt of yours."

He made her sit on a low mossy patch, and caught his breath as he saw what she had been pretending was trivial. The bolt had caught her right thigh about four inches above the knee, from the rear. Driving clean through the fabric of her cloak, it had stuffed the material into the wound at the end and ploughed on to emerge in front. It must have missed the tendon, or she wouldn't have been able to walk, but that was all the mercy he could find.

"It's got to come out," he told her. "And it's going to hurt like hell. And bleed worse than now. You must have lost quite a bit of blood already, and left a trail a blind man could follow."

"It won't hurt me," she said, "and I can stop the bleeding."

"Not and walk, you can't. That'll have to be bound up. Come on, into the water." She submitted without a tremor as he splashed and soaked the cloak free of the rear wound, and then, grimly, yanked out the metal quarrel and pressed his fingers over the gory mess. In a moment she reached down and tugged his hand away, and he saw that the blood no longer flowed.

"Body control. I've heard of it. Earthans can do it, some of them. Trouble is, with all the instances I've ever heard of, it gets to be a cult, a thing in itself. Body worship."

"I know. It's not like that with us. This, my body, is only a carefully selected biological machine for me to live in and through. It serves and obeys me, meditates experience to me. Which is as it should be."

"All the same, I'm going to bind that wound. Hold still."

She cast the sopping cloak away to the bankside and stood patiently while he skinned out of the thin cotton underpants he wore—last relics of Earthan mores, he thought—and ripped and tore at them until he had made a useful pad. He laid it firmly over her muscular thigh.

"If you'll just hold that in place— He had saved the elasticized waistband, and doubled it now, asked her to lift her foot, and slid it up and into place with a wry chuckle. "Archaic, but it fits as if it was intended. A garter!"

"Your people are very fond of concrete symbols."

"Have to be, since we can't exchange mental ones directly. Something else strikes me, though."

He handed her up out of the stream and into her cloak, and they set away again. "It seems as if I've done that kind of thing before. Not," he added hurriedly, "done running repairs on wounded nudes, I mean. First-aid! Is it all right for me to try and guess who I am?"

"I can't stop you. What have you guessed so far?"

"Not much. All I can do is add up the various qualities and see what type of person comes out of the whole. Anything more than that is ridiculous. My mind just won't seize on it. It's all right for you to talk about your body being an instrument to serve you. I'll agree that's a good way to think of it, in fact. But I can't go to the next step, and assume one can take on a body or drop it, at will, like a suit of clothes. That's too much. Even an actor who impersonates somebody knows who he is inside, all the time. Incidentally, what happened to you back there? Did you fall?"

"Yes!" She was brief. "I stumbled. I'm not used to being—handicapped."

"Lord!" He was contrite. "I'd forgotten about that. You can peel the thing off now, can't you?"

"Of course I can't." She was more curt still, almost angry. "Nor can you, although it matters less in your case."

Look"—she sounded like a mother explaining something crashingly obvious to a thick-headed child—"all the inhabitants of that village have seen us, know us. In a little while every one of my people will know, not only that you are escaped again, but that I am with you." She stumbled into an unseen strand of creeper, almost fell, and shrugged away his hand as he grabbed to hold her up. "And, if I remove this blindfold, anyone who knows me, has seen me once, will be able to touch me and know exactly where I am. And you!"

"I didn't know that."

"You know now. That, incidentally, is how the disc works. I think of the person I wish to talk to. It is something like forming a picture in the mind, a tuning-in. The other person feels that thought as a call. This disc simply converts and amplifies thoughts—as distinct from feelings— You are not paying attention!"

"You're right, I'm not!" He was angry in turn. "Now you tell me! I though you said there was a sanctuary we could reach?"

"There is. I'm sorry, I spoke from habit when I said *all* our poeple. There is one small section which is remote from all this, which is not, in a strict sense, our people at all. That's where we are going. You called it a sanctuary. We call it Birthplace. It is where we are all born. There is one such place on each of our major continents."

"Is it far?" He was concerned more with her difficulties than her revelations, now that he had time to appreciate just how handicapped she was.

"If we are not caught or killed on the way, it should take us about three days." Again they crested a hilltop, plodded down the shallow side and struck into the higher slope beyond. He could feel her determination to manage without his help, and he couldn't blame her for being angry.

Out of a long silence, she said, "I am intrigued by what you said about body-worship. You think it's wrong to make a fetish out of being perfectly healthy?"

"Not wrong, exactly. I'd call it immature. No offense to you. You're about as perfect, physically, as I can imagine

anyone ever being. But there's more to life than just being alive, no matter how vividly, and you prove that. You do things. You *use* your perfection for a purpose, something more than just being alive! I've seen fellows like that, all rippling muscles and poses, and forever doing push-ups. Muscle-bound in the head, too, as if they had worked hard to lock themselves into a cage. To reverse what you said, they become the servants of the body, instead of the other way around."

"That's very profound," she murmured.

"It's not, really. Old stuff. But that brings to mind another thing, a point where I think *your* culture is missing something. You said, perhaps not in so many words, that each one of you aims only to live his own life, develop his own potential, do what he is fitted to do. Sounds ideal. But!" He put out his arm to help her hop across yet another little stream as they leaned into the hillside and struggled up.

"You've found a flaw in that? A mistake?"

"Well, not a mistake. A deficiency. A limitation. It narrows your society down to the size of the individual. Men, not Man. I keep harping on about school, I know, but think of this. Whoever I am, I started out with a tremendous wealth of other people's experience, discoveries, learning and progress already done for me. And that includes other things, like business, industry, science, the whole fabric of society built up of strands. Think of a dog. You know what a dog is? All right. He lives his life fully, even happily, but his offspring start the same place he started, do it all over again, advance not at all. Whereas take me and suppose I was a student of—say, economic history. All right, I start where my predecessors left off! I carry on. I serve something, an idea or a movement or a concept, no matter what, that is bigger than I am, that was there vigorously before I was born and will still be there after I'm dead. That's culture, in our sense. It's a time binding thing. Are you getting something of what I mean?"

"Oh yes. You can't take it with you."

"Exactly! You have to leave it behind, for somebody else to pick up. And every little step you make subsequently

modifies the whole. I said it applied to culture. But it applies even more to art. And again, I'm not being profound, just echoing what my ancient ancestors knew a long time ago. The classical Greeks knew it. *Ho bios ne de techne makre*. That's Hippocrates. Or, into the Latin version, *Ars longa, vita brevis*. Art is long, but life is very short. Now, to my way of thinking, you've fallen into that. With no real social culture to weld you together, you've nothing to pass on! You all have to start again from scratch!"

He knew without knowing how he knew that she was no longer angry, but amused. Possibly laughing at him inside. He *had* been a bit pompous.

"I suppose I've exposed all my ignorance," he muttered, and she did laugh now, not unkindly.

"You're clever, Darro. You've succeeded in being absolutely right, and absolutely wrong, both at once!" They had lost the stream and now came, with a last effort, to the top of the hill they were climbing. She paused to look back, where everything was murmuringly still. "No alarm as yet. You know, I am learning to appreciate sight, smell and sound as never before. And I can think, all to myself inside my head, without all the constant murmur of other minds to distract. It's strange."

She found a smooth stone and sat, and he settled by her knee, watching her face. She seemed to glow. "Had it occurred to you that I am now, to all intents and purposes, like you? Like an Earthan woman, I mean?"

"You could never be that. I could be selfish, and say that I wish you were, but you can't do it. Your whole history is against it."

"My history? According to you, Darro, I have no history. No culture exists for me to stand on. Art is long, you say, and life is short. Would you want to live a long time, Darro?"

"I don't know. Every day seems to bring some new discovery in medicine that offers to prolong life, but our people don't seem any better, or happier, for that. Expectancy, the last figures I saw, is now over the century mark. What I'm doing with those figures in my mind I don't know but there they are. And I don't think it matters. It's not how many

years, surely, but whether I have something to live for, something yet to do, some more contribution to give, some purpose. That's what I meant by what I said, about living just for myself alone. That would be pointless. I think I would want to live as long as I had something still to do. But I wouldn't want to be old."

"No, that's true. To be incapable, one wouldn't want that. But if you could be forever young and healthy?"

He couldn't answer. The whole line of talk made him uneasy. He thought of an evasion. "It's not my question, Aporia. I'm only half-alive now! What do I have to live for?"

"Look at me as an Earthan woman, and ask that again."

"Oh no!" He got up hurriedly, turned away from her. "That's not on, and you know it. All right, while you're wearing that shield you're down to my level, but when you take it off again—?"

"I didn't say 'down to your level,' Darro. That would be something to live for, wouldn't it? I would make you as happy as you could make me."

"For how long? Remember, I don't know who I am!"

"You will know. That's why I'm taking you to Birthplace. That's one of the reasons, so that you can learn, safely."

He turned to stare down at her. "Supposing, when I find out, I don't feel the same about you. What then? I can't guarantee a thing. I know how I feel right now, but in three days time, who knows?"

"Then give me those three days, Darro. Neither of us knows what may lie beyond. You may change, I may be destroyed. We have three days, let's not throw them away. We've grown close, exchanged our lives more than once. You love me. I know you do, and I'm happy to know it. You can't see the same feeling in me for you, but it's there. It's been there a long time." She stretched out a long slim arm, supple and white in the starlight, to touch him. He took her fingers. "Three days," she whispered, "isn't very much."

"I'm sorry!" He had to force out the words past a tongue grown suddenly thick and clumsy. "I'm not built that way. I'd want it to be a permanent undertaking. I don't necessarily mean a ritual, or swearing an oath, or whatever other form you may have, just that, for me, it would have to be

for the rest of my life—our lives—and I can't honestly say that, can I?"

Her fingers tightened on his violently, just for a moment, then she pulled gently and drew him down by her side again.

"I knew nothing would come of it, but I had to try. I've committed all the sins in the book so far and got only hurt for my efforts. I've interfered in Earthan affairs that were none of my business, and made them worse than when I started. I've run you into needless danger. I've broken the code of my people over and over. I've caught life's oldest ailment from you—Habil was right, there, but not in the way he meant, poor man—and I've thrown myself shamelessly at you. No, let me say it. You have me completely defenseless, and I do *not* mean the shield, now. But you've quite properly put me in my place."

"No no!"

"Oh but yes, yes!" she insisted. "That must have been where Weseen went wrong, thinking she could treat the thing as a game, trying to shut her eyes to the truth—just as I tried to do. And failed, thanks to you. And you were quite right, darling, it wouldn't work. Come on, let's be getting on our way, and I'll tell you the real reason why."

He rose, gave her his arm until she was erect, and they set off down the slope. In the starlight he could now see the gross black bulk of what had to be a mighty mountain ahead of them. The evening was cool, just right for walking. She took his hand affectionately.

"You were criticizing our culture because, you said, art is long and life is short, that we have no structure that passes on our accumulated learning. That's not quite right, you know. We have schools, of a kind, and we do transmit learning. The difference, putting it very simply, is that you train to become a useful member of a going society, whereas I had the opportunity to learn the facts of life. Unfortunate phrase, that. Not what it usually means, but *all* the facts of life."

"Isn't that what I'm saying? We transmit cultural values. You pass on data. It's not the same."

"And your society doesn't work, Darro. It never has. It's

splitting, at war with itself. Because, you see, where it is possible to pass on data, it is *not* possible to pass on experience. And values derive from experience."

"Now wait a minutel" he protested, as they started once more to toil up a slope. "That's not valid—" and he hesitated as his memory supplied him with a rush of names. Famous names who had left the world a poorer places with their passing. Some of them untimely, too. Mozart, and Chopin. And that man who deserted his wife and family and fled into the wilds because he had to paint. Gauguin. "All right," he agreed gruffly, "you have a point. But mine still stands, doesn't it? Experience is all you have, and you can't pass it on, any more than we can."

"I can't," she admitted, "but I *can* take it with me. I said I had committed all the sins. I haven't. There are a few of our secrets I haven't told you about. But I might as well. Darro, how old do you think I am?"

"That's a devil of a question!" he protested, completely thrown. "What has that got to do with anything we're talking about?"

"Quite a lot. More than you think. Life is short, you said. How long do you think mine has been?"

Dawn was barely beginning to stain the sky behind them, filling the air with an insubstantial grayness. The dream-world again.

"How can I answer that, Aporia? You've shown me that your people have a highly developed science, or art, of physical efficiency. You look—in my opinion, about twenty-three, but if you claim to be twice that much, I'd have to believe you." He snatched a side-glance, saw that she was smiling, an oddly rueful smile. "More than that?" he wondered.

"Much more. Darro, I'm a fool again. I should never have brought the subject up. We were close, once, until I spoiled it. Now, my dear, I'm going to ruin it altogether."

"I refuse to believe you're an old woman!" he said, very firmly.

"But I am, I am. We ignore time, Darro. Not like your people, who must squeeze it greedily, cramming through a brief youth to learn enough to live an equally brief heyday,

slaving all the time to acquire a sufficiency to keep you in your all-too-early reminiscent dotage. Never able to see, to do, to be, to experience any more than a tiny fraction of life. We aren't like that. As I told you, we don't bother to name days, or have weeks, or months, or to number the passing years. That doesn't matter, when you have as many as you wish."

"If you don't count them, how do you know how old you are?" he argued, but the debate was mechanical. The sound of her voice sent chills along his spine. As many years as she could wish? *Would you want to live a long time?* she had asked him. What did she mean by a long time?

"We don't count the years," she murmured, "but, as it happens, I can give you a figure. Purely by chance, while I was living in Dangelar, making my model in geel I was approached by an official of your arts and entertainments section. You know the name?"

"Kelley and Sons; they export what bits of your culture they can pick up. Your geel model of a hillside was one."

"Right. Well, he asked me if I knew of any typical wood-carving art. And I told him I had a piece or two at home that he could have and welcome, because I once tried that medium and it didn't satisfy me. I gave him the pieces. One was a male nude, the other a gambar—that's an animal something like a bear—and then thought no more about it. Some time later he came bothering me again for evidence of title. Were they mine to dispose of? Because he had passed them along to a scientific colleague, who had dated them, by radio-carbon or some such method, as being about four thousand years old. This, of course, made them antiques, and the poor man was afraid he might be accused of wrongful possession of relics. I cleared that up all right. But I carved those works, Darro. And from green wood that I felled myself. So, I am at least four thousand years old. At least!"

He halted, staring up at the mighty mountain that was now emerging before them out of the morning haze. The first blood-red spears from the sun were setting fire to the tip up there. It was huge, impressive and impassive, as if

ignoring the shouting squabbling midgets who crawled at its feet. He drew strength from its grandeur, turned to her.

"You must be raving mad!" he said. "Four thousand years old?"

"Not mad." She made a sad smile and a feeble jest. "Sad, but not mad. See, where the green ends on the breast of the mountain? That is Birthplace. That's where I was born, where all our people on this continent were born. And I can remember when that forest down there was nothing more than a green grass valley. Yes, four thousand years, and more, much more. And I was trying to snatch at three days!"

"All at once," he said, "I feel tired. We've been walking most of the night. We need food, rest, and your leg needs looking at."

"Wise man! Take safe refuge in mundane details. I don't blame you. And you're quite right, of course. But we'll have to go carefully. There's a village down there."

"I took this bow from the hunter," he said. "What sort of things would he have been hunting?"

"Hereabouts?" She furrowed her brow in thought, and he saw the creases in the film. They served to remind him that she couldn't tell, now, how he felt. That was just as well. "There will be, because of the village, a fair abundance of at least two kinds of edible creatures. One is very like your squirrel, very fast, dark gray fur. The other you'd call a rabbit, which burrows in any low hillside, is usually white or pale fawn in color."

"Just thought, unless you have some way of making fire, we'll have to eat 'em raw!"

"A deal Darro. If you bring anything back worth cooking, I'll show you how to make a fire. Meanwhile, I'm making over that way, where I hear water. And I'll gather some berries and a root or two."

"You think I can't hit anything with this thing, don't you?"

"Let's say I'll be surprised if you do."

Ten minutes later she was surprised, and said so, when he found his way back to her with a pair of the "rabbits" dangling by their ears from one hand. She had settled for a

tiny green patch on the edge of the stream, and had laid out a fair collection of fat white tubers, all washed and clean.

"You're no more surprised than I am," he confessed, as he helped her gather twigs and dry grass for a fire. "I'm turning out to be a queer sort of fellow altogether. What with having a headful of academic stuff, social science and such, and undeveloped artistic leanings, to say nothing of a rather youthful and idealistic approach to—to life, I appear to have spent quite a lot of time living off the countryside. Not as a way of life though. More as a leisure pursuit. Vacations up in the hills, living rough. And that sort of thing usually goes with the kind of person who is wealthy."

"Ah, that explains it!"

"You mean, this makes some kind of sense to you?"

"Oh yes. I was surprised to know that you—you should be so handy at this kind of thing, but I didn't know about the vacations. Let me have the bow a moment. There are *some* things you don't know, thank goodness." She clicked open a recess in the butt and extracted a lens. "This is a hunter's bow, remember. And this will give us our fire."

Skinning and cleaning, chopping into quarters, skewering efficiently on twigs, snuffing the delicious smells of the roasting meat and the roots—it was all very familiar, and he pondered it furiously as he ate. She watched him with a half-smile that twisted one corner of her lovely mouth into a dimple.

"There's a certain amount of fun in trying to guess what you're thinking," she admitted, after a while. "You look as if your arithmetic is not supplying the right answers!"

"You can say that again!" He grinned ruefully. "If you're done, shift over this way a little and let me have a look at that leg. I'll just get the grease off my hands." He stood in the cool water and waited for her to stretch out her foot and leg to him. "Trouble is," he admitted, "that as fast as I find a part solution I run into another gaping chasm to explain. For instance, I think I know, now, what's been done to me. That's all right. But I still do not know why. And then again, if I'm here, I must be missing from somewhere else. That's logic. But why haven't the 'somewhere else' people done—"

"What are you talking about?" Her gray eyes were huge. "You say you know what has been done to you? You know?"

"That part's easy, by simple elimination. Zeiger was right when he said the mental pattern clashed with the body image. You said the same. But he was going from the wrong end. It's the body that's been changed. Plastic surgery. Or, if you want the modern jargon term, bio-cosmetology." He looked up at her, and she seemed baffled.

"You've missed that, in learning about us? Well, that isn't surprising, I suppose. We don't advertise our deficiencies too much, and it wouldn't interest you anyway, as you are just about perfect. But Earthan medicine is getting very clever at physical remodeling, ever since they learned how to grow neutral tissue *in vitro*. Tissue that doesn't have the homograft reaction, that can be cultured into just about anything, and then surgically inserted. I never heard of anybody having a whole-body job, but there's no reason why not—" and he had to stop there because her astonishment was now changing into distaste.

"You really think your body has been altered to resemble James Hart?"

"I know it leaves a lot of holes open. It doesn't explain why. I've no idea what they did with Hart's body, why they had to pick on me, whoever I am, or anything. But how else can it be done?" He slid off the garter and pad and inspected the holes in her leg. They were healing well, almost closed, and with no sign of infection. He looked up at her again. "Well?"

"Your explanation doesn't explain anything, Darro. It assumes that all this happened before Zeiger and Thral became involved, else Zeiger wouldn't be making the mistake you mention. And it doesn't account for Paul Garvey."

"Garvey?" The name was such a surprise to him that it took him a while to place him. "The bank president? What's he got to do with anything? Oh, you mean young Allen being killed?"

"For a purpose, Darro. Not just accident. For Garvey's benefit."

"Oh come!" he began to protest, but as he spoke, a sudden

unfolding of his memory released new data. It was like reading from a page of print:

“on the demise of the afore-mentioned title-holder all rights of tenure, ownership and possession shall pass, irrespective of testament, to the oldest male issue—” The screed rippled by, came to the point: *“In the event there is no entitled issue, all the above-mentioned rights shall be deemed within the control of the senior officer of the estate, to be disposed as he shall think fit and proper.”*

“Well, I will be everlastingly damned!” he breathed. “So Garvey inherits the Allen throne! Aporia, that throws me back to square one. Garvey plotting with Zeiger, probably promising to support his research with a bit of handy cash in return for getting young Allen out of the way; Zeiger with some kind of hold on Thral, and making him lend a hand to confuse the issue; twisting my brain to make me do it; shutting me away in a mental home to save the obvious inquiries; wash out my memory just to make it certain—”

“Except that you are now assuming again that you *are* Jim Hart.”

“So what’s so impossible about that? You reckon I’m not a killer, that I couldn’t have done it? But I could, Aporia, with this shield. I could kill you, right now, and you couldn’t stop me.”

“Jim Hart might,” she said, very steadily, “but you couldn’t. No, I was right not to tell you who you are, I can see that. You’ll have to be prepared properly. And we must get on.” She drew back her leg, curling it under her ready to rise when they both heard, distantly, a familiar chattering sound.

“That jet-copter again,” he muttered, looking up. “They must really want me bad!”

“Both of us,” she corrected, as they scrambled hurriedly out of the open and fell prone under a bush heavy with flame-red blooms, to stare up at the whirling machine. “Thral must be desperate, but surely even he wouldn’t violate Birth-place?”

Darro watched the spinning blades, saw the machine drift over their heads and on, dwindling against the majestic side of the mountain. He was confused as never before, thrown

once more back into a cardboard dreamland where everything was beautiful and nothing made sense. That mighty mountain would be a wonderful thing to paint. The spinning machine didn't belong in the picture though. He watched it drift on, heard her murmuring to herself.

"Not Birthplace! He can't!"

"How many villages about here?" he asked.

"One immediately below us. Another just across the valley. And there is one up there, five miles from Birthplace. We call it First Village, where the newborn get their first contact with life in the world."

He let it go, asked no more. Her tone was enough to warn him that there was something religious involved here. Something sacred, at any rate. And that was a dangerous subject to tangle with. Probably all mixed up with her delusions of age. The spinning blades were now so distant as to be a blur. The machine swung and slid away to the left in a large arc, and she sighed in relief. It provoked him to one daring question.

"If it's such a terrible sin just to fly over the Birthplace, isn't it a worse one for you to take me there?"

"Much worse," she agreed. "It's a desperate throw. All or nothing, with destruction for me if I'm wrong."

"You mentioned that before. You said it wasn't the same as killing."

"My people don't kill, not in the sense of execution. That's barbaric. If I'm judged wrong I will be cast out of the Kalmed community. I will be left to grow old, and die."

"Don't we all?" he demanded. "What's so terrible about that?"

"You wouldn't understand." She drew herself up on a knee and then stood while he scrambled up beside her.

"I'm trying to. D'you mean you have some sort of elixir that keeps you everlastingly young, and that you'll be deprived of it, if they cast you out?"

"Nothing like that!" she snapped, and was immediately contrite. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be angry with you. I'm tired. We both are. We had better find some place to sleep during the heat of the day—" She caught her breath and froze absolutely still as a powerful snuffling and snorting broke

from a clump of bushes only five or six yards away from them.

"What?" he breathed, staring at the agitated greenery.

"Gambar! Damn this blindfold, but for it I would have detected him long ago. If we keep absolutely still he may not bother us."

"Not on your lifel" he grunted. "If that thing's as much a bear as you say, he's got our scent already, and the reek of the cooking fire." He glanced urgently around. "Into the stream and out the far side. If you have to, climb a tree."

He saw now a massive gray bulk, and then a sharp-snouted head well equipped with teeth. That thing was at least seven feet tall!

"Climb a small tree! You hear, a *small* tree!" He gave her a nudge and she ran, leaping into the water. He ran after her, not so precipitiously, snatching a glance back to check. And gray-fur grunted, swung his head, and began to lumber in pursuit.

"Here goes nothing!" he breathed, dropping to a knee on the far side of where they had built their fire. Some forgotten training had led him to draw and cock the crossbow immediately after using it, so all he had to do was press in a quarrel and wait.

The thing *was* like a bear, heavy-footed, hump-shouldered and rolling in its gait, a difficult target to hit in any vital spot. Then it slowed at the close stink of the fire, dabbed with a curious paw, a paw fringed with huge claws. It snarled, dabbed harder at the bite of the hot ashes, and then sat back and up, to lick the burn. He knew he would never have a better moment. He aimed for the soft sag of flesh under the jaw, and fired. And then wheeled and sprang into the water, splashed across to the other side, and turned to look back.

The gambar had fallen forward, was making feeble but determined efforts to crawl, to drag its bulk forward along the turf. Then it shuddered, and lay still. He was tempted to go back and collect the claws as a trophy. They were beauties! Then he thought of Aporia.

"Where are you?"

"Here!" Her voice came from a tangle of green leaves above an enormous branch, on a tree that was a venerable old giant. "What happened?"

"I killed it. Come down!" He waited for her to scramble along the big branch and drop by his side. He had set his foot in the bow-stirrup and recocked it by the time she reached the ground.

"You killed it? A gambar, with a crossbow?"

"Look for yourself!" He watched her astonishment with a scowl, waited until she had turned to him again. "I don't much care how old you think you are, or how superior you say you are, or how advanced your people are—or any of that. I do know this. You are a conceited and dangerous fool! The next time I tell you to climb a little tree, you *do* it, understand me? A *little* tree, damn you!"

"Don't you use that tone on me!" she cried, her smoky eyes flaring. "I was tramping these woods and dodging gambar before your people knew what civilization was, while your kind were living in tents and wearing feathers. You can't tell *me* what to do! A little tree, indeed. Why, didn't you think I could climb a big one? Is your masculine vanity hurt!"

"No, it isn't. I ought to put you over my knee and paddle you. And if you pull one more fool trick like that, I *will*, so help me! Get this into your ancient brain, lady. I'm dependent on you for finding out who I am. You can't do that for me if you're dead. Come herel!" He seized her arm and dragged her to where she could see the sprawling carcass of the gambar, across the stream.

"Take a good look. Like a bear, you said, and so it is. See those claws? It can climb a tree a damn sight faster than you can. A big tree. By hugging! But it can't climb a little tree, because the trunk slips between its legs. See? You may have wandered these woods when you were a gay young thing, but you were never treed by one of those or you'd not be here now to make such a bloody fool of yourself!"

She stood, and stared, and he could see her wilt like a slapped child. He felt sorry for her, but made himself squash

it away, along with all the rest of the nonsense. She was alien. Not human. He fastened on that.

"You were quite right," she mumbled. "I am a fool. Again."

"All right. Now, let's find somewhere to hole up. Away you go!"

They found a snug corner against a rock and under a spread of flowering shrubs. They slept out the heat of the day, and went on in the afternoon. In mutual silence they evaded the village, crossed the valley, and struck into the first climb at the foot of the mountain. There was nothing to say. The little rapport between them was shattered completely.

By night fall they were climbing steadily, and the air was distinctly cooler. His mind was full of a host of questions, but they drifted idly, seeming to be unimportant now, not really impinging on his feelings. Birthplace. That implied children, and set an enigma, because, if they had children in the usual way, and they lived to be so impossibly old, it just didn't add up! Nonsense, all of it.

So was her insistence that he was not Jim Hart. Rubbish. Zeiger and Thral, and of course, Garvey, had all conspired together somehow to get young Allen murdered and lay the blame on Jim Hart. Why? Oh, possibly because the Kalmed conceit had boggled at the idea of one of their women falling for a spaceman. As simple a thing as that. The rest was just a matter of Kalmed mental wizardry, and he was no more than a pawn in the game.

He analyzed it dispassionately. It didn't matter, not really. As Jim Hart, the mind, he had been thoroughly destroyed, as good as dead. Even if the wizards of the Birthplace, the high priests or whatever they were, could restore him whole—why, even then, he was wanted for a double murder. He couldn't win!

In the thick dark of midnight they almost stumbled on the second of the villages, only managing to veer around it in time. That small incident triggered a train of thought. She had invited him, made him a free gift of herself. And why not? Why didn't he make the most of it? He had nothing to lose, that was certain. And if she was all that old, neither had she! That thought amused him in a bitter way, kept

him amused until they had rounded the village and happened on a stand of the now familiar nut-trees. She showed him, also, a spreading cluster of bushes that bore a fruit very like grapes, only bigger and more fluid, with a clean acid flavor. They rested and ate.

He worried away at his train of thought, trying to push himself into being the cynical adventurer he wished he was. It wouldn't work.

"Aporia," he said, out of a very long silence. "Your people, do you marry and have families, as we do?"

"No." She spoke coldly, with something of her original aloof manner in her voice. "That is one aspect of Earthan culture we find distasteful."

"Having babies?"

"No!" she snorted. "The way you treat your women! I suppose they have only themselves to blame, but nevertheless it is infamous that you expect a woman to be a lover, a companion, a teacher, a reproducing machine, and the responsible instrument for future generations—and a person as well!"

"I've heard that kind of thing before. But you can't get around biological facts. Or can you?"

"You can *use* them, properly. With us, a woman has babies only if she qualifies, and wants to. Only between the ideal age-limits, what you'd call between fifteen and eighteen. The babies are cared for, and trained by people who have that vocation, who do it well!"

"You have no family life?"

"Your sacred ethic, isn't it? Home and family, the seed-bed of prejudice. *My* wife, *my* husband, *my* children, the perfect breeding ground for all the primitive failings. Possessiveness, dependence, division, preference, distrust, prejudice—warped mentalities—aggression—all stem from that pattern. We have none of it. Our children grow up with healthy bodies and healthy minds. As adults we do not tie each other with artificial bonds. We are a free people in every way, free to do what we think right, free to accept full responsibility for the consequences, too. Free to live, in fact."

"And to die, too!" he retorted, stung by her comments.

"Oh yes, that's part of the responsibility. Shall we go?"

They went on, steadily up. By daybreak they were well up the side of the mountain and into a broad green path. "We call this the road to the world," she told him. "We can follow beside it, until we are past First Village, and then we will be free of pursuit, at least. And then you will be made a whole man again. That much I can promise."

"And then what?"

"I don't know. What happens afterwards is up to the High Council."

By noon they were past First Village. The air was very fresh now, and the road ahead broad, green and deserted, leading straight up the mountain.

SEVEN

THEY WERE ALMOST on top of it before he actually saw it. The road led to a broad green shelf, a natural platform leading back up against the gray stone wall, an ideal place to maintain a lookout. And then he saw.

"Your people believe in camouflage, don't they? The place is like a fortress!" And it was. It took the eye of the artist to separate out stone masses from trailing streaks of green and brown, and the blaze of flowering creepers, but when he did he saw stout walls, slit windows and a high walk up there where one man could see for miles. And one square door that two men could hold against a regiment. A stronghold.

"It was a fort, once," she told him. "Once, our way of life was new, and like all new things it was feared, and attacked by those who wanted to cling to the old ways. But all dissenters are long since dead. Inevitably." She went forward with her head high, letting him follow. She had a point, he thought. Given the means to do the trick, you could overcome opposition by simply outliving it.

He followed her into the shade of the square door. Into gloom, and then darkness like the pit. To keep up his courage, he said, "You make it sound as if it happened abruptly, this new way of life."

"It did." Her voice came from one side and he stretched a

hand to touch the wall as a guide to the twists and turns. "Once we lived by machines and devices, as you do. Until we realized that our lives were being lived for us, that we were serving a great machine called society, squirreling around in futility in a substitute life that was artificial. Then we broke that image, learned how to live for ourselves. Because we had learned how to have enough *time* to live. That's the secret."

The dark passage shook itself once more and there was light ahead, so that they could go faster.

"I have traveled this path many times," she said, "from one world to another. But never before in this direction."

Before he had time to ponder on the impossibility of that they came out on another broad shelf into bright sunlight, and his thoughts spun away into confusion as he stood and stared.

It looked for all the world like an enormous park, or—he amended that—a botanical garden. It had that air of everything being planned and laid out at its best. The color was dazzling, defying tongue and eye, enough to drive a colorman into raptures. Blossoming shrubs and trees rioted on the eye, piled in profusion, interspersed with patches of cool green, and stretches of winding silver-gray paths. He caught the sparkle of a fountain, the distant cool ripple of a small lake, and the great spreading majesty of brooding old trees.

Buildings, too. He saw a slant roof, the thrust of a tower, the glint of glass, from structures that stood wrapped in growth. He heard, faint with distance, the happy shout of children. Words came to mind and were dismissed as tawdry incompetence. The Garden of Eden could have been like this, he thought.

Then he started and turned as movement caught his eye, and an old man came towards them from a flower-fronted watch-house on their right. An old man, with white hair and suspicious eyes, in a paper-white cloak.

"Who dares to come back from the world?" he demanded. "And what are you?"

"You are Pator, of the Gate. I know you well, but I

wouldn't expect you to remember me from among so many. I am Aporia."

"The name I know, and the face. But what are you, a shade?"

"No. I live and breathe as you do. What you see, or fail to see, is the reason why I'm here. I seek audience of the Mother."

The old face hardened. "I have no word of that."

"I am aware of that. A great danger threatens the Kalméd people. I'm here to expose it, to ask Mother Delma for help."

"I cannot tell if you speak true or not." The old man's suspicions were still strong. "And who is this one? I don't remember that face. Who are you?"

"I can't answer that. I don't know who I am."

"I know who he is." Aporia spoke earnestly. "I can tell you this. He is Earthan. And he has been transpersoned. Incompletely!"

Patar cringed back as if he had seen a ravening beast, his hand slipping into his cloak and reappearing with a disc which he pressed to his forehead. Aporia turned stiffly. "You'd better put down the crossbow and the rest of it. That will help to allay suspicion. Fear has no place here, nor force."

Patar kept his eyes on them. In a moment or two he put away the disc. "It is permitted," he said. "Delma will see you in her chambers. But remember, every guardian here will be watching both of you all the time."

"Poor old man," she breathed as she led him down from the shelf, down a gentle slope, and into a winding path. "It is as difficult for him to adjust as it was for me. They can't watch us, not while we are shielded."

"You seem happier now."

"I am. The die is cast. And anyway, this is home, a happy place!"

A twist in the road brought them suddenly upon a silent, intent group of boys and girls clustered around a magnificent flowering bush. In the midst of them a tall golden-haired woman stood lecturing. At least, he thought, she seemed to be lecturing, by her pose and actions. But she said little,

only a word now and then. She held one of the enormous blue blooms in her fingers and was explaining something. Mind to mind, he guessed, grasping just a hint of how different, and how complete, education could be here.

And it wasn't until the silent group was far behind that he realized there hadn't been so much as a stitch of clothing among them all! Something caught fire in his mind. This was a way to learn, a way to live, totally uninhibited and honest. *Real* living!

They had veered away in a large semicircle and were now approaching a sheer rock face that had a carved stone stairway zigzagging up its face. They went up, flight by flight, and the whole scene opened out below them in all its loveliness. At the top they came to a broad balcony, backed by high double-doors of glass. Aporia took his arm, stretched out her hand to the scene.

"We'll snatch this moment," she said, "because it doesn't come often. Mother Delma has this view constantly, but I've seen it only a few times. It is rare for one of us to reach this pinnacle. There, you see, at the heart of it all, is the baby-house, where we are all born, where we stay until we are old enough to walk unaided and talk a little. There, that's the playground we start in. There's the next. And then the whole becomes a playground as we are old enough to grasp it. Those buildings, there, and there, are the places where we learn about the way the world moves, what makes it, and why. You'd call those sciences. Humanities, too."

"There aren't many of you."

"No need. There are seldom more than a hundred new lives here at any one time. Remember, there are only a hundred thousand of us on the whole continent." She said it as if it made some obvious sense, but it was just one more bit of confusion to him.

They turned away to the double-doors, and saw a very old, white-haired woman standing there, studying them. Her cloak was pure white like the others, her eyes bright blue, and her face, although seamed and furrowed by age, was calm, held traces of what must have been beauty once.

"Mother Delma!" Aporia went forward, bowed her head.

The old woman moved aside, waving both of them into the chamber beyond.

"Come in. Pator said you were empty people, and so you are. Will you explain that first, please?"

They went into a room that was walled with a solid mass of bas-relief carvings of figures and faces in a bewildering variety. The old woman moved to settle into a deep chair by a large table where a globe stood. Aporia went nervously down on to the edge of another chair and pinched her fingers to her forehead.

"This is the first thing you need to know about," she sighed, and peeled away the strip of film from her brow, to let it hang limp.

Mother Delma sat up again, surprise rippling her old face.

"A mask for the mind! My child, how could you bear to be so smothered?"

"It hasn't been easy. I'll explain in a moment, but there's just one thing I want you to do for me first. Please call Weseen here. It's very important!"

His thoughts broke apart in wild disarray as the old woman sat back and pursed her lips. Weseen?

"This is most irregular. But, in this instance, very well." Delma got out a disc, pressed it briefly to her forehead, put it away again. He had to speak the words that crowded to his tongue.

"Weseen? But she's dead!"

"She came home a few days ago, urgently, out of time, and in distress. You know it is none of our business what follies the world commits, so I did not think more. But if it's to do with this devilish device, that's another matter. And you're Earthan, so Pator said?"

He nodded, not knowing what to add.

The old face creased. "Most irregular indeed. But tell me about this thing!" She jabbed a finger at the limp plastic in Aporia's hand.

He groped in his cloak and produced the tray, laid it on the table.

"There are more in that box, and he is wearing one, Mother Delma. Try it. Try to compel him!"

"I have already tried, child. It is effective. Not very wonderful. We could duplicate it, were we so foolishly minded. An Earthan thing?"

"Invented by a Dr. Zeiger. Who is a close friend and associate of Kalmed Thral. I am not saying Thral has deliberately given away information to this Zeiger, but I suspect he has been careless. Earthans are not fools, as I have reason to know."

"Thral!" Delma stared at the limp stuff in her fingers. "It was Thral who helped Weseen home. These are grave matters, Aporia. Ah, here comes Weseen now." He had heard no step, and when the curtains twitched aside from a doorway, he saw why. She came in, bobbed her head to Delma.

"You sent for me, Mother?" she said, and then she realized there were others present. She swung guileless blue eyes on Aporia, and then further, and staggered back with a gasp. "Jim? What are you doing here?" And then the sudden brilliance died in her eyes, her face smoothed. "But you're not Jim now, are you?" He sat quite still and speechless as she stared, and then she added in a fearful small voice, "You're not anybody! Mother Delma, what does this all mean?"

Her words were his thoughts, because this Weseen was no more than a child, no more than eleven or twelve, with only the first fine traces of young womanhood beginning to bud forth from her slim boyish body. And she was as naked as a baby. A vibrant young animal. Weseen?

"I think you had better tell *us* what it all means, child."

"It's bad," Aporia added kindly. "You'd help if you told us all about it. This is properly a matter for the High Council now, so we had better get the facts straight." The girl drooped, made her way to a chair and sat. Aporia spoke again. "Just what is Thral trying to do, anyway?"

"You know about that?" The fresh blonde head shook in despair. "I went to him for help. It was a mess. I was in trouble, over him." She looked once again at the man who was not Jim Hart. "I don't expect you to understand how I felt. When his ship was away I hated myself for being fascinated, but when he came back, each time it was worse

than ever. It's a kind of magnetism, a fire. I couldn't help it."

"I can understand that," Aporia murmured. "You were caught, you wanted to get free, yes?"

"Worse. We lived together, you know. It was madness, an appetite that wouldn't be satisfied. And then I found I was going to have a child. *His* child!" The silence grew thick in the lovely room. Aporia broke it.

"You went to Thral for help?"

"That was awful! All I wanted was to come home. I sent word here to expect me, then went to see him to arrange it. He was furious. He wanted to expose the whole thing, make a case of it, use it to attack the Earthans, to show them up as the corruption they are—"

"The fool! Oh, the incredible fool! It would have just the opposite effect. Imagine the Earthans learning that one of us had been seduced by a spaceman, a nobody! But wait. Thral isn't that stupid. What actually did happen?" The girl shuddered as she thought back.

"It was awful. I didn't want that publicity, the shame. I just wanted to come home, to get out of it. But he insisted the incident should be used in some way. That Jim should be punished somehow. I had no choice but to go along, because I needed him to get me home. So it was planned—" She broke off and dropped her head in her hands.

"Let me guess." Aporia's voice was like steel. "You were to meet Hart, and somehow Thral would be there, would compel Hart to kill you, and then be caught and tried for murder. Because Thral is obsessed with the idea of getting the Earthans slung off our planet. Right?"

"That is hardly an obsession," Delma interposed, coldly. "Many of us share the feeling. It was a mistake to ever allow them here!"

"Perhaps. But to do it this way? What went wrong, We- seen?"

"It was a horrible thing to do, but I felt horrible about Jim, too. I agreed. But then everything went wrong. We had to wait for Jim's ship to come back. Then Thral revealed to me that an Earthan had been eavesdropping on all we had said. He had heard everything."

"Dr. Zeiger!" Aporia breathed. "That madman! He would. I can guess the next part. He had Thral in his hand, like that!" and she made a squeeze.

"That's right," Weseen sighed. "We had to cooperate with him, or he would have told everything. Not just our plot, but the secrets, the homecoming, everything. So we had to cooperate, you see. But I don't understand"—the girl raised her bright blue eyes in bewilderment—"what has gone wrong now! Thral said there were to be two killings. Myself, and a young Earthan who had to be got out of the way. And Jim would be caught and punished for both. But—that's not Jim!"

"One moment!" Aporia was urgent and imperative. "Pay attention. I'm going to ask you to look, and tell me whether or not you recognize—just yes or no, mind, no names. All right?" She turned, her eyes blazing. "Darro—take it off, please!"

He shrugged, pinched the edge of the film and peeled it away, watching Weseen. He saw her blue eyes widen in horror. She turned to Aporia, and opened her mouth, but Aporia got in first.

"Don't say it. Your face tells me you know who he is. And that's all I wanted. Unless you want to add something, Mother Delma?"

"Not at this time. You may go, Weseen. You'll have to speak up, at the High Council, you realize that. Go!"

"And now"—as the drapes rustled into stillness after the departing girl—"what are we to do with you, Earthan? In all justice, we owe you your identity, and that much we can do, right here."

"Will he be able to bear it, Mother Delma? For that fear alone I had to bring him here, to your care. I didn't dare risk it myself."

"It will be quite safe, my child, provided he is prepared. It all had to happen to us once, remember, when we were like him. How much does he know?"

"Almost nothing. I have tried to give clues, to let him discover his own way, but in the circumstances it's not surprising he didn't."

"Hmml!" The old woman had somehow subtly gained pow-

er. She dominated the room now without effort. "The problem is afterwards. Earthan, I can give you back to yourself, but what happens then? You cannot return to your own people, because you will know things we do not want revealed."

"Can't go back anyway," he said, wearily, "because I'm a convicted murderer and a refugee from detention. Frankly, I don't want to go back. I'm pretty sure it's hopeless, but from what I've seen of your way of life, I'd like nothing better than to learn more about it. So long as I can ask a few questions. Like, for instance, how does a girl of twelve come to be living in Dangelar and associating with spacemen?"

"You will probably have to remain here for the natural duration of your life. We shall see. Your mind appears to be of a fine quality. Please listen to what I have to say." Those old eyes were compelling, now, but in a kind and gentle way. "You have been transpersoned, improperly, because you were not fully aware of what was happening. You were not prepared. I shall now prepare you." Her mind circled and held his like the grip of a strong hand.

"Once we of Kalmed were like you. We had science. We studied life. You will agree, I think, that intelligent life differs from all other forms in that it is cumulative; it adds up. One generation goes on after the other. But the experience dies with the person, which is a tragedy. We have overcome that. Look at me and see that this, my body, is old. Soon it will no longer serve me properly. When that times comes I will discard it and pass into another, a fresh young body. It is no more difficult than going to sleep and waking up again refreshed, once you know how. And we know how."

The idea lay in his mind like a heavy lump. But then it began to grow and sprout ideas. Aporia, four thousand years old and more, this way? And Weseen stabbed to death—but now here, as a child! A Birthplace!

"Yes—but how—?" he mumbled, and the old woman smiled.

"Good. Your mind accepts the concept. That is more than most of our people could manage, when we first discovered the technique. Though complex in theory, it is simple in

practice. You the person are the sum-total of all that has happened to you. A pattern. The difference between noise and music is in the arrangement. A picture is just daubs of pigment on a surface. It is the pattern which means something. That pattern can be recorded, can be transmitted from one body to another, in certain carefully controlled conditions. For instance, in a newborn child the personal identity is the body. A separate ego does not properly begin to develop until the body begins to ready itself for reproduction. That is a biological process, nothing at all to do with the mind, which then discovers it is a thing in itself. And this is the universal problem of adolescence. It is for that reason that we prefer to transperson into a body just before adolescence. As you saw with Weseen."

He shoved the impossibility away to the back of his mind and concentrated on common sense questions. "What happens to the adolescent personality that is already in the body?"

"A good question. In your culture you impress on a child, right from the start, a name, an identity, a self-hood which it would never have if left alone. You doubt it? Think. Isn't it true that your children rejoice in all kinds of fantasies and fairy tales, pretending to be this and that and the other thing or person? Doesn't that show that the personality, at that time, is a fluid thing, not set? And isn't it true that at adolescence you are told to put away childish things, to 'grow up'? Now we train our children not to be any particular person, but just to live fully and grow healthy. But there are physical types, nevertheless, which we study very closely. It would be a disaster, for instance, to transperson Aporia, here, into the slow-moving maternal body-type. Or a social-associative type. Or a physical dominant, even. She is the inwardly reflective dispassionate sort. As you are. It was a gross error to transperson you into that body. It was a worse mistake still to move you into a body older than your own. And a crime in that the original personality had to be released—dispersed—before you could be inserted. This is distasteful, but I have to tell you, because it's true."

She had led him by her own ways to the edge of a dark chasm. He had to jump, but, being human, he tried to dodge.

"Can't you put me back into my own body?" She shook her head slowly.

"You know I can't. You know by this time that your body is dead. You know, by now, who you are. You know!"

Her words became a thin thread of sound wailing through a whistling emptiness, echoing and dying away. Her face, the room, the hardness of the floor and the seat under him, all faded into gray, became a pinpoint of light at the far end of the long tunnel of night into which he fell. He heard a faint murmur, incongruously, in his ear, "We'll have to get Weseen after all. He's gone, but she knows the image—"

The pattern of bright images was familiar and comfortable, but "they" wanted to drag him away into something that hurt. He resisted, but he was helpless. Flat on his back. On a series of thin bars. Aches and pains flooded in as he opened his eyes to a dazzling blue-tinged glow. It seemed that a thousand ghostly fingers brushed his naked skin. The light brightened. A face came to peer down, a well-remembered face, with enormous gray eyes full of concern.

"I know who *you* are," he muttered, trying to grin, and an answering smile lifted the corner of her mouth just for a moment.

"You must keep quite still. You have to adjust this body as much as possible to match your own pattern. The apparatus will help, and I will guide you." He saw now that she was stripped to the skin, too.

"What apparatus? What's happening?"

"This chamber is charged with undifferentiated metabolic energy at a very high tension. You can feel it tickling over your skin. All the time you didn't know who you were, you had no pattern to impress, but now you have, and this body doesn't fit you properly. We are going to change that, Darro."

"That was a good guess," he chuckled. "David Rollo, bless my fond and fatheaded parents. But the boys always called me Dayrø, which is worse. You knew, didn't you?"

"Almost from the start, although I could hardly credit anyone would be so insane as to transperson a twenty-three-year-old into a thirty-five-year-old body. Once I realized there was dirty work going on, that explained it."

"You know my age, too?"

"I know a lot about you, David. As a person, that is. The body is a different matter. I don't blame Weseen for being tangled. Shall we get on?"

"What do I have to do?"

"Nothing active, just keep still. I will bring my hand close to you, to induce polarity. That will stimulate your body patterns. It will hurt, each time, just at first. That's the old pattern deleting. You keep still now, because if we so much as touch, we'll both be killed in one bright flash!"

"Just my luck!" he complained. "Here I am, in full possession of my faculties, alone with you, and I daren't even touch you!"

"We are not alone," she corrected, trying to be stern. "Mother Delma is watching us through a lead-glass window. I'm starting at your feet."

It was like having teeth pulled, all over, and it helped, in a wry way, to mask his perplexity at coming to grips with himself after so long. David Rollo Allen. It had a solid and familiar feel, and came complete with mental images of his home, his school, his friends. He recalled his concern over Grandfather's death, and the urgent packing and catching the ship out to Kalmed.

The *Hermes*. The sight of S.S. *Troy*, as he straggled down the gangway. The meeting with Garvey, the rendezvous in the quiet room in Dragon Lane with Weseen—a Weseen who was a gorgeous bosomy blonde. And drinks. And then haziness. He could have filled in the details, but he let the thought slide as unimportant. He was much more interested in the trim torso that moved temptingly near him, as she patiently and painfully teased out the knots in his nerve-patterns.

"Painful to her, too, he saw that much. Every time she brought her palm daringly close to draw out an exquisitely agonizing twist of pain, she tensed and gritted her own nerves against the polar opposite of it. Merely by rolling his eyes he could see the fading white cicatrice where that hunter's bolt had pierced her leg. On his behalf. They'd saved each other a dozen times. Their lives were hopeless-

ly interlinked, and yet it was just as hopeless as ever for them to be more than just known to each other.

And, he recalled, she was still under sentence of some kind. What would they decide, this High Council? He was still pondering that as the invisible tension began to dwindle, and the torture was over. She gave him a weary smile.

"Finished. The rest you can do yourself."

"I'm grateful. It hurt you just as much as it did me, didn't it?"

"It's nothing. I've done it before, in an emergency. How are you?"

"Reassembled!" He sat up, then got to his feet. "You've made a new man of me. I hope it's as attractive as the old one!" He said it with a grin, but there came a sudden polarity between them that had nothing to do with artifice or machine, and she turned away hurriedly, suffused in glowing pink all over. He felt as if he'd been plunged into boiling water himself.

His confused gaze caught the stare of Delma's old eyes through a glass-panel in the door, and he made a smile for her, too, as she opened the door to let them out.

"We must go, now, to the 'house,'" she said. "Here are your cloaks. we have no time now to spend on pleasantries. The High Council has been called."

She hurried on ahead of them, through rooms glittering with strange and unearthly gadgetry, and into a down-spiraling corridor. As they went on and down he became aware of many more joining up in the procession, at their heels, all in white. He snatched a side glance at Aporia. Her face was calm and set, like some beautiful mask.

He had a growing sense of apprehension. These were people who could manipulate forces unlike anything he knew, and they were, he realized, facing a challenge to their whole way of life.

The 'house' proved to be a single room carved out of the solid stone within the pediment of the rock where Mother Delma's chamber stood. There were a few already present as she swept in. They gave room for her to take the center position. She waved Aporia to stand beside her on the right, and put him on her left. In a while Weseen came

through the throng to stand opposite. She had put on a short white jerkin, and looked pale but composed.

He sensed that the chamber was almost full. All were silent. There was no one moment when it happened, just a time when he knew that he was in the presence of a great multitude, much greater than this immediate flock. He saw the others solemnly raise their right hands to their foreheads, and he copied, holding the disc gently against his head.

An infinitely gentle but masterly "voice" spoke in his head. "The High Council of the Kalmed people assembled, know this. Accusations are made of non-proper involvement with Earthans, of secrets betrayed, ethical codes broken and unworthy behavior. Of those concerned, who speaks first?"

"I am Thral." There was no need for the name. That "personality" was unmistakable, a compound of arrogance, self-righteousness and resentment. He spoke in words, but David felt the emotions, the feeling-pictures that were appropriate. Thral etched in the Earthans with acid clarity as as pushing, petty, conceited people who were crude, noisy, shallow and with values that were offensive, but a people with a certain pervasive and primitive vitality. He introduced Weseen's dilemma delicately and went on against a shock of distaste to explain how he planned to use this as a stick to beat the Earthans, to destroy the worthless man Hart, to turn the Earthan values back on themselves. So far, all was righteous.

Now he introduced an element of sinister cunning. The man Zeiger had spied, had planted recording devices in Weseen's rooms, to gather "information" on Kalmed habits and behavior. A snoop. A "peeping tom," in fact. A vile thing to do. There was a brief indication of Zeiger's cunning in deceiving Thral into the belief that this foul Earthan was a seeker after truth and eager to minister to his fellow-Earthan's misfortunes. But so cunning!

David had to admire the artistry of the performance, even as he writhed at its bias. This was how to tell the truth and still deceive. Thral was making out a good case for himself.

He slid now into the picture of his anguish at being

trapped, and used it to further underline what devils the Earthans were. Zeiger had "made" him demonstrate this "transpersoning" thing that he had guessed at from his spying. The plot involved killing Weseen, which was nothing, and killing a young Earthan, which was a trivial matter, of concern only to other Earthans, and then to blot out Hart's personality and transfer the young Earthan's identity into Hart's body. Of course, Thral had never intended to really do it, but Weseen hadn't properly understood. She had helped the action she believed was intended, and something had gone wrong.

Hart had been destroyed, but instead of becoming the other Earthan, had been changed into a mindless thing, as was only to be expected from inferior creatures like Earthans. They were not advanced enough to be able to endure the process.

Thral's "voice" ceased for a while, letting it hang while the assembled minds deliberated in crosscurrents of opinion, finally settling down to the feeling that Thral had made the best of a bad situation. Foolish, but sincere.

Thral resumed. A new and unexpected factor had emerged. The mindless Earthan had suddenly become violent and uncontrollable. He recited his own experience graphically, also painted a fearsome picture of the "thing" that had broken loose. Then he delivered his final indictment, that the mindless one had escaped and was at large in Kalmed territory, "with the aid and assistance of one of our own people, who must speak in due course." And, with a brief picture of the extreme steps he had taken to recover this menace, he left it like that.

A good case, David mused, listening to the surf-roar of mental comment.

After a while, the "master" voice called for attention, and for Weseen. Her "voice" was just as vividly personal, her story brief. She explained, without reserve, her emotional involvement with Hart and all the attendant sensual enjoyment, her disgust and helplessness, her addiction. Then the pregnancy. It brought a shocked storm.

He realized more than ever that to these people the

bearing of a child was a sacred and highly important matter. As it should be, he thought.

The rest of her story confirmed what they had heard, with a shade of difference of emphasis. The "master" called for anyone who had knowledge of the mindless one in flight.

Habil tuned in to describe how his village had caught the Earthan, and one other, had held them for a while, and then both had become mindless and vanished! Another storm.

And then the "master" voice spoke again. "Will that one who assisted this Earthan now speak, if present and possible?"

David stood stood quite still.

Her voice was very familiar, like the warm clasp of her hand. "I am Aporia. I am not mindless, nor ever have been. Nor is the Earthan. He is here, with me!" "Here" was a vivid picture-thought. It was followed by the dry-as-dust confirmation from Mother Delma. Just a confirmation. It left a strained, painful silence. Aporia broke it with thought-forms that were as chill as snowflake patterns.

"The Earthan was transpersoned into the Hart body. It was done badly, clumsily, and incompletely. It has now been completed and he is whole. I say this is common justice, if only to atone for what was done to him as a blunder by Thrall!" His protest came instantly and bitterly, but she threw the chill of her accusation straight back at him. "You blundered, more than once. You were deceived by Zeiger. You tried to pressure Weseen into a scheme she had no liking for. You have used—abused—power you possess, first to destroy one mind, and second to warp and deform another!"

"Earthan minds! What do they matter? What else could I have done?"

"As Weseen did! She made a fool of herself, so she decided to come home and start again. You could have done as much!"

David listened intently as the crosscurrents of opinion swirled about him, this way and that, finally settling, but only just, in Thrall's favor. He knew it instantly. "I chose

for the best," he declared. "I chose that which would do most harm to the Earthans. The situation is such, now, that I have great prestige. I have a hold on Zeiger. I can force him to declare that this state of mindlessness is a possible result of their living on our planet. The Earth-people fear mental phenomena greatly. They are uneasy. And, I believe, with cause. The Earthan was mindless, as I can testify. I do not accept the story that he is now whole!"

That stirred things up quite a bit. He could sense both Aporia and Weseen trying to be heard over the multitude, and he also felt that majority opinion was veering heavily in favor of Thral. But the "master" was in no great hurry to settle anything. He got silence.

"Who speaks for the Earthan?"

David sensed Aporia gathering herself, but he couldn't hold in any longer. Whispering soundlessly but throwing out the words in his mind as vigorously as he could, he "said," "I don't know exactly how to work this device, and I don't know whether you can hear me, but if you can, believe me, I don't need anyone to speak on my behalf. I am David Rollo Allen. I am the young Earthan who Thral arranged to have killed and transferred to Hart's body. And made a mess of it. Do you still think I'm mindless?"

There came a mental explosion of indignation against which the previous reactions had been gentle whispers. He rocked as probing indignant minds dug at him from all directions. A thousand inquisitive fingers stirred in his mind, and hatred boiled over him like acid. But he set his teeth and fought back, not angrily but with stubborn determination. The master got silence again.

"You may not speak!" he ordered, sharply.

"Why not? Scared you might learn something?"

Anger lashed out again, but Aporia's voice rang out like a bell. "Let him speak! If he can, he has the right!"

"And so say I!" The call came in Delma's tone, and David wondered how he could ever have thought of that mind as dry-as-dust. It echoed now with a tone of authority. "I am Delma. You know me. I am senior to almost all of you. Thral claims that Earthans are inferior. The very fact that this one can speak as we do is enough to prove how false

that claim is. And Thral's action can only be justified if the Earthans are inferior. They are not. Thral is wrong. And we are fools if we do not listen. Speak, David!"

He waited for the mutterings to subside, gathering his thoughts. "This isn't the time for hashing over what's been done. Jim Hart is dead, and you can't call him back. What has been done to me can't be undone either. It's done. I'm Earthan. I probably do not understand a half of what's going on here, but I do understand Earth ways of thought, and I can tell you this. Thral has no hold on Zeiger at all. Quite the reverse. Zeiger now has the knowledge, and the power to destroy you all. And he will, unless he's stopped. I give you just one instance, which Mother Delma, and others, can confirm. Zeiger has devised a mind-shield. Against it all your powers are useless. I wore it and Thral thought me mindless. He was powerless against me. I ask you to imagine this device in the common possession of Earthans, all of them. How long would you last?"

He waited for the storm to subside, and for the master to ask the question he had to ask, in the circumstances.

"Why do you turn against your own kind?"

"I don't, no more than you turned against your own kind, many years ago. You discovered something good. Those of you who appreciated it had to fight to keep it, while others who feared it tried to destroy it, and you. That is the same fight you have now, all over again. It is as common to us as it was to you. Those who cannot understand will seek to destroy what they cannot understand, as they always do. Forget I am an Earthan, for the moment. I know good when I see it, and I will fight to save it. What other answer do you want?"

And then he withdrew, deliberately, to let the debate thrash itself out without him. He knew he had made his point. One good thing about this mind-to-mind stuff, he thought, you really know what the other fellow thinks. And he was right. They wasted a little time haggling over a point or two, and castigating Thral, but once it dawned on them that Zeiger really was threatening everything they stood for, they snapped into it hard. Earthans were good

at attack, at violence, at overcoming others, they knew all that. But they didn't know what to do.

They called him back into the debate in the end. "We are agreed that an emergency exists, a threat. You have pointed at it. Can you suggest a remedy?"

"There's no easy way. You can't interfere with Earthan interior affairs, not without tipping your hand. You can't get at Zeiger without warning him in any direct way, because you're just not that kind of people! You're stuck!"

They didn't like it. It struck him that when the chips were down they weren't all that different from any comparable body of Earthans trying to find a way to climb back along a limb without losing too much face.

"As I see it," he told them at last, "I'm the logical person. I owe Zeiger a blow or two, and I'm a renegade so far as my own people are concerned. You're the only friends I have left. So, if I can have a bit of assistance, I'm prepared to try and get him, capture him, bring him back, whatever you like. But I'll need help, and it will take some working out!"

With that, eventually, they were agreed, and the Council was over. The details could be worked out on a local basis. The chamber cleared. Delma led him back to her own rooms, where a meal had been ordered for herself, and two others. There Aporia dug her toes in hard.

"I go with you!" she declared. "I claim that right, the right to win back some of my pride. The chance to climb a little tree!"

EIGHT

STRATEGY WAS the first thing. Mother Delma was good at it. So was Aporia, once she had grasped the idea. And Thral, smarting from his rough treatment by the roused Council, was eager to do what he could to help.

"We have a thousand eyes," the old woman said, "and instant contact. We ought to be able to keep one Earthan under surveillance for you. He is at this moment actually in his laboratory buildings." For one whose dedication kept

her outside the world, she showed remarkable interest in it. "You need to be able to move quickly. Transport?"

"If we can use the jet-copter?" He spoke to Thral, who declared at once that he could persuade the police-pilot to obey. "Right. We'll meet you the other side of First Village!"

The quick march back down that broad green road was something he had never given a thought to. Up until now, the way had ended at Birthplace. Now he was starting a new life, something after the fashion of these strange people, and he felt the springing tingle of excitement just as they must feel it. And there was something else, a sense he couldn't define but could feel positively. He knew every flutter and bubble of emotion Aporia was feeling as she strode by his side.

Thinking back, it had been the same with Mother Delma. That painful session in the metabolism-field had done this for him. He caught himself back from the plunge into philosophy about it, from wondering whether it was some inherent fault in Earthan society that imposed so many artificial patterns on a person that his real sensitivities were somehow dulled. It was a matter for another time. Right now he had a tough job ahead.

"It's going to be tough," he warned her as they carefully skirted the village. "You don't know what you may be letting yourself in for. Zeiger knew enough to be able to invent a shield. It's on the cards, therefore, that he probably knows enough to devise, also, an artificial way of projecting the same power you do."

"That's not possible," she objected, and he sighed as she went on. "We learn this technique as children, like learning to walk. Zeiger just hasn't that kind of mind!"

"He doesn't need it, dear. All he needs is the same analytical technique that yielded the shield. To make that he had to analyze your power in some way. He doesn't have to be able to do it mentally. Look, an ordinary bow calls for strength. A crossbow does more with less. And a pistol does much more, with no effort at all except to pull the trigger. That's the way *our* culture works. He's liable to turn some kind of blast on us that will explode a white bomb in your mind the way Thral did in mine!"

"I am coming with you!" she declared, and he gave up the argument in resignation. The jet-copter was prompt, whirling down out of the afternoon sky to bounce to a landing on a green patch just beyond the village. The story had all been prepared for the yellow-uniformed policeman. He carried a sub-caliber stunner in one hand as he ducked under the slip-stream and came to present himself, with a courteous nod to Aporia.

"You James Hart? Turning yourself in?"

"That's right. This is Kalmede Aporia. She talked me into it. I'll not give you any trouble."

"Obliged to you, Kalmede; that took nerve. This character has already killed one of your people and beaten up Kalmed Thral, here. A bad one!"

"Not now," she smiled. "We know how to handle him. You'll be returning him to the sanatorium?"

"Those are my instructions. Be obliged if you'd come along too, and give evidence?"

"Of course! Shall we get in?"

The pilot had the front control seat to himself. Thral sat sat immediately back of him, leaving the rear for David and Aporia. No conversation passed. Thral's features had an unreal look, as if they were slightly plastic, but he stared indifferently in front of him as the passengers settled. The pilot poured on power and the engine note changed subtly as whirling blades bit the air. They went up. David put up his disc and thought at Thral, who copied the act without otherwise moving.

"Did Zeiger say anything at all to you about shielding, or that I had stolen a number of the shields?"

"Nothing at all. He has insisted that you are in some way immune, but nothing else."

"And you know, now, that's not the truth. When he hears I'm on the way back, what will he do, I wonder?"

Aporia came in. "Would he assume you've told anyone about the shield effect? Us, for instance?"

David thought it over, put a question to Thral. "Has he been told that my escape was assisted by a Kalmedan?"

"No!" Thral's thought was edged. "I kept that from him."

"Good! That helps. But he has to regard me as a danger.

A threat, just by being alive and loose. If he can feel sure of getting me under his control again, he'll be happy. But can he take that chance?"

"What else can he do?" Aporia demanded.

"Very simple!" David was grim. "If he can knock this thing down out of the sky, all his worries are over, just like that! And an alibi for the crash would be even simpler. Blame it all on me!"

"How can he touch this machine?" Thral scorned. David told him, just as he had told Aporia, and the reaction was identical. "A device to project mental power? Impossible!"

"You'd have said that about a shield, too, but I have half a dozen in my pocket right now. And if Zeiger does lash out with a beam of energy of some kind, I'm cooked. Me, and the pilot. Different for you and Aporia, of course. You don't mind being killed!"

"This talk of killing is insufferable!" Thral lashed back. "There will be no killing! Zeiger is to be captured and taken back to Birthplace, to be kept secure!"

David put away his disc ruefully. He couldn't expect a man to reverse thousands of years of thinking in a flash. He looked down over the green hills, and then ahead to catch a glint of sea. So soon? Three days to walk, but less than an hour by air. That must be Gablot, down there.

He saw the pilot reach for a microphone and that movement stimulated him into urgency. He reached for the precious tray, set it on his knee, opened it, and was at once struck by the low level of liquid. Evaporation! He fumbled out a film and it came up spotty-dry and crackling stiff. Not daring to chance it, he discarded that one, got out another, and spread it over his forehead as the pilot was saying,

"Officer Ford to Sergeant Bragan, do you read?"

Aporia turned her head, opened her eyes wide. "We'll be out of touch!"

"Better than dead. You too, come on!"

She hesitated. The pilot's speaker crackled. "Bragan to Ford, report!"

"Got him, sergeant, all safe and peaceful. Two Kalmedans helping."

"Good work, Ford. Come on down, you know where."

I'll contact Zeiger and have him ready to take over from you."

Aporia made up her mind, reached for a film, spread it and was delicately stretching it over her forehead as Thral turned and saw. Instant suspicion twisted his features.

"Is that necessary, or is this another trick of some kind?"

"Don't be a fool!" she snapped. "Do you think I'd do this if it wasn't desperately necessary? Zeiger has deceived you all ways, up to now. Do you still want to take chances with him?"

The pilot twisted in his seat. "We're going down now, folks—hey, what goes on here?"

Thral ignored him, his eyes probing the two like glittering daggers. "By the great Kal!" he muttered. "It's true! There's nothing there; I can't feel you at all!"

"You take a lot of convincing," David grunted and was reaching forward with the tray when he saw Thral's eyes go eyes go suddenly and shockingly blank.

The Kalmed's noble features contorted in one spasm of agony and then stilled, and he toppled and slid from his seat in a senseless heap. David caught his breath, looked past the Kalmed to where the pilot, also, was slumped in a heap over his controls. The engine noise began to dwindle alarmingly.

"Here!" He shoved the tray at Aporia. "Thral might just be alive, still. If he is, slap one of these on him. I'll get the controls!"

He scrambled over Thral to grab and heave the pilot out of the way so that he could drop into the seat. The engine noise was bucketing ever more quietly. He cast a desperate eye over the various gauges and dials, trying, testing and guessing frantically. There were foot-controls he didn't dare test yet, a thing on a column that looked as if it was meant to be gripped, and a stick-control. He seized and twisted the grip-thing. It went with him, and the motor noise grew loud and strong again. So much for that.

He peered out and down to see a large duplex building slowly drifting by below. A double building clear of town and with a green open patch in the grounds. That had to be the Sanatorium and Research Center. But how to turn back?

He twisted once more, and the engine worked harder. They were going up. That was all right. That was up and down. He scoured his mind for what little he knew about helicopter principles and windmill craft. He dragged back on the stick-control gingerly, and their forward motion slowed, halted, and they began to go backwards. He tried his right foot on the bar down there, felt the other one respond in reverse, and peered down to see the scene slowly spin. He was now flying backwards in a slow arc.

Aporia came to hiss in his ear. "Thral's still alive. Unconscious, but alive!"

"Check the pilot, sweetheart. We *need* him. This thing flies like a cock-eyed butterfly full of fermented nectar!" He checked the backward motion and they hung in mid-air, spinning like a dreaming top. Moving his feet with delicacy he managed to kill the spin while they were looking the right way. He eased forward on the stick, and they crawled forward.

"David!" She straightened up. "The man's dead. Quite dead. He must have been killed instantly!"

"What price Zeiger now? A brain-shield and a mental death-ray. Quite the mad scientist, isn't he? Thral all right?"

"Yes. David, what are we going to do now?"

"Think you can work that radio? Grab the mike. There'll be a button you have to press, to talk. Raise that sergeant. Tell him what's happened. Use your head, mind. Not too much!"

He squinted ahead, trying to outguess the controls. This would have been a good time to *be* Jim Hart. *He* would have been able to handle the thing. He got it to go forward sluggishly, struggling against a tendency to wag the tail. He heard her speak.

"Sergeant Bragan, can you hear me?"

Click, rattle. "I read. What's going on up there? You in trouble? Ford, are you in trouble?"

"Officer Ford is dead. Kalmed Thral is unconscious. This is Kalmede Aporia speaking. Dr. Zeiger is projecting some kind of lethal radiation at us. Can you stop him?"

Click, rattle. "What the hell? *Who* was that? Say again, please!"

David set his teeth grimly. Not much help there. Not that you could blame the man, at that. He peered ahead, nibbling at the controls, making for his target very slowly and unsteadily, but making it.

"Please pay attention!" She spoke clearly and sternly. "Zeiger is using a radiation device against us. It has killed Officer Ford, and rendered Kalmed Thral unconscious. The prisoner—Hart—is trying to control the flying machine."

The roof of the nearer building was directly ahead and below now, and the green space where he had to land was just beyond that, in between the two buildings. Bragan's baffled voice came in a shout.

"You say Ford is dead? And Zeiger is doing what?"

"He has some kind of projector, a weapon. You must stop him!"

"There he is now!" David snapped, as he saw a white-coated figure go scuttling across the rooftop dragging a clutter of equipment with him.

"Bragan to Dr. Zeiger. Dr. Zeiger, can you hear me? There's some—" The agitated voice chopped off short, leaving a steady featureless hum of carrier-wave power only.

"That's it!" David growled. "He's got Bragan too, now!"

He could see detail enough to identify Zeiger, even to the sunlight glittering on his thick glasses, saw him haul back and away from the edge of the roof and turn to stare up. He did something with the equipment he was carrying, leveling a fat tube, aiming it. Aporia saw, and spoke into her microphone.

"Dr. Zeiger, I believe you can hear me. You must know that the thing you are using has no effect on us!"

If Zeiger heard, he made no reply. They saw him turn and crouch to make some adjustment to the box-part of his gear, and they both winced as they felt their nerves being tweaked.

"Turning up the power! Aporia, he might be able to break down our protection. I've got to get down there, fast!" Still guessing, he reversed the twist grip in his hand, and the power-chatter fell away rapidly, too fast for comfort.

The roof below ballooned breathtakingly. As he gasped and

tried to twist back for power another nerve-knotting blast came from the man below. The tingle shook his hand away from the grip. The roof leaped up to meet them. The crash snapped him painfully forward against the transparent hood of the cabin, the stick-control gouging into his stomach and prodding the breath out. But he was able to move, to lever himself up and stand, half-blind with tears of pain. The windmill blades clucked half a dozen more times and stopped.

He twisted his head around, to see Aporia scrambling up from the floor with an angry welt along one cheekbone and testing her right shoulder with care.

"We're down!" he told her, foolishly. "That's something. You break anything?"

"I think I will live a little while longer," she muttered. They both turned at the sound of a groan, to see Thral sitting up, looking sick.

"You believe in a mental-power projector now? Good! Kick that door open, sweetheart; we're wasting time!"

They tumbled out into the cool of sunset, and on to a deserted roof. David went down to peer under the wrecked machine, and called them to see.

"It would have been too much good luck if we'd squashed him under there, but we've clobbered his gadget, if nothing else. He must have dropped it and run." He peered about the roof and saw a dark entrance to a stairway. "That's where he went! Now, more strategy. Thral, you know this building fairly well, I imagine?" Thral nodded painfully.

"All right; you go straight down to the ground level and check. If he's fled, organize some kind of chase. If not, if he's still in the building, block the exit. Don't let him out, got it?"

"I can hear you, but there's something wrong—"

"You're shielded. Give thanks for it. You'd be dead otherwise. Come on!" The dark opening got them to an iron stairway, down to a cold and quiet corridor. Thral gestured to an elevator door.

"That's the fast way down. You intend to search floor by floor?"

"Right, while you box the far end."

Thral hesitated. "We're operating blind. We can't keep in touch!"

Aporia put her hand on David's arm. "Can't we chance it? Surely he wouldn't have had time to make more projectors?"

"All right, if you say so. We'll chance it!" He peeled off the flimsy shield and dropped it on the floor. "All or nothing. Down you go, Thral, and good luck!" The Kalmedan made a stiff smile, put out his hand.

"Good luck to you, too. I misjudged you. Forgive me!"

As the elevator doors clicked shut, David grinned. "I make friends the hard way. Now, lovely one, I'll take the far end of this corridor, and—what is it?"

"No need. He's still here, in the building. I can feel him.

"You're sure?"

"Quite sure. I met him only once, but I can't mistake that pattern!"

"That doesn't figure," he demurred. "I don't like it. Zeiger would be shielded. It's the obvious thing. This is a mistake, somewhere."

"Very well, I will check with Thral." She slipped her disc to her head, waited a moment, then nodded. "Thral gets him, too. About three floors below. Come on!" She led away at a trot down the zigzagging stairs. He followed, protesting uneasily.

"It's still wrong. If Zeiger's not wearing a shield, you can compel him, can't you? And I just can't see him slipping up on a thing like that!"

"I'm trying to compel him," she muttered, as they trotted down and down. "I can't grip him, somehow. It's as if he was unconscious. There's no response at all! But it is definitely him!" They dropped two floors and she veered away at the third, along a corridor where lights gleamed and there was a faint hum of machinery. "This way!"

"Hold on now!" he protested. "You still can't hold him?"

"Not at all. It's weird. I'm touching him, but the pattern doesn't respond. It's like a ghost!"

"Tricks! The man's full of them. I suppose we have to go on, but be careful!" They trod nervously along the cor-

ridor until she halted by a door that was faced with walnut but was steel underneath.

"In here?" he demanded, and she nodded.

He leaned on the door and there came a rush of sound and smell that said "laboratory" instantly. Acids and pungent fumes, long heavy benches littered with apparatus, and the far wall decorated with gauges and power-boards. Busy machinery ticking and purring.

"Still here?" She nodded and pointed. He went ahead of her along a lane between two benches, ducking and dodging to peer around and past boxed instruments, balances, glassware and bottles, racks of tubes, and all the time his eyes and ears alert for sign or sound of movement. He came to the end, around a corner to where a thing stood on a tripod stand. It was a fine-spun web of copper, and silver, and glass threads inside a transparent hood. Electrodes fed into it like quills into a porcupine, and a ghostly blue glow shimmered and danced in and out of the maze. He halted, staring, feeling chills up and down his spine. Because he, too, could "feel" Zeiger, now. She came to stand by him and stare.

"That? A synthetic mind?"

"A recording!" he snarled. "Damn him all to blazes!"

The high roof-lights flared into sudden glare and they spun around, to see Zeiger standing several feet away, a smile on his pudgy features, his thick glasses gleaming.

"As you so correctly deduce, Mr. Hart, a recording. No, don't move!" He hefted a curiously clumsy assembly of wires and tubes, boxes and switches, all mounted on a strip of perforated pegboard. "This is my prototype brain-beamer. Effective, isn't it?"

"Not against your own shielding, it isn't!"

"That won't work, Mr. Hart. I've had several faithful eyes watching you ever since you discarded your shields, up there in the top corridor. Both of you. I am well served. I'm glad you've come back. I need you, as an excellent experimental subject. You've brought back the rest of the insulators!"

"The secret is out, Zeiger. The entire Kalmed race knows."

"That was foolish of you." Zeiger's eyes glittered. "And

futile. And rather surprising, that they should accept the word of a defective?"

"He isn't defective," Aporia declared. "If you don't know any better than that, you're a fool. Nor is he James Hart."

"Indeed!" Zeiger grinned and edged closer. "You really do believe that nonsense about transpersoning, don't you? Of course, it's an article of faith with your race, but you can't expect me to swallow it, you know. See for yourself that I have recorded a personality pattern. My own. Good enough to deceive you, wasn't it? But I'm still here, alive. That thing is just a copy, held together by material structures. The body is material. When the body dies, dissolution occurs, physical *and* mental, despite all your faith to the contrary. Dear me, Thral tried to prove me wrong on that, and see how he has failed!"

David felt the stirrings of a wild hope. "Thral didn't fail!"

"But he did, Mr. Hart. All he succeeded in doing was to destroy the balance of your mind. Which I will restore!"

"You won't. I'm not James Hart. I am David Rollo Allen. And I can prove it, here and now, to you! Garvey met me off the ship. He took me to a place in Dragon Road. He introduced me to you, remember? He said you were a doctor, that you had to give me an injection against some local infection, remember? And you did!"

"You've been told all that!" Zeiger's voice climbed to a shrill cry.

"Oh? Who told me, Weseen? She wasn't there. She came in later, with Jim Hart. They were both drunk. Then Thral came in. And then Garvey left. And then Thral. Hart was knocked out. You killed Weseen, didn't you, Zeiger? And then me, didn't you, Zeiger?"

The pegboard contraption shook. Sweat sprang out on Zeiger's face.

"It's a trick!" he croaked. "You're trying to trick me!" His finger went to a trip-switch.

David lunged, catching at a nearby bottle, sweeping and throwing it all in one movement. And then an incredibly agonizing pain wrenched his nerves into paralyzing knots and he crashed helplessly to the floor. Gasping, he felt the

exquisite agony ebb away in little flutterings. He sat up, aching in every muscle, peering with eyes suddenly difficult to focus.

Zeiger was nowhere to be seen. His contraption lay shattered on the parquet floor, wreathed in the thin brown fumes and stink of acid. David shook fog from his head, saw Aporia sprawled and twitching by his side, fighting for control. He levered himself erect, handed her up to her feet.

"Come on," he growled. "He can't have gone far, and we've pulled one more string. Make for the door, in case he tries to get out."

They staggered unsteadily along either side of a bench covered with reagent bottles in neat array. He halted long enough to scan the etched labels. "We can use something in the way of weapons," he told her. "Keep your eye on that door!" He ran a finger along a row and halted as he came to familiar symbols. "These will do nicely. Grab that one—"

"There!" she called, and he spun, seizing a bottle, catching a glimpse of a white coat, flinging the bottle without stopping to think. The aim was poor. It shattered high on the steel door, sprayed drops that made instant fumes. Zeiger screamed and fell back with his arm up to protect his face, then turned and scuttled away out of sight.

"Benches!" David snarled. "The place is a blasted warren!"

He swept part of a bench-top clear with angry waves of his hands and leaped up on it to stare around from this vantage point. He stooped back down, caught up one more bottle, nitric acid this time, and glared about the long room. Over there in a corner he saw a recess, a nook where there was a desk and filing cabinets. And he could hear sobbing and mumbling. He caught just a glimpse of a white coat. Making for that desk, he guessed, and watched tensely. Aporia came up with a scramble by his side, a bottle in each hand.

"Over there," he whispered. "What've you got?" She showed him the labels. "Sulphuric—and ammonia! He won't care for either of those. There!"

He whirled and threw, the bottle glittering to smash against the wall. Brown fumes billowed up. Zeiger screamed again

but kept going this time, managed to reach the desk. Aporia braced, and threw, lobbing the bottles one after the other. The fumes were now enough to catch at the eyes.

"Give up, Zeiger," David shouted, coughing. "You haven't a chance!" The acrid air of the laboratory rocked to the shock of an explosion, and Aporia went back, and down, all in a crashing heap.

"Primitive methods!" Zeiger screamed. "Simplest and best, Hart. Primitive methods!"

The pistol banged again through the gray fumes. David felt a red-hot hammer slam him in the side, doubling him up in agony. He lurched, fell to his knees, scrambled his fingers to another bottle and stood up, as straight as he could against that fire in his belly. And the pistol roared once more. Pain exploded in his chest. He fell back, and down, and hit the floor with a surprising sense of impact that didn't hurt at all. He rolled over, pushed his hands at the floor, made them work. The floor was wet with liquid that bubbled against the wood, that brought white patches to his fingers where it touched.

And it was amazing. He couldn't feel anything! He got up, aware that there was a bubbling in his throat. He clung to the bench-edge and stared. And the whole of the end of the laboratory was in flames. Glorious flames, crackling and leaping, reaching out to lick at the apparatus. As he watched, he saw a great glittering pile of glassware leap apart in green-flame ruin. Beautiful!

He felt tired, suddenly, and lay down again by the simple device of letting go the edge of the bench. The floor was very soft, cosy! He rolled his head to one side for comfort, and there was Aporia. She was lying down too. Resting. A red trickle ran from the corner of her mouth, and there was a black-red hole in her breast. He peered at that worriedly.

She whispered, very faintly, "Disc! Call Thral. Get Mother!" He pondered that thickly, then heaved himself up on an elbow to paw at her cloak for the disc. The material was smoldering and fragile, cracking away as he touched it. He found the disc, laid it on her forehead. She was quite still.

"Listen!" he thought, with a giggle. "Here what she's thinking!" He fumbled to get his own disc, clutching it with

fingers suddenly thick and crude, lay down again, and placed it on his forehead.

"David?" That was Thral. Good old Thral, a real friend after all. "David, I am with you. Have no fear. Give yourself to me, and all will be well. All is well, David!" And then there was a very comfortable darkness, and sleep that seemed to last for all eternity.

And a gently friendly voice said: "Wake up! Welcome home!"

It was the oddest sensation, a strange lightness and buoyancy. Eagerness! And impatience, too! He opened his eyes to see Mother Delma smiling down at him, holding his hand. She let go as he sat up. "Begin again, David!" she said, and it took him three or four deep breaths before he could accept that the lean and wiry body down there below his chin was his own.

Then he felt a soft and mischievous nudge at his mind and looked aside, to his right. She was there on the couch next to his, smiling at him. She—it had to be—there couldn't be any other gray eyes quite like those! A slim, lovely, bud-blossoming girl of twelve—Aporia! She sat up, held out her hand.

"Begin again, David," she breathed. "Both of us, together this time!"