

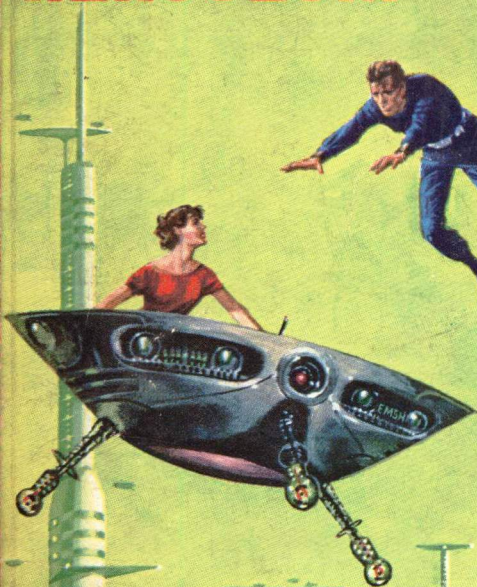
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HE LICENSED THE RIGHT TO KILL

ONE AGAINST HERCULUM



JERRY SOHL

Complete Novel



LEGAL ASSASSIN OF THE STARWAYS

Corruption was the rule of order on the domed planetary colony of Herculum. Earthman Alan Demuth, for instance, couldn't get the job he had rightfully qualified for without paying a kickback to the man he hated, Jack Bohannen. Alan thought he could simply report Jack's graft, until he learned none would listen.

There was one desperate recourse. Under provision of the law, Alan could ask for a crime license. His crime would be homicide, and the victim Jack Bohannen. The law gave him twenty-four hours to make good his murder.

Failure would mean Alan's death. Success would mean the clean-up of graft and dishonesty. But Alan never realized that in a graft-ridden society, even a license to kill is liable to prove a backfiring fraud!

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

JERRY SOHL who is now in his middle forties, says he is married and the father of three children. As a reader of science-fiction since the early days of the Gernsback pulps, he had tried writing, but gave it up to concentrate on the life of a newspaperman. After his military service . . . "I joined the staff of the *Daily Pantagraph* in Bloomington, Ill., where I was police reporter, music critic, drama critic, movie editor, telegraph editor, feature writer (ad infinitum) for six years until I decided to try my hand at what I had enjoyed reading so much, and my first novel, *The Haploids*, sold the first trip out in 1951."

Recently he has quit the newspaper field, moved back to the state of his birth, California, "to do nothing but write, and I have been writing like mad ever since."

THE MARS MONOPOLY (D-162) was his previous Ace Book.

One Against Herculum

by

JERRY SOHL

ACE BOOKS, INC.

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SECRET OF THE LOST RACE

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ALAN DEMUTH glided the blue flyabout in a long arc toward the roof parking area on the taxi service building. He was moving faster than he would ordinarily, faster than he should have, but his practiced eye told him there was a clean path to the rooftop. Besides, he had reason to make this flight something to remember. It would be his last. When he'd set the flyabout on that roof it would be the end of what had been and the beginning of what would be, and the thought of it made him grin. It would be like graduating.

At the last possible moment, when he was still a hundred yards from the roof, he braked the craft violently. The force of the sudden deceleration glued him to his seat, made his arms on the wheel leaden weights. But his grip was firm and his determination firmer. He did not let go.

It was a perfect landing. He didn't even feel it when the wheels touched the rooftop. Should have been doing that all along, he told himself as he stepped lightly to the roof. He commenced rolling the craft to its cradle, thinking, goodbye old Two One Three we've had fun together have fun with the next guy they assign to you, I won't be seeing you any more I'm getting a better job, baby.

He didn't hear the Aquariian approach, but then one never heard Aquariians because they walked on incredibly soft feet and shoes were not a part of their culture. Alan saw him out of the corner of his eye, turned, and there he was, Vlenorhak, the taxi clearance man, glaring at him with his pink eyes, his life fluid pumping agitatedly beneath his glasslike skin.

"Who do you think you are?" Vlenorhak said in his shrill voice, commencing to tremble. Vlenorhak looked so fragile standing there shaking with anger. But then Aquariians al-

ways looked fragile. Actually, their flesh was rock-hard and resilient.

"I'm Alan Demuth and that was my last flight. Want to report me?" He grinned at him.

"It would be just like a Softie to wreck a flyabout on his last day. Or wreck the taxi clearance office. You could have killed someone."

"Oh, I'm a Softie, eh?" Alan said, taking a package of cigarettes from his pocket. Because Earth flesh was not as hard as Aquariian flesh, the term was used in a derogatory way by Aquariians when they were angry. But there was a way to get even. Aquariians had a little metal filter in each nostril and it filtered the air very well, but it didn't catch all the tobacco smoke if you breathed it directly into their face. Alan lighted a cigarette and was satisfied to see Vlenorhak turn away.

"All right. I've got you checked in," the clearance man said. "Go on down to Harnak. He wants to see you. Told me to tell you."

"Thanks." Alan gave the flyabout its last push, patted it affectionately, and walked to the riser. Harnak was the taxi service coordinator. No doubt he had some last words of wisdom to impart before Alan took off.

I shouldn't think like that, he thought. Harnak's all right for an Altairian even if he is my boss—was my boss. Yes, Harnak's worn well for the year I've been with the service as a taximan, though it was hardly what I expected to do when I came to Herculum. But tomorrow, tomorrow will be different.

On Level One he walked to the coordinator's office, passing other taximen waiting for dispatch, waving, exchanging greetings. They knew this was his last day and they were glad for him, hopeful for him, and Alan felt a sudden surge of affection for them—Earthmen, Altairians, Vegans and Aquariians all. A great bunch.

Harnak's compound eyes looked up from the paper work on his desk when Alan entered the office. They had the

greenish tinge they held when Altairians are tired—or bored. But when they saw Alan they lightened.

"Greetings, Alan," Harnak said in his guttural voice. It came from behind his eyes where a human's ears are because Altairians had a proboscis where a mouth should be, and they conversed with each other through their antennae. But they had learned to talk nonetheless because they had to breathe. It seemed to Alan that the alien life forms on Herculum had adapted themselves more to human ways than vice versa, which of course was all to the good.

"Greetings," Alan said as a concession to the Altairian form of welcome. "My last day." He sat on the edge of the desk and looked into the hexagonal facets of the eyes, knowing that there were perhaps several thousand images of himself impaling themselves on Harnak's brain. He drew on his cigarette, blew a plume of smoke in the air.

"Yes," Harnak said, giving the human equivalent of a sigh. "I know." He dipped into a drawer and brought out a pinch of pjarva with his hairy hand. Pjarva was to Altairians what tobacco was to humans. Alan watched fascinatedly, as he always did, while the proboscis unrolled and Harnak made little sucking noises as it explored his palm. It reminded Alan of a twentieth century vacuum cleaner.

When he was through, Harnak sat back with a little sigh of contentment. "I'm sorry to lose you, Alan. We could use more men like you."

"It's no discredit to the taxi service when I say I'm glad to go," Alan said. "I'll never make my nest egg this way."

"Yes, ambition. We've all got it. But there must be taxi men, just as there must be dome repairmen, food handlers—you name it." The eyes flickered a little. "You may be back, though. And if you do come back, don't think it's a step down."

"I won't be back. I take the test tomorrow."

"You also took the test a year ago."

"Yes. It seems years ago. I won't fail this time."

"Nobody who takes the test thinks he's going to fail."

Alan crushed out his cigarette. "I'm a different man from

what I was a year ago. I wasn't green behind the ears yet, to use an Altairian phrase."

"A very apt one, and it well may be." The eyes, the hundreds of facets, regarded him for a long moment. "Alan, I think you'll be back. Upgrading is difficult. Jack Bohannen and I were only talking this morning about how few make the grade."

"Bohannen," Alan said sourly. "You'd think he owned Herculum. Why, he graduated from the same school I did a year earlier than I and he created no great stir at Flagg. Yet on Herculum he walks around with his head in the clouds, if you'll excuse the expression."

"There are no—er, clouds—where I come from," Harnak said. "But I understand what you mean. I'm sorry you feel that way. He must sense it because he mentioned you. He knows you're up for the tests again. It is his opinion you won't make it."

"A lot he knows about my potential."

"He's the testing chief."

Alan shrugged. "A teacher correcting papers."

Harnak sighed again. "Well, I just wanted you to know there will always be a berth for you here."

"Thanks, Harnak. I appreciate it. But I hope I won't have to come back to Two One Three, mighty trim little craft though she is. Have the next man who gets her take care of her, will you?"

"Sure."

"I've got a lot of studying to do today. Got to start the tests at the crack of dawn tomorrow."

Harnak got up from his desk on his hairy legs. "I've seen a lot of them come, I've seen a lot of them go. Being a flyabout taxi man isn't such a bad life. My ten years will be up in three years. I'll admit my ambitions were for more than that when I first came here, but I'll leave with no regrets. Maybe being what I am is the lesser of a number of evils, but there are a lot of things on Herculum which are a lot worse, believe me."

"I believe you."

They walked to the doorway and looked out on the moving line of flyabouts. Harnak was right, Alan thought, being a taxi man wasn't bad if you looked at it as merely completing a mission, putting in your time. But if you were going to retire to Earth with anything at all you'd never get it that way. A taxi man's pension was adequate but nothing more. You'd still have to work hard when you returned home. Anybody with any vision at all wanted more than that, and Alan had seen it long before he left Earth for his stint at one of the outposts, one of the crossroads of the universe.

As they stood there in the office doorway an Aquarian turned into the entranceway area and commenced walking down the catwalk which was above the flyabout ramp. They watched him approach, looking at him idly. Then they saw him turn and look behind him, as if he were afraid of something. Then he started to run toward them.

When he reached them at the doorway he stopped a few feet away and looked from Alan to Harnak, his pink eyes blinking rapidly. Alan saw that his life fluid was working overtime, so rapidly was it flowing. The globe dimly seen within his chest was throbbing violently.

Harnak, sensing something was wrong, stepped back and said, "What do you want?"

The Aquarian stood rooted to the spot, his breath coming rapidly. He appeared very agitated and Alan could not understand why. It was early morning, he was young, in good health, yet he seemed to be having a terrible struggle with himself.

Suddenly the Aquarian withdrew a length of white pipe from the pouch at his side, eyed Alan frantically, started to raise it. Harnak shouted something at Alan, but Alan did not even then think the Aquarian really meant to hit him.

A shape at the area entranceway caught Alan's eye even as the Aquarian was getting ready to let go with the pipe. It was this flicking of eyes that saved Alan this initial blow because the Aquarian turned in time to see the figure now coming down the catwalk leveling a stunner at him.

Once again the Aquariian seemed incapable of motion, staring wide-eyed at the oncoming figure.

Alan drew the Aquariian into the office even as the snap of the stunner was heard outside.

But did the Aquariian appreciate it? No. He turned, uttered a shrill cry and once again raised the pipe to strike. Harnak moved then, snatched the pipe from the Aquariian's hand. But the hand moved nonetheless and even though Alan twisted to one side it connected with his shoulder with bone-crushing force and he fell to the office floor.

The Aquariian would have jumped him had not the figure coming down the catwalk reached the office door at that moment. There was a little snapping sound and the Aquariian slumped to the floor.

"Police," the Earthman said, holstering his stunner and coming in. "This is the last of the day's criminals."

"Oh," Harnak said. "Criminal status."

"Yeah. He was going to try assault." The Earthman glanced at Alan, who was getting to his feet. "Would you say you've been assaulted?"

"I was hit," Alan said, brushing himself off, "but I don't think I was badly assaulted."

"This here's Krendovirk," the policeman said nudging the prone man with the toe of his shoe. "He took open assault. Had a lot of chances, but he didn't quite make it." He sighed, brought out a book and made an entry in it. "But then they seldom do. Never got out of my sight even."

The Aquariian stirred. His eyelids fluttered. The policeman said, "On your feet, Buster. You've had it for today."

The Aquariian nodded dumbly and rose. "I shouldn't have tried it," he said. "I shouldn't have tried it."

The Earthman collared him and led him out of the office. "That's what they all say."

Alan and Harnak went to the door again and looked after them. Harnak shook his head. "A poor way to try to upgrade yourself." He turned to Alan. "Don't you ever try it."

"Did you ever?"

"No. Oh, sometimes when I've been bored I thought I might. If you upgrade yourself and keep your present classification and position, you get the benefit in credits, the difference, you know. But you don't stand much chance. Besides, I've never been that mad at anybody. And the police can be pretty rough. That policeman was using only a stunner; for the more advanced violations they use heaters and blasters. But that's the first one who ever came in here. Funny, when you consider there's a limit to where a person can go in Herculum."

It was not the first police action that Alan had witnessed during his year under the dome. Every morning a new group of persons who had for some reason or other chosen criminal status were set free on Herculum streets to try their hand at the violation they had chosen. He had seen them running from police, hiding, committing their crimes—he had even taxied them here and there on occasion. But for every successful criminal there were nine others who failed. He could never understand why anyone would want to take that chance, for failure meant jail terms, work on the outside with repair crews (and that was a dangerous job), or downgrading, depending upon the mood of those in the Hall of Justice and the nature of the crime contemplated.

If he could not honestly upgrade himself through tests, he would never apply for criminal status to try to do it. No, Alan said to himself, that would be asking for it. Just asking for trouble. If he couldn't upgrade himself through tests, he'd come back and work for Harnak. That would be better than knocking one's self out trying to outwit Herculum police. Herculum police were too practiced in ferreting out criminals. Besides, wasn't applying for criminal status a rather vain thing to do? It meant you considered yourself smarter than you really were, if you applied for it because you thought your test grades weren't high enough.

No, Alan told himself, I'll take my chances with the tests, obey all the laws and live out my next nine years here without incident. If I'm a taximan, then I'm a taximan. If I get upgraded, then I get upgraded. Life is too short to get

all excited about trying to get what is plainly not for you.

He said goodbye to Harnak and walked up the catwalk to the entranceway and thence on home. He'd have to get a lot of studying done and he'd have to rest a lot before the tests the next day if he expected to exceed the previous year's score.

And thinking about the previous year's score made him shake his head. I know I'm not stupid. How could it have been so low? But then he'd been new, the trip from Earth had been exhausting, and he hadn't quite recovered from space fever yet.

"This year," he said, grinning, "it's going to be different. A lot different."

He was right. The difference started the next day.

2

ALAN DEMUTH SAT in the Testing Chief's outer office in quiet confidence, his eyes focussed beyond the half dozen file attendants and beyond the long window, seeing the fly-about's there. They looked like water bugs chasing each other, darting here and there. They might have looked like bees if the sky had been a blue instead of the yellow-green of the dome.

Memories of Earth had receded remarkably in the year he'd been on Herculum. Sure, he could remember boulder-strewn creeks, the azure blue of summer skies, the fluffy spindrifts that were clouds, the intense green of holly, but it seemed rather something he had seen on tridi, or in a book, something like a remembered session at a dreamer, though Alan didn't care much for the dreamer routine. He liked to get his experiences first-hand, not vicariously. But still memories of Earth had an air of unreality about them. He supposed that is what life in a dome does to a person.

He brought himself back to the office and wondered what

was going on in Jack Bohannen's office. He'd been surprised at first when he was called to be there this morning, thinking that perhaps he had somehow failed the tests again—not that he had really failed the first time, just that he had scored so much lower than he thought he would. But as he thought about it he began to see that it must be that his score was so much higher than it was the previous year.

Yes, Bohannen's probably surprised to see the high score. Quite a change from the lad who'd taken the tests fresh from Earth a year ago and not caring too much, cocky, filled with reckless abandon, certain he could pass with ease. There's been no mistake this time.

The test hadn't been easy and the machine giving it had been merciless, but Alan had met every challenge. Sure, he'd missed a few, everyone does because a human being simply isn't perfect. But he knew he must rank now in that stratum at the top, and Bohannen no doubt was calling him in to inform him of this, perhaps check on his score, offer him his choice of some of the top key positions soon to be vacated.

He grinned. No more flyabout taximan work for me. Soon one of those file clerks beyond that counter will be handed my tape to file away, and perhaps their eyebrows will rise, seeing the score—except that Vegans and Altairians have no eyebrows.

The thin female Aquariian looked up from her reception desk, her pink eyes finding him on the bench. In her shrill, grating voice she said, "It won't be much longer, Mr. Demuth."

"Thanks, honey," Alan said, "but what's been the hold-up?"

"Hold-up?" The Aquariian's life fluid beneath the translucent flesh of her cheeks quickened its pace. "I don't understand."

"Just an idiomatic expression. Means the same as slow-down, hindrance, block." She couldn't have been on Herculum long. She had not yet come to understand the byways of the English language.

"Oh. Mr. Bohannen's very busy. That's all."

"I gathered that." He stared at the pipestem bones of her neck and the hint of delicate muscles beneath the flesh of her shoulders. They look so brittle and weak, he thought. But then I suppose we do too to Altarians and Vegans. But the Aquarians came closest in appearance to the people of Earth, and they, along with the Altarians and Vegans, had been emancipated from their galaxies.

The outer office door opened and Alan in idle interest turned to see who was coming in. A girl stood in the doorway, her hand on the doorknob, talking to a man in the corridor. It would not have elicited much attention from Alan had it not been that the girl was beautiful, and there were far too few of them on Herculum. She was blonde, her eyes were blue, and she filled her dress neatly.

"I don't know, Frank," she was saying, and then she said something else to the man, turning her head so that Alan was unable to hear her distinctly. The man Alan had never seen before.

Now the man reached out for the girl's hand, took it and said, "I'll give you a call later," smiled at her and turned away.

The girl came in, closed the door behind her. She was very feminine in the way she did this, her hand on the doorknob was fine-boned, Alan saw, and when her eyes swept to his there was an electric quality about them that made him catch his breath.

Something plopped to the floor. Alan had not noticed, but she had been carrying an armful of folders and it had been one of these that had fallen. He moved from the bench, picked up the folder and handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said, smiling and displaying even white teeth. "I shouldn't try to carry so many at one time."

His mind frantically trying to think of a way to prolong her presence, Alan said, "Do you work here?"

"Why, yes, I do." She joggled the folders together and put them back under her arm. "I'm a clerk."

"Oh."

She looked at him curiously. "You don't sound very approv-

ing. Filing test tapes is an entirely acceptable occupation."

"I—I'm sure it is." He added hastily, "Do you know Mr. Bohannen?"

"Why, of course. He's my boss." She started for the counter door. "If you will pardon me, I've got work to do."

"One moment, Miss—"

She turned. "Yes?"

"What is your name?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It does if I want to call you sometime."

She eyed him coolly. "It would, if you were going to call me sometime. But I don't think you are." With that she went through the swinging door.

Alan went back to the bench and sat there. Well, I get A-Plus for effort, but that's about all. He watched her move to her desk and deposit the folders there. She was pretty, all right. But judging by the scene at the door she was already taken.

Not that she couldn't be persuaded to drop the man at the door, though, he thought, grinning. Yes, things were looking up.

The Aquariiian girl's piping voice made him jump with its suddenness. "You may go in now, Mr. Demuth," she said.

"Thank you," he said, rising. She was still looking at him, so he winked at her and said, "Know something? You're a doll." He left her flustered and bewildered to walk into Bohannen's office.

He had not expected such a luxurious place. All the offices he'd been in since he'd come to Herculum were severe and plain. Everything about Herculum shouted its temporary nature, a place where men put in their stint and move back to the richer life, but not this place. There was a thick-pile rug on the floor and Alan wondered how many credits it must have cost Bohannen to get it from Earth, if it came from Earth. It certainly was not manufactured at Herculum, for Herculum was only a stopover, a place between places.

There were actually framed paintings on the walls, and

the walls themselves were paneled with wood. The desk was long, low and sleek, the lighting was diffused. It could have been an office on Earth. It was out of place on Herculum.

The burly Earthman rose from his leather chair behind the desk and came around it, extending his hand, saying, "Glad to see you, Alan. Sit down, sit down." He moved a comfortable chair away from the wall for Alan. "Long time since we've seen each other."

An uneasiness began to rise sickeningly in Alan. Something about Bohannen's manner was responsible. Why should he greet him like a long lost friend? They weren't that close at Flagg.

"Don't look so woebegone, Alan," Bohannen said, moving around to his chair. "Or is it that this office makes you homesick?" He laughed. "It cost me a pretty penny to outfit it like this, but don't you think it's worth it?"

"It's very homey," Alan conceded. "Like your room at Flagg."

"It's all of that." Bohannen reached into a tray, picked up a cigar, offered the tray to Alan.

"No thanks." He brought out his cigarettes.

"Funny you should mention Flagg. I haven't thought about the school for some time. We had a lot of fun there."

Alan lit his cigarette, looked across the desk at him. "I don't recall that we were what you would call chums. You were in the class ahead of me."

"You mean you don't remember the Classic?"

"Of course I remember the Classic. I remember how I tackled you in the Junior-Senior game, too."

Bohannen grinned. "I'd have won for the class if it hadn't been for you. You always could run faster than I. But then I had the edge on you in other things."

Alan raised his eyebrows. "I wasn't aware of that, Jack. Just what things are you talking about?"

"Well," Bohannen said, laughing easily, "perhaps not at Flagg, but here. I've been here two years now. I was lucky

enough to fall into this job after my initial test. It's perhaps the most important job on Herculum."

Alan couldn't argue with him there, but he did have reservations about how adequately Bohannen filled the post. Jack Bohannen endeared himself neither to his classmates nor the school. He always had something going, some racket, some shady extracurricular activity that involved money. Bohannen was seeing to it he got his. Maybe that's what it took to be a success on Herculum, but Alan preferred not to think so. How ironic it was to be sitting across from him so far from Earth! He had never expected to see him again when he graduated from school. Yet there he was.

"No doubt you are wondering about how you came out in your test, Alan," Bohannen said, running a hand across his forehead as if to wipe away perspiration, though there was no need to do this because of the perpetually temperate climate of Herculum. Unless Bohannen was under tension, and now that Alan felt it, it was obvious.

"Yes," Alan said as casually as he could. "I was wondering why you wanted to see me."

"Of course you'd wonder." Bohannen picked up the tally sheet and the roll of plastic tape. "Last year you scored only a little over a hundred on the intelligence test. Hardly more than normal." He looked up quickly. "That wasn't good."

"I'd just got over the fever and I really shouldn't have taken it so soon," Alan said defensively.

"Hmm." Bohannen looked at the sheet again. "Endocrine balance was fair, but your emotional stability was ten points below normal."

Alan said. "I'll grant you I wasn't in shape then. But what I want to know about is this year's score."

"Of course, of course." Bohannen drew in on his cigar and picked up a second tally sheet and the other roll of tape. He studied it for a long time.

"Well?" Alan prodded, perspiration beginning to break out on his palms. What was Bohannen trying to do?

Bohannen put down the sheet and the tape. "Alan, I'm

terribly sorry to tell you this, but you haven't done as well this year."

If the dome itself had come falling in upon him, Alan could not have been more surprised.

"I haven't done as well?"

"That's right, Alan."

"But that's impossible! I've studied for a whole year, I was completely sober when I took the test and I'd had a good night's sleep. I don't understand it!"

"Of course you don't understand it." Bohannen shook his head. "The fact of the matter is I don't understand it myself."

"I—I lived an exemplary life for a whole year as a flyabout taximan in accordance with status rules, looking forward to this year's test." Alan gripped the sides of the chair hard. "Jack, I—I just can't believe it!"

Bohannen wiped his forehead again where hair was beginning to recede. He managed to present a faint smile. "I'm sorry, Alan, but facts are facts. I don't know if I can convince Status you ought to be kept on as a taximan. According to your test you'll have to be downgraded. That means a year in the kitchens, with the garbage details or perhaps in sewage disposal. It's not a pretty picture, but at least you could look forward to next year's tests again."

Alan wet his lips. "There must be some mistake, Jack. I was so confident, so sure . . . Why, I knew all the answers. I didn't think I was missing a thing. Oh, I knew I missed one or two, but that's about all."

"You were overconfident, Alan." Bohannen tapped the tape with his finger. "The machine is never wrong. You know that."

"The machine," Alan said coldly, "is run by humans, and humans are sometimes wrong."

"Not in this office," Bohannen said stiffly, deftly depositing cigar ash in the desk tray. "I interpolated your record myself. That's why I called you in. I was frankly surprised, Alan."

"You were surprised?" Alan leaned forward in his chair.

"I want an investigation. Something's wrong—either with you or the machine."

Bohannen fixed him with a cold eye. "Are you suggesting that I upgrade you just because you feel something's wrong?"

"I did too well in school. I want last year's record investigated and this year's too."

"Good old Flagg, eh?" Bohannen smiled thinly. "You didn't know me very well at school, but now you bring it up. You can't expect me to do for you what I wouldn't do for anybody else, Alan, just because we went to the same training school on Earth."

"I'm not suggesting anything like that," Alan fairly shouted. "All I'm asking is to investigate or"—he had a sudden thought—"or I could take the test again and have it monitored this time."

Bohannen got up quickly. "You're like all the rest, and you're wasting your time and mine. Nobody takes the test except once a year, and nobody can request monitoring but me, and that only when I feel that a subject might be trying to cheat. Your test was a fair one and I can think of no reason why it should be repeated." He grinned at him. "What's the matter, do you think being a cook's helper beneath your station?"

Alan gripped the sides of the chair even harder to keep from rising and hitting Bohannen square in the mouth. He held himself rigid, saying only, "That's an ugly thing to say, Jack."

"Is it?" The eyes narrowed. "You never liked me, did you, Alan?"

"I never thought much about it, but since you ask and since this is becoming a breast-baring session, I don't think I did."

Bohannen laughed. "Jealousy talking, Alan."

"Don't be childish. Your grades at Flagg weren't higher than mine and you had a million deals going all the time."

"Bigger deals now, maybe, Alan? Real deals now. This is the big time, and play is for keeps now, eh?"

"I don't know what bad luck ever got me assigned to

Herculum when there are so many other outposts I might have gone to."

"It does seem a pity," Bohannen said, smiling broadly.

Alan looked at him through narrowed eyes. "All right, Jack, you've called me here for more than just to laugh at me. I've sensed all along there's something behind all this cat and mouse play. I know I didn't do badly on that test—and now I'm thinking maybe I didn't do so bad on the first one—but I bided my time, waited out the year. You've had your fun, now what do you want?"

Bohannen beamed at him. "I'll give you credit, Alan. I'll really do that. You *are* smart."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you don't have to gather garbage, if you want it to mean that."

"What are you leading up to?"

Their eyes met and held for a moment. Then Bohannen said coldly, "I want ten percent of your salary credits if I turn in your true score, which is high enough to get you any one of a number of top echelon jobs. Ten percent for as long as you hold the status and grade."

Alan stared at him incredulously.

"The alternative . . . Well, we needn't talk about that. Let's talk about your acceptance. If you accept and fail to pay me my cut, I'll demand a rerun on you, which in my capacity I can do at any time. And of course you'll be drastically downgraded if I do."

"You are the lowest form—"

Bohannen held up a deprecatory hand. "Stop and think. How did I get this rug? These pictures? These walls? All the comforts. And they come from little percentages here and there, Alan. In this life, my boy, it's every man for himself, and I'm getting mine." He glared at him. "And if you think you can report me to anyone for making this offer to you, you'd better think twice. I could see to your transfer to some bleak outpost to hell-and-gone if I wished."

The uneasiness Alan had felt at the beginning had long since turned to cold fury and then to biting, white-hot anger.

Unable to contain it any longer, he rose and started around the desk for Bohannen.

Bohannen backed away, a crafty smile on his face, a stunner in his hand. "Please, Alan," he said. "No melodramatics."

Alan stopped a few feet from the man. "You're crazy, Jack," he said. "You'll never get away with it."

Bohannen sighed. "Sit down." And when Alan had returned to his chair, Bohannen went on, "I'm sorry, Alan. Truly sorry. To downgrade you from flyabout taximan breaks my heart, an old Flagg classmate like you. But what else can I do?"

Alan said nothing. What was there to say?

"You don't seem to understand my position," Bohannen said. Then he shrugged. "Well, perhaps I can tell the Status people to find something for you. I'm sure you don't want to leave Herculum."

"Why do you do this to me? Why single me out? I don't have a grudge against you, Jack. I—"

"Single you out?" Bohannen chuckled. "You are difficult, Alan. Difficult and unreasonable. Nobody's singling you out. Why, there must be hundreds who are beholden to me, settling each credit pay day. For the most part they were quick to see the wisdom. Those that have not sometimes have chosen the criminal route, much to their disappointment and discomfort. What makes you so reluctant?"

"You admit you've done this to others?"

Bohannen said dryly, "Come now, let's not be naïve. How else can a man accumulate a nest egg during his ten years in this colony? I succeeded a man who made a sizable fortune this way and I intend doing the same thing. The man who succeeds me will probably make his. It so happens that the position of Testing Chief is an impregnable one."

Alan, consumed with rage, turned and walked to the door lest he leap over the desk and throttle Bohannen. And the stunner would prevent the success of that.

"Sure you won't change your mind?" Bohannen said.

Alan turned and faced him squarely. "It may interest you to know that I'm applying for criminal status at once."

Bohannen snorted. "That's the stupid way to try upgrading. Why be a pawn in a police exercise? Besides, the games seldom work. We have a good law enforcement department here on Herculum. You ought to know that. Tell you what. Why don't you think it over? I won't enter your downgrading for several days."

"A stupid act, you say?" Alan managed to smile. "I don't think what I'm going to do is so stupid."

"Well, then, don't apply for anything trivial. You'll need a good many points to make taximan again."

"I'm going to apply for the maximum, Jack."

"Murder?" Bohannen smiled wryly. "I presume your invective has turned this aspiration toward me?"

"You guessed it," Alan said, turning on his heel.

"I'll be waiting," Bohannen called tauntingly after him. "But I don't think you'll make it."

3

OUTSIDE THE Division for Testing building Alan caught his breath. He wanted to run, to do something, he wanted to hit things, break a window—anything to dissolve his tension. But he did none of these things because he thought: Maybe I am an unstable feeling the way I do maybe I did fail the test I shouldn't have got so mad at Bohannen. And immediately he started to calm himself, walking slowly, casually, down the avenue, his heart gradually slowing from its wild pounding.

I've really done it now. I've got my foot in it. Way in it. Saying I'd apply for murder with Bohannen as the target! What a thing to do!

The shock of this chilled him. He didn't want to kill anyone, even Bohannen. Sure, there would be a lot of points in

upgrading if he'd apply for and actually carry out the act without detection, but the very nature of the crime was abhorrent to him.

Then Bohannen's leering face appeared before him and he found himself gritting his teeth and hating the man's insolence. What should he do? Accept his true score and kickback ten percent to him? Perhaps that would be the adult thing to do, certainly all the others faced with it must have come through—except those, as Bohannen had said, who applied for criminal status. But even if they succeeded in their criminal deviltry, Bohannen in the last analysis could fiddle with their score any way that he wanted to.

No, Bohannen was too powerful a man to fool with. It was easy to see that Alan would have to accept what he offered or else be stubborn and be downgraded to some idiot occupation. There was no middle road.

Or was there?

As he walked, Alan refused the offers of several flyabout men. There was no extensive private transportation on Herculum, and the taximen were everywhere to speed the getting from here to there. But he was going nowhere in particular.

Except that his steps took him to the Division of Status office and he walked by it, surprised on the one hand that it was there, and on the other knowing that is where he had directed himself. He stood for a long time across the street from it, looking at the long windows, the busy people behind them, thinking.

If I accept downgrading I'll spend my entire ten years in a servile position. I'll go home with next to nothing. He grimaced at the thought. Might as well not go home at all. Might as well apply for criminal status and—what's that poem?—be a violin string that breaks at its fullest vibration.

There would be some satisfaction in that. And self-respect. And there was a chance he might succeed.

The clerk in the Status Office was an Altairian. He shuffled papers on his desk with his hairy seven-fingered hands, and when he looked up, Alan could see that his eyes had the

green of boredom. In his guttural, raucous voice the clerk said, "Yes?"

Alan looked back, unblinking. "I want to apply for a change in classification."

The clerk sighed. "Who doesn't?" Pause. "How long have you been on Herculum?"

"A year."

"Oh." The hairy hand reached for a printed form. "What you mean is you want to apply for testing. I'll fill this out and you can take it to the Division of Testing."

"I don't want to take the tests."

"You don't? You said you've been here a year. Surely you know you are eligible . . ." Pause. "How long has it been since you took your last test?"

"Hardly half a day."

The hairy hand dropped the form. "Well, you're not the first one to take the test and be disappointed. But you should know the law here by this time. No upgrading in such cases, and you wouldn't want to be downgraded, would you? The machines are never wrong. I was disappointed in my own score."

"Something went wrong."

The eyes went even greener. "Sorry." The Altairian's hands returned to the work on his desk. "Better luck next year."

"No," Alan said, taking a firm grip on the hard counter top. "Better luck this year. I'm applying for criminal status."

"Criminal status?" The green eyes flashed fire. "Well, why didn't you say so?"

"I just said so."

The hexagonal facets of the eyes glowed with a little orange. The hand went into a drawer, withdrew a red printed form. "Have you considered the degree?"

"Yes, I have."

"Simple thievery, robbery—maybe even assault, if you wanted to commit yourself that far. The simple ones carry only a few points upgrading. The more serious crimes are, of course, worth much more. And you understand you get

credit only when you successfully carry out your plans. And another thing: If you are specific, you get double upgrading."

"Specific?"

"If you identify your victim. The nonspecific criminal statuses are usually the more popular. It depends upon whether you want a lark or if you're really serious about upgrading." He sighed. "Some men map out a fine ladder to climb, sometimes never get beyond the first rung. This your first?"

"Yes."

"I'd make it simple and nonspecific, if I were you. You can get familiar with the routine. Later on you can take something more serious, make it really worth doing."

"I don't want anything simple," Alan said levelly. "I want the maximum."

"The maximum?" the clerk repeated foolishly, his proboscis vibrating, his eyes glowing like red coals. "Did you say the maximum?"

"Yes."

"But that's murder!"

"I know," Alan said calmly. "Where do I sign?"

The red eyes continued staring at him. The proboscis did a little dance. Finally, the coarse voice said almost in a whisper, "Specific or—nonspecific."

"Specific."

"Oh, my!" The eyes, all the facets of them, regarded him balefully. Then the Altairian's proboscis drew back and he said, "Please wait just a moment," and he disappeared through a door into an inner office. The door bore the legend, *Chief of Status*. He was gone only briefly, returned to usher Alan through his workspace to the inner chamber.

The man behind the desk was an Earthman. He was a little older than the usual run of Herculum men and his eyes were even more tired than the Altairian's. He stood up, indicated a chair for Alan, and said, "My name is Jeff Branner." His eyes flicked from the printed slip in his hand to Alan. They were tired eyes, perhaps, but Alan could see

wisdom behind them. "Clerk Krenor tells me you want to apply for criminal status."

"That's right." Alan took the chair, looked around. This office was nowhere near as plush as Bohannen's, yet the men held comparable jobs. In fact, except for the desk and chair and filing cabinets, it was almost bare.

"And you're applying for the maximum?"

"Yes."

"And it's to be specific?"

"Yes."

Branner nodded, sat down. "Mr. Demuth," he said sternly, "Are you trying to be funny, or are you really serious about this?"

"I was never more serious about anything in my life."

The Status Chief sighed. "Very well." He frowned, looked at the card again. Then he said, "Usually people here on Station Herculum are satisfied to try to upgrade themselves by a successful act of petty thievery. At the most they net a few points, and if they're successful—and they seldom are—they try it again, hoping to compound their successes into an important job with the corresponding increase in pay. They sometimes accept only the wage hike, keeping their previous classification. Sometimes people need change—heaven knows Herculum is no paradise—so they're allowed the fun of becoming criminals for a day, with the resultant success or failure not being important, and the fine or jail term not being too important either in cases of failure, just an extension of the game as it were. Not really punishment, you see? Actually, a sort of vacation. It has worked out rather well."

Alan said, "I'm pretty well familiar with all that, sir."

"Very well, then. Now suppose you tell me why you've chosen the category of murder?"

Alan took a deep breath. "Must we go through all this? Isn't it enough that I have chosen it without having to explain it?"

"Would you rather explain it in the Psychiatry Division?"

"No." He hadn't thought of that. "Well, when I applied for station life here, it wasn't to run a flyabout taxi."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Something administrative. I specialized in it, trained four years for it."

Smiling, Branner said, "Didn't we all? Competition is keen here, Mr. Demuth, and somebody has to fly the taxis."

"I was first in my class at Flagg, Mr. Branner. I hardly expected to end up as a common hackie."

"This isn't Flagg and this isn't Earth. And hackies, as you put it, fill an important role in our life here."

"Oh, I know. It's not that I really look down my nose at taximen."

"It's just that you're ambitious, is that it?"

Alan squirmed a little in his chair. "When I first arrived here exactly a year ago, I took the test. I had just come off the long Earth-Herculum run still getting over space fever. It all was new and I was, well I guess I was too confident. Maybe I was out of my mind, I don't know. Anyway, the tests presented no challenge. But when the results came out I had an abysmally low score. I only missed being sent elsewhere by the smallest margin."

Branner nodded. "I sympathize. That sometimes happens to young men on their first days on Herculum. And that's one reason for the tests. You might be a whiz on Earth and quite something else on Herculum. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I can understand that. But today I took the second test. Its results were lower than the first."

"That sometimes happens too." Branner leaned back in his chair. "Look at it this way: For a whole year you brooded about it. When the time came to take the test you were on edge, all keyed up. The result? Worse than the first time."

Alan said firmly, "Neither result is correct, Mr. Branner."

Branner laughed. "Think your score is really higher, eh? Well, you're no different from all the others. Everyone thinks his score ought to be higher."

"I know mine ought to be higher."

"Of course. Someone altered your score. Isn't that right?"

How many people do you suppose we get in here each month with that complaint?"

"Jack Bohannen altered my score, Mr. Branner."

Branner scowled. "Jack Bohannen is Chief of Testing. Why would he want to do a thing like that? Not only would he ruin himself, but he'd place the entire classification concept in jeopardy." He brightened. "No, Mr. Demuth, he didn't alter your score."

"He wants a rake-off—ten percent of my salary—to upgrade me to my actual score which he says would entitle me to a top echelon job."

Branner's face hardened, his eyes grew cold. "It wouldn't be so pitiful if I hadn't heard it so many times before. Do you realize the seriousness of that accusation? It hits right at the heart of everything here on Herculum. Do you really think I ought to believe it? It so happens that Mr. Bohannen must interview those whose scores are at variance with the scores of previous years, particularly if there is to be downgrading, as there was in your case. Naturally one immediately thinks that he is at least as smart as he was a year ago, forgetting what an artificial place Herculum is, how confining it is, what effect living under a dome has on an individual. It is easy to move from there to endeavoring to place the individual he thinks responsible for it in an undesirable light. So the story of the rake-off is invented to bring the guilty one to heel. The wonder is that it should happen to so many of you." Branner shook his head. "It's almost a prevalent psychosis."

"Psychosis is hardly the word," Alan said bluntly. "Stupidity would be a better one. And not on my part, but yours."

"I would say that rather proves it."

"And do you know why I think you're blind? Because I happen to know what Jack Bohannen is, for I was at Flagg with him for three years. He had all sorts of deals going, and the shadier they were, the better, just so long as he profited by them. I also think that's how he got through school, commissioning his work done, paying a little here for this, a little here for that."

Branner studied Alan closely and coldly. "There happens to be a lot of difference between school life and life in a dome on a planet like Herculum. Remember, Bohannen had to take the test in the first place. It was on the basis of his score that he was given the job he now holds. He has done well in his two years and I personally don't think that a man of his caliber would risk being thrown out of this station by a thing like that. If you have any real proof of your allegations, I'll be willing to consider it. If you don't, I suggest you dismiss it from your mind at once."

Alan said dismally, "I don't have any proof except what I heard with my own ears, which is that he admitted my score was higher than the score he's presumably interpolated it at, and that he'd enter my true score if I'd pay him ten percent of my earnings."

"As I said, I can't believe—"

"I don't care what you believe," Alan said hotly. "I happen to be telling the truth."

"Is that so?" Branner's laugh was without humor. "You want to know what I think? I think you're a psychopath."

"I didn't come here to ask you what you thought. I'm only telling you what I think because you asked me."

"You ought to go to the Psychiatry Division. Maybe they could help you."

Alan shook his head. "The only thing that will help me is an investigation into the way Bohannen handles his office."

"I'm sorry for you, Mr. Demuth, if you think he's conducting himself improperly. But action can't be initiated on such a nebulous thing as a man's feeling his score ought to be higher."

"All right," Alan said resignedly. "Forget it. I won't even ask you to initiate any action. All I'll ask is that I be granted a change in classification to criminal status."

Branner went on, "Do you know what would happen to you if you'd try to convince any office that the Testing Chief is unscrupulous? You'd be laughed out of it."

Alan set his lips. "So I want the maximum. Murder."

Branner looked at him sharply. "Specific?"

"Specific."

"Jack Bohannen?"

Alan nodded. "Jack Bohannen."

Branner sighed, rose, went to the windows, cleared them with a pass of his hand near the activator, looked out on the city. "I think you're making a mistake applying for criminal status, Alan. Particularly murder. Even if it were true that Bohannen juggled your score—and I doubt it—you're taking a million-to-one chance in a category like that. Few people even get by with petty thievery, to say nothing of killing. The authorities will be watching your every move. They'll have Bohannen guarded. You'll have only twenty-four hours." He turned. "Don't you see what you're up against. Sure, you'd get—I think it's fifty points—but you'd never really get it because a murder under those circumstances is just impossible to commit."

"They've got to let me get away at the beginning."

"Yes, but they'll find you." Branner turned back to the window, lost in thought.

Alan looked at his broad back and, for the first time, thought what failure would mean. But he immediately inched his mind away from it. Bohannen was the real criminal, and his downgrading of Alan was a challenge Alan could not disregard, especially since Bohannen threw it in his face. When he stepped out to murder Bohannen, wouldn't he actually be doing Herculum a service? History would bear him out after the deed was done, after the facts were brought to light, after the investigation was made.

That was the way to get back at Bohannen. The only way.

Branner at the window was saying, "I suppose it's a good thing, letting those who are dissatisfied resort to criminal status. God knows what the frustrations might bring if the status rules were so rigid under the dome that a man didn't have that final recourse."

He turned from the window. "Look out on the city, Alan. What do you see? Station number one hundred twenty-seven, known to us as Herculum. Two hundred odd thousand people—Altairians, Earthmen, Aquarians, and Ve-

gans, a potpourri of the cosmos—all living together beneath a dome a mile high on a planet in the 95 Herculis double star system because it happens to be a point equi-distant to a number of systems. It never really becomes home to any of them or to us. It is an intergalactic stop for spacers, probably always will be.

"I'll have been here ten years at the end of this year, Alan. Then I'm retiring, taking my family back home to Earth, to the Earth which my son has never seen. When he comes of age he'll have to go through it just as I have, either here or at some other station, way station or outpost on some minor planet, before he earns the privilege of returning to Earth to live, even as others from other systems are on duty here to earn the right to return to their own planets." He smiled. "Living like this you know there's never any place like home."

Alan had listened patiently. Now he said levelly, "Just what does all that mean, Mr. Branner?"

"It means ten years isn't so long even as a flyabout taximan, Alan."

Alan shook his head. "I'm not going home that way. Maybe I'm too proud. I want to make something of myself. Let the taximan jobs go to the men who don't care what they do."

"You're too ambitious."

"I'm no ignoramus, I can tell you that. Yet that's what my record will show. I was never able to do anything else. Unable to elevate myself above that classification. It wouldn't be so bad if I weren't as intelligent as I am, but knowing how I did in school, knowing my potentialities, I can't have any self-respect that way."

"So help me, Alan, nobody on Herculum is an ignoramus."

"I'm as good or better than Bohannen."

"Isn't that just common jealousy talking?"

"No, it's something deeper than that. Suspicion. Because I know Bohannen better than you do, because I've seen what he can be. I saw his office, the rug, the pictures. Lastly, because I talked with him and heard what he had to say."

Branner shrugged. "Those in charge of divisions can

furnish their offices any way they see fit. If he wants to spend his entire salary on frivolities, that's his business." He looked squarely at Alan then and said, "Do you know the penalty for failure in the case of murdering a specific?"

"I don't care to know what it is."

"It's death, Alan. You will be expelled from the dome." Branner added tightly, "And nothing can live out on the burning sands beneath those two bright suns for longer than two hours."

"So I know the penalty for failure." He grinned. "Better not fail then, it seems to me."

The Status Chief sighed, pushed the printed form across the desk. "All right, then. Sign here. There doesn't seem to be anything more that I can do for you."

As Alan scrawled his name, Branner said, "You will report at police headquarters at five thirty tomorrow morning."

On his way out, Alan heard Branner say softly, "Good luck."

4

ALAN WAS THE first man in the assembly hall at police headquarters, where he had been instructed to go when he presented himself at the reception desk at the Division of Law Enforcement.

"Just down this corridor, you can't miss it," the Aquarian at the desk said boredly. "It's the assembly hall. Lots of lights."

He was right. There were hundreds of lights in the ceiling and Alan made no shadow on the floor. He didn't see the sour-faced Earthman at the small desk at first, but he saw him when he called to him.

"Name?" the Earthman said in a tired voice. Everyone, Alan thought, is bored and tired this morning except me.

"Demuth. Alan Demuth."

The Earthman made a check mark on a chart. "O.K. You're the first. Take a chair." His eyes slid to the wall clock at the end of the long hall. "You got fifteen minutes to wait."

Alan took a nearby chair, stared at the clerk because the clerk was staring at him.

"Stupid," the Earthman said. "All you guys are stupid. You especially." He glanced at the chart. "The maximum. How crazy can you get? You think you'll get away with it?"

"No. I'm just too scared to commit suicide."

"Ha-ha. Very funny. Don't make me laugh. They'll nab you in a matter of minutes."

"Think so?"

"I know so. You're the first maximum I've ever seen. Think they won't do something special with you? You'll see."

Just then another figure came into the room, an Altairian.

"Over here," the clerk said. "Name?"

"Proplap Y."

"That's a funny one. Robbery?"

"Yes."

"Take a chair with Mister Screwball over there. He's doing the maximum. Maybe you can help him."

The Altairian came to sit beside Alan. He said, "Funny man."

"Isn't he?" Alan said dryly.

Two Altairians came in together, headed for the clerk.

"Well, well," the clerk said. "Don't tell me. I know. Senbla Ksank and Trenor Karnak." A trace of a smile passed over his face. "You boys worked together pretty good the last time you were here. Going to try it again, eh?" He referred to the chart. "Let's see. Senbla, you're going to try for assault, that's worth five points. Why don't you try specific?"

"I'm not in the mood," Senbla said.

"And you," the clerk went on, "you're taking robbery this time, Trenor? That's worth five points, too. You want to make it specific?"

"And make the authorities' job easier? No thanks."

The clerk shrugged. "Suit yourselves."

Now an Aquariian was walking noiselessly across the floor toward the clerk, who said, "What we got here? One of those hard-skinned boys." His eyes jumped to the list and back. "Don't tell me, let me guess. Gadda Kruklik. Right?"

The Aquariian trembled before the desk.

"Now stop your shaking, Gadda. You'll be shaking plenty before the day's over. Even if it's just a matter of a little thievery. That's worth only three points. Want to make it six?"

The Aquariian said he wasn't interested.

The clerk shook his head. "You're missing a good bet. We don't care much about three points. You'll make that easy."

Trenor said, "Don't listen to him, Gadda. He'll talk you up to the maximum if you let him."

"Speaking of the maximum, you gentlemen want to meet Mr. Demuth there. He's out for murder. And what's more, it's specific. None less than our Testing Chief, Mr. Jack Bohannen."

"Is that true?" Trenor asked, amazed.

"It's true," Alan said.

Senbla shook his head. "You've never done anything before, otherwise you wouldn't have chosen either maximum or specific. I'm glad I'm not in your shoes."

An Earthman came from out of the corridor and walked across the floor to the clerk. Alan watched him come and then suddenly he realized who he was. He was the Frank whom the clerk in Bohannen's office had talked to while she held the door half open. Was he going to try criminal status?

"And you're Pilson," the clerk said, checking off the name. "Frank Pilson. Welcome to our club. Robbery and specific. Terra Transfer office. Good luck to you, sir, but you'll never make it."

"Don't be so sure," Pilson said.

"Everybody's got schemes. They never work."

Pilson turned away toward the chairs where the rest of them were sitting.

"Five minutes, folks," the clerk said. "Chief Vrilark will be with you directly." He left his desk and walked to the end of the room where the clock was, deposited his chart on a table there and took a chair behind it.

Pilson caught Alan's eye. "You're the only other Earthman here, eh?" he said as he sought a seat at his side.

"Looks that way," Alan said. "I heard your name. Mine's Alan Demuth."

Pilson extended his hand. "Glad to see you here. I needed a little moral support. What are you going for?"

"Murder," Alan said. "The murder of Jack Bohannen, Chief of Testing."

Pilson whistled. "That's a big order. Why'd you choose a thing like that?"

"A long story. I'd rather not go into it."

"Sure, if you don't want to. Me, I'm going to rob the Terra Transfer office."

"You seem to think you can get away with it."

Pilson nodded. "I understand most think they can do it. I've got something special planned."

I wish I did, Alan said to himself. It had been a rough night, lying awake trying to figure angles. But he knew that no matter what he tried to do, the police would be there ahead of him. He'd have to rely on developments, try to be resourceful, lean with the punches, try to outwit them as best he could. He had no specific plan, wasn't sure in fact that it would be a good idea to have one.

"Aren't you going to ask me what it is?" Pilson asked.

"Why should I? Then it wouldn't be yours any more."

"I suppose that's right."

"Besides, I might be a police spy."

Pilson's eyes narrowed. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"Yesterday in Bohannen's office. You were talking to—that girl."

"Oh, yes, of course. I remember now." Pilson brought out a package of cigarettes, offered one to Alan. "How come

you chose murder? No, I already asked you that, didn't I? Want to know why I chose robbery?"

"Why?"

"Because I think I can get away with it. Ten points isn't anything to sneeze at. It will put me into a thousand-a-year higher classification. And I aim to do it, too."

It seemed to Alan that Pilson was taking the whole thing pretty lightly. "Why did you choose Terra Transfer? Won't they be guarding the place?"

"Sure. But they won't catch me." Pilson chuckled.

A gong sounded, a portal opened and one of the largest Vegans Alan had ever seen strode into the room, stepped to the platform at the end of the room, the overhead lights shining on his smooth features, his bald head and eagle-like nose. Alan noted that his wings had been clipped close to his body in accordance with Herculum rules and he wondered how large his wing span would have been if they had not been clipped. If Vegans had been allowed to fly here they would have had an unfair advantage over other inhabitants. Equality, he thought bitterly, is the keyword of Herculum.

The clerk stood up and called the roll. All during it the Vegan looked them over with a red eye that missed nothing.

"That's about the biggest Vegan I ever saw," Pilson said at Alan's side. "No wonder he's the chief of police."

"That's right," Trenor said. "Vrillark's a mighty big one."

"Silence!" the clerk said.

Vrillark moved forward to the lectern, staring down at them all disdainfully. In his whistling voice that was somehow as militant as his bearing, he said, "Only six here today? This seems hardly worth it. Evidently there is more satisfaction on Station Herculum than there has been. Yesterday there were nine." His round eyes went on examining the two Earthmen, three Altairians and the single Aquariian who stood silently before him. The fragile-looking Aquariian was shaking visibly. Vrillark went on, "I am glad to see there are no Vegans here this morning."

So much for racial pride, Alan thought, reflecting on the

Vegan penchant for ruffling their feathers to display the brilliant colors of the underlayers. Let's get on with it.

The police chief picked up a paper from the lectern before him. "Perhaps you will be interested in yesterday's results. Five cases of thievery—that's worth three points, though two of them were specifics, making it worth six—two cases of robbery, worth five points because it involves another person, one case of assault, five points, and a lone case of assault with a deadly weapon, worth ten points, except that this, too, was a specific and worth twenty." He looked up at the criminal status candidates and added dryly, "Needless to say, none was successful."

He let them all digest this, and then went on, "During the past month there have been about two hundred contenders, some for the excitement of it, some for honest attempts to upgrade themselves. Of this total, three successfully completed their missions. The others took downgrading or were given penalties for their failures. The unsuccessful ones now realize the futility of believing the machines are wrong, if it was dissatisfaction with test scores that led them here. Others know their ambitions exceed their abilities. Or perhaps I ought to say simply that their fling at adventure is at an end and today they are quietly resting in their cells or are busy with penal work groups inside and outside the dome, depending upon the nature of their violation. Still others managed to pay their fines; you have that option in some cases. Suffice it to say, they all have had time to think about life on Herculum in a new way as a result of their experience."

The Vegan's red eyes roved over the group, his head high, his mien disdainful. "Everyone knows life under the dome can be dull. We don't question your motive for criminal status, and be assured we make no attempt to uncover it. Sometimes, as you know, the Division of Psychiatry actually prescribes criminal status, and regulations have declared applicants' reasons are a personal thing. But please be assured that the department is ever watchful and ready to arrest you quickly and efficiently."

The tall Vegan's wings fluttered a little, settled in place again. He went on: "The time is five forty-five. At six the release gong will sound, the main portal will rise and you will be free to go. You will have until six tomorrow morning to complete your missions. No attempt will be made to interfere with your activities for the first five minutes.

Virllark picked up the chart, faced them rather sternly and said, "The roll has already been called and you are all present." Then he managed to convey the Vegan equivalent of a smile, a ruffling of feathers about the beak. "We have this morning something a little more than the usual and I think it is worth mentioning. There is in our midst a would-be murderer. Murder, in case you are not aware of it, carries a point value of twenty-five if it's non-specific. This one is specific, making it worth fifty. Will Alan Demuth raise his hand please?"

Alan did so.

The Vegan said, "Gentlemen, look well upon that face, for it will soon be the face of defeat."

There was a shuffling and a few nervous glances in his direction.

The chief continued, "Let the rest of you not relax, however, for we have special plans for Mr. Demuth and there will be no curtailment of our force because of his status request. Mr. Demuth has said he will kill Mr. Bohannen, Chief of Testing, in the next twenty-four hours." He looked directly at Alan as he said, "Let me tell you, there was one other case of murder three years ago. It was quite unsuccessful. The subject was apprehended within half an hour because he failed to put the department to any great test. The next day he died in the hot sand five miles from the dome. A halftrack brought him back. I daresay he wasn't a pretty sight." His eyes snapped to the wall clock. "It is ten minutes to release time. Enjoy yourselves well in those ten minutes, for they may well be your last as free men for some time to come." He turned, strode rapidly from the platform, pausing at the portal before going through it to turn and say, "Good luck, gentlemen."

The candidates stood up, shuffled around. The clerk picked up the chart and started to leave the room. Suddenly he halted, turned and came toward Alan. "I almost forgot to give this to you," he said, handing Alan an envelope. "It came early this morning."

Alan tore off the end of the envelope, wondering what it could be. He withdrew the paper inside and opened it. It read:

Greetings, Alan, on the big day! May it be one of the last of your life. For your convenience I have arranged to be in my office until 6 p.m. today and hope you will drop by. I'm sure you want it to be over as quickly as possible. I have arranged to take the time off whenever necessary in order to see you through the dome locks to the sands outside. They tell me it is very warm out there.

Jack Bohannen

Alan crumpled the paper and stuffed it into his pocket. Bohannen was trying to rattle him, trying to put on a big front. Well, he was succeeding a little, but there must be a way the deed could be done. Just how, though, remained to be seen.

"Bad news?" Pilson said, approaching him.

"A challenge. That's all."

"From Bohannen, I'll bet." He snorted. "You know, I think I could dislike a man like that." He looked at the clock. "Three minutes to go. I wonder where I'll be twenty-four hours from now."

"I only hope I'm still alive. I understand for the major crime tries they use heaters and blasters."

Pilson grinned. "Don't let it get you down. They have to get you in their sights before they can take a shot at you."

They moved toward the portal along with the other candidates, Alan's heart commencing a rapid beat as he realized in a few minutes he'd be trying to elude the police.

He glanced sidelong at Pilson, saw that he didn't seem worried, and wished he could maintain such a stoic calm.

Pilson turned. "Do you know where you're going when you go through that door?"

Alan looked at him. "I really hadn't given it much thought. Just to get away, work myself toward Bohannen's office."

"You don't even have a gun. How are you going to commit murder?"

"I'll think of something."

Pilson shook his head. "I don't understand you. Haven't you given any thought to it?"

"I want to remain flexible. I want to see what the police will be doing."

Pilson laughed, saying, "They'll be doing plenty." Then he sobered, said in a quieter voice, "Look, I'm in the same boat as you, but I've planned mine out. I've even got a place to go."

"You mean before you go to the Terra Transfer office?"

"Long before."

"You'll never commit your robbery holed up somewhere."

"Ah," Pilson said with a mysterious smile, "that's only the beginning, this place I'm going to. You want to know something?"

"What?"

Pilson drew closer and said guardedly, "They'll never arrest me when I leave it."

"Why?"

"Because I won't be Frank Pilson any more. I'm going to change my face. Makeup. Can't tell it from the real thing."

Alan nodded dumbly. "That's a good idea." He wished he had thought of it.

"Look," Pilson went on, "I've got the apartment, I've got the girl who's going to let me use it. Want to come along? It will work as well for two."

There was hardly time to think. Alan had to grudgingly admit he had given little thought to what he was going to do, except go after Bohannen. Somewhere along the line he'd

pick up a weapon, get to the office and kill him. Or was that just wishful thinking?

Maybe, he told himself, I really want to get caught.

He immediately killed the thought. No, he would go through with it, had to go through with it. Of course it wouldn't be easy—he didn't expect it to be—but he would be determined to carry it out to the end, whether it was the end of him or the end of Bohannen.

Pilson's idea was good, but should he team up with him? Maybe it would be best. If he were made up to look like someone else he could commit the crime and then hide out for the remainder of the time. Still . . .

The gong sounded and its ring reverberated through the room as the main portal slid up.

Now was the time!

5

THERE WAS A cry and the criminal candidates surged toward the opening. Beyond it were the streets of the city and not a policeman was in sight.

"Coming?" Pilson asked over his shoulder, already starting through.

"Coming," Alan said, moving forward. Might as well accept Pilson's help. It would be well to have a friend in a city suddenly friendless.

"Let's go then," Pilson said, starting to run. "That five minutes is going to seem awfully short five minutes from now."

The six had run out to the smooth street, the three Altairians running off to the left, the Aquariian streaking out of sight ahead of them on the right. Alan was surprised at the speed of the little Aquariian. Being noiseless was one advantage; being fast on his feet was another.

People they encountered in their flight down the street

jumped aside, and some, aware of what was going on, cried out with wishes for luck.

They took the first street to the left, then the next one to the right. When they entered the succeeding street to the left, they slowed to a walk. At first Alan had been suspicious of each individual, but then that was because they naturally looked at a running man. Now they were walking normally and the people they saw paid no attention.

Pilson kept glancing skyward, the barely visible dome far up in the haze, and Alan asked him why he was doing this.

"They might have a flyabout up there," he replied.

"They're supposed to give us the first five minutes."

Pilson grinned and jabbed his arm. "Alan, I'm surprised at you. Do you mean to tell me you trust the police? I don't. That five minutes could be just so much hokum to make us let our guards down. Me, I don't trust anything or anybody. That's my motto. Take nothing for granted."

"Even me?"

"Even you." He laughed. "I'm watching you like a hawk."

"A hawk. Odd to hear a term like that. Haven't thought of such a thing since I left Earth."

"Well, don't get bogged down thinking about home. We've got places to go, things to do."

"How far is this apartment of yours, Frank?"

"Oh, you must have misunderstood me. It's not *my* apartment. It belongs to a girl named Connie Craig. And it's not far. Come on, but keep a sharp lookout."

"This Connie Craig—is she the girl I saw you talking with yesterday?"

"Yes. One and the same. Now come on."

They quickened their pace down the wide street, just two among two hundred thousand people. Several flyabout taxis stopped nearby and Alan turned away lest he be recognized. It had become the practice of the Division of Law Enforcement to broadcast the description and the names of the day's criminals. He didn't want to be identified as one if the broadcast had already been made. Pilson

understood and told the taximen they were walking and would continue to do so, thank you.

Once they rounded a corner and nearly ran into an Altairian in the red uniform of the police department. The Altairian eyed them hotly. Pilson said, "I beg your pardon, Officer," and proceeded on casually with Alan at his side.

Hearing a sudden stirring behind them, they turned and saw the Altairian coming up fast.

"Let's go," Alan said, breaking into a run.

"Damn," Pilson said. "I don't think it's been five minutes yet. What's that fool—but let's not argue." He caught up with Alan, shot a look behind him. "The fool's gaining."

Alan risked a glance. It was true. He spied a doorway, shouted, "In here," and ducked into it, Pilson at his heels. There was, Alan saw with relief, a riser at the end of the hall at street level. They jumped into it, the door hissed shut behind them, and Pilson instructed it to take them to the top floor. The riser shot up the shaft, came to a gentle stop at the top floor, the doors hissing open. They were in a cupola, stepped out to the roof.

Where to now? Alan wondered. Are we caught before we even get started?

But Pilson said, "Here," and pulled on his arm. They headed around the cupola for a private two-seater with the words Division of Economics Number 4 lettered on the side of it.

Alan was sure they were lost. "You need a key for a flyabout. Nobody'd leave the keys in it. I know. I was a taximan."

"Never mind," Pilson said, lifting the rear cover where the mechanism was housed. With flying fingers he adjusted wires, came back to take Alan's arm again. "We've got wings. Since you were a flyabout man, get at the controls and take off."

Alan was dubious, but he crawled in, activated the starter and was rewarded with a gentle purring of the engine. Gently the flyabout lifted from the roof. He was beginning to have a healthy respect for Pilson. Any man

who could rewire a flyer that fast to bypass the lock mechanism was a man worth knowing. He hadn't made a bad choice after all. If Pilson was that resourceful, perhaps he'd really have a chance at Bohannen after all.

They chanced a look back on the roof, saw the policeman jump out of the cupola with his gun in his hand. It was useless at this distance; not that the blast wouldn't reach the craft, but because of accuracy and loss of strength of the beam at that range.

So far so good, Alan thought. Our first brush with the law and already we're ahead.

"I know one thing," Pilson said. "They must have descriptions of us out. Otherwise that Altairian wouldn't have followed us. Now he'll let them know we've hooked this flyabout."

Alan nodded. "We can't fly it all day. They'll have their own flyabouts out looking for us and we're a mighty big target."

"We'd better set it down somewhere."

"Where's this apartment you mentioned?"

Pilson took his bearings. "Let's see. A little to the left and straight ahead for a few blocks."

Alan kicked in the accelerator. They shot ahead at full throttle, Alan twisting the wheel to bear left. Suddenly he jammed in the brake. The flyabout stalled and fluttered to the ground, landing in a park area.

Pilson said, "Say, you're all right. I pride myself on my mechanical ability, but I don't think I'd ever be able to work a flyabout this well. We make a good team, you know that?"

"Thanks."

Both men jumped from the flyer, ran through a heavy growth of bushes. On the other side they straightened and started to walk again. Pilson's eyes went to the sky and he grinned, elbowing Alan. "Look," he said.

Three police flyers arced overhead, stalled and dropped behind them to the park.

"They didn't waste any time," Alan said. "That Vrillark was right. They can be pretty efficient."

"As soon as we went through the portal they had flyabouts in the air. They weren't taking chances. They never do. They can't afford to let criminals succeed, otherwise everybody'd be trying for criminal status."

"How far is this apartment now?"

"One more block."

They walked, Alan trying to do so as nonchalantly as possible, trying to be just anybody out for a walk with a friend, at the same time keeping a wary eye out for red uniforms. A few hours ago Herculum had been an almost friendly place. Now it was a booby trap, capture lurking in every shadow, in every face that passed them by. He was glad it wouldn't last more than twenty-four hours. A man can take only so much tension.

He glanced at Pilson. The man was a cool one, walking as if he were out for a bit of fresh air and not someone desperately trying to elude police. But then Pilson had a much lesser crime to commit. Assault. No, robbery. Robbery of the Terra Transfer office. I'm getting rattlebrained, Alan thought. Well, anyway, there's a big difference between robbery and murder. Maybe I'd be as cool as he if I were just going out to rob someone or something.

"Turn here," Pilson said.

They rounded a corner and Pilson guided him to twin doors in a tall building which Alan saw at once was a residence hall and apartment house. They rode up the riser confidently, stepped out on the fourth floor. Pilson walked to a door there, activated the viewscreen and beamed at it. Almost at once it lost its opaqueness and a head became visible.

Viewscreens were noted for what they lost in detail, but there was no mistaking Connie Craig, the girl in Bohannen's office. She was every bit as pretty as he remembered her.

"It's me, honey," Pilson said.

The words jarred Alan. Evidently Pilson knew her quite well.

The door opened to reveal the girl. He saw now details he had not remembered. She was not as tall as he, and

attired as she was in a becoming house dress that failed to hide the fullness of her figure, she was even more striking than he remembered. Her eyes were warm and welcoming, and she said in a soft voice, "I've been expecting you, Frank." She looked at Alan curiously, but before anyone said anything more, Pilson took his arm.

"Come on in," he said, and they walked through, closing the door after them.

For some reason Alan felt ill at ease.

"Did the stuff come?" Pilson wanted to know.

"Yes, Frank. It's in the bedroom." She continued to stare at Alan. She said, "Hello. You're the man in the office."

"Yes."

Pilson stepped back. "I'm sorry, Connie. Little change in plan. This is Alan Demuth. He's all right. In it with me. I would have told you he was coming, but I didn't know he was until we met at the assembly hall. This is Connie Craig, Alan."

The touch of the hand she offered was cool and soft. Alan felt the flush creep over his face and he thought; I'm behaving like a schoolboy.

Connie said, "So you're one of them, too?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

Pilson said, "Of course he's one. Why else would I bring him here?"

The girl looked at Pilson for a long time. Then she said, "Why did you decide to do it, Frank? I told you it would be all right and you said you'd tell me when you came this morning."

"There isn't time, Connie. We've got work to do. The police may have traced us here."

She said firmly, "Telling is simple. You could tell me in a few words. It was so—so sudden, Frank. So unlike you."

Pilson sighed. "All right. I've been in grade how long?"

"I don't know. Two years, isn't it?"

"Yes. Well, I knew it would be useless to take the tests. The last time I didn't elevate my score a single point."

Connie was bewildered. "I didn't think it was so im-

portant to you, Frank. Suddenly you've become ambitious. Why?"

Pilson went to her, took her by the shoulders. "Can't you figure out why, honey?"

She stared at him blankly.

"It's because of you. Look, if I pull this off, I'll get an increase in credits, an annual increase, that will build for our future. Can't you see that?"

Now Connie's eyes brightened. "Oh, Frank, you don't have to do this. If—if you fail—"

He said grimly, "I won't fail."

"But they always do! How many candidates are successful?"

"I'm doing it for you, honey."

"I'm telling you, you didn't have to!"

"I want the best for my little honey."

She shook her head bewilderedly, "I don't understand you, Frank. Suddenly you're talking about our future. I—"

He moved away. "Connie, let's talk about it some other time. Right now Alan and I have some work to do. It will keep."

"I still don't like it, Frank."

"In here," Pilson said to Alan, cocking his head at an open doorway. Alan moved to the room as Pilson said, "You go prepare a little coffee like a good girl, huh?"

They entered what must have been Miss Craig's bedroom. On the floor was a large parcel which Pilson untaped. Inside were trays of vials of varicolored liquids, putty-like substances, assorted powders and small boxes. Pilson beamed at them, saying, "See this? This is the secret." He rubbed his hands together. "I've been preparing for this day for a long time. Watch." He picked up a small can, set it on a dresser, started to take off his clothes. "You might as well get undressed, too. Better close the door, though."

When Pilson stood naked, he picked up the can, set it on the floor and stripped off the top tape patch. Instantly a cloud of dark vapor rose from the receptacle, and Pilson stepped into it, rubbing the particles into his pores, much

as if he were lathering himself with soap. Before Alan's eyes Pilson's complexion darkened considerably, as if he'd been under the health lamps for weeks. Pilson looked at him and grinned at his amazement. Alan was astonished to see how blanched the corneas of his eyes seemed, how white his teeth had become, but of course it was only that his skin had darkened so.

Next Pilson picked up a piece of putty, added some dark powder and worked it into a mass that became the same color as his skin. This material he deftly applied to his chin, his forehead and nose, watching himself in the mirror over the dresser.

"How's that?" he said proudly when he had finished, turning to let Alan see. "Who do you see now?"

Alan was forced to smile his appreciation. "You're not Pilson any more, that's for sure." The substance blended into his features so well it was impossible to guess where the artificial part of him began.

"I could do better if I had more time," Pilson said, drawing on his clothes. "But this will fool Herculum cops." He laughed. "See what I mean?"

Alan nodded. "I guess maybe you're going to rob that Terra Transfer office after all."

"Now it's your turn." He eyed the makeup materials, frowning, looking at Alan and then back at the kit. "I think we ought to lighten your skin. And how about changing your hair from blond to black? And this"—he picked up a small vial—"will allow a change in the pigment of your eyes. Just a drop in each eye. Instead of blue eyes, you'll have brown."

"Do you think that's absolutely necessary?"

"You're out to kill, aren't you? You don't want to get caught. Sure you want the eye pigment. It won't last but a day or two anyway. And you won't feel a thing."

Yes, it would be helpful. He could walk right in on Bohannen and Bohannen would never know him.

"All right," he said. "I'll take the works."

"Good boy."

Yes, he could walk right into Bohannen's office and kill

him . . . Except he wondered if, when the opportunity came, he could actually do it.

No time to think about that, he told himself. I'm committed but good. It's either Bohannen or me. The equation has been reduced to its simplest terms and it looks like a man will be killed. I just hope that it isn't me.

"Hand me that lightener," Pilson said. "Yes, that's the one. Mmm." He compared Alan's skin coloring with that on the label of the can. "I don't think it will be too light. It will make you look a little anemic, that's all. Here goes. Be ready." He set the can on the floor, lifted off the tab. The vapor misted before Alan and he walked through it just as he had seen Pilson do, rubbing himself to make sure it covered him like a fine film.

Then he looked at his arms. They looked like anything but his own, so pale and wan, and when he looked at himself in the mirror he thought: I look like I've got one foot in the grave.

"Your nose needs work," Pilson said, slapping gooey stuff on his nose and working it around. "This will really shape you. Do you realize how distinguishing a nose is? We rely upon it a lot. Take those Altairians. You can't tell them apart, but they can tell each other apart because they look at each other's proboscises. That's their distinguishing mark. Ours is our nose. Not to say that other parts of our faces don't make any difference. Look in the mirror."

Alan did as he was told.

"I'm giving you a wide, more flaring nose. Like that?"

"I look like a wild animal of some sort."

"You do at that. Maybe I've overdone it." He reduced it a little. "There. How's that?"

"That's better. But I can't believe it's me."

"That's the idea. Now the eyes. Tilt your head back. Keep your eyes open."

It was difficult, but Alan managed. The dark drops plunked into first the right eye and then the left, and a world of brown suddenly washed in front of him. Pilson handed him a cloth and Alan dried his eyes. The next look he had in

the mirror, he wondered who the man was he was looking at. Even my mother wouldn't recognize me, he thought. The new Alan Demuth. He grinned. The effect was startling. It was almost creepy watching a man you didn't know doing the very same things you were.

"Believe me, my boy," Pilson said, "there won't be a cop to put a hand on you." He beamed at his handiwork. "You'll get to Bohannen easily now. I'd be willing to bet on it."

Alan said, "I wish I could be that sure."

Pilson slapped him on the back. "Chin up. Come on, let's get our coffee."

They left the bedroom for the living room and Connie walked in with two cups of coffee. "I hope these hit the spot," she said, putting the steaming cups on the low table. "Are you ready for it?"

Then she saw them and stepped back, her hand going to her throat. She would have uttered a cry if Pilson hadn't said, "It's just us, honey."

"Oh," Connie said with relief. "I didn't know. I thought somebody—"

"Never mind what you thought. The change would be enough to startle anybody. Think we did a good job?"

Connie said truthfully, "I wouldn't have believed it possible."

"A tribute to my skill," Pilson said. "See, Alan? I told you I had prepared a long time in advance for this."

"I don't see why you didn't ever tell me about it," Connie said. "When that package came this morning I couldn't imagine what was in it. Now that I know, I don't know how you ever did it."

Pilson grinned and his white teeth flashed. "Yes, now you know. I'm cleverer than you thought, baby." He picked up a cup of coffee and took a healthy swig. "My, that's good coffee."

Alan took a sip, made a wry face because he'd burned his tongue. "Say, this stuff's hot."

"Yeah, sure is," Pilson said, drinking more of it and smiling at Connie. "You sure make a good cup of coffee."

"Thank you," Connie said.

It was the look in her eye that startled Alan, like lenses shifted out of sight. It was an odd look.

"Come on," Pilson said. "Drink her down, Alan. We've got to get a move on." He finished his cup.

"Wait a minute," Alan said. "My coffee's still hot."

"Is there anything else I can do?" Connie said in a strangled voice.

"No," Pilson said. "Just accept our thanks." He kissed her.

It made Alan cringe inwardly.

"There's not another one like you in all of Herculum," Pilson said, walking to the door. "Come on, Alan."

"Yes," Alan said just to be saying something. At the door he stopped to give her a last look. "Thanks for the coffee, Miss Craig. I really appreciated it. That and the use of the bedroom."

He hesitated. There was something strange about her, about the way she looked. Almost as if she were about to say something to him. Her eyes were puzzled, uncertain.

"Come on," Pilson said, pulling on his arm. "Let's get the job done."

6

ON THE STREET again they commenced walking and Pilson said, "Nothing to fear now, Alan. Nobody's even giving us a second look."

It was true, Alan was forced to agree. They seemed to have become invisible. All the same, an uneasiness was gnawing at Alan's mind. It had something to do with the way Connie had looked at him, but for the life of him he could not ferret out the meaning of it.

"Come on," Pilson said, grabbing his arm and quickening his steps. It was the cheerful move of a man who has

nothing to fear, a confident man, and Alan wrenched his arm away.

Pilson stopped and stared at him. "What's the matter?"

"Look, I've got my murder to commit, you've got your robbery. Thanks for the disguise and all that, but I think I'd rather do my job my own way."

Pilson sighed. "You still don't understand. Alone, our senses are halved. Together we are more formidable, more alert. What's more, we can help each other. If you want to do the deciding for us, that's all right with me, but personally I think we ought to cooperate. Which shall we do first, my robbery or your murder? You understand the actual commission of the act must be done by each of us alone, but there's nothing that says we can't work together."

Alan considered it. Then he said, "The way I see it, if we're together the job of the police is simplified. Apart, they must split up their forces, too."

"I suppose you're right there," Pilson said grudgingly. "But how do you intend to get across town to the Testing Center?"

"I'll find a way."

Pilson grinned. "I don't think you'd ever make it your way. Why don't you try mine?"

"What's your idea?"

"I'll show you. Come on." He started down the street.

Alan shrugged and went along with him. So far Pilson had shown intelligence and resourcefulness. Maybe it would be best to keep with him. But somehow it had all seemed too easy.

Maybe that's it, he said to himself. Vrillark talked as if it would be a matter of minutes before we were all captured, still here we are walking in broad daylight and not a policeman in sight.

They walked to an intersection where flyabouts were parked and where there were many people moving about, Altairians, Aquarii, Vegans and Earthmen, all rubbing shoulders. Music drifted over the area from some source deeply hidden, and it was interrupted by a voice which said

the time was eight twenty-five. Two hours and twenty-five minutes. It hadn't seemed that long since six o'clock.

"In here," Pilson said, tugging at his sleeve.

They moved quickly down a passageway between two large buildings. At the rear of one of the buildings was a door that Pilson now approached.

"Know anything about the underground?" Pilson asked.

"Underground?"

"Sure. The blood vessels of Herculum." Pilson tried the door, but it was locked. He reached into a pocket, brought out a small box and held it against the molecular sealer. "Locking doors is ridiculous when you have one of these things." He spun the dials and as he did so, a small light brightened and gave out a steady light. "There," he said, pushing a small stud on the side of the box. He was rewarded with a clicking sound, and when he tried the door again, it opened easily. "Just a matter of finding the correct molecular combination." He patted the box. "Somebody invents a lock to beat all locks and along comes somebody who invents a pick that will open any and all. I bought this from a man for a hundred credits. Expensive, maybe, but I think it's worth it."

They entered the room and the door swung closed behind them. As far as Alan could see, this was a storeroom beneath street level, with boxes piled here and there. He didn't see the door in the floor until Pilson pointed it out to him.

"Give me a hand," Pilson said, indicating one of the rings in the door. Together they lifted it. Below was an opening that disappeared into blackness. At one side of it was a ladder.

Pilson said, "Ready to go underground?" He grinned. "They will never find us down here and we'll make it to the basement of the Testing Center without any trouble."

Alan had to smile. Pilson knew all the answers all right.

"You go ahead. I'll let the lid down."

Alan clambered down a few rungs, waited while Pilson drew the door closed over them, and then started down, feeling his way. At first it was so black he was unable to

see anything, but as his eyes grew used to it, he could faintly make out the sides of the tunnel, the rungs of the metal ladder.

"Down into the heart of Herculum," Pilson said, his voice oddly distorted in the enclosed space, echoing faintly. "These tunnels handle the water, electricity, and most of the rest of the functions of Herculum. It shouldn't be too far to the bottom."

"I hope you know the way to the Testing Center. I wouldn't want to get lost in a maze."

"I think I know how to get there. Hit bottom yet?"

"Not yet—wait, I think I have." Yes, it was a floor. He stepped from the rung, saw that it was a little lighter here. A dull effulgence came from the tunnel walls to the right and left.

"We go right," Pilson said, joining him on the floor.

They started down the tunnel, their steps echoing hollowly. In some places water dripped from above them to wet places on the floor, but for the most part the tunnel was dry. Eventually they came to a place where it branched, and Pilson confidently made the choice of which one they would take.

"You seem to know these tunnels," Alan said. "Have you ever been down here before?"

"A few months ago I made a little tour down here, just in preparation for this day. I think it was worth it."

They walked a long distance, taking this branch, then that one. The corridors never became bigger or smaller, but in some places there were more pipes and cables than in others. At length they heard a faint humming noise that grew louder as they went along the tunnel.

"We're getting near the power source," Pilson said. "That's about in the center of Herculum, and it's a big room. Almost as big as the assembly hall, though not as high. From then on it's about as far as we've come to the Testing Center."

The room they came to was a large one, with pipes in great profusion about the walls. In the center of it were large machines and from these the cables and pipes blos-

somed at the ceiling. It was eerie in that dimly lighted room with the humming devices crouched like sleeping beasts in the center of it.

"This way," Pilson said cheerily, leading the way to the left. They walked side by side now, passing many tunnel openings on their way. "The one we want is on the other side."

The attack was completely unexpected. One moment they were walking quietly around the machine. The next moment figures darted toward them from everywhere—from the machine itself, from the tunnel openings, and from before and behind them.

It was a short battle, though they both fought like demons. Alan assumed they were police and vowed he would die fighting, but when it was over and they were held, he saw the oddest assortment of shapes he had ever seen. There were Altairians who were losing their hair and whose proboscises were limp, Aquariians whose bodies gave off a weak glow similar to the faint luminescence of the tunnels, and Vegans whose red eyes had paled to pink. The strangest of all were the Earthmen, bushy-bearded men with bleached bodies.

One of the tallest now strode before them like a general, looking them over and saying, "Well, well, look what we've got here. A couple of adventurers." He stroked his beard and spat on the cold stone floor. "If you came down in the tunnel looking for excitement, you've found it. What'll we do with them, men?"

There were shouts of "Kill them!" and "Let's have 'em for lunch" and general laughter as the underground dwellers moved around before them.

"Of course," the leader said, coming forward, "you know we can never let you leave our little world, don't you?"

"What are you?" Pilson said. "What are you doing down here?"

That brought laughter again, but the leader silenced his flock with a wave of his hand. "We're living down here. We are the disgruntled, a collection of the dissatisfied."

"Carrión, living off the world above," Pilson said.

"Well, we live off the world above," the leader said, fixing Pilson with a fierce eye, "but I'd hardly call us carrión." He shot out a fist and caught Pilson in the midsection. Pilson was propelled backward and Alan reached out and caught him before he fell to the floor. The leader said, "Would you care to call us carrión again?"

"Scavengers," Pilson spat out.

The fist shot out again, but Pilson jumped to one side, lashed out with a fist of his own and caught the leader on the cheek. The leader cried out, staggered back, put his hand to his cheek and looked with surprise at Pilson.

"Who are you?" he asked. "What are you doing down here?"

"Criminals," Pilson said. "We're escaping the police."

The leader nodded. "A likely story."

An Aquarian said, "I'll bet they're both police."

"He's right," Alan said. "We're using the tunnels to get to the other side of Herculum."

"You'll never get there," the leader said.

"Why not?"

Everybody laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"You are. Down here there are different rules from the world above. One of them is that anybody who comes down here never gets to go back up. Is that clear enough?" He jerked his head at two Aquarians who stood trembling to one side. They came forward now and ran their hands over them. The things taken from their pockets were put in a pile on the floor before them.

The leader was interested in the box Pilson had used to open the door. "What's this?" he asked.

"A broadcaster," Pilson said. "Everything you say is being recorded in police headquarters."

That brought laughter again. The leader tossed the box atop the small pile of possessions and said, "All right, you can pick up your things. Jurnik, take them to our little jail. We'll figure out what to do with them later."

Jurnik turned out to be a Vegan whose eyes had not only lost their luster but whose feathers were scraggly indeed. Life in the underground, Alan concluded, was no picnic, judging by the specimens he had seen. Jurnik led them down a tunnel; they would not have gone except that two Altairians pressed bright knives in their backs and prodded them on.

"In here, gentlemen," Jurnik said, stepping to one side and indicating an opening between pipes.

Pilson stepped as if to go in, but he stepped back at once. "That's no room in there. It looks bottomless."

Jurnik giggled. "It *is* bottomless. You can't even hear the splash. Here." He snatched at the box Pilson was carrying and before anyone could stop him he threw it between the pipes.

There was no sound if it hit bottom.

Puzzled, Pilson took hold of one of the pipes and leaned into the dark area beyond. He uttered a cry and came out, facing Jurnik. "Who are you trying to fool? That box is in there on the sand."

Now Jurnik was puzzled. "No. It can't be." He moved to the pipes to have a look-see.

Pilson gave him a violent push that sent him screaming beyond the pipes and out of sight, his cry fading as he fell.

The two Altairians had been so stunned they had merely remained where they stood, as had Alan. But when Pilson turned to them, they started for him.

Alan jolted himself out of his daze and threw himself into the fray, dragging the nearest Altairian from Pilson, dodging the flashing knife as the Altairian came at him furiously. He caught the knife hand, gave a mighty twist, was gratified to hear the blade clatter to the floor. Even as he did so, he heard cries at the end of the hall. The others were alerted now and would be on them in moments.

Alan waded in, punched with all his might, the Altairian grunting as each blow fell. The Altairian, long absent from the normal environment of street level, did not have the stamina he should have had. In a few moments he was re-

duced to a doddering creature, collapsed to the floor with Alan's last wallop.

He turned to Pilson, saw the Altairian at that moment sink his blade into Pilson's back in an unguarded moment. But the knife did not go in. It slid along the back, tearing the clothing, the flesh. Alan could see the glint of metal there.

And immediately knew what had been bothering him for so long. Pilson was an android!

Pilson seemed unaware of any injury. Why should he be? He delivered a powerhouse right to the Altairian's head that sent him reeling backward.

Alan did not wait. Already he was far down the tunnel when Pilson turned for him.

"Alan! Wait!"

Pilson was shouting, but Alan ignored him, hurrying his steps. He had to get away from Pilson if he were to survive. He broke into a run, taking this turn, then that one.

But there was no losing Pilson, for the android was closing the gap behind him quickly, saying nothing, moving efficiently on his convincing feet.

Alan spied a ladder similar to the one they had come down, skidded to a stop and started up it.

"Wait, you fool!" Pilson was saying, coming up fast.

At the top Alan pushed mightily against the heavy door, wrenching it open. He hurried out of the hole, pushed it back to fall heavily in place again. He looked around. Another room similar to the one they'd started their journey in. A door. He had no difficulty in opening it, rushing out into a street. It was bright.

He had no idea where he was, but he knew he had to disappear quickly, otherwise Pilson, with his superior speed, would overtake him quickly. He rounded a corner, ducked into the first open doorway he saw, ran down a length of corridor where it curved right, then took another passageway left, still another left. This one went down. He hoped it would not return him to the underground.

He stumbled down dark steps because he had not seen them coming, could hear the hiss and whirr of machinery.

His eyes became used to the dark again, and he could make out vague shapes of controls, pipes and masses of machinery for controlling the block.

Quietly he crossed the floor, climbed atop a pipe beneath a window, opened it noiselessly and squeezed through to the outside, the bright light blinding him again. He was in an open area, surrounded on all sides by buildings. Fine, he thought. Just fine. There's no escape here except through somebody else's basement window. He decided to rest a moment to catch his breath but had hardly sat down before he heard a sound behind him in the room he had just left. Could it possibly be Pilson?

He could not look in the window to see whether or not it was Pilson without risking detection, so he moved on tip-toe several windows down, found one that slid open at his touch, slipped inside into a room similar to the one he had left, locked the window behind him.

"There," he said to himself. "Pilson doesn't know which window I went through, will be unable to get through the closed and locked window . . . unless . . ." He didn't want to think about Pilson's strange abilities. ●

Collecting his wits, Alan brushed himself off, went up the stairs to the corridor, took a left, a right, and found he was out on the street again. He decided which way the Testing Center lay and started in that direction.

When he came to Herculum's large park area, he knew he was going right, crossed the intersection to it. Across the great park was Bohannen's office. He grinned. And not a policeman in sight. Maybe, he thought, I'll make it yet.

It was quieter in the park and there were fewer people. He made a beeline for the great mile-high shaft in the center of the park, for it was behind it on the opposite side of the park that the Testing Center stood. A look behind him showed him he had been successful in eluding Pilson. He started to feel good.

As he walked across the park his eyes took in the great column at its center, the top of it lost in the everpresent mist at the top of the dome. Of course that was as it should

be. It was the combination of the mist and the translucent dome that filtered the light from the twin suns and made the floor of the city livable. He had been impressed by the shaft when he had first arrived on Herculum, and one of his first ventures in the flyabout taxi was to fly to the top of it and view the city from the light-bathed platform there. And once he had flown one of the technicians to the top of the column so the technician could take some sort of reading on the outside of the dome, which he had done by going through the lock there to the incredible brilliance beyond it.

The technician could have taken the riser, but he'd said the riser was slow compared to a flyabout, and Alan had riveted the technician to his seat the way he thrust upward. The recollection of it made him smile. He'd been a good flyabout taximan, had endured his year of it gracefully, and the habit of flying was so strong and his position at the moment so precarious, he wished he were back at that simple job.

"Alan Demuth! Alan Demuth!"

It was a girl's voice and it made him stop on the grass a few hundred feet from the thick shaft. But he could see no one. Then he looked up and saw a flyer overhead. Connie Craig's head appeared out of the cockpit as she sent the flyer fluttering down. He could even read the lettering on the side of it: Division of Testing Number Three.

Alan did not wait. He started running, wishing he were anywhere but in the park. Was the girl in on it, too? Were she and Pilson both androids? No wonder those who ventured into criminal status didn't have a chance with creatures like these two allied against them.

Now he was on the firm pavement around the shaft, started to run around it and—came face to face with Frank Pilson.

Alan stopped, stunned, uncertain.

Pilson was smiling, saying, "Well, Alan, it seems we meet again."

Alan eyed the grass, the bushes, the trees. They were alone. Yet Pilson seemed so confident. But then didn't he always appear confident?

"Don't try to run away, Alan. There's no escape. Now that

you know, there's no sense in carrying the game any farther. The police will be here in a moment." He glanced to the edge of the park and Alan followed the direction of his gaze.

From several directions police flyers, their red lights blinking, were coming in to the shaft slowly.

7

ALAN TURNED BACK to Pilson, his mind working furiously. There had to be a way out of this. If there wasn't, it would be the end of the game, the end of the day and the end of Alan Demuth. But what could he do with Pilson so near, with the police flyers converging on him?

"I suppose," Pilson said, "that you are wondering how I managed to follow you here so quickly."

"It had occurred to me."

"Remember my putting putty on your nose to change its shape?" He smiled. "You didn't know it, but there was a little transmitter in with it. That little device has been sending out signals ever since I put it on. You could have never escaped, Alan Demuth. Did you think we were fools?"

"That's not really you talking," Alan said. "I know that much. Who are you?"

"My name is Anton Loomis, sergeant of police, at your service. Your capture ought to insure my lieutenantcy, if they will overlook the fact that you seemed to have guessed what I was back in the tunnels. It was the knifing, wasn't it?"

"Where are you?"

"At police headquarters. This is only my second portrayal. It was fun while it lasted, as long as I was with you, but as Chief Vrillark pointed out, we could hardly allow you to get near Mr. Bohannen." He grinned. "Wouldn't you say mine was a rather convincing portrayal?"

Pride, Alan thought, goeth before a fall, and he rushed Pilson in such a frenzy of action that Pilson barely had time to get his hands up to ward off the feet Alan brought up heavily on his chest as he ran at him. Alan fell to the pavement, wrenching his shoulder, but Pilson, propelled by the force, smashed back up against the gleaming metal of the shaft and hit his head hard on a sharp outcropping.

Beneath Pilson's torn scalp Alan could see metal. But this high order robot was well made and Pilson came back in a flurry of action, his arms outstretched to receive Alan in their vice-like grip. But Alan was ready for that, had no intention of being so received, hoped his human responses were as good as the sergeant's, jumped aside and ran for the entrance to the shaft.

Just inside was the riser, doors open, for which Alan breathed a prayer of thanks—nobody was at the top—and jumped in. At once it became activated and the doors whooshed closed.

But Pilson shot through as the doors swung shut like steel jaws. He struggled to get all of him squeezed in beyond the doors.

Pilson didn't quite make it.

With a shriek of twisting metal, the leg was severed just above the knee.

The riser started its journey to the top of the shaft, Pilson inanimate on the floor of the cage, the snagged leg useless, trailing battered pieces of metal and wires. His eyes were open, but they were unseeing.

For a moment Alan thought the sergeant had lost control of him because of the severed leg, but then the eyes blinked, Pilson stirred and grinned up at him. "I'm still with you, Alan."

Alan said, "I wish it had been your head instead of your leg."

"Now, now, it doesn't make any difference. You'll never escape anyway. It was a foolish thing for you to try." Pilson struggled to a sitting position.

Alan glared at him. "Why didn't you arrest me five minutes after we left the assembly hall? Why all this?"

"My boy, you miss the point of the criminal games. If we hold each candidate in too tight a rein we'd get nowhere. It's our occupation, our classification, and we practice it by giving you a head start and plenty of rope. Of course the use of robots is confined to the more serious cases, such as yours. It's not often we get a chance of capturing a murderer—or should I say a would-be murderer. If you had not discovered my identity so soon we might have let you actually confront Mr. Bohannen. But since that knife wielder back in the tunnel wrecked that part of it, there was no other route open to us except your arrest."

The riser went up gently, hardly a sound to mark its movement. It was a mile to the top.

"Didn't you know about those tunnel people?" Alan asked.

"No. Oh, we heard rumors. It will clear up a lot of missing persons when we clean them out of there. We always assumed that a missing person somehow took it upon himself to leave the dome, heading for self-destruction. We could never understand it, but there it was."

"You're going to clean them out then?"

"You bet we are."

"Why do you suppose they're down there?"

"Dissatisfaction. Why do you think they are?"

"Life on Herculum must not be the heaven it's painted." Alan brought out a cigarette and lit it. "People like Bohannen, for example, make it less than desirable." He blew out a stream of smoke and watched it float gently about the car. "And then there are people like Jeff Branner over at Status. He thinks Bohannen's a great guy. Maybe it's because so many in the higher echelons are blind, can't see beyond their noses."

"You're the typical griper. You belong down there with those tunnel rats."

"Yes, and you can't see it either. Why do you suppose so many take part in the criminal games?"

"They were invented for guys like you, Alan. You'd be

dissatisfied anywhere. This gives you a chance to let off steam. Except that you bit off a little too much. The only steam you'll let off now is that on the hot sands of Herculum. You won't be a pretty sight when they pick you up. Too bad you'll have to go that way. You're a pretty resourceful guy. Observant, too." Now Pilson got to his foot, leaned against the cage. "When we left Miss Craig's apartment you wanted to go off by yourself. You didn't suspect anything then, did you?"

Alan nodded. "I didn't know what I suspected until I saw that knife slide down your back. When I saw that, then I remembered what it was you did wrong."

"What was it?"

"You drank that hot coffee too fast. It was too hot for a human to stand. I burned my tongue on it. Thanks to Connie Craig for serving it that way."

Pilson was thoughtful. "I should have known. I'll have to remember that next time."

"Is Miss Craig one of you?"

"What?"

"Is she a robot being maneuvered by someone at headquarters?"

Pilson laughed. "There are many of us, Alan. What's more, we're adaptable. I had only a few hours to become Frank Pilson. I think I did very well."

"There really is a Frank Pilson?"

"Of course. I could be you in a few hours. Not that I would want to be you now, not with what's going to happen to you. There are adjustments to make me taller or shorter, wider. Anything. And there are characteristics to acquire in order to be the person you are portraying. It's very interesting work." He looked down at his leg. "Chief Vrillark isn't going to be pleased about the damage to this limb. But that's one of the hazards of the profession." He looked up. "There are robot Altairians, Vegans and Aquarii, too, run by members of their respective races. I've often wanted to try operating one of them. It would be fun to see what would happen. But it's against the rules."

Pilson went on, but Alan forced his thoughts away from him and things that might have been (it was difficult though trying to wrench his mind away from Connie Craig) and gave himself up to thinking about what he'd do when the riser reached the top of the shaft. He could hear the barely perceptible sough of air as the cage rose, wondered how far upward they had already come.

"The police will be waiting at the top," Pilson said, "if that's what's going through your mind. Some of them are there already."

"You know what's going on?"

"Of course. There are nine—no, ten—flyabouts out there. Just a matter of time."

Alan glanced at the cage controls.

Pilson grinned. "Up or down, it really make no difference. You're caught in a riser. It makes my work easier. And don't try stalling the cage. That would only prolong things. I could wrench your hands from the controls easily."

There was no denying it, Pilson would be the victor in any test of strength. Human muscle could not compare with the strength of steel.

The gentle purr of the cage tapered off to complete silence and the riser's doors hissed open. Alan had expected to see the top of the shaft as he had seen it from his flyabout, but the doors opened only to a corridor.

"After you," Pilson said, giving little jumps toward the door.

Alan walked out into the bright corridor. It curved to the left and he followed it into ever-increasing whiteness around to the opposite side where it opened out to a level place that blinded him at first after the subdued light of the car. After all, they must be only a few yards from the top of the dome itself.

A dozen feet away the platform ended. Beyond that there was nothing—nothing, that is, except hovering police flyers. It hurt his eyes to look at them because of the iridescent dome behind them, but he squinted, counted nine flyabouts.

The occupants of these saw him and Pilson and now they commenced bringing their flyers in toward the platform.

Something else caught Alan's eyes. Beyond this group of flyers he saw Connie's craft and he wondered what she was doing there. She had called to him from her flyer when she had hovered over him in the park. Now she was no doubt watching to make sure he was finally taken into custody. She had been such a fine girl; it was hard to think that she was one of them.

Well, you can't always win, and those suns out there beyond the dome were going to be awfully hot. For a short time, anyway. After that he wouldn't feel the heat any more. That was some satisfaction. Nothing would ever bother him again.

He took a step toward the outside platform, glanced to his left to see Pilson hopping toward him on his one foot, wires and metal dangling from the other, a grotesque figure of a man. And beyond Pilson, in the dark recess behind him he saw something he hadn't seen before. The corridor continued around that side and there was a door.

A door to where?

Pilson hopped at his side, and Alan sauntered reluctantly toward the edge, watching the flyers moving within a few yards of the platform. He could see the faces of the Altairians, Vegans, a few Earthmen and one Aquarian, all uniformed, and all waiting to take him back. The Earthmen were smirking.

"The whole police department mobilized to capture one man," Alan said bitterly.

Pilson poised on his one foot. "As I've said, you must admit we don't get a chance to do this every day."

"You must be very proud," Alan said tightly.

Pilson managed a shrug. "You were committed to the act. We were committed to your capture. Nothing can change that."

"And if I'd done it and managed to escape until tomorrow, I'd have been congratulated. It's ironic."

"Oh, I don't know. Of course it would have been im-

possible, but let us just say you were successful. You'd have proved your point and you would have had your reward, those fifty points upgrading for your superiority." A ghost of a smile flickered on his face. "A superiority, I might add, which existed only in your mind." Pilson sighed. "That's the trouble with you fellows who hope to show us a thing or two. You're all alike in that way, and you're all alike in the fact that you inevitably end in failure."

"Do you always send so many men after one man?"

Pilson hobbled closer to the edge. "It depends upon the nature of the crime contemplated."

"It hardly seems sporting."

"I agree. That's why it is so ridiculous anyone should apply for criminal status. Particularly murder."

In that instant, with Pilson so confident, Alan summoned up every ounce of reserve strength, rushed savagely at Pilson, hit him hard with his shoulder. Though the blow was softened by his own shoulder muscles, the jar of contact with metal was a shattering one and he winced with the pain of it.

Pilson danced on one foot, trying to keep his balance. The arms waved frantically, the foot moved perilously close to the edge. Then it was over the edge and Pilson was pawing at the floor, trying to stay on the platform.

Alan approached him, aimed his foot, kicked Pilson hard in the face. It was something he would never have done to a man. But Pilson was a robot. His head snapped back, his outstretched hands moved closer to the edge, slid farther, nearly stopped, and then they suddenly disappeared.

It had all happened with surprising suddenness, and Alan did not wait for those in the flyers to collect their senses. He ducked back into the corridor the way they had come, ran around to the riser, hardly able to see in the dim light, went in, wrenched off the artificial nose Pilson had attached, felt smarting flesh where it had held so well, and felt too the hard object within it, the signaling device that told the authorities where he was at all times.

He threw it to the floor of the cage, nimbly leaped from the

car just as the doors were beginning to swish closed. Next he turned right this time, ran around to where he had seen the door, found that it opened easily, breathed a prayer of thanks, and went through it, closing it gently after him.

Before him was a narrow, dimly lighted corridor that curved downward. He grinned. At least he'd hold them off a while this way.

He didn't want to think what would happen when they waited at the bottom of the shaft and didn't find him in the descending riser. Of course they'd come up the corridor.

But he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

8

ALAN RAN DOWN the corridor, hearing only the whistle of air past his ears and the clomp of his shoes on the hard floor. After a few minutes of running he stopped and took off his shoes. If someone should open the door at the top, they'd hear him if he left them on. He ran in his stockinged feet then.

It was only a precaution. Nobody would open the door, probably. Why should anyone when the signal device was in the riser?

But even running downhill can be tiring, and after a while he slowed to a walk. There was no sense in rushing to the ground, although it would take more than an hour to reach it. As soon as the police saw that he wasn't on the riser they'd start up the corridor for him, perhaps sending a flyer or two to the top to start down.

Pilson must be dead, he told himself. Or as dead as a robot can be. And that sergeant at police headquarters will be out of a job for a while. But I can't fool myself. My troubles aren't over. What happens when the police coming down from the top meet the police coming up from the bottom with me in the middle?

He kept his slow progress down the slope, noting now that the curve was not nearly so extreme as it had been. The shaft was getting larger. He wondered how far down it he actually was, wished there were windows or doors so that he could look out. But there was nothing except the endless curve of walls, illuminated by a continuous tubelight in the ceiling.

Ultimately he came to a level place where a door opened to the inner wall. He found it unlocked, looked down the dark shaft, could see nothing. Probably an opening used for an emergency exit or repairs. On the same level on the other side was a door to the outer wall, and his heart gave a leap at the sight of it. If he could get outside he might evade searchers on the way up—or down. Except that they would open the door just as he had done. And there he would be.

Or would they open it?

He opened the door, saw a ledge only a few feet wide. He stepped out into the outside brightness, looked at the ground from this dizzying height, saw specks that looked like flyers down there but he couldn't be sure at this distance. If he stayed inside the shaft until he heard someone coming; he could step out on the ledge, close the door and move around the shaft out of sight. It might work. And if it didn't . . . Well, he'd think about that when the time came.

"Alan!"

He was so startled he nearly toppled from the ledge. He'd been so busy looking down and considering his predicament he failed to see the flyer above him. He looked up to see Connie Craig wave at him.

He waved back. If she were with them, all was lost. But all seemed rather lost anyway, so what was the difference? If he could get in her flyer without police knowledge, he could take it away from her and escape. It depended on the girl. He'd have to pretend to go along, forced himself to smile as he saw the hovering flyer inch closer to the ledge.

"Back there I thought it was you who went over the edge," Connie was saying as she manipulated the controls

to steady the craft in the winds around the shaft. "Then I went down and saw it wasn't. Are you all right?"

"I'm all right."

He waited as she maneuvered the craft within two feet of the edge, was surprised at the able way she handled the controls, then leaped to the flyer, which bobbed at this new weight, and Connie was kept busy trying to compensate for it.

When the craft was steady, he said, "All right, now let me have the controls."

"What?" she said, turning to him in genuine surprise. "Why should I do that?"

He grabbed her arm, pulled her from the seat, and she commenced fighting him with her fists, the flyer dipping and careening.

"You're a fool!" she cried.

But he said nothing as he edged himself into the seat. There was no sense in taking chances. She might guide the craft right into the arms of the law. And that would be the end—even worse than jumping from the ledge of the shaft.

Once in the pilot's seat he turned the flyabout so he could look down, was satisfied to see flyers at the base of the shaft, unmindful of this solitary flyer so near the top of the dome. Next he eased the flyer carefully and slowly away from the shaft.

Connie's lips were shut tight and her eyes were hostile as she said, "A fine one you are. I should never have bothered to look for you. I rescue you and what do I get?"

"You were Frank Pilson's girl friend and Pilson's surrogate robot was one of them." He shot her a look. "What does that make you?"

"That makes me hate you."

"Why?"

"Because you're so stupid."

"That's easy to say."

"It's not hard to prove."

"How?"

"It's not true that I was Frank Pilson's girl friend. Oh, sure we were friends. But nothing more. Late yesterday he called and asked me if I'd cooperate by letting him use the apartment this morning, today being my day off. He said he was going to enter the criminal games and wanted a place to change. I tried to get him to tell me why he suddenly decided to enter the games, but he said he was in a hurry and couldn't explain. I could see nothing wrong with letting him use the apartment. Frank's been a friend. It was the least I could do. So I consented."

"Are you trying to tell me you didn't know he was sending a robot, a robot run by the police department?"

"Will you let me finish?"

He shrugged. "I suppose there's no way to stop you." Now that the urgency of the action about the shaft was over, he was becoming conscious of her nearness, wished he hadn't been so gruff. Maybe she was telling the truth. Still . . .

"You're impossible," she said, turning away.

"All right. I promise to listen."

She turned back, smoothed her skirt thoughtfully and said, "When I said I would let Frank use the apartment, I thought it would be he who'd use it. But when he came in and started to 'honey' me, I knew something was wrong. I was rattled. I couldn't understand. Then when he kissed me . . ." She shuddered. "Have you ever been kissed by a robot?"

"Well, hardly."

"I knew then it wasn't Frank. I couldn't understand it. Why should someone posing as Frank come to the apartment? And why should he bring you there? I was confused."

"That makes two of us."

"So I made some calls, finally got hold of Frank. He readily admitted he allowed the police department to make use of his image. He said he made a hundred credits out of it." She curled her lip. "I'll never speak to him again."

"But why did you fly to the park the way you did?"

"I wanted to tell you. I knew you were in some kind of trouble, something more than just taking part in the criminal

games, and I also knew that you didn't know about Frank, about the robot replacement. I was just too startled to think straight at the apartment. So I went to the office in a taxi, took one of the staff flyers and started to look for you. Mr. Bohannen thought it was irregular, my taking a flyer, but he didn't stop me."

"Bohannen's got other things on his mind."

"Yes, I know. I didn't know that you were committed to murder him. Not right then I didn't. I've heard it since on the radio and on tridi. They've caught everybody but you, did you know that?"

"Those poor guys—there were five others. I guess Vrillark's right. It doesn't pay to turn criminal."

"Who's Vrillark?"

"The chief of police. A big Vegan."

The flyabout mingled with others over the city, sank slowly to the lower levels and ultimately landed atop Connie's apartment house. As casually as two people would ordinarily move from a flyer, they emerged and moved to the riser, taking it to Connie's floor. They paused for a moment in front of the door, then Connie went in and came out, saying there was no one inside.

There was no alternative to trusting her. Alan turned, entered, and found it was as she had said. He locked the door, sprawled wearily in a chair, told her what had happened to him since he had left her.

"You need something to eat," she said, glancing at the wall clock. "It's after noon."

"I am hungry," he said, "but I hate to take the time. I need to get over to the Testing Center."

"They've got it heavily guarded. Come out to the kitchen. I'll make you a sandwich."

When they were in the kitchen he took a chair at the table and watched her scurry about. "Tell me about Bohannen," he said.

"Must you kill him?"

"If I don't I'll lose my life outside the dome."

"But why? Why have you set yourself on this course?"

"Because he's getting a percentage of I don't know how many people's wages for upgrading them."

She stopped and stared, her lips parted. Then she blinked her eyes and said, "I don't believe it."

He leaned forward. "You mean you work right there in his office and don't know about it?"

"Mr. Bohannen has been nothing but fair to us in the office. It doesn't make any difference whether we're Altairian, Aquarian, Vegan or of Earth."

"It doesn't make any difference either as far as the rake-off is concerned." He grinned. "You're not only beautiful, you're also naïve."

A spot of red showed in her cheeks. "I may be naïve."

"You saw me there yesterday. Would you like to know what he said to me in the office?" When she said nothing he went on, "He told me my score was low—too low for Alan Demuth, I knew."

"Everybody," she said coldly, "thinks his score is low."

"I'm not dumb. It was just too much lower than what it should have been. I was suspicious, puzzled. But when I talked to him about it he said everybody has to make a living, he'd be here only ten years, and he had to make all he could during those years. He asked me for ten percent of what I'd make each year and in return he'd upgrade me to the level of my score."

She said, "I can't believe it, Alan."

"Go ahead, don't believe it if you don't want to. It only happens to be the truth."

"But it's—dishonest."

"Now you are naïve!"

"It's incredible. I know a lot of people come to see him, but I . . ."

"Sure. A lot of people are paying him that ten percent. He's getting rich. How do you suppose he manages to outfit his office the way he does, that rug on the floor, those pictures, that paneling." He darted her a look. "Are you sure you don't know anything about this?"

"Of course I'm sure. After all, there are seven of us in

the office. The machine handles the tests, Mr. Bohannen reviews them and adjusts the final grade in each division and affixes the possible statuses. From our place part of the records go to the status office where the occupation specialties are affixed. Then these are duplicated and the originals returned."

"You don't handle any of the grading?"

"No. We file the records away, and that's no easy job. Filing information on two hundred thousand people is a full time job for the seven of us."

"But can't you see that it is possible, though?"

"Yes," she said soberly, "I do." She was so grave that Alan looked at her curiously. She said, "Why that look?"

"You seem to be worried."

She smiled. "Am I still . . . suspect?" Her teeth were remarkably white and straight. In fact, she was so perfect in every way Alan had a sudden uneasiness, the safe uneasiness he'd had about Pilson. On impulse he got up from his chair, walked over to her, took her in his arms, lifted her from the floor and kissed her soundly.

It was a long kiss and Connie did not protest during it. In fact, she answered it warmly. Alan could feel her quickening heart. Or was it his own?

"Satisfied?" she said, stepping away, her face flushed, her eyes mocking. "I'm not like Frank Pilson's robot at all."

He grinned, feeling a little foolish and yet pleased with himself at the same time. "I guess you're not." Then he added, "I should have known when he drank that coffee."

"I like my coffee hot. Nobody drinks it right down. But I didn't think about that at the time."

"Know something else?" he said as he accepted the sandwich she had prepared.

"What?"

"You're harboring a criminal."

"If what you're saying about Bohannen is true, you're not a criminal."

"It's true. I knew him on Earth. He always managed to wriggle out of things, always had a dozen schemes going."

She said thoughtfully, "He's taking an awful chance with the records. Why hasn't there been an investigation?"

"He's too trusted. I don't think Jeff Branner's in on it. But a lot of other people might be."

She went on, "But even if there were an inquiry of some sort, how would they catch him? You said—"

He nodded and said between bites, "Maybe they're not all the same as me. In my case he interpolated the score lower than it should be, waited for the gripe. I was a fool not to object the first time I took the test. I waited a year, and that suited him fine because he knew I'd be sick of being a flyabout taximan. Then he put the proposition to me. In most cases the applicant is willing to pay for having his score recorded at its real grade, so nothing appears wrong on the record. I imagine my first year score is registered as it should be, but I was given the status of taximan and did nothing about it, don't you see? You can accept any status lower than your score, if you want to. I suppose my accepting the taximan status made some eyebrows rise, but that's about all."

"You think there might be others that have been deliberately altered?"

"I'm hoping there are."

"Two hundred thousand records are a lot of records to go through."

"I know." He sighed. "It seems hopeless."

Connie frowned. "I think I'll return to the office. Maybe I can uncover something."

"You'd better uncover it before tomorrow morning."

"Why?"

"Because by that time I might be dead. Or sentenced to die on those sandy wastes outside the dome."

At that moment the annunciator sounded and they jumped at the sudden raucous blare, saw the face of the Vegan at the doorviewer as they moved to the living room.

Recovering, Connie rose and went to the door, motioned Alan to stand at one side of it beyond range of the scanner before she activated it.

"Yes?" she said calmly.

"Herculum police, Miss Craig," the voice said. "You'd better open the door."

9

GETTING JUST THE right note of indignation in her voice, Connie said, "Am I under arrest?"

"No."

"Then why must I open the door? What right have you to ask me to?"

The Vegan was patient. "Criminal Alan Demuth has been traced to your apartment, Miss Craig. If you don't open the door immediately, I'm afraid we'll have to come through it."

"Very well," Connie said, stepping out of range and darting a what-do-we-do-now-look at Alan.

He nodded for her to open the door.

She did.

At once three persons entered—two Vegans and an Al-tairian—and as Connie stepped to one side, Alan rushed toward them.

The three police officers lifted their guns, but the presence of Connie and the suddenness of Alan's attack tipped the balance in his favor as he collided with them and caromed out the door, managing to catch the edge of it in his hand and slam it after him.

He heard the door jerk open as he raced down the hall, felt the heat of the blast pass his head, saw the hole it made in the wall toward which he was rushing. He turned abruptly just as another blast reached him, nicking his shoulder and spinning him to the floor.

He lunged to his feet in the doorway, still another blast slamming the corridor's end wall, sending debris into his neck and the odor of burning filling the air. The feet were closer now.

Alan raced up the stairs three at a time, and by the time he had gone up two flights he was so winded he didn't think he could make the last one. At the landing to the final flight he spied a large metal barrel, did not stop to think what it might contain or why it was there, but put his shoulder behind it and sent it crashing down the stairs. It bumped down, rolled around on the landing, started to roll down the next flight. He heard a warning cry of the Vegan and a moment later a bone-shattering crunch as the barrel smashed into one of them.

He did not wait to see and hear but opened the cupola door and ran across the roof to Connie's flyabout. Thankful that he had had presence of mind to leave the keys in it, he slid into the seat, kicked it into motion and was just rising when he saw the figures burst out on the roof, their guns in their hands and he thought: The story of my life, or at least this day of it. He depressed the accelerator all the way, shoved the steering mechanism upward and to the right, screaming into the air, the flyer shuddering under the demand for sudden power. Then he was weaving among the afternoon flyers, for the moment safe, but only for a moment. They'd be after him and the flyer before long. He'd have to get rid of it.

He had just had the thought when he saw the flashing red lights of approaching flyers, knew he'd have to act fast, dropped the craft like a plummet atop a building, got out and raced to the cupola, down the stairs and out to the street.

In a window he passed as he walked with studied leisureliness, he saw it was two o'clock, wondered if he'd elude them until six the next morning. Not the way things were going. They were after him in earnest, probably had the whole force working on it. At this rate he'd never get near the Testing Center, much less escape capture.

"Alan Demuth," he heard from a radio in a shop he passed, "continues to remain at large. Residents are urged to be on the lookout for a light-complexioned Earthman

six feet tall, brown eyes, black hair cut short . . ." And he passed out of hearing.

There was no justice, no opportunity, no chance.

He walked with unconcern toward the park and the great shaft so recently the scene of police action, kept to the bushes, tried not to appear furtive, just a man looking for something. There were a few people on the greensward, and those who were there paid him little attention. He kept to the outer edges so that he could dart across the street and into busier sections and thereby lose himself if he were spotted.

He was successful all the way across the park, which took him the better part of an hour, only to find a cluster of policemen before the entrance to the Testing Center. Connie was right; it was heavily guarded. He also saw a number of other people—too many for this time of day—in various casual poses and activities near by: a gardener, a man sweeping the street, several flyabout taxis with drivers he didn't know dozing at the wheel or pretending to, several Testing Center flyers, saunterers and groups having conversations.

Well, Alan, he told himself, there goes your chance to murder Bohannen. How could anyone commit a crime when Herculum was so mobilized against him? There would have to be some other way. But how? He lay in the bushes near the street looking at the building and the people around it for a long time.

There could be no entry from the ground. That was obvious. But the building was only a half dozen stories tall. Suppose I land on the roof. Is it as well guarded as the ground entrances?

It was, he decided, a chance he'd have to take. There was no other way. He'd simply have to go back, get Connie's flyer—no, they'd have traced that. But he could get a flyabout taxi. Maybe his old Two One Three. He'd fly it or some other taxi over the top of the building and drop from it. The machine would continue on and crash into the dome. That would give the ever-vigilant repair crews something to

do, and it would create the diversion he'd need. They might even think he crashed with it.

He painstakingly retraced his steps back across the park, was forced to seek cover in bushes several times as pairs of policemen strolled by. If only a lone policeman could have come by! He'd have confiscated his uniform and perhaps might have been able to enter the building that way.

When he walked into the building, he did so confidently, a man who knew where he was going. In fact, it was easy, for he'd done it almost every day for a year, and he passed Harnak's office without incident, even to glancing in and seeing Harnak there and exchanging glances. But of course Harnak did not identify him because of his change in coloring at the hands of Pilson. He had the same nose, since he had torn the false one away, but he did not have the same complexion or color eyes. So Harnak didn't give him a second glance. There were many drivers and there were new ones all the time.

Some of the flyabout taximen waiting for dispatch looked at him, but they weren't looking at him curiously. So he made it up to the roof without creating attention. But here it was a different story.

Vlenorhak, the taxi clearance man, came rushing toward him nervously. He said as he came across the roof, "What are you doing here? Are you a new man? Do I have your name?"

Alan glanced around, saw the blue flyabout taxi where he had left it and said, "I'm a new man. I'm supposed to take off in Two One Three."

"Oh?" Vlenorhak looked at him suspiciously. "I thought the new man for Two One Three was an Altairian."

"You thought wrong. Better check with Mr. Harnak."

"I'll do just that," the Aquarian said stiffly. "You wait right there." He turned to go back to his cage and make the call.

It was easy. Alan simply walked to the flyabout, activated it and rose slowly from the roof, glancing back to

see Vlenorhak race out of the cage and shout something at him.

He took several deep breaths and turned the flyer toward Bohannen's office. He knew he would be sighted before he got very far, but he didn't care. This time it didn't matter. The unexpectedness of it, the boldness—he was counting on these things to work in his favor.

For a full minute he glided along in the direction of Bohannen's headquarters without creating any attention, just another flyabout taxi. Except that the police would be alerted now and they'd be looking for Two One Three.

He grinned when he saw them, three police flyers moving up fast from the rear. He hadn't been a flyabout man for nothing. The only question was whether or not the taxi would hold together for what he planned to do with it.

Now there were a half dozen police flyers converging on him, so he wasted no more time, suddenly jammed the flyer full throttle to a long sweep to the right, felt himself pressed hard against the seat as it moved in a sharp arc. Just as quickly he shifted his course to the left, shooting toward the top, aiming at the top of the shaft, not caring now who or how many were behind him. He braked suddenly near the top of the dome, in the blinding haze there turned to meet the many flyers moving in from all directions, carefully sighting where he thought the Testing Center would be below him, aimed the craft a few blocks short of it, and at full power dived toward it. The wind rose from a dull whoosh to a high whine before he came upon the rising flyers who now scattered before his charge. At the calculated distance before the Testing Center, he leveled off, braked suddenly and shudderingly, opened the door, and with his hands on the controls for the last maneuver, shoved them out of phase and made to jump.

But he did not jump.

At the last possible moment he saw what he had not been able to see before: Red-uniformed policemen in the cupola and behind it, their guns drawn.

Now the flyabout swept by and Alan turned to the in-

side of the flyer to re-establish phase and bring the craft under control. But already it was gyrating wildly and he was able only to keep himself from being thrown from it as it careened, dipped and bobbed. He saw houses, streets, people, the brightness of the dome, all in a blur as the craft slithered in air. Several times he reached out for the controls, only to be thrown violently about in the craft's thrashing.

The flyabout lost altitude, ultimately struck a housetop and fell in a long arc to the street where it crashed and bounced high in the air. Alan was thrown from the vehicle, slid along the street and rammed a wall.

He got up, but his vision was blurred. He staggered a few steps, heard the final crash of the flyabout a few hundred feet away but was unable to focus his eyes to see it, turned into a narrow passageway, knowing police would converge on the site in force and hoped he would be able to escape somehow.

He stumbled down the passageway, feeling disembodied and numb, preferring to lie down and die but knowing that he must somehow keep on, and then becoming aware of a wetness on his cheek. He put his hand there and it came away with blood on it. It impressed him hardly at all.

In the areaway behind the building he opened a door, fell inside and lay on the floor, hearing mounting activity outside. He must keep on; they'd find him there.

It was then he saw the door in the floor. Just like the one he and the fake Pilson had gone through earlier. Now, summoning what little strength he had left, he lifted the door, slid over the edge to the ladder, managed to lower the door over him, and then hung on the rungs feeling that if he did not he would fall to the tunnel floor. For a long time he hung there, eventually getting up enough strength to lower himself rung by rung, afraid his weakness would envelop him completely and he would fall before he reached the bottom. But he made it, and when his foot came in contact with the hard floor, he slumped to the cool surface and surrendered to unconsciousness.

When he awoke he found himself in a well-lighted room, though a small room, with pipes running through it at the ceiling. There were ceiling lights, lamps, chairs, a table and other comforts he never expected to see underground. The room he was in, he soon discovered, was not really a room but a section of the tunnel. At either end of the room were drapes which closed it off, and as he stirred on his bed, an Aquariian's head appeared momentarily from between the drapes. Then the head was gone and there were sounds from that end of the room.

A moment later the Earthman Alan recognized as the leader of the underground, came in and drew up a chair at the side of the bed saying, "How do you feel, Demuth?"

"Better," Alan said, surprised at the concern in the other's voice. "But how did you know my name?"

The leader snorted. "We know all about what goes on upstairs. Lucky you decided to go under. Otherwise you'd be dead." Though he was whiskered and his flesh was white, the leader's lips curved in a smile and his faded blue eyes twinkled. "You're sleeping in my bed, you know. My name is Carl Garcia."

"The leader," Alan said. "The last time I was here you were about ready to have me tossed down the bottomless pit. How come the change?"

"You're one of us now. We thought you were one of the police officers. Every once in a while they come down here on some pretext and try to roust us out."

"Pilson—he called himself Frank Pilson, but he was really a police sergeant named Anton Loomis—"

Carl nodded. "I know Loomis. And I knew the man you were with was a robot. But I thought you were with the police."

"He said he was going to have you chased out of the tunnels. Hasn't he done it yet? I mean—hasn't he tried?"

Carl grinned now. "Hasn't tried at all. Better not either."

"Why? I don't understand."

"Sure you want to hear it? You look pretty bushed to me."

"I'm all right." He tried to sit up, but the effort was too much for him.

"You got a nasty crack on the head."

"My flyabout went out of control."

"Yes, I know. We've been rooting for you."

"But how do you know these things?"

Carl shrugged. "We have all the comforts of topside. Radio, tridi and what have you. We keep in touch."

"Why do you stay down here?"

"Why do you? And why did you come?" He looked at him squarely. "We're all in the same boat, Alan. We can't go up there without surrendering to the law. But that doesn't mean we can't go up and take what we need. They let us live and we let them live."

"But why should they?" Alan scowled at him. "It seems to me you're a thorn in their sides, and as militant as the police system is, I can't see why they don't come down here and drive you out."

Carl laughed. "They're not likely to do that. You see, down here are all the control valves for the city. It was arranged that way in the beginning. In that large room where you and Pilson were attacked are the master machines for communications, water, electricity. The atomic piles are there. The city is self-sustaining. It won't be a hundred years or more before they have to be renewed. But when they were put in there was a provision for their being turned off in case of emergency or if Herculum were to be abandoned for some reason or other. We control the valves and we have a system of perpetual watch. In case a party comes down to clear us out, all we have to do is turn everything off. They know that. They don't dare come down to do that. The people upstairs wouldn't stand for it."

"I see. You have a sort of stalemate."

"Exactly. Besides, the forces in control don't want the people of Herculum to know we exist, which they would certainly know if we turned everything off down here." Carl Garcia got to his feet. "You look mighty weak. You need something to eat."

"No, I—"

"I insist. And no more questions." Carl left the room, a thin, pale man who looked as if he needed the food more than Alan did. But Alan saw that there was no hesitancy in his walk, no sign of weakness in the way he conducted himself. And he remembered the brightness of the pale eyes.

In a few minutes the Aquariian he had first seen at the drapes entered the room with a tray and Alan ate with gusto food every bit as good as any he had eaten on Herculum. The Aquariian said it had been prepared in "the kitchen," wherever that was, but outside of that he was saying nothing.

"Leader Garcia does the talking," the Aquariian said. He produced a package of cigarettes from his pouch and gave them to Alan. "He also wants you to have these." And when Alan finished his meal, the Aquariian, who wouldn't even tell him his name, picked up the tray and walked sedately from the room on soundless feet.

A little later Carl returned to sit on the chair again. "Feeling better?"

"Much better. Where do you get the food? Or should I guess?"

"You've guessed it. We're accomplished stealers. Have to be in order to exist."

"Don't any of you ever get caught?"

Carl smiled thinly. "Once in a while. But for every one of us who gets caught, we retaliate by catching one of them."

"Them? You mean a resident, or do you mean the police?"

"The police. The citizens of Herculum are not to blame. But the police, under the heel of Vrillark, perpetuate the conditions on Herculum. We feel justified."

Alan nodded. "And Jurnik, unfortunate as that was, isn't the first person to fall into the bottomless pit?"

"No, indeed not. And of course the pit isn't really bottomless. But it's so deep one can't really hear anything that hits the bottom."

Alan tried sitting up again. This time, despite his sore

muscles and throbbing head, he was able to. "What time is it?" he asked, feeling a little giddy with effort.

"About noon."

"Noon?"

"Noon of the day after."

Alan looked at him somberly. "And I never killed Bohannen."

"No, you didn't. Now you are fair game for Vrillark and his henchmen. If they ever catch you, you'll get a quick decision in the Hall of Justice and then"—he made a rapid motion with his hand—"out you go on the burning sands."

"A failure," Alan said. "I thought I'd be able to do it."

"Oh, you still may. There's always a chance, if you want to take it. But I don't think you will. Many of us have set out to avenge ourselves for real wrongs—several have even tried to kill Bohannen. But they never succeeded. You can guess what happened to them."

"Pilson expressed great surprise to find you all down here. He said it cleared up a lot of missing men in police files."

"The missing men," Carl said grimly, "are those who went back up and tried to carry out some criminal intent—criminal, you understand, from the standpoint of Vrillark."

"How long have you been down here?"

"Three years. I got tired of trying to raise my score to where it should be. I applied for and received criminal status five times, all told. I succeeded twice. Once for thievery and once for robbery."

Alan gave him a hard look. "Are you telling me you weren't granted your true score?"

"Who is? Bohannen's little racket covers a lot of the people on Herculum. And the man before him did the same thing. It's a choice job and Vrillark and the powers that be are getting rich off the system. You see, they had to find a man of Bohannen's caliber to fill the job. About the only honest man in a high place I know is Jeff Branner. He's the status chief. I don't know whether he just closes his eyes to it all or whether he's just not aware. Everyone respects him, and so many men gripe to him about their score and

about Bohannen, he takes it as a sort of Herculum disease. Branner thinks living under a dome just naturally makes men feel that way, I guess. Anyway, he's never been moved by it."

"And the rest of you down here—you are all disgusted because there doesn't seem to be anything that can be done about the corruption, is that it?"

Carl sighed, moved in the chair. "I think the thing that disgusts us here is that there are so many men who are willing to pay their ten percent. They know it's wrong, but they lack the courage of their convictions. They feel they can pay ten percent of what they make for ten years and still come out ahead. And not be in any trouble. Their records will be clean when they return to their planets. It's as simple as that."

Alan digested this. Then he said, "Haven't you thought about an attack—a frontal attack?"

Carl heaved himself out of the chair. "That's all we ever do think about. We have guns, heaters, blasters and stunners. We have been waiting until our numbers grow large enough so that we'd have some chance. When I first came down here there were barely twenty men here. Now there are close to two hundred."

"That ought to be enough."

"I think so. But we haven't devised a good plan yet. We'd be cut down if we came up with no set plan."

"It seems to me," Alan said, "that the answer lies in the Testing Center. That's where the records are kept. Why not attack the Center and investigate the records and then present the discrepancies to the Justices?"

"We've thought of that. But none of us knows anything about the records, how they're kept and how to interpolate them. We know they're wrong, but we wouldn't know how to prove it. I don't suppose you worked in that Division, did you?"

"No, I didn't, but I know somebody who does."

"Somebody who can be trusted?"

"Sure. A girl named Connie Craig."

Carl stared at him. "I wish I could believe that."

"Believe me, she's to be trusted."

Carl sat in the chair again, his thin body relaxed, but his pale blue eyes were wide open, staring at the ceiling. "If that's true," he said finally, "that's what we've been waiting for."

"And what's more, I think I know how to do it."

"How?"

"Is there a door from a tunnel in the Testing Center?"

"I think so."

"Why couldn't we use that to get in?"

"It has been thought of." Carl frowned. "We'd better have a general meeting about this. Maybe the time for action is right now. Do you think you will be well enough in a day or two to carry out a foray like that with us?"

Alan grinned. "I'm ready now, if Bohannen's at the end of the trail."

10

IN THE AREA TO one side of the giant machines the tunnel was flooded with light, and most of the two hundred underground dwellers were there, though Carl Garcia explained that some men had to take guard posts.

"It's not often we have a meeting like this," he told Alan. "The reason is we're sitting ducks when we do. The rest of the time we're spread out under Herculum and it would take an army a year to clean us all out."

Not exactly sitting ducks, Alan noted. He saw heaters and blasters and stunners everywhere, to say nothing of knives and clubs and weapons unseen. The eyes of these men were determined eyes. He felt good about being on their side.

The lights were placed at intervals in the ceiling and the cords reached to wires that had been bared. "We take the juice when and where we please," Carl explained. "The same

with the phones, radio and tridi." He grinned and added, "They never bill us either."

The men had brought chairs with them, and Alan joined Carl and four others at a table. There was no need to rap for order because there was no noise or horseplay and very little conversation. Carl Garcia simply got to his feet and said, "Gentlemen, you've all been wondering when the great day would dawn, when we'd march against the unscrupulous ones topside. Many of you have been impatient, some of you haven't wanted to march at all, preferring to stay down here and live out your lives. The rest of you fit somewhere in between." His eyes moved from face to face. "It appears that the time has come to move."

There was a general shuffling of feet. Aquariians trembled a little. The proboscises of Altairians flexed nervously. There was a flurry of Vegan feathers. Earthmen coughed.

"I have been reluctant to order an attack," Carl went on, "because it must be orderly and well planned, and proposals for it have been vague and nebulous, other than that we simply go up there and get as many as we can. Besides, it has been pleasant down here, much better than work with penal groups or repair crews or a one-way trip to the sands outside the dome. It is nice to know that our numbers grow week by week. Sometimes I think if we wait long enough we might ultimately have more people down here than they have up there."

There was laughter at this; Alan was pleased to note. It made the faces relax. Men who still had humor were not lost.

"I don't know how many of you have been following the games. Perhaps all of you know about Alan Demuth who is here beside me. If you don't, just let me tell you that he chose the maximum and made it specific. You can understand what a tizzy Vrillark was in when this came to his attention. He could not allow Demuth to reach his goal or complete his act, which was to murder Jack Bohannen. I don't think we need to wonder why." Again a little laughter. "Most of us have wished we had the courage to ask for

the maximum and make Bohannen our target. We have simply been satisfied with inching our way up by lesser criminal deeds, until we became so soured with it we committed some grave act which necessitated our voluntary removal from among our friends upstairs, via these tunnels."

He paused again, and there was a respectful silence. Then he went on. "We cannot live out our days down here. We owe it not only to ourselves but to those people still above us who are victims of Herculum's corruption, who are in bondage, to rise up against what we all clearly see as an evil. We did not come to Herculum to engage in a civil war, but for the good of Herculum it seems that we have no alternative."

There was more, but the assembly needed no words to kindle their spirits. It was evident in every eye, in every face. These men were not really happy underground. They longed for normal lives, for a chance to go home when their times came, an opportunity to once again live their lives on their native planets.

When it was over, Carl asked for comment.

Allupul, one of the Vegans in the forefront of the crowd, rose majestically to say, "All this talk. All I want to do is go up there and have done with it. I was not made to live under the ground. If I live here much longer I shall even forget how to fly."

An Earthman midway to the rear got to his feet. "Yes, Mr. Carpentier," Carl said. And Carpentier said, "I've not been down here long but I want to say I don't like being a parasite on the civilization over my head. I say attack and get it over with."

"Easy to say, Mr. Carpentier," Carl said calmly. "But we need a foolproof plan."

"Plan, plan, plan," an Altairian in the front row said. "That's what I heard the first day I came down here and I've heard it every day since."

"What would you suggest, Kril?"

"I say like Carpentier does. Kill. Take over. I'm tired of being a mouse running to a hole."

Carl said coldly, "Killing will be held to a minimum if

I have anything to do with it. Those whose classification is police work aren't responsible. Their leaders are. It's the leaders we must get rid of—and by that I don't mean murder. They shall be tried in the Hall of Justice."

An Aquarian got tremblingly to his feet. "Justice," he said, "is pliable, I understand that. But suppose the Hall of Justice doesn't decide in our favor but theirs?"

"We must accept justice for what it is, Tlarogil. Blind, justice works one way. It is up to us to see that justice opens its eyes and works for us."

Alan began to see method in Carl's manner. He was letting the men vent their feelings and pointing out the flaws in their thinking. When all had had their say, then he would tell them what to do. Carl was not the leader for nothing. He saw that now.

Finally, when the discussion began to die down, Carl Garcia presented his plan. He said they would first capture Jeff Branner.

"Why Jeff Branner?" Allupul wanted to know. "He's one of the few good men in Herculum."

"I know," Carl said patiently. "That's why we must take him. He must see that what we're doing is honest, that we're trying to rectify a wrong, not being merely rebellious."

Allupul said, "And what do we do with him when we have him?"

"After he sees what we do, then he can be our spokesman before the Justices."

"But suppose he won't do it?"

"He will because, as you say, he's one of the few good men in the top echelons."

The plan was to come up through one of the rooms in the Division of Status building, kidnap Branner, and return to the tunnels. Next, they would come up in the room of a building near the Testing Center.

"Why not come up into the Testing Center the same way?" Kril said. "No sense in coming up near it."

"By the time they learn of Branner's kidnapping, the police will be out in force guarding all the important en-

trances to the tunnels. Do you suppose they won't have men guarding the one in the Testing Center? We must come up through one not under surveillance." He rattled a few papers on the table before him. "Number Seven Three One Seven is a door off the North Branch Sub-division A-Six. It opens in the rear of a storage room beneath a large dwelling unit."

"And then we attack the Center?" Krill went on.

"Yes. We assemble in the storage room and leave it in squads."

Next, the men in the tunnel entrance room of the Testing Center would be removed so that the rest of the squads could move up inside the Center itself.

"Why all this activity at the Center?" Tlarogil asked. "Why not take over the police station?"

Carl smiled. "I propose that you answer your own question."

The Aquariian had a violent fit of trembling as others looked to him for an answer.

Tlarogil said, "Because our records are there."

"Right. We will prove our case through our records. Mr. Branner will be the impartial observer to see that we do not alter or destroy them."

Carpentier rose. "I have a suggestion."

"What is it?"

"That we turn everything off down here when we attack the Center. That way there will be confusion everywhere."

"Yes," Carl said. "It will bring part of the police force down here, divide them when they ought not be divided. An excellent suggestion, Mr. Carpentier."

Alan smiled to himself. That was already part of the plan. But Carl let it be Carpentier's own contribution. Once again Alan was forced to admire Carl Garcia.

"Most of you are wondering when all this is to take place," Carl said. "We plan to move at midnight tomorrow. I suggest meanwhile that you clean those guns of yours and outfit yourselves with all the torches you can. Some areas have light that is not dependent upon the machines here, but

others do not. We will be prepared. Let us hope that the police are not."

The session continued for some time with Carl designating squad leaders and inspecting guns and outlining each man's part in the plan. Then they moved from the tunnel chamber, the lights were put out and in a little while it was as it had been when Alan and Pilson had first entered it.

Later, in Carl's room, there was a council of war with Allupul, Kril, Carpentier and Tlarogil in attendance, chosen by Carl because they had spoken up at the meeting.

"I didn't mention it at the meeting," Carl said, "but Alan Demuth here has a friend who can help us in the records department. Her name is Connie Craig, a clerk in Bohannen's office."

Tlarogil nodded. "I know of her. I know one of my own race in the office and was introduced to her."

Carpentier said with a grin, "You're not the only one who knows her. I met her when I went in to see Bohannen on my score."

Carl turned to Alan. "I want you to call her."

"Call her? I knew I'd have to get in touch with her, but—"

"One of our technicians will put you through." He called to someone beyond the drapes, a head appeared. "Tell Herki I want to see him." Then back to Alan, "You'd better just tell her you'll see her. No sense in spilling everything over the phone. We'll get you there. Do you think you could bring her back?"

Alan considered it. It was a lot to ask, considering the gloom and danger in the tunnels, but it would be better to be sure of her. He might not be able to contact her during the conflict. He said, "I think I can bring her back."

Carl looked at him for a long time and then said, "One thing more, Demuth." He paused for a moment, then spoke with surprising firmness, "I want you to be second in command. You have the aptitude, the ability, and by your choice of status you have shown you have the courage. Do you accept?"

Alan's heart beat a tattoo. It was more than he expected,

and hoped he'd be equal to it. "I accept," he said solemnly.

"Very well." Carl turned to the others in the room. "Does everyone understand?"

There were nods. Carpentier said, "It's a job I wouldn't want. Good luck, Demuth."

In a few moments an Altairian named Herki appeared at the drapes and Alan left with him for a walk down the tunnel.

"We'll get a junction box," Herki said. "It's easier to make contact that way." He carried a small bag of tools with him. It might have been a walk on Herculum, it was so natural, the repairman and his tools, the nonchalance of the stroll. At length they came to a division point and Herki unscrewed the cover from one of the metal boxes at the side of the tunnel and inserted wires. To these he attached a small viewbox and microphone.

Alan dialed information, got Connie's number from the circuits there, and then called. In a few moments her face appeared before him.

"Alan!" she said in surprise. Then she frowned. "It is you, isn't it? You're not very clear. Where are you?"

"I can't tell you that."

"I've been so worried. When you left here I know they shot at you and I didn't know whether you were hit or not and they wouldn't tell me what happened to you."

"I'm all right."

"They've been keeping watch here. I knew you must have escaped—at least I hoped you did. I think they're expecting you to come back. They've questioned me about you, but I didn't know if it was a trick or not."

"They didn't arrest you?"

"No. Mostly because you might come back. That's my theory, anyway."

"Can you leave your apartment?"

"I think so. They'll think I'm coming to you."

"They probably have this line tapped."

"I suppose. I hope I haven't said anything."

"You haven't." His mind raced. Where could he have her

meet him? If he went to her apartment it would be too dangerous. But where could she go? No place that didn't involve danger. But it couldn't be helped. "Remember where I first kissed you?"

"What?"

"I want you to be four levels below where I first kissed you, in the area behind this structure. Do you understand me? I will meet you there as soon as I can make it."

"Yes, I think I understand. I'm sure I do." She smiled, then became grave again. "I've missed you, Alan."

"And I, you. See you soon."

Herki disconnected the wires and they returned to Carl's room. Alan said, "Can you tell me how to get to the nearest tunnel exit to where Connie Craig lives?"

"You talked to her then?"

"Yes. It's all set up."

Carl brought out a sheaf of papers, examined them. "You say she lives here?" He pointed to the spot on the map.

"Yes. Is this the nearest exit?" Alan indicated a red circle with his forefinger.

"That's it." Then Carl said with genuine concern, "You're not going there yourself, are you?"

"I don't want to involve anyone else."

"I'm going with you." He glanced at Herki. "Want to come along?"

"You bet," Herki said eagerly. "Haven't been out of these tunnels for I don't know how long."

An hour later, after trudging down tunnels and turns Alan knew he'd never remember, they came to one of the ladders.

Carl directed the light from his torch upward. "That's it. Opens three places down and across the back areaway. Come on." He started up the ladder. "Herki, you cover me when I open the lid." Herki clambered up after him, putting Alan third on the rungs.

It was night, which is not to say that it was dark, for a world of two suns has little darkness. But it was not as light as day, for one of the suns was not in the sky and the other

was near the horizon. Carl encountered no difficulty or opposition in raising the lid, stepped out into a storage room, followed by Herki and Alan.

"You stay here, leave the lid up," Carl told Herki. "Also, be ready to open the door when we all come in. Got it?"

"Got it," Herki said. "I guess I won't see much of the topside this trip."

"Not this trip," Carl said with a smile. "Next one makes it permanent. We'll all be up here then."

Leaving Herki there, they eased themselves out the door, looked down the street between the buildings.

Carl said, "My guess is she lives over there." He pointed to one building. It seemed right to Alan; he said so. Carl went on, "From what you told her, she ought to be coming down this street from either direction. You look one way and I'll look the other."

From around one of the buildings a solitary figure appeared, walking toward them. Carl said, "I think she's coming now."

Even as he said it a flyer glided into view overhead and three other forms appeared behind the girl.

"Taking no chances," Carl said grimly. "Let's get back out of sight."

They moved back to the wall, watched her approach. She saw them about the same time the others did and started to run.

"Halt!" came the cry from behind her. From overhead a brilliant beam shattered the dimness, illuminating the area.

Connie did not stop but ran to them, breathless on her arrival. Alan took her arm, propelled her through the door which Herki opened at the optimum time. There were clicks of stunners, but no one was hit. Then came the *blam!* of heaters and blasters. They were peppered by debris from the building.

"Get her down in the tunnel," Carl cried. "I'll hold them off for a while." He leveled his gun and started to shoot.

Alan guided her to the hole in the floor. "There's a ladder," he said. "Start down."

Connie did not stop to question it, but did as she was told. Alan wanted Herki to go next, but Herki would not budge. To save argument, Alan started down. Halfway down he heard Herki on the ladder. Alan and Connie had reached the tunnel floor when Carl started down, with Herki still coming. They stepped out of the way.

Suddenly the opening above was bathed in a bright red glow and there were screams and shots. Then three persons came tumbling down: Herki, who did not have far to fall, but who was nonetheless injured and could not get out of the way; then Carl Garcia, who struck Herki; and finally, a red-uniformed Altairian, who was dead and who fell on the two. Rocks and dust and debris tumbled down out of the hole following them.

Herki had been knocked unconscious. Carl, grimacing with pain, slid from under the Altairian policeman, aimed his blaster up the shaft and fired it. The report was deafening, and out of the hole now fell larger rocks, pieces of metal and sand, all but burying Carl, who struggled toward Alan.

Alan tried to help him, reached for him, but at the last moment, with sand now filling the tunnel itself, and unable to extricate himself, Carl said, "Take over, Alan."

"I'll dig you out," Alan said, frantically working with his hands.

"No," Carl said with difficulty. "I've been hit. I'm hurt bad. You"—he grimaced again—"go while you have a chance." He managed to smile weakly as the sand from the shaft covered his shoulders, his chin. He was still smiling as it ran over his face and completely buried him.

Alan held Connie close to him until the sand stopped coming down.

Then she turned to the place where the tunnel now was completely blocked and said, "Who was he?"

With effort and trying to keep his voice in control, Alan said, "He was Carl Garcia, the leader of the underground. A fine man."

"A brave man," she said.

THE KIDNAPPING of Jeff Banner, Chief of Status, would have run off well, had it not been for an unforeseen obstacle at the end of it. No one was to blame, for speed was essential to the entire operation of the freeing of Herculum, and minor points were overlooked. But even a minor point becomes a major one in a time of crisis.

When Alan and Connie left Carl Garcia, Herki and the Altairian policeman buried under tons of sand and debris in the tunnel, it was with sad hearts that they moved along the corridors, and Alan could see that it had an even more profound effect on Connie. But of course it was because he had become used to violence in the past days, while she had been exposed to so little of it.

"Don't think about it," he said. "It happens in war. And this is war. Or as close as you can get."

She did not understand yet. "War?" She looked at him curiously. "War against whom?"

Then he explained it all to her, and she became more amazed with each step.

"Do you mean there are actually people living down here?"

"Men. No women."

"And the main reason is that they've become so disgruntled because they didn't get a good test score?"

And then he went into detail. "You don't seem to be able to understand that all this has happened under your very nose upstairs." He stopped and faced her to say, "You've got to get rid of your unwillingness to believe that such a thing is possible. Why do you suppose we've got you down here? You are the only one I know who can be trusted to go over the records."

"But two hundred men!" She shook her head. "It's fantastic! I find it hard to believe—"

"That's just it. It's as hard for a person on the topside to think there are two hundred men living in tunnels under them as it is for the same person to think that the whole testing setup is run in an illegal way."

"I suppose you're right." They started walking again and Alan did his best to direct their steps to his point of origin. "I think I understand now why I couldn't see the records," she continued. "I went there and tried to work in some of the records along with my regular work, to check them out as you wanted. But Mr. Bohannen came around and looked at me in an odd way and wanted to know what I was doing."

"That was because you let me use your apartment. You're suspect, that's all. If you had been one of the other clerks, he might not have paid you any mind." He shot her a look. "Could you have convinced any of your co-workers to assist?"

"I wouldn't want to try. I don't trust them. Sometimes, since we've talked about it, I feel perhaps I'm the only one in the office who doesn't know what's going on."

As they walked he told her what he wanted her to do, told her how they were going to kidnap Branner and invade the Testing Center. "And that's where you come in. You've got to go over some of the records in front of Branner. You've got to prove there is corruption."

"Still, there are two hundred thousand—"

"There are only two hundred men down here," he said. "All of them claim their scores were altered. You won't have to go through two hundred thousand. And you'll have plenty of evidence before it's all over."

Eventually, after having wandered an hour longer than Alan felt they should have, he came back to the meeting area. At once he informed Allupul, Kril, Carpentier and Tlarogil what had happened to Carl Garcia, and a general meeting was called.

There was no argument. The four Carl had spoken to concerning Alan's ascendancy to power, related it to the

gathering, and they accepted him without question. He in turn introduced Connie and told them what part she was to play and at what cost she had been brought underground. They seemed satisfied and eager to get on with it, and Connie was impressed with their determination.

"I can't imagine how anyone could possibly live under the ground like this," she said when the meeting was over. "I know I could never do it."

Carpentier, who was standing nearby and who overheard her, shrugged and said, "You have lived under a dome. It's not much different, is it?"

"I suppose not."

The raid on the Status Center was to be a small operation, Alan decided, and he picked Carpentier and Kril to accompany him, which pleased them. Connie would be left below for use that night in the Testing Center operation. He asked her if she was afraid to stay underground.

"No," she replied. "I'm only afraid for you. I know I can handle myself, but how do you know what waits for you up there? It might be worse than what happened when you went after me to bring me down here."

He shrugged. "Nobody knows what's in store for him. Sure, they will have the place guarded. Might even have the door guarded. But that is the chance we'll have to take. You can't win anything without taking a chance."

Connie put her small hand on his arm and said with real concern, "Will you please be careful, Alan Demuth?"

"That I will be," he said. Then on impulse he drew her into his arms and kissed her soundly.

The next morning everything was double-checked. Heaters, blasters, stunners, torches, clothing. There was to be no slip-up. Then, after lunch, Alan, the Altairian, Kril, and Carpentier started down the tunnels toward the exit below the Status Center, armed with one of the maps of the underground with exit points.

They came to the exit marked on the map, started upward, Alan in the lead on the ladder. His palms were clammy, which made grasping the rungs difficult, and his

heart was beating like a jack hammer. But through dry lips with a dry tongue he offered a prayer for the operation, hoping it would have no terrible end like the one involving Connie Craig.

Carpentier was second on the ladder, with Kril the last. They did not move fast, preferring to rest on the upward climb to catch their breaths. When they emerged they would need all their wind and they would have to be alert.

When Alan at last reached the door in the floor, he stayed on the ladder for a long time, not moving.

"What's the delay?" Carpentier whispered to him. Even the whisper echoed in the shaft.

"Listening," Alan explained. "But I don't hear any steps. I don't think anybody's in the room."

"You lift the lid," Carpentier said. "I'll have my stunner ready. I don't think we'd better blast anything."

"O.K." Alan pushed against the door with both hands on the side opposite the hinges. It was a heavy door and hard to open, but it finally moved upward.

But it groaned and squeaked as it did so.

Throwing caution to the breeze, Alan shoved it open all the way and clambered out of the shaft, his gun drawn.

No one was there.

Something clicked in his mind. Someone should have been there, he felt. Surely the police would not be so stupid as to leave any tunnel exit unguarded.

Or was it just luck?

The three crawled out of the shaft, all surprised as Alan at the lack of opposition.

"I don't like it," Kril said. "There's something funny."

Carpentier shook his head. "I don't either."

"Let's not dwell on it," Alan said. "Let's capitalize on it and get Branner."

They put their guns out of sight and opened a door to a corridor, walking down it until they came to the stairways at the front of the building. It had been decided to use the stairways rather than risk being caught in a riser.

Clerks in the building didn't give them a second glance.

There seemed to be nothing unusual in three men walking about in the Status Center.

The same clerk was in Branner's outer office. Clerk Krenor's eyes were as red as when Alan had first seen him.

The Altairian clerk said, "Yes?"

"We'd like to see Mr. Branner," Alan said.

"Do you have an appointment?" was the weary question.

"Yes," Carpentier said. "Guard him, Kril."

This was not part of the plan, but there was no going back now. Alan slid his eyes to Carpentier, saw nothing but good humor in the Earthman's eyes, so he turned and went into Branner's office.

Jeff Branner looked up from his desk to see the two Earthmen. His first reaction was surprise. Then this was replaced by disapproval. "I don't believe you have an appointment," he said. Then he looked squarely at Alan. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

Alan laughed, but Carpentier said, "You've seen us both, Mr. Branner. We've been here to see about applying for criminal status."

"Oh?" His manner became firm, almost curt. "What do you want this time?"

"We are requesting a change of status for you."

"Appointments are made with my clerk, Krenor." Then Branner's eyes opened wide. "Did you say a change in status for *me*?"

"Yes," Alan said, drawing out his stunner. "You will come with us, please."

"Come with you?" The eyes were angry. "I certainly will do nothing of the kind. What do you think you are doing?"

"Kidnapping you," Alan said simply.

Branner leaned forward, looked at him closely. "I do know you. You're—you're Alan Demuth!"

"Yes, he is," Carpentier said, going around the desk. "Now you'd better get on your feet." He reached for Branner's arm.

"Don't you dare touch me," Branner said, moving away

and getting to his feet. "I do not care to associate with people who take the law in their own hands."

Carpentier's hand was lightning fast. It enclosed Branner's arm in a tight grip and Branner was propelled toward the door, protesting. "You'll never get away with it, you two," he said. "I'll see that you are both tried in the Hall of Justice."

In the outer office he stopped to stare at Kril, whose stunner was pointed at the clerk's head.

"Better let him have a little," Carpentier said to Kril.

The stunner snapped. The clerk fell forward amid the papers on his desk.

Branner turned to Carpentier to say furiously, "I'll see that you get the maximum for this."

"Come on," Carpentier said.

It was odd, Alan thought. For a man who said he would be reluctant to lead men, Carpentier was taking a lot upon himself. But perhaps he misjudged himself. Perhaps Carpentier was more of a leader than he thought he was.

They paraded through offices and down the stairs to the basement room. The door in the floor was still open (I should have closed that, Alan thought) and no one was there. Alarm bells rang in his head, but he could not determine what was wrong. There was not time to weigh suspicions.

They gathered around the shaft opening, Alan behind Branner, Carpentier facing him on the other side of the hole, and Kril a little to one side of him.

It was then that Carpentier gave his big smile, drew his gun.

"Now, Mr. Demuth, if you will be so kind as to close the opening to the shaft, we shall be ever so grateful. At the moment the several flyers we have had hovering over the Status Center are landing behind us in the areaway—"

But that is as far as he got. Kril moved with electric speed, hit Carpentier hard with his shoulder. The Earthman fell into the shaft, the stunner he was holding clattering to the floor. He made frantic attempts to grab at the rungs and at the sides of the shaft, but his downward plunge was too

rapid. His scream echoed in his drop to the tunnel floor. There was no sound after he hit bottom.

No time for explanations, conjectures. "Down, Mr. Branner," Alan said to the stunned Status Chief. "Get down in that hole. Climb down the ladder."

"Better hurry," Kril said, moving his stunner in a menacing manner. His proboscis trembled. His eyes were red.

At that moment Alan knew what he had missed. The clerk's eyes had been red when they should have been green. A giveaway he had overlooked.

"You knew," Alan said as Branner lowered himself over the edge. "You knew about Carpentier."

"Of course," Branner said stiffly—as stiffly as a man can who is going down a ladder.

"A robot?"

"No." And as if he'd said too much, Branner set his lips together as his head disappeared from view.

They found Carpentier dead when they reached the tunnel floor, not that Alan had expected him to survive the long fall. But he would have liked to question him. Now he still didn't know if there were others in the movement who were not true to it.

"Never did trust him," Kril said. "He was a funny guy. Kept pretty much to himself. Except at meetings. Then he was always full of suggestions."

They left Carpentier there and moved down the tunnel, Branner sputtering and reminding them of what a horrible fate awaited them on the burning sands.

"The people of Herculum will never stand for it. You two will go to your deaths. Nothing will be gained by what you do with me."

Alan said calmly as they walked along, "If you put us to death, you will have to execute about two hundred others."

"Two hundred others?" Branner shook his head. "I don't understand."

"You will," Kril said, "when you meet them. Two hundred men disgusted with the corruption upstairs. That's

why they're all down here. They can't take the large scale graft."

"Corruption is a dirty word," Branner said. "It is tossed at me every day. I don't believe there is corruption on Herculum. You are all disgruntled men. You are down here because you are dissatisfied with yourselves, not with the system. You expected too much." After a pause, he said, "Are you trying to tell me two hundred men actually live in this maze of tunnels?"

"That's true, Mr. Branner," Kril said.

"It can't be," Branner said firmly. "If they did I would have heard about it. Surely Chief Vrillark would know about it and he never mentioned it to me."

"Of course he didn't," Alan said. "He didn't want you or anybody else to know. I imagine that Mr. Bohannen never mentioned it to you either."

"Are you still saying that Bohannen is unscrupulous?"

"Don't let me say it, Mr. Branner. Let some others tell you how they were offered upgrading for a price." They walked into the area beside the machines. "And here we are. We'll have some corroboration within minutes."

He led Branner into the tunnel where Carl's room was, pulled the drapes aside and let Branner enter it. Allupul, Tlarogil and Connie Craig were there. Alan said, "Meet two disgruntled men, Mr. Branner." He introduced the Vegan and the Altairian. "And this is Miss Connie Craig, one of the clerks in Mr. Bohannen's office."

"Don't tell me, Miss Craig," Branner said dryly, "that you are disgruntled, too."

Connie said coolly, "I felt as you do, Mr. Branner, until I learned some of the facts in the case."

"And just what are the facts?"

"That there is widespread dissatisfaction in Herculum."

"Is that so? Suppose you tell me why you think there is."

"I have seen the men down here. I have talked to many of them. What Alan told you is true. There are many men getting rich because of fear, fear that they instill in those who come to Herculum to put in their years to earn a place at

home. They return there so much the poorer because of it. The men you will see down here are those who resisted."

Branner sighed. "It's the old story, isn't it? It seems I shall never hear the end of it until I leave Herculum."

Alan said, "Yes, you will hear the end of it, Mr. Branner. That's why you were brought down here."

"If you had proof, I would believe you. But all I have heard so far are the complaints of the dissatisfied. Does anyone have evidence, other than hurt feelings or dissatisfaction because he did not make the status he was aiming for?"

"You will have your proof."

"Will I?" Branner's eyes were mocking.

"Every man down here has been, at some time or other, offered upgrading at a price. Mr. Bohannen is behind all that. But it doesn't stop there. We have reason to believe that Chief Vrilark is also part of the set-up. It has evidently existed here for some years. Just how many people are involved, we don't know. We feel certain however that you are an honest man. We will let you be the judge of what we discover when we invade the Division of Testing."

Branner was astonished. "Invade the Division of Testing? You are mad. Are you thinking of taking over control of Herculum yourselves? If you are, you had better think twice. You would never be recognized by any of the four powers involved. It is senseless."

"No, we aren't planning anything like that. All we are asking is that Herculum be restored to what it was prior to the seizing of control by men in high places. This control is handed over to favored individuals when tenures are completed. One of the reasons nothing has been done before is that residency here is not permanent. The dissatisfied ones ultimately go home at the end of their terms; and the rich ones reluctantly leave also, since no one can stay beyond his ten years."

"A noble enterprise," Branner said. He looked around the room. "All this was stolen, I suppose."

"Yes."

"I thought you said there are two hundred men down here."

"There are. You will meet most of them before it's over."

A brittle silence ensued. Then Branner said coldly, "And just when are you planning this little venture?"

"Tonight, Mr. Branner."

Kril, who had stood in shadows, laughed and said, "You won't have to wait long for your proof, Mr. Branner. Some of us down here have been waiting for it for years. You are the lucky one."

"Rebels," Branner said snappishly. "Every one of you. Destroyers of established order. You will all get what you deserve."

"Amen," Allupul said. "That's all we want."

Alan said, "Sometimes it is necessary to take action against an established order."

"I don't believe it," Branner said. "You can't name a time when such action would be justified."

"I can. When the established order is corrupt."

"I hate that word," Branner snapped back. "It ought to be outlawed on Herculum."

Tlarogil, who had stood mutely by during it all, said, "It will be, Mr. Branner. Just leave it to us."

12

THE GENERAL meeting was a short one. The men were impatient to have done with it and so was Alan. But there was more to consider than the mere movement against a force that was sure to be arrayed against them. There was planning. Everything would have to go off with split-second precision.

Jeff Branner was impressed with what he saw, but he still insisted he needed positive proof before he'd take the word of anyone.

"The fact that there are so many living down here indicates something is wrong," he said. "But whether it is with the Testing Center or not remains to be seen. I still think you ought to proceed in an orderly, legal manner. You would be heard."

"We have tried to be heard," Alan said. "Every one of us. But all that we spoke into were deaf ears."

"I would speak up for you. I would insist."

Alan shook his head. "I'm afraid they wouldn't listen to you, Mr. Branner. You have been allowed to hold your position because you suspected nothing."

"I don't believe that."

"We'll see."

At the meeting Alan conferred with each squad independently, giving instructions. He explained that since Carpentier proved to be an agent implanted in the underground there might be others and for their own protection he was talking only with small groups. None would know what the others were doing. It reduced the chance for failure if there should be spies still among them.

Since Carpentier was in on the original plan, it might be that he alerted Herculum police to it. Therefore it had to be abandoned. Not that the Testing Center would not be invaded, but that the attack would come from a different direction. The police would be looking for an attack via the tunnels. This would be an attack from the air.

Kril pointed out something valuable. "When we turn off the power, it's going to be dark up there. Both suns are going to be below the horizon. Oh, it's not going to be pitch black, but it will be quite dim."

"Thanks," Alan said, glad to have the information. He ordered all available hand torches to be brought out and distributed.

The plan was for Alan, Kril and two others to come up under the taxi building. They would confiscate one, two, three or four taxis at the precise moment the power was turned off. They would fly them to the top of the Testing Center and hope that police there would be scurrying to

the tunnel exit room in anticipation of attack. When the party landed atop the Center, it would descend to the records rooms and hold them until others joined them. In the meantime the tunnel door in the Center would be blasted, but the men would not be coming out of that opening. They would be emerging at other nearby points and fighting their way to the front entrance of the Center where one of the party who had landed on top would be to open the doors for them.

"That's the job for me," Kril said, his proboscis jiggling in anticipation. "I want to there to let them all in."

It was decided that Branner and Connie would be in the last group to come up. It would be safer that way.

After the briefing was over, Connie watched them all leave the hall and said, "I can't see anything wrong with it. I hope too many people don't get hurt." And then she turned to Alan. "I wish you weren't the leader. Somehow that makes you so much more vulnerable and responsible. If you lose—"

"We won't lose," Alan said crisply. "We'll be fighting for our lives. The enemy will merely be fighting to perpetuate a dishonesty."

"I know," she said. "But there's still that chance."

He kissed her. "I'm also fighting for something else."

"What?" Her eyes were tear-rimmed as she looked at him.

"You. If I lost or gave myself up now I could never have you. This is the only way."

"I know." She shuddered in his arms. "I only hope we find the altered scores. It would be terrible if Branner were right."

"He's not right. I think he's beginning to realize that."

Kril led the way to the tunnel exit below the taxi building, explaining that he had studied the map and knew exactly where it was. Since it was Kril who had sent Carpentier to his death when the Earthman had turned on them, Alan was ready to trust him in everything. So they trudged along dank tunnels, Kril in the lead, then Alan, and then two

others, Tarko, a Vegan and Hulikor, an Aquariian, both of whom had volunteered out of their original squads.

Watches had been set and every group was left to work out their own problems. The next hour would spell the success or failure of the revolt.

Even as he walked with the three others beneath Herculum streets, Alan knew forces above were preparing for any eventuality. It was peaceful and serene in the underground, but it would not be so for long. Vrillark would surely send a force down when the power was shut off. Alan was counting on it, just as Carl Garcia had. The move would divide Vrillark's men and the men who were sent to the underground to restore the domed city's power would find no opposition. They would actually be performing a service: Turning on the power when the battle was over. They would be dealt with when they returned to street level.

Alan had to grin. Perhaps the group, when it discovered how the fight had gone upstairs, would elect to stay underground to become the new resistance. That would be ironic.

Kril stopped, flashed his light up a shaft, and then directed it to a metal plate beside the ladder. "Number Three Six Five One Eight," he read. "The exit off the East Branch Subdivision B-Seven." He turned to Alan. "This is it."

"All right," Alan said. "Let's go up." He made a move to start up the ladder.

Kril stepped in front of him, his proboscis jiggling with emotion. "Please," he said. "Let me go first. If anything happened to you we'd be without a leader."

"A leader," Alan said, "leads."

Kril nodded. "I know. But he doesn't lead if he's dead."

Alan considered it. "All right. Go ahead."

Kril started up the ladder. The long climb was made with a series of stops to rest and with eyes fixed on time-pieces. The power was to be turned off at seven. Exactly at seven. It was six fifty-five halfway up the ladder, and it took four minutes to reach the lid.

"A minute to go," Kril hissed from his place at the top.

They were silent. From somewhere far below came the steady drip of water. From above came faint noises.

Routine noises, I hope, Alan thought. Flyabouts coming and going. Harnak in his office, Vlenorhak on the roof. Unless this wasn't their shift to work. It didn't matter.

"Now!" Kril whispered. He drew his blaster from its holster. "Get ready."

Tarko had a stunner and Hulikor a heater. Alan felt the reassuring stub of a heater in his hands.

Any second . . .

A hum Alan had not been aware of began to fade in a downward whine. That would be the power going off. He hadn't realized how used to it he had become.

With a mighty heave Kril pushed open the tunnel door and scrambled out into darkness. The others moved up the ladder and out to stand with him. Torches were played about the room. Nobody was there.

Now they heard cries from elsewhere in the building, the sound of running feet.

"The power going off has really got them," Kril said jubilantly. "Let's get those flyabouts."

They moved to an inner door, found it locked.

"Stand back," Kril said, leveling his blaster at it. A sharp bark and the doorknob and part of the door were twisted and shattered, and the torches picked up a beam filled with debris and dust. Kril reached out, pulled the door open.

"Better let me go first," Alan said. "I know this place. Worked here for a year. Come on."

He led them into a supply room and they walked between shelves heaped with flyabout parts. Someone should have been in the room, but whoever had been wasn't there now. The metal door stood ajar. They moved out into the repair shop. Here there was activity. Hand torches jiggled in air as men who held them walked or ran here and there, and there were more shouts and cries. A little light came from the open end of the room, but it was eerie, remembering how bright with light the repair shop usually was and how dim it was now with dancing lights and running feet.

"Over this way." Alan directed the group to the ramp that skirted the flyabout parking area, and they filed past Harnak's office, now a dark interior. Taximen, repairmen, clerks and others passed them in the darkness. Nobody stopped the four men who looked like any other four men scurrying about in the dark.

"Down here," Alan said, climbing over a metal railing. "It's not far to the floor." He let himself over, dropped nimbly to the parking floor. Here were parked flyabouts all ready to go. Some near the head of the line still had drivers, but those back where they were, were empty.

"One for each," Alan said. "Let's go." He moved to the nearest flyabout and got in.

Kril's arm came out, his fingers gripping Alan's arm. "Something I didn't think of," Kril said. "I don't know how to drive one of these! What'll I do?"

"No time to learn now." He turned to look back. Tarko and Hulikor—if they were Tarko and Hulikor—were climbing in their own machines. "Better come along with me."

Kril jumped in beside him.

Alan activated it, started slowly around flyabouts ahead.

He was satisfied to see two other flyabouts behind him. Ordinarily no flyer was supposed to get out of line or go ahead of the others, but this was a special occasion and in the confusion he hoped nobody would notice it.

They left the taxi building and on the ramp outside they zoomed to the apron. From there they shot aloft. Just three flyers among many in the air. No lights. Identification would be impossible. Kril said in his ear, "I just hope we don't hit anything, and I hope nobody hits us."

The dome was a dull orange far overhead. Below them the city was blobs of black without a light anywhere, except for a few moving hand torches here and there.

"I hope you know where the Testing Center is," Kril said. "I'm lost up here."

"I know." He looked behind again. The other two flyers were in line. Good men, Tarko and Hulikor. "What time is it?"

Kril flashed his light on his watch. "Seven nine."

"About right. They blow the Testing Center door at seven fifteen sharp. We've got to be inside by then."

Alan moved the taxi in a wide circle, dropping slowly. The Testing Center was right there to the left. Down, down. Stop. The flyabout came to rest gently on the roof. The two others landed without incident behind him.

On the roof there was nothing. They gathered together, moved toward the cupola.

Suddenly the roof cupola door opened and they managed to sprint to safety behind it before two Altairians in uniform came running out, their guns drawn.

"Damn!" Alan breathed to himself. Louder, he said, "Come on," and went around the other way to the door. The others scrambled after him.

The Altairians exchanged excited cries in their own tongue and started for them. Hulikor calmly turned and shot them with his heater. There were screams of pain as the figures collapsed on the roof. Alan hoped the cries would go unnoticed in the confusion.

They darted down the stairs. Halfway down they heard cries from the roof. The cries could not have been made by the Altairians shot by Hulikor; others must have landed. A moment later there were steps on the stairs behind them.

Hulikor, who was in the rear, again turned and fired. Once again there were cries in the darkness and the sound of thudding bodies. Then they moved down the stairs in the dark building, their torches brightening the interior, their weapons ever at the ready.

Once they came to a corridor only to see torches moving toward them. Tarko's stunner snapped a volley of shots. The torches tumbled to the floor still burning. The men who held them slumped there with them. They would be incapacitated for hours.

They gingerly made their way to the floors below, coming to the floor with the all important records room. There was no one here, but from Bohannen's office came sounds.

The door to Bohannen's office was closed, but there was

a light inside and a sound of drawers opening and closing. Alan tried the knob gently. The door was locked.

"I'll blast it," Kril said. He directed his weapon at the knob and lock and fired. An instant later Alan kicked the door open. They all rushed in.

There was Bohannen, his face white, his forehead beaded in sweat. He was breathing hard. In the glare of torches his eyes were wide. His own hand lights were on an adjacent desk, directed at a filing cabinet. On another desk were piled many folders.

"What the devil!" Bohannen said angrily. "It's only me. 'You men should be out there getting ready to stop those sewer rats.'"

"We *are* the sewer rats," Alan said.

Bohannen's wide mouth dropped open. His hand whipped to his side, but it stopped there when Kril said, "Better not, Mr. Bohannen."

"How did you get in here?" He commenced shaking. "You couldn't have come up through the tunnels. We've got them—" He snapped his jaws shut.

"Just what were you doing?" Alan asked, moving to his side. "Getting ready to move?"

"You'll die," Bohannen said. "You'll never accomplish what you think you will."

"It looks to me as if you were trying to get rid of the evidence," Alan said. He brought his light to bear on Bohannen's face. "Are you still denying that you alter records?"

Bohannen wet his lips, stared at him. "Look, Demuth—"

He got no further. At that precise moment a tremendous blast shook the building. That would be the tunnel opening on the ground floor. Charges from blasters had been placed around the lid, a blast from the tunnel floor set them off, as had been planned. Now underground men would be pouring out of half a dozen exits in the vicinity. There was no time to lose.

"Better go down and open the front door," Alan told Kril. "They'll be coming that way soon."

"It'll be a pleasure," Kril said, moving off.

"You'd better go along, Tarko, Hulikor. I can handle Bohannen here."

Bohannen snorted. "You'll all get yours for this."

"If by that you mean we will all get what we truly deserve, I'll go along with that."

"That's not what I mean." He moved and Alan followed him with his beam.

"What do you think you're doing, Jack?"

"Just sitting down."

"Tired?"

"Unnerved is more like it. How would you feel if you were unjustly accused by a bunch of—of rebels?"

"You aren't being unjustly accused. You'll get what's coming to you. There will be a trial in the Hall of Justice."

Bohannen started to reach for something in his pocket.

"Stop," Alan said. "What are you reaching for?"

"Just my handkerchief. It's hot in here."

"All right. Not as hot as it will be out on the burning sands, though."

Bohannen said, very ugly, "This isn't all over yet, Demuth." He wiped his perspiring forehead. "You're just two hundred against all the police of Herculum."

"How would you know how many we are?"

Bohannen smiled weakly. "Look, Alan," he said in a more friendly voice. "Can't we work this out somehow? I know I haven't done you any favors, but I could see to it that—"

Alan laughed. "Still preaching the same line, eh?"

"The uncorruptible Demuth." Bohannen's lips curled. "Your kind disgusts me."

"You set your pattern at Flagg, Jack. It was just a matter of time before somebody set things right. You can't win the kind of game you're playing. I think maybe you even knew that when you started."

"Don't talk nonsense. The man who preceded me is living in luxury on Earth. This is the way life is, Alan. It's you who have the wrong idea. There will always be those who operate on the fringe of the law. You can't stop it."

"I can stop *you*, Jack. That's all I want to do."

Bohannen's eyes were sliding this way and that. The message they sent to Alan was one of imminent attempt to escape. There was also the set mouth, the expression of desperation, the clenched hands.

"I wouldn't try it, Jack," Alan said. "You'd be gunned down before you took a half dozen steps."

"You wouldn't shoot me, would you, Alan?" The eyes were full of misery, the voice abject. "After all, we were together, we've known each other for—"

"The old school tie," Alan said with disgust. "Now who's giving out with it?"

"I know, I know." Then the eyes hardened. "You'll never get anyone to interpret the scores. My clerks will refuse to do it."

Alan smiled. "We'll see."

The sound of running feet in the corridor. Shots from somewhere outside. Many men burst into the room. Alan was not sure which they would be—friend or foe—since he could not take his eyes off Bohannen. But they were friends.

"Hulikor's dead," Kril said. "And Tarko's stunned. But more than a hundred of us made it. I've set them up at points all around the building. I brought a few along with me."

"Branner and Connie," Alan said. "What about them?"

"They're here," Kril said.

"It's disgraceful," Branner said. "Wholesale slaughter, all of it."

Alan said wearily, "Believe me, Mr. Branner, it was the only way."

Branner said stiffly, "You haven't proved anything yet."

"Alan," said a sweet voice at his side. "Are you all right?"

"Keep him covered," he told Kril, and turned to Connie. Her face was barely discernible in the torchlighted room, and he turned his own light to her face to see her happy eyes. "I'm all right," he said, taking her hand.

"I was so worried."

He kissed her tears away. Then he said brusquely.

"There's work to be done. Bohannen here was trying to gather some records to take with him. Could you go over those first, Connie?"

"They're mad, Jeff," Bohannen said. "I hope you don't believe what they're saying. You know me well enough to know I wouldn't do anything wrong. I've always considered it a sacred trust."

"I want to believe you," Branner said. "I only hope for your sake nothing is discovered out of order."

"Nothing will be," Bohannen said confidently. "The only reason I was up here in the first place was to place these records beyond their reach."

Branner sat heavily on one of the desks. "I have an open mind, a fair mind. I am willing to listen to charges and counter-charges. Now I want to see those records."

The lights flickered overhead. In a moment they came on full strength.

"Thank you, Chief Vrilark," Kril said smugly.

"You'd better get to work now," Alan said.

"All right," Connie said, approaching the stack of folders.

"Here is a complete list of complaints from members of the underground. You can start with them." He had produced a sheet of paper from his pocket, unfolded it for her.

"You're wasting your time," Bohannen said. "I insist that these records be undisturbed. Miss Craig, I am giving you an order. You will not tamper with them. You will not touch them."

"Go ahead, Connie," Alan said. "That's an order from me."

"I am warning you," Bohannen said to the girl. "If you touch those tapes, you will be as guilty as they are."

"Examine the records, Miss Craig," Branner said wearily. "I will take the responsibility for it."

"You can't do that!" Bohannen said. "Those records are my province."

"These are unusual circumstances, Mr. Bohannen," Branner said. "Let us hope you come out of the examination spotless."

CONNIE WAS TO check the records in the analogue room and then translate the tape scores, but Alan could not get the key from Bohannen to get into the room.

The Testing Chief was stalling for time, and Alan knew he was hoping for some eleventh hour victory on the part of Vrillark and the regularly constituted police force.

"Give him the key to the room," Branner said. "You're wasting valuable time."

"I am the only person authorized to work in the analogue room," Bohannen said. "I won't be responsible for what—"

"I have worked there, Mr. Bohannen," Connie said.

"Someone has always been with you."

"I'll be with her," Branner said coldly. "Now let Demuth have the key." When Bohannen was still reluctant, Branner said, "Are you afraid you'll be found out? If you are as innocent as you say you are, you have nothing to fear."

Alan said firmly, "If you wish, we'll take the key by force, Jack. It's up to you."

So Bohannen gave up the key.

Then, with Branner at her side, Connie busied herself in the analogue room. But it wasn't a quiet evening at the office. Even as she worked on the first tape it became obvious it would be a race against time, for there were sounds everywhere about the building—the roof, where police were trying to land flyers and were being repulsed; the tunnel shaft door where Vrillark's men, successful in having re-established Herculum power, were trying to come up; and the streets about the Testing Center where police squads were engaging underground fighters.

Alan and Kril, whom he had taken a liking to, strolled through corridors, talking to the men, to Allupul and

Tlarogil and others in charge, going to the roof themselves, and finally to posts about the Center. Since there seemed to be no limit to the number of men Vrillark was able to muster to attack groups of resistance about the building, Alan decided to consolidate his men inside. He was repeatedly surprised at the way his fighters were able to repulse their foes; the underground men fought with ferocity where the forces of Vrillark were timid and hesitant.

Even as the men withdrew into the comparative safety of the building there was an ominous note in the streets about the Center: Vrillark's men were withdrawing also. Soon there were no red uniforms in sight, though an occasional snap of a stunner or crack of a blaster from hidden places showed they were still there.

Vrillark was up to something; it could not be that he had given up. The men felt it too, being given to peering out windows, muttering, uneasy with the silence in the streets.

"I don't like it," Kril said, shaking his enormous head, his many-faceted eyes glowing like coals. "I'd feel safer if he were out there leading them on."

"So would I," Alan was forced to agree.

All the while Connie was translating tapes, Branner was at her side, and Bohannen was sitting mute in one of the office chairs, the picture of a man defeated and awaiting sentence.

After a half hour of tense waiting, Connie and Branner emerged from the analogue room, Branner with a fistful of tapes and papers, Connie looking happily at Alan, which let him know just how well things had gone with the tapes.

Jeff Branner strode to Bohannen and stood before him, staring down at him disdainfully. Bohannen would not look at him.

"You knew which ones to take out of the files, didn't you?" Branner said, riffling the tapes in his right hand. "Not one matches with your entries." He detached one of the tapes and a matching card. "This one shows by far the greatest discrepancy. It belongs to Alan Demuth."

Still Bohannen would not look at him.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" Branner demanded.

Bohannen's eyes slid up to his. "I didn't start it," he said thickly. "It started long before I ever arrived here. For all I know, it is part and parcel of Herculum."

"If it is," Branner said, "it's time it ended."

Angry, Bohannen said, "You look at me as if I were the one responsible. It just happens to be the way things are done here, that's all."

"It is not the way things are supposed to be done here," Branner said quietly. "And I'll see to it that it is stopped."

Bohannen shrugged. "You're in the minority. I could name a dozen men in high places who are in on this."

"Chief Vrillark?" Branner asked.

"He's one." Bohannen smiled. "Want to know some others?" When Branner said he did, Bohannen recited a list of them. "How does that strike you?"

"It strikes me as disgraceful. You men are parasites, living in luxury off—"

"No lectures," Bohannen said, raising a deprecatory hand. "They bore me."

For a moment Alan thought that Branner would strike Bohannen, for his eyes narrowed in fury and he moved a menacing step nearer. But then Branner turned away. He said, "My apologies, Demuth, for not believing you." Tapping the tapes in his hand, he said, "It appears that the very foundation of Herculum is a nebulous one. How much is sham? How much is real?" Then he shook his head dismally. "I don't know how it can ever be corrected."

At that moment a great blast shook the Testing Center. Then there was the sound of breaking glass, falling masonry, the shriek of rending metal. The view from the office windows was momentarily obscured by dust and falling debris.

Everyone was stunned by it. Then there was chaos. What had happened? There were cries and the sound of running feet.

Allupul came charging into the office, his feathers aflutter and his eyes blinking rapidly. "They've torn a big hole in the floor above," he announced.

"They?" Alan asked. "You mean someone's blasted it?"

"It's a hole bigger than a blaster would ever make," Allupul went on. "I thought the whole side of the building had gone."

Kril said, "How in the world could anybody do that?"

Bohannen rose from his chair, his face the color of putty. "It's Vrillark," he said slowly. "He's energized the old guns."

"Old guns?" Alan faced him. "What old guns?"

"There's an arsenal," Bohannen said. "We talked about it some, in case of attack."

Branner nodded. "That's true. There are some big blasters in there in the event of a dome attack. On treads. But they're supposed to be used outside."

They had no time to talk about it any more because a louder-than-life voice carried to them from beyond the street.

"Alan Demuth," it said, "this is Chief Vrillark. I have withdrawn my forces from about the Center because I intend to reduce it to rubble if you do not surrender at once."

"He could do it," Bohannen wailed. "He could do it!"

"Shut up!" Alan said, going to a window. The street looked very much as it had, except no one was in sight. But beyond it somewhere, behind a window, that barricade down there possibly, was the giant weapon. What to do now?

"It's the only way," Bohannen went on in a high-pitched voice. "He wants to destroy you and me and all the records. And he will, I know he will. He'll say it was the only way to win, and he's right." He turned his white face to Branner and Alan and the rest of the men in the room who were watching him. "I don't want to die. None of you want to die. Give up. Give up to Chief Vrillark. You can't win."

Alan looked around at his men, white-faced as Bohannen. Except Kril wasn't there. Now where was that Altairian? He'd like to have a council of war. Perhaps somebody could suggest something.

He looked at Connie. She was frightened, but she said nothing.

"I don't know what to tell you," Branner said. Then he went to a window and opened it.

"I'd be careful if I were you," Alan said.

"Can you hear me?" Branner shouted. "Chief Vrillark. Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you," came the quiet reply.

"You and Jack Bohannen and the others are guilty of grave injustices to the people of Herculum," Branner said in a loud voice. "I hereby order you to put down your weapons and surrender. It is you who are wrong, not the men inside the Testing Center. If you put your weapons down I will insure you a fair trial."

The answer came quickly. "I am sorry for you, Mr. Branner. I know there is a gun at your back. I would like to rescue you and Jack Bohannen, but it is impossible. That is why I am asking them to surrender. If everyone will march out of the Center quietly, there will be no bloodshed. But Jeff Branner and Jack Bohannen must not be harmed in any way. Do you hear that, Alan Demuth?"

Alan went to the window. "I hear you," he shouted. "But the answer is no. We will not surrender. It is you and your men who are guilty, not us. We have discovered the real guilt here in the Testing Center in the form of falsified records and malfeasance on the part of Jack—"

A crack of a blaster exploded the window casing at his side, and the glass shattered, shards flying this way and that. It was, thankfully, not the giant blaster that had been fired, but the pieces of glass were deadly and it was only by sheer luck that none of them had hit him.

"Deadlock," Branner said grimly.

"I don't want to die," Bohannen said, wetting his lips. "Surrender, Alan. Please."

"Don't be disgusting," Alan said.

"We're giving you five minutes," Vrillark said. "Five minutes, Alan Demuth. Do you hear? At the end of that time we will start blasting until there is nothing left of the

Center or the people in it. It is the only way to save Herculum. And don't try to escape down the shaft. There are men in the tunnel who will only be too happy to shoot you. Five minutes."

Alan called for a meeting of all the squad leaders, but Kril wasn't among them. He couldn't imagine what happened to the plucky Altairian, but he had more pressing problems than thinking about him.

The decision of the group was to make a run for it at the moment Vrillark set his gun firing. There was no other way. To remain would mean death. To surrender without fighting would be to lose everything that had been fought for so valiantly.

During it all Bohannen's face broke out in a sweat. At the announcement of the decision he got up from his chair and dashed out the door. Alan sprinted to follow, reached the door, saw Bohannen running down the corridor. Bohannen was staking everything on escaping the Center and making for Vrillark's side. Alan was just as fully determined that he would not make it.

Putting everything he had in it, Alan rushed after him, and just before Bohannen reached the steps, he made a flying tackle that took him back to Flagg. Bohannen crumpled at the top steps.

He brought him back, had just reached the door when Allupul stepped out.

"Something funny out there," Allupul said. "Chief Vrillark's coming over to the Center."

Alan left Bohannen with one of his men, rushed to the window, saying, "Are you sure it's Vrillark?" This just didn't make sense, the police chief exposing himself this way.

"I'd know that big Vegan anywhere."

Alan looked. Sure enough, crossing the street with one of his red uniformed Altairians was Chief Vrillark, marching imperiously proud, head high, wings tucked back, the militant picture of a man of power and decision.

"What the devil does he expect to gain out of this?" Alan asked no one in particular. "Better go down and let him in."

The five minutes were about up. Now this. Strange.

A minute later Kril, dressed in police red, escorted the furious police chief into Bohannen's office.

"Surprise package for you," Kril said, withdrawing the stunner from the Vegan's back.

Alan could only stare in surprise.

Kril said, "I had an idea something funny was going on, so I just waylaid one of the men and donned his uniform, worked myself over to Vrillark and—well, here we are."

Branner nodded. "I see you don't want to die any more than the rest of us, Chief Vrillark."

"I shall make a full report of this," Vrillark said pompously. "You will all be reduced to subservient positions."

"No," Branner said, "I will be the one who makes the report. Your status as Police Chief terminates as of this instant."

Jeff Branner was Status Chief. There was nothing anyone could say to that.

Branner turned to Connie. "If you will, Miss Craig, I'd like you to take that list of men Alan Demuth gave you and write up an order. The members of the underground are here and now the police force of Herculum, pro tem." His eye ran over Alan, Allupul and several of the others. He smiled when it reached Kril. "Kril," he said, "because of your work in bringing in Vrillark, I am changing your status to Police Chief. Your first duty will be to take your charge to the window so that he can disband his gang of cutthroats. I will personally review their status, one by one."

While Kril was insisting Vrillark make his announcement to his men at the window, with a stunner in his back, Branner was saying to Alan, "Your score proved to be one of the highest ever made on Herculum, Demuth. It will give me great pleasure to change your status to that of Chief of Testing, if you will take the job."

"I'll be glad to," Alan said, grinning.

Branner raised his eyebrows as he looked at Connie. "You deserve upgrading, Miss Craig. But frankly, I don't know just where you will fit."

Still smiling, Alan said, "As the Testing Chief, I think I would like to request a provisional status of Wife for Miss Craig, Mr. Branner."

"Is she willing?" Branner said, deadpan.

"I'll ask her," he said, taking her arm and leading her to the hall.

"I don't think there's much I can do about it," Connie said. She squeezed his arm. "Not that I would have it otherwise." She drew his head down to hers.

Alan needed no further encouragement.