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SECRET MISSION TO
SAVE A HOSTILE WORLD

ANTHROPOL

LOUIS TRIMBLE



SIX MONTHS TO OVERTHROW A WORLD

There was a double urgency priority message from the Chief waiting for Vernay, Anthropol's troubleshooter. The new assignment was a crucial one—get control of the totalitarian-feminist government on Ujvila—and do it before Galactic-Military brought the newfound planet under Federation control their own way—by slamming in an invasion force and destroying half the planet.

Gal-Mil didn't like Anthropol's slow scientific methods; the natives were afraid of aliens and certainly didn't want Vernay's intervention; and the underground opposition had too much to hide.

So it looked like this mission was going to be one of Vernay's hardest, if not his last.

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

LOUIS TRIMBLE writes:

My interest in science-fiction (and science) goes back to the early days of Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*. From then until college and, later, trying to make a living, interfered, I was an omnivorous devourer of all the magazines (*Wonder Stories*, *Air Wonder*, etc.) and the books (Burroughs, Wells . . .) I could get my family to buy me. I began college as a chemistry major and found the reality less interesting than the stories; however, with the changing attitudes in science teaching, my interest was later regenerated, but oriented more toward linguistics. My work for the past dozen years, teaching technical writing (and doing technical editing) to university engineering students, has given me the chance to redevelop my earlier interest in the physical sciences and mathematics and to put the interest to practical use.

ANTHROPOL is my first shot at a full-length science-fiction novel, after some fifty-five previous books (mostly Western and mystery novels) but I don't expect it to be the last.

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LOUIS TRIMBLE

ACE BOOKS, INC.

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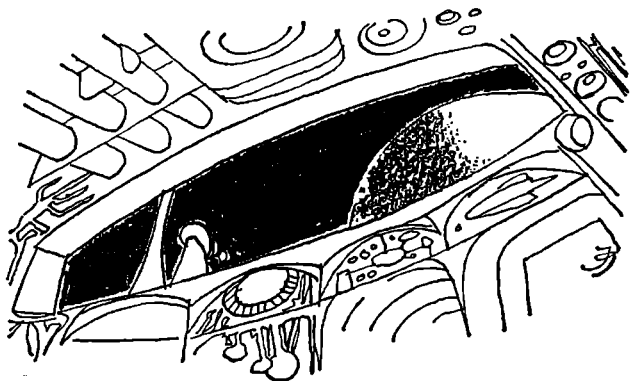
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I



FINISHED CHECKING out a rumor that one of the Freebooter groups had tried to annex a pair of alien-inhabited planets located at the edge of the galaxy. Since the Galactic Federation had put the planets under its protection, one or another of its branch organizations was responsible for making sure that none of the anti-Federation Freebooter groups tried to move in to exploit the native populations.

I didn't need much time to learn that the rumor had nothing behind it. The natives of both planets were as innocent of corruption as any of Rousseau's beloved noble savages; and there was no sign that any Earth-originated people had ever called there since the discovery trip made by the Anthropol Central exploratory ship nearly a century (Earth-based time) in the past.

I rode my shuttle from the surface of the smaller planet up to the transport yacht waiting for me in orbit. By the time I had been pulled into the belly of the yacht, I had the inevitable report ready for transmission back to Anthropol Central on Earth. But the skipper himself was waiting for me as I climbed out of the decontamination chamber, and his message put the report to the back of my mind.

"Scramble message for you from the Chief, Vernay," he

said. "I couldn't answer because it's in one of the new codes."

I dressed in a hurry and headed for the Com-room of the ship. If I had learned anything in my ten years as troubleshooter for Anthropol, it was to not keep the Chief waiting. It made no difference to him whether his messages had to cross one light-year or a hundred parsecs; nor whether the receiver was isolated in some equatorial jungle on Livingston or Schweitzer, or crawling through the squalid slums on one of the Freebooter-controlled planets. When the Chief sent a coded call, you answered—even if you had to do it by intuition.

The message had been taped for me. It was in a new headquarters' code, one designed to keep Galactic Military from intercepting and understanding. That was a pointless game. Gal-Mil broke our codes as regularly as we broke theirs; but devising new codes almost daily had the virtue of keeping a lot of operatives with code-book mentalities occupied.

I caught the key signal for the code, tuned my translator to the correct coordinates, and stuffed the receiver into my ear.

The Chief's deep rumble said clearly, "Double urgent priority, Vernay. Cancel the assignments on your list. Report immediately here. Signal landing time when you come out of the By-pass."

I pulled the receiver from my ear. "Send this," I told the Com-op. "Message received, being acted on." I passed the remainder of the order to the skipper and then went below for a quick meal while we worked far enough out into space to begin the By-pass operation.

We were roughly 15,000 parsecs from Earth, and that meant our older model ship would have to go through the By-pass twice, biting off a little less than 8,000 parsecs per trip. I calculated a half hour (Earth time measure) getting to the entrance point and another hour getting from the exit point to Anthropol headquarters on Earth. Time in a By-pass is not measurable; the concept is meaningless.

I used up my half hour eating. When the first warning bell rang, I went to my cabin, lowered myself into the adjusto-chair and activated the automatic strapdown. The second bell came, and within three minutes the "nothingness" came.

More than one planet-tied character, Earth-originated and alien both, has asked me to describe the By-pass. But how do you describe absolute nothing? The emptiness of color—light sucked out as a pump sucks water from a bucket?

The emptiness of heat—that momentary sensation of having brushed absolute zero? The emptiness of everything—suspension of thought, of body, of all molecular action?

I experienced them all, but so briefly that it was impossible to measure the elapsed time it took us to enter the By-pass, to come out the other side, to reenter, and to come out again. Only then was I aware of time, of existence again. The all-clear rang and I unstrapped and went back to the galley for a cup of kaf. I always felt the need of something when I came out of a By-pass, but I didn't want to breathe liquor on the Chief, so I settled for the one commodity ubiquitous throughout the galaxy—kaf.

The yacht worked its way into an Anthropol-assigned orbit around Earth and I transferred to a shuttle. I used up the thirty minutes necessary to get me to land wondering about the urgency of the Chief's recall message. There had been no pressing—or even impending—problems when I had left six weeks before. But six weeks provided ample time for developments that could concern Anthropol, especially with the new By-pass techniques permitting one-jump far out exploration—even to the nearer satellite stars orbiting the galaxy. And exploration meant the discovery of systems inhabited, sometimes by aliens, at others by one of the long-lost colonies of Earth-originated peoples who had left on the primitive early starships when control of the Inundation had seemed beyond the capabilities of science. The only solution to the preservation of mankind had then seemed to be sending the great ships into space with their city-sized populations.

Before I could even formulate a guess as to a problem important enough to justify the expense of bringing me back through a priority By-pass, the shuttle dropped down onto the high valley country of the central Rocky Mountains. Five minutes later I was inside the Anthropol Central tower and going up the air tube to the Chief's office. He was waiting, despite its being the middle of the night. When he failed to greet me with his inevitable, dry, "You took long enough," I knew that more than just another problem had come up.

Before I could do more than sit down, he said, "Tell me what you know of the planet Ujvila, Vernay, and of its sun."

"Zero," I said. He nodded. "Until last week no one else knew anything about them either. Then our explorer ship *Deneb* out in Sector Q-12 picked up some audio at a frequency analogous to one of the old Earth radio band-

widths. They traced the transmission to the second planet of a small star not on any of the maps."

That wasn't surprising. Since the galaxy had been found to contain more than the 10^5 million stars pre-Inundation astronomers estimated, new ones are found all the time, even after over fifteen centuries of far-flung exploration.

"Earth-originated population from one of the lost star-ships?" I asked.

"Definitely," he said. "The *Deneb* transmitted enough data back to the monitor ship in Sector Q-12 for us to determine an E-o people. It was all linguistic data, of course, picked up from the planet's radio broadcasts. Then when the scout team had the language under control, they shuttled down. But why hear it from me? Kroglin and his crew finished the complete Reconstruct this morning. That's when I called you." He reached out to activate the machine that would play the Reconstruct tapes for me.

Kroglin headed our top Reconstruct team, the one that did all the key jobs—those that had to be finished the day before yesterday and those so highly technical that it wasn't safe to misplace as much as a syllable. Later Kroglin told me that when he started on the four microtapes the monitor ship had sent on from the *Deneb*, he expected a standard Reconstruct and was about to turn the job over to a second echelon team when he realized he might have something a little out of the ordinary.

Routine or otherwise, reconstructs are pretty much standard as to initial procedures. The first steps are always unscramble jobs. Coded data as to the position of a scout ship is automatically fed at close time intervals to the monitor ship hovering in the middle of whatever sector the scout ship happens to be working in. When the scout ship's crew makes any observations, they do so in the presence of an activated circuit, and their remarks are coded and sent to the monitor ship. Similarly, when a scout team leaves the ship and goes to the surface of a planet, each member carries his own throat transmitter that feeds both his vocal and sub-vocal remarks back to microtape on the scout ship. This same data is also sent automatically on to the monitor ship where it is put on the same microtape as all the other data from that scout ship. Routinely, the data goes through a By-pass to receiving tapes waiting at Anthropol Central on Earth.

At each stage, of course, the data is monitored. Position and other quantitative data are recorded on dials as well as on microtape, and oral comments are broadcast through a

decoder at the same time they are being put on tape. In that way, should any trouble arise, it's known about immediately.

In the case of the *Deneb* and its scout team, the team's remarks—vocal and sub-vocal—made from the time of their leaving the ship, were heard by the monitor crew on the *Deneb* at the same time as they were being taped there and being sent on to the monitor ship. There, in turn, they were heard orally—along with any remarks made by the crew of the *Deneb*—and the totality was fed on to Anthropol Central.

The result is a mishmash of data flooding into Anthropol Central from any given monitor ship—in this case the one in Sector Q-12. The job of a Reconstruct team is to separate the data into parts that fit logically, set aside the irrelevant, and reconstruct the remainder, either in report form or in narrative form, whichever best fits the given situation. In the case of the data from the *Deneb*, Kroglin had chosen to set the scene with some brief reports. Then he switched to narrative form to present the material from the scout team.

The Chief said, "Sirat ran that scout team. He had Covid as his technician and Reah as his linguist. There isn't a better team in the galaxy when it comes to contacting Earth-originated populations cut off from their heritage for two millennia or better."

He hesitated, his finger still poised over the switch that would activate the machine. "Listen carefully, Vernay. What you're going to hear is the first problem they ever met that they couldn't handle."

I listened. Then I listened again. I listened over and over, even though after the first run-through I knew that by daylight I would be on my way to a planet called Ujvila.

II

REPORT 1. To Anthropol Central. From exploration ship *Deneb*. Subject: location of inhabited planet. Location made by tracing radio waves at audio frequencies. Star small, with three planets, of which only planet two is inhabited. Dense cloud cover prevented clear laser photos from reconnaissance orbit. However, linguistic analyses of radio transmissions made and telemetry data on environment gathered.

Linguistic analysis: The inhabitants of the planet are definitely Earth-originated. Radio transmissions picked up indicate a common tongue with mutually intelligible dialects.

According to the analysis of linguist Reah, the language is archaic in structure, lexicon, and phonetic patterns. It is essentially agglutinating, basically Finno-Ugric. From limited reference sources available, linguist Reah has determined that it is essentially Magyar with a strong overlay of Rumanian lexical elements. The language shows no structural, phonetic, or morphological contacts with sapient alien or Freebooter speech patterns. It is therefore assumed that the planet has been isolated from contact since the starship carrying the original pioneers made planetfall. The native name for the planet is Ujvila, meaning approximately "New World"; for the sun, Napunk, meaning "Our Sun."

Environmental data: Preliminary data is as follows: atmosphere is Earth life form sustaining but 3% richer in oxygen and 7% greater in water vapor content. Gravity, 98%. Further data to follow when closer survey made. End of transmission.

REPORT 2. To Anthropol Central. From exploration ship *Deneb*. Subject: results of photographic survey of newly discovered planet Ujvila. By proceeding just beneath cloud cover extending from 3,000 to 10,000 meters, *Deneb* managed to cover 67% of the planet's surface. No sign of detection indicated. Aerial maps being transmitted. Oral data as follows: planet elliptical with slight flattening at poles. Diameter 2,600 meters through the equator. Inclination to plane of the ecliptic, 20.6° . Small polar ice caps followed by wide bands of barren lands, similar to Earth Arctic tundra, reaching to an average of latitudes 50° to 23° land is fertile, with belts of prairie alternating with mixed deciduous and evergreen forest. Nature of flora not yet determined. Between latitudes 23° the entire land surface is covered with thick jungle and swamp. Approximately 34.5% of the surface is made up of seas. These bodies of water break the planet's land area into three continents, only one of which lies in the fertile belt. This continent alone shows signs of habitation, with a fairly large city at N. Latitude 43° , one lesser in size similarly located south of the equator, and a still undetermined number of smaller towns and villages scattered throughout the fertile areas. Only two inhabited areas were noted outside the fertile belt, one on the sea-coast at N. Latitude $14^{\circ}30'$, the second on the same sea-coast at N. Latitude $51^{\circ}18'$. Both appear to be supply centers for small lumbering and mining industries in the equatorial and arctic zones respectively. Further data to follow upon scout team's contact with natives. This step

will be taken according to routine procedure. End of transmission.

The remainder of the Reconstruct was in narrative form, mainly from the viewpoints of the scout team members. That way I had a vivid picture of what Sirat, Covid, and Reah saw, heard, felt—what their impressions were—but only a very hazy picture of what ultimately happened to them.

REPORT 3. Narrative Reconstruct based upon oral transmissions from exploratory ship *Deneb* scout team. Personnel as follows: Leader, Sirat; Technician, Covid; Linguist, Reah.

With the *Deneb* stationed in orbit one hundred kilometers above the surface of the planet, the scout team prepared to take the shuttle down, their goal the northern city.

Reah said, "Does anyone need another run-through on the language programmer?"

"No," Sirat said. "We don't want to sound too well versed in their speech, anyway." He glanced around. "Are the trade good samples all aboard?"

"All checked," Covid said. He waited for Sirat's signal and then eased the little shuttle from the bay in the *Deneb*'s underbelly and began the descent through the cloud cover toward the surface. As they broke into the open, the city began to come at them in sharper and sharper detail.

"I'd say this city is definitely the capital," Sirat commented. "That central cluster of buildings looks administrative."

He and Reah watched in the viewscreen. The city was obviously planned around a central core of heavy buildings surrounding a tall tower that gave a view of the flat landscape. Outside the core was a wide belt of green filled with grass, heavily-leafed and flower-laden trees, and thick clusters of bushes. In front of the squat stone structure fronting the tower was a cascading fountain. Despite the efforts at beautification, the architecture seemed somehow heavy and unyielding.

Wide avenues cut a swath through the tight clusters of low buildings that made up most of the city. One led westward to a small village at the edge of the shimmering sea. A second ran directly north to a cleared area containing a cluster of rounded structures with a number of primitive winged aircraft standing near them.

"From the position of the sun, it's mid-morning," Sirat observed. "But notice how few people there are on the streets, and how few vehicles." He focused the tele-camera

for a closer look at the handful of persons moving about the nearly deserted streets. As they studied the pictures, both he and Reah commented either aloud or sub-vocally, thus making sure that their impressions were heard on the *Deneb*.

"They're definitely Earth peoples," Reah concluded. "But not happy ones from the expressions on most of their faces." She added, "Do you notice they have only two types of costumes—those loosely fitted coveralls the men seem to be wearing and those loose blouse and trouser outfits on the women?"

"I'm glad you can tell them apart," Sirat said dryly. "Half of those in blouse and trousers look like men to me."

They studied the people a short time longer while Covid slowly angled the shuttle toward the airport to the north. Those few they saw were light-skinned with hair coloring ranging from black to deep blond. They moved slowly, almost apathetically.

"I wouldn't hurry either with a temperature of thirty-five degrees centigrade and a saturation of over ninety," Sirat said.

"That's a nice winter day where I come from," Reah said. "But look at those women coming from that large building in front of the tower. They aren't wearing that ugly dun color like the others, and they're moving fast enough."

"Blue, green, gray-silver," Sirat said. "Uniforms, I suppose."

"Perhaps not," Reah commented. "If their culture is as archaic as their linguistic forms, they may still have a primitive caste system based on economic levels." She shook her head. "It's always puzzled me that so many descendants of the early starship peoples retrogressed after making planet-fall and developed cultures that seem to be based on exploiting their fellow humans."

Covid broke in sharply: "Something is trying to tie into our Com-system, both audio and video."

"Help them out," Sirat suggested. "Follow standard pre-landing procedures."

Covid brought the shuttle to a halt a bare kilometer above the barren area with its few primitive aircraft. Setting the automatic controls, he moved to the communication panel. "Cut into the video only at first," Sirat said. "And let's get a look at whoever is on the other end before they get a look at us."

Covid manipulated the pick-up beam until the view-screen was filled with a squarish face, stern and uncom-

promising in its expression. The cheekbones were high, the eyes faintly slanted. A tight cap that arced down to cover the ears hid the hair completely. In the background a viewscreen showed an exterior view of their shuttle. It was being watched narrowly.

"Now tie the transmit beam into that viewscreen he's watching," Sirat said. "But keep the audio one-way until I signal."

Reah said with conviction, "That's a woman, not a man. And notice, she's wearing a green uniform."

"With that face, who cares about the sex?" Covid remarked. He signaled to Sirat that the audio was on. Already the viewscreen the female was watching had changed to show the interior of the shuttle, but only a restricted view that conveyed little information.

Sirat stepped in front of the transmit pick-up. The watcher's head jerked and a torrent of Ujvilan, too rapid for any of them to follow easily, burst from her thin, flat mouth.

"We are traders. We come in peace," Sirat said slowly in Intragalactic. He snorted as he realized he was talking to a dead microphone. "Audio on," he instructed Covid: At Covid's nod, he repeated himself.

His answer was another torrent of Ujvilan. Reah said softly, "She obviously doesn't understand Intragal."

Sirat said in the female's language, "Please speak slowly. We are not well versed in your tongue."

The torrent began again, broke off abruptly. The head swiveled to one side, eyes focusing on someone out of range of the shuttle's pick-up beam. Then the watcher rose and stepped to one side. Another female took her place. Covid whistled softly.

This woman was definitely feminine—the face long and narrow, verging on the beautiful. The looseness of the obviously well tailored dove gray uniform could not hide the slender figure. A pair of grayish green eyes looked steadily into Sirat's. There was no sign of fear or anger; there was only polite curiosity. In contrast to the bigger woman standing, this one had her head bared so that deep blond hair, cut short and held sleekly to her head, showed plainly.

"You speak our tongue?"

"We speak many tongues," Sirat said, "but not all of them well." He moved slightly so that she could have an angled view of his trader's uniform with its intertwined gold and silver monetary insignia. "We are three traders from the third planet of the Rigel system. I am called Sirat."

"You are all males?"

Reah whispered, "Ten Galactic libras that this is a matriarchy."

Sirat said to the woman, "No, we are one female and two males."

"Then I would speak with your commander."

Sirat signaled to Reah. They had all been exposed to cultural patterns different from their own too often to carry this off any way but naturally. Reah moved into the pick-up beam as Sirat stepped aside.

"I am Reah."

"I am Commanding First Officer Elna, Chief Protectress of the Kalauz. I speak in her name. What is your purpose in coming here?"

"To trade," Reah said. "We have many fine articles from the far corners of the galaxy—things of use, things of beauty." She put on a salesman's smile. "As leader, I request permission to land and show our wares."

With no hesitation, Elna said, "Permission granted. Set your ship on the ground one-half merfold south of the building directly below you. You will be met and escorted to the Kalauz."

She disappeared from the screen. The square-faced monitor returned to stare sourly at them. At Sirat's signal, Covid cut the audio and video connections and then returned to his pilot's chair.

As they dropped toward the ground, Sirat said to Reah, "Play this carefully. If it is a matriarchy and they try to shunt us aside, insist we stay with you." He frowned. "She was too pleasant, too quick to agree—too much of a contrast with all the other impressions I've had of this place."

"Maybe they've been contacted by traders before," Covid suggested.

"Not by Federation-licensed traders or we'd have a record of the planet," Sirat pointed out. "And if Freebooters have been here, we want to be doubly careful."

"I doubt it," Reah said. "I listened to a good deal of their radio transmissions; I heard no indication of any modernized forms of speech. If the Freebooters had been here to trade, they would have left some linguistic signs, even though only names for goods new to the Ujvilans."

"We'll still play it with cautionary procedures in operation," Sirat said. He nodded to Covid. "They haven't heard you yet. Pretend not to speak the language. That will give us a chance to use Intragal—on the pretext of translating for you. If they really don't understand Intragal," he added carefully.

"I'll determine that soon enough," Reah promised.

The shuttle touched down. They watched through the exterior viewscreen as a squadron of seven open vehicles rolled down the broad highway leading from the city. They stopped in a semicircle around the sleek little ship, with the central vehicle of the seven directly opposite their entry port. They were wheeled cars, with two wide seats, one set behind the other. In the front of each car, hands on a tiller, sat a man in dun-colored coveralls. Beside each driver was a woman in blouse and trousers of the same color. In the rear of all but the central vehicle were a pair of green-clad women. The rear seat of the central vehicle held only Commanding First Officer Elna.

Sirat opened the entry port and let the landing ramp unfold itself to the ground. Reah led the way, her hands empty. Sirat and Covid followed, each carrying a sample case. Their first impression as they reached the outside air was one of thickness, of moisture rising up to strike at them. The sun itself was half obscured by a layer of haze, but its heat could be felt with a force that made them glad for the cloud cover.

Trained observers, all three members of the team passed sub-vocal comments on their reactions to everything they saw and felt as they walked slowly toward the central vehicle where Commanding First Officer Elna sat waiting. As they approached, the female guard seated beside the male driver stepped out and stood at attention, hands at her sides.

"No visible weapons," Sirat murmured. "Watch out for a trick of some kind. This is too militant a culture for no one to carry weapons."

Close up, Elna was fully as beautiful as the viewscreen had pictured her—and with an even more arrogant cast to her features. She made no move to rise but nodded to Reah. "You may join me. The omul can share the rear of the next car."

Omul referred to the men, and Reah said quickly, "Forgive, First Officer Elna, but it is the custom for my omul to stay at my side. They are in my charge."

There was a moment's pause and then Elna inclined her head. "They shall sit on the bench facing us." She smiled, obviously directing herself only to Reah. "And welcome to Fovarosh, the capital of Ujvila, in the name of the Kalauz."

Reah murmured the formal answer to the greeting and stepped into the car. After she settled herself, Sirat and Covid followed, sitting on narrow, hard seats that projected

from the rear of the front seat. At a sign from Elna, the string of vehicles began to roll silently back toward the city in the near distance.

Covid said in Intragal, "Electrically powered. I wonder where their power sources are? We didn't pick up any signs of nuclear stations or even any burning fossil fuels."

"What does he say?" Elna demanded sharply.

"Forgive," Reah said quickly. "He does not speak your tongue. He was commenting on the beauty of the countryside—and of yourself."

Elna said coldly, "It is not permitted for an omul of his class to even think of a dwamna of my rank in such terms!"

"I shall so advise him," Reah said. She glanced at Covid and spoke in Intragal. "Do you want me to try to find out what their power sources are?" Her eyes flickered to Sirat. The answering movement of his eyelids signified negative.

Sirat said subvocally for the benefit of those on the *Deneb* and others who would be concerned enough to listen to the microtapes, "The feeling of suspicion is as thick as the air. The fewer questions we ask now, the more I hope to get these people to relax."

As the cars rolled down the wide, tree-lined avenue toward the heavy building with the tower rising behind it, Sirat commented again sub-vocally, "Close up, the entire city has the feeling almost of a prison planet controlled by Freebooters. I like this less and less. Stand by on the *Deneb* for possible quick action."

The silence in the rear of the vehicle had become almost embarrassingly long. Reah said, "It seems a quiet city. I see no people strolling under your beautiful trees."

Elna gave her a surprised glance. "Why should there be? These are the hours of work. Is it different on your world?"

"For those who are not at work, yes," Reah answered. "The elderly, the young, those on vacation, the women seeking an hour's respite from their household routines. . . ."

"We have no such nonsense!" Elna snapped. "Only in the Sehgayn, the poorer quarter of the city, do you find females and males about during the day. These are the lazy, the drunkards, but they grow fewer as the rehabilitation policies of the Kalauz touch more and more of them. But I suppose there will always be those who live in a squalor brought about by their own refusal to live the full life offered by the generosity of the Kalauz."

As she talked, the central vehicle had peeled off from the others and entered an underground garage beneath the

heavy building that fronted the square. The glare of an obviously ancient form of electric illumination flooded down over them.

Covid said in Intragal, "I'll bet this Kalauz is generous!"

Elna frowned. "What did he say? What words did he use in making reference to the Kalauz?"

"He merely asked if we were to meet the Kalauz," Reah answered.

"You, yes. The males, no."

"That is impossible," Reah said. "As I stated before, they are my charges. They are also my assistants. Without them, I cannot show our wares."

"No male defiles the Kalauz by his presencel"

A clear, cool voice came from a grille on the front dashboard of the vehicle. "These are visitors. Let all of them come to me."

"As you order, Kalauz," Elna answered.

The car stopped at the foot of a wide, sloping ramp. The guard left her seat and opened the door. Sirat and Covid rose and stood awkwardly in the narrow space until the women had stepped past them. Then they followed. Elna led the way up the ramp.

Sirat crinkled his nose. "It smells like a prison," he said sub-vocally. "It has that same odor that marks all planets with anachronistic penal systems."

Ahead, Elna said to Reah, "This building is the headquarters of the Igaz, the Administration. We shall go through it to the taller building. It is the castle of the Kalauz."

Reah commented sub-vocally, "Note the euphemisms in the language, of the type typical of totalitarian cultures. *Igaz* means 'righteous,' not 'administration.' *Kalauz* means 'guide, pilot,' not 'leader' in the sense we use the term."

They reached the end of the ramp and stopped in front of closed twin doors. Elna touched a button and the doors slid slid apart. "A primitive elevator!" Covid muttered.

"Translate his remarks!" Elna ordered.

"He was commenting on the advanced elements in your culture," Sirat said.

"I spoke to the female, not to you!" Elna snapped. "An omul does not address a female of his own or a higher class unless he is so instructed. When he does, he uses the title *dwamna!*"

"Forgive, *dwamna*," Sirat said, recalling the formula.

They entered the elevator. It carried them silently and swiftly upward. The corridor they stepped into was brightly lighted, with none of the glare of the lights below, and

with none of the penal odor Sirat had remarked on. Soft carpeting rolled past painted walls to an ornate doorway a short distance ahead.

"Soon you will have the privilege accorded few of our people—and fewer of our males. You will face the Kalauz herself," Elna stated.

Reah said with soft probing, "On a recent trip, we met the ruler of a world who was also the head of the people's religion. Is this the case on Ujvila?"

"The Kalauz is not the *head* of our religion," Elna said. "She *is* religion. Her ancestors were those who first broke from the Great Egg. They led the lesser people into the world and as time went on gave them the many cultural advantages they have now."

They reached the ornate door. It swung open silently, letting them into a wide room. Their eyes moved to a side wall where a large viewscreen showed their ship. A trio of green-uniformed females was moving up the ramp and inside.

"What right have you to enter our ship!" Reah cried.

"The Kalauz has so ordered," Elna answered. "It is being searched."

"For what reason?" Reah demanded.

The cool voice they had heard earlier came from a grille in the ceiling. "Do you take us for fools who believe you have come to trade? To conquer us with your superior technology—that is why you are here. Do you think we are not aware of the ship out beyond the clouds?"

Doors swung open in the wall opposite the viewscreen. Sirat cried, "Activate your shields!"

But he was too late. The half dozen gray-uniformed females who stepped through the doorways each held a small weapon. Light lanced out in thin needles. Sirat felt the jolt of an electrical charge. He managed to register "Stunners!" into his microphone before he lost consciousness.

The mate of the *Deneb* watched the shuttle break free of the cloud cover and approach the landing bay in the ship's underbelly. "I don't like it," he said. "Hours with no communication of any kind. And look at the way the shuttle is moving—as if the automatic pilot had been programmed wrong."

"Maybe they're hurt or unconscious," the communications technician said. "Or dead," he added thinly.

"If so, it happened after they came on board," the mate pointed out. "The laser camera was clear enough when it showed them being escorted back into the shuttle by those rock-faced females in green." He shook his head. "Plutol

It's going to miss us. Send out the magnetic grappling beams."

He watched through the viewscreen as the magnetic beams reached out, caught the shuttle and turned it toward the *Deneb*. Slowly, the smaller ship was drawn to the bay beneath the larger one. It disappeared from the viewscreen. There was a faint jar.

"Shuttle in!" a voice called.

"Get inside on the double and see what's happened," the mate ordered. He activated the viewscreen that gave him a view of the shuttle berthed in the landing bay. Two crewmen moved to the entry port and swung it open. It made a high-pitched squeaking and then that sound was swallowed by the deep rumble of an explosion. The mate had an instant to see the gouts of flame and smoke as they poured from the entry port of the shuttle. Then the explosion swept away his picture on the viewscreen. He felt only an instant of fear.

On the microtapes in the monitor ship, the rumbling sound faded, and silence took its place. High above Ujvila, the pieces of the *Deneb* and its crew began to find orbits for themselves.

III

I WAS WRONG. I wasn't on my way to Ujvila by daylight; instead, I was checking into the Conditioning Unit and working with the head programmer to set up a regimen that would turn me into an Ujvilan. As the Chief said, this wasn't just another go-in-and-straighten-things-up type of job. This was real trouble. We had no actual evidence, but it seemed fairly certain that not only the scout team but the entire crew of the *Deneb* had been killed.

That wasn't a common situation, even when we were dealing with a hostile population. Before I left, the Chief said, "There's always the chance that one of the Freebooter groups got to Ujvila first and persuaded this Kalauz to keep the Federation away. The Freebooters could even have given them the technology that led to blowing up the *Deneb*."

It was a tenable enough theory, except for linguist Reah's insistence that there was no sign of Freebooter linguist influence on the Ujvilan language. But as the Chief pointed out, her analysis had been based on the rather formal speech used in radio and video broadcasts. The language forms then would tend to be less apt to have absorbed non-standard words or patterns.

The point was never cleared up during the six month period I spent being conditioned to go to Ujvila. But a number of other things became clear. A Federation ship found the remains of the *Deneb* and its crew—enough so that it was definitely established that all of them, including the scout team, had been killed. Only it wasn't one of Anthropol's ships that did the finding. It was a Gal-Mil vessel.

And that really caused problems. I didn't learn of them until my programming period was ended and I had reported to the Chief for a final briefing. During a conditioning program, a man is not permitted to be distracted. Once he begins his regimen, he is as cut off from the outside world as if he were set down on a deserted planet. It was the same in my case. I lived, thought, walked, talked, ate—performed every human function—as if I had been an Ujvilan.

I didn't even bother to wonder where the young Ujvilan male they supplied for me to pattern myself after came from. The Chief had resources, I knew; I merely assumed he had used some of them. I found out the answer at my briefing. I found out a number of other things too, things I wasn't too pleased to hear.

The Chief came right to the point. "Galactic Military intercepted our transmissions as usual—and broke the code. That means they knew about Sirat and his crew and the *Deneb* as soon as I did. They sent a ship to Ujvila and found the remains of the *Deneb* and of the bodies. Then on the grounds that there was a threat to the Federation, they sent one of their own reconnaissance outfits to Ujvila. After it returned, they made their report."

I said, "They used their usual tactics to get information, I suppose?"

I had supposed right. Gal-Mil's philosophy is almost opposite that of Anthropol. Where we try to establish contacts through cooperation, through evolutionary methods, they prefer the go-in-and-take-over system. The result is usually chaos for a period—usually a long one. Ultimately the native population returns to power; but more often than not a resentment has developed which lasts for generations. And I know cases where after five centuries, the Federation is still a term that brings an automatic hate response to some peoples. They, of course, are always potential deserters to one or another of the Freebooter groups.

But the Federation permits both Anthropol and Gal-Mil's approaches to solving problems of hostile populations—depending on the circumstances. The Council majority isn't in

sympathy with Gal-Mil's high-handed and often violent tactics, but like any other political body, it is controlled as much by lobbyists and expediency as it is by logical or humanitarian concepts.

As a result, when Gal-Mil went to Ujvila, sent crews down to bring back a cross-section of the population, and then ran their prizes through interrogation procedures, they were only mildly censured by the Council. Their results were too illuminating.

"It was that raid on Ujvila that brought back the man you worked with in Conditioning," the Chief said. "Our monitors happened to pick up some of the Gal-Mil transmissions sent by their expedition. So when they sent their report to the Council, I was ready to move in and demand a hand in the affair." His lips split in what passed for a smile. "As usual, Gal-Mil tried to cut us out. They wanted to handle the whole rehabilitation procedure themselves."

"But we made the first contact," I protested.

"That was the basis for my initial argument," the Chief said. "I can't say I got everything I wanted, but at least we haven't been written out of the rehabilitation plans."

After I heard what our role was, in some ways I wished we had been written out. I was to be the only Anthropol rep on Ujvila—and only because I had been so thoroughly conditioned. The entire plan was under the control of Gal-Mil. That meant I was under the authority of a Gal-Mil officer and was required to follow his instructions. The only other concession made to Anthropol was to allow them to have their own communication ship in orbit above Ujvila. But it was tied into a communication system set up by Gal-Mil and so had no authority of its own. Even so, it would be of some value to me. I could get a message to the Chief if I had to. I had a complaint channel open to me if I thought Gal-Mil was going too far or too fast. Gal-Mil, of course, would hear everything I reported; but without our ship involved, I knew that nothing I might transmit would ever get past the Gal-Mil communication system. So, little as it was, having our own ship up there gave me a certain amount of confidence.

I almost lost it when I was called to Gal-Mil headquarters for another briefing. Going from the fairly relaxed atmosphere of Anthropol to the aseptic rigidity of Gal-Mil was almost like moving into an alien culture. Not even the attractiveness of the female colonel who led me to the briefing helped. I prefer my women out of uniform and with soft, warm voices; but beyond the obvious characterizing differ-

ences, it was hard to tell the sex of a Gal-Mil officer. They are all trained in the same pattern, indoctrinated in the same ways. And since they have no more discrimination on the basis of sex than does Anthropol, Gal-Mil has a large number of feminine members.

In fact, the General who briefed me was also a woman. Her aide was a man with a ramrod for a spine and a military manual for a brain. Whenever the General needed a rule quoted, he supplied it. I tried levity twice to kind of lighten the situation. The General's response was a frosty smile; the aide gave no indication that he even comprehended what I was trying to do.

The gist of my briefing was simple enough: Gal-Mil had established a communication center in an isolated area not too far from Fovarosh, the capital of the planet. Precisely where it was located was none of my affair. When I needed to know, I would be told by the Gal-Mil officer already established on Ujvila. And there went my opportunity to make use of our communication ship without first going through a Gal-Mil screening.

Gal-Mil had a number of personnel already on the planet. Two had been discovered—and had disappeared. The remainder (How many wasn't my business either.) had established themselves successfully, at least so far. From the information obtained from them and earlier from the liberated—a Gal-Mil term for "kidnapped"—Ujvilans, it seemed that there was an anti-Igaz political movement. Over the centuries there had been a number of them; all had been destroyed. This group, called the Neo-Politicos, had lasted longer than the others; in fact, they were now in their second generation.

And here is where the Chief's persuasion and power showed: Gal-Mil had wanted to move in and take over the Ujvilan government by force. But the Chief had argued for a try at generating the take-over from the inside, that is, through the Neo-Politicos. Experience had shown us that, almost always, when a native group ousted another native group—politically or by revolution—the result was a far happier population than when the force was imposed from the outside.

But the General informed me, there was a time limit on the Chief's approach. If it hadn't succeeded in a quarter of an Ujvilan year, then Gal-Mil's methods would be used. Since I was the only Anthropol representative on Ujvila, it was up to me to see that the Neo-Politicos succeeded in taking over, and within the quarter year. But a fifth of the time

had already passed, since Gal-Mil had got their personnel on the planet while I was still in Conditioning.

I said, "What assurances does Anthropol have that your men will cooperate rather than try to sabotage our efforts to get the take-over generated from the inside?"

It wasn't a politic question. My first answer was a frosty stare from the General and a stifled gasp from her aide. Then the frost went away. "Fair enough," the General admitted. "Considering the rivalry between Anthropol and Gal-Mil, you have a right to that question.

"The answer is that our personnel is instructed to give you all possible cooperation until the deadline. Then—if you haven't succeeded—we begin direct operations."

"Direct operations" is another Gal-Mil euphemism. It means, "Move in by force."

I said, "How do I make contact with the Neo-Politics?"

She informed me that they had a learning tape prepared for me. On it was all the information I would need. That ended the interview. The aide conducted me to the learning room. I was put under and subjected to the tape. When I came back to the world, I wasn't sure I had learned very much. I did, however, have some contacts on Ujvila; I had my instructions for procedure; and I had had my path smoothed for me to some extent.

When I returned to the Chief on my way to the shuttle that would take me out to the waiting ship, I said, "I don't know too much, but I got promises of more cooperation than I ever expected."

"For a good reason," the Chief said. "Out of all the garbage that came from interrogating the Ujvilans and that came from the Gal-Mil personnel reports from the planet, the word 'alien' keeps popping up. An alien take-over has Gal-Mil worried enough to agree to cooperate with us."

"What alien culture has the technology to move in on a planet under Federation surveillance?" I demanded. "And for that matter, did you ever find records of any aggressive enough to try it?"

The Chief shook his head. "I agree. But I read the reports and listened to the interview tapes, and the concern is there. It may all be based on the suspicion by the totalitarian mind directed at anything not conforming to their concepts of what is normal—and I include Gal-Mil along with the Ujvilan government—or it may have some basis. Personally, I think it's the first. But I haven't said so, not as long as the worry works to our advantage."

He rose to shake my hand. "This is a tricky assignment,

Vernay. It's the kind you might not come back from. The probabilities aren't very much in your favor, especially when you have to fight Gal-Mil as well as the Ujvilans."

"I've fought Gal-Mil before and survived," I said. "I know a lot of their tricks."

"Keep talking to yourself that way and you might be all right," he said, and went back to his desk.

I went out to the shuttle to begin my trip to Ujvila. As we pulled up toward the waiting ship, the Earth looked particularly beautiful.

IV

POTKIL and I squatted shoulder to shoulder in the same thick shadow. She was silent, but I needed no words from her to know that huddling this close to an omul—a male—was not to her taste. The feeling was mutual. I had no desire to share even the same air with Potkil. But neither of us had any choice tonight. When she requested a male assistant for a high security assignment, she'd got me.

I wasn't too surprised. The preferential treatment I'd received in the two Earth months since my coming to Ujvila obviously indicated that someone fairly high up in the Igaz was a Gal-Mil operative. I'd even been given the semi-military rank of seged, which gave me a status somewhere between the scrubmen who cleaned the government buildings and the lowest order of free (non-criminal) female. The deep brown color of my coveralls proclaimed my rank.

But I wasn't wearing them tonight. Both Potkil and I were in the ugly dun-colored clothing that set us off as free but without rank. It was a protective coloration in this part of the city. It was a neighborhood of low-ordered working people, so low that the official superiority of the female was seldom displayed; here the men moved on an almost equal footing with the women of their own class.

I was tired of squatting in the recessed doorway that protected us from a possible passerby. The night was dark with thick clouds and the streets were unlighted except for an occasional glow from a window in one of the dwellings. I needed to stretch before my muscles began to cramp.

I spoke softly from the side of my mouth, barely moving my lips and controlling the volume of my voice so that the sounds carried barely to Potkil's helmet-covered ear. "It is close to time to move, dwamna."

"The time will be when I so decide, omul." She made

the simple word "omul" into an epithet. Her voice was as low as mine but it slashed at me with all the arrogance the years of being unlovely and unlovable, of fighting to rise above her original class had built into her.

I gave the stock answer, "Forgive, dwamna."

Despite my six months of conditioning, I found elements of Ujvilan culture hard to stomach. It wasn't a matter of my being outranked by a female; it was what Potkil represented, not her femaleness, that bothered me. I would have felt the same had she been male or a bisexual Libran or an asexual Cygnan, human or alien, Freebooter or Federationist.

And what Potkil represented was a mirror of the level of Ujvilan culture that ran the planet. She represented totalitarianism in some of its most vicious aspects. But right now she represented an immediate threat to the six months of conditioning I had undergone and to the two months of nerve-wrenching existence here. Now I was in a position to make the contacts that marked the first major step in my mission on the planet. I had finally received an order from Gal-Mil. I was to come face to face with the leader of the Neo-Politicos and to try to work out with him Anthropol's plan for a peaceful take-over of the Igaz.

But here Potkil squatted, a thick-bodied toad, while the precious time dribbled away. I had no watch, but I knew from the distant quarter hour chimes that we had already passed the time when we were supposed to leave here and begin tonight's mission.

I couldn't understand her continuing to delay. It was probably the most important assignment of Potkil's career. Already a ranking officer in the Igaz-render, the government police force, if she succeeded tonight she had been promised a promotion to head of that force. And that would mean a status of Officer Second Class, only one level below that of First Officer Elna, and as high as the low-born could rise.

I tried again. "Dwamna, if our quarry should escape . . ."

This time she didn't take offense. She sounded almost amiable, as close to amusement as she was capable of. "Had we followed the original plan, I'm sure the quarry would have escaped, omul. But the plan has been changed. So has the night's goal."

The thick, hot night contracted into a heavy lump and hit me at the beltline. Changed! Changed how? The original plan had seemed difficult enough. And we had gone over it time and again to make sure that everyone involved knew

his role perfectly. And now, with the minutes sliding into eternity, Potkil threw aside those long hours of labor.

Or had she? I had the sudden feeling that I might be the real quarry of this mission; that everyone else connected with it had been briefed on the change but me.

I said quickly, "I am no longer to go to Horty's saloon, pretend to get drunk, and start a fight with the rendor there?"

"There has been no change in that part of the plan," she said.

"But then what—"

"Do not interrupt, omull! It is not your place to expect an explanation, only to obey orders. But I will tell you this much; had the original plan worked, you would have given a password during your fight that would have let the suspected Neo-Politicos in Horty's think you were one of them and then they would have tried to rescue you from the rendor. You remember that much, I presume?"

I ignored her sarcasm. I remembered that much and more. Once I had given the password that Potkil's fantastically efficient spy system had learned, every Neo-Politico in Horty's would have identified me as one of them and so come to my aid. And while they were helping me escape from the rendor, pictures would be taken of them and tiny signaling devices attached to their clothing. Potkil's theory was that between the identifying pictures and tracing those wearing the signaling devices to their homes, we might round up a good-sized chunk of the central core of the Neo-Politico movement. And she would have been right. From the little information I had been given by Gal-Mil, the capital was the center of Neo-Politico activity and Horty's saloon, buried here in a low working-class district, was one of their central meeting places.

Potkil had long suspected Horty's place; now she was out to prove her suspicions.

She said, "Much of the plan will go on as before. But you will not simply stagger to the bar and demand of Horty a double krish for a thirsty man. Instead you will demand a double krish of high quality, of the kind with pits in it."

"I do not understand the difference," I risked saying.

"Nor does it matter whether you understand or not." But a second time she relented. "I learned only very recently that those particular words are more than just an identification of one as a Neo-Politico. They are an announcement that the speaker has a message of vital importance and is to be taken to the filthy rebel who leads them—to their head himself!"

I wanted to see the head of the Neo-Politicos, but not this way, not leading Potkil and her trained two-legged animals, the Igaz-rendor, to him.

I said, "Do I understand that when I am rescued from the rendor in Horty's I won't just be taken to a place of safety and turned loose but I'll be taken to Neo-Politico headquarters?"

"That is my information," she said.

I couldn't argue with her. Potkil's spy system was skilled in feeding her all the rumor and fact possible to learn. But it was Potkil's own innovation that had made the mixture of information useful in the fight against the Neo-Politicos. She had everything run through primitive but efficient computers. By a process of iteration, with all variables but one held as constants and changed each time, she managed to come up again and again with solutions to problems that had plagued the Igaz. Since my coming to Ujvila, I knew of a dozen fairly high up Neo-Politicos who had been caught and proved guilty—two of them from Potkil's own department.

But tonight Potkil had outdone herself. Because if she succeeded in capturing the head of the Neo-Politicos, the others would have no choice but to run and hide. And when they did, I knew she would have nets waiting for them to tumble into.

Nor was there much chance that she had erred. Potkil was too careful, too painstaking a worker: a sexless machine in a grossly feminine body; a compassionless entity with room inside herself for only one love—her Kalauz.

"That is why we wait," Potkil said. "My Igaz-rendor are setting up a ring of cars with scanners in them. You will be wearing a tracking device. It will lead us to the very heart of the Neo-Politicos."

"But what if they have their own pick-up scanners?" I demanded. "Then they will sense my device and know I am no more than bait."

"Hardly. The device is silent now. But at the proper time—when you are taken from the saloon—I will activate it by remote control."

She rose. "It is time to go."

I stood up beside her. I was of average height, tall but not too tall for an Ujvilan male, but Potkil towered over me. I didn't like what I was going to have to do next, but Potkil's change in plan had given me no choice. As I rose, I worked a sliver of plastic from the front seam of my coveralls. I staggered a little, as a man who has squatted

too long will, and I half brushed against Potkil's loose blouse. My hand touched the plastic, colored the same as the cloth of her clothing, to the rear of her blouse. It clung, invisible in the heavy darkness, and too light for her to feel.

"Forgive, dwamna."

"Repeat your procedures!" she snapped at me.

I said, "I am to proceed slowly down Enfil Street while you go down Draca Road. When I reach Kurva Street, I cross it and enter Horty's saloon. I pretend to be quite drunk and I stagger to the bar and address the man there. I demand a double krish, not the cheap stuff but that of high quality, with pits in it. When I am served, I will show my money. Because of its being more than a working man should have, the rendor will come from the stations at the rear of the room and demand to know where I got so much. Then I am to say, 'I am an honest working man with a thirst.' That is the signal that I am in need of assistance."

"Correct. Then the Neo-Politicos will rescue you. The remainder I have explained."

She turned away, starting down Draca Road. The doorway we had waited in was at the end of a triangular building, formed by the meeting of Draca Road and Enfil Street. As we walked south toward Kurva Street, we would each be taking a leg of the triangle and thus getting further apart. By the time we reached Kurva, a full block would be separating us. Potkil's job was to wait in the darkness at the corner, watching Horty's, ready to signal her Igaz-rendor forces to start their tracking.

My job was to be bait—bait that should land the biggest fish in the anti-government sea.

But if my little piece of plastic didn't fail, Potkil would never reach the corner of Draca Road and Kurva Street. By now it should be sending out a signal detectable only by the sophisticated gear Gal-Mil had supplied the Neo-Politicos. People were supposed to be waiting in a building facing Draca Road, waiting in case they heard that signal. And when they heard it, they were supposed to use a stunner on Potkil, take her quickly into the building, and by a route I did not know, get her to Gal-Mil's, communication center outside the city. A Gal-Mil ship was to come down and take her away.

I did not like Potkil, but I had a moment of pity for her. Once off Ujvila, she would be interrogated. I knew something of Gal-Mil's methods of interrogation. Both they and the kidnapping process itself came too close to the violence

Anthropol people were programmed against to make my part in this sit well inside me.

But my choice was clear enough—sacrifice Potkil or sacrifice the Neo-Politico movement.

I turned the corner and started my slow, staggering process down Enfil Street. Only an occasional light showed from a high up window, not enough to help me see past the deep shadows engulfing the street. I kept my slow, weaving pace until I was halfway down the long block. Now I was in an area where there were no lights at all. The sidewalk was narrow and badly cared for. Most of the houses fronting it had short flights of steps leading to their front doors. But here and there was a waist-high iron fence, gated to stairs going down to doors that led into rooms set half above and half below street level. I counted the stretches of fence. When I reached the seventh, I stopped and clung to the top of the fence the way a very drunk man might. Reaching my tongue to the right upper wisdom tooth, I pressed the tiny control that had been installed there. It activated the volume of the scanner detector that had been emplanted in the bone behind my right ear.

The detector was actually activated at all times, and when a scanner was being tuned to me, a soft, almost imperceptible humming vibrated the ear bone. But when the scanner was some distance away, the vibration could be so faint that I wasn't sure if I felt it or if my imagination was acting up. Then I turned up the sensitivity level of the detector.

I felt nothing, heard nothing. I was surprised. Always before when I had gone out on missions for Potkil, I had been scanned. Supposedly for my safety but, I knew, mainly because I wasn't trusted. I puzzled over the change and then I realized that Potkil could not have put a normal scanner on me. I was carrying a special tracking device—the one she was supposed to activate by remote control—and it and a scanner beam weren't compatible: one would generate interference in the other.

Relieved, I moved on down the sidewalk, continuing my counting. I could make my contact now without too much fear of detection. But Potkil had delayed so long, I was afraid that the contact might have left the meeting place. I had to force myself not to run.

At the tenth fence I stopped, fumbled open the gate and started down a short flight of concrete steps. The air was even heavier here, close to the building, and the darkness thicker. My nostrils caught the odors of generations of cheap food having been cooked, of people who worked too hard

and washed too seldom, of the homeless and the hopeless who had used the areaway for a night's resting place.

My outstretched hands touched the cracked paint on a door's surface. I stopped and stood motionless. My coming hadn't been noiseless. If my contact was still waiting, my presence was known. Agonizing minutes passed. I thought I was too late, and made a move to turn and leave.

Then I caught the pinprick of light, so brief and tiny that I wasn't sure I had seen it. I faced the door again. A second time the light came, a mere flicker caught by the edge of my vision. But now I was sure. I raised both hands and placed them flat against the rough door.

The faintest of sounds came from behind me; air stirred as someone moved in the darkness. The sharp tip of a weapon touched my skull at the base of my hairline.

I tensed. This could still be a trap. It was the kind of device Potkil's computers might come up with to test me. But the lack of warning from the scan detector in my ear-bone reassured me.

I said, "I can't get krish for my thirst by standing here." I spoke in Intragal rather than in Ujvilan.

The weapon remained where it was. A voice, sexless in its softness, murmured, "Name?" The word was also in Intragal, but the accent was heavily local.

"Vernay." Since it was my own name and still one suitable for Ujvila, I had kept it. One of the most difficult things in my work is to learn to respond automatically to a different name; I kept my own whenever I could.

"Proof?"

"My speech. My being here. My desire for krish."

"All of this her spies could know as well."

I assumed by "her" the voice meant Potkil. I said, "Would they also know that she had a plastisignaler attached to her blouse and that soon the detector should pick up the signal—if it hasn't already?"

"It has. The matter is resolved."

I had another moment's pity for Potkil. Then I said, "What more proof do you need?"

"None. Follow through as planned."

I said, "A warning. I put the plastisignaler on Potkil because she changed her plan at the last moment. Her Igaz-rendor are alerted to follow me. I am supposed to take them to the head of the Neo-Políticos."

"This change of plan is known and has been taken care of. You will do as Potkil instructed you. However, instead of being rescued, you will be arrested. Allow this to happen.

Allow yourself to be taken out of the saloon. But fight a little. Once outside, the Igaz-rendor will take you from the local rendor. You will be brought to the leader."

In a way, it seemed a lot of unnecessary rigamarole. On the other hand, I thought, if no part of the plan went as scheduled, if both Potkil and I disappeared, there would be an immediate stirring at Igaz headquarters.

The voice said, "Act as if there had been no change, as if you did not know about Potkil."

"All right. Take that stunner away from my neck so I can turn around."

The pressure of the weapon went away. The air stirred again as the owner of the voice moved beyond my reach. I went back to the street and continuing my weaving progress toward Horthy's saloon.

V

SPLASHES OF COLORED light marked the entrance to Horthy's. The faint jangle of cheap music grew louder as I crossed the street and made my staggering way to the door. Places such as Horthy's were scattered throughout the lower-class districts of the planet's two cities and all of its villages with any pretensions to size. This was the only type of recreational facility conceded the lower classes by the Igaz. As a result, saloons gave the underprivileged their one opportunity to congregate openly. To compensate, the Igaz always saw that every saloon had a small squad of rendor constantly watching.

I went inside Horthy's. Noise and smoke, the stench of sour, cheap liquor and of sweating bodies gushed at me. I stopped just inside the doorway, leaning forward and peering blearily around. The room was L-shaped, with the L outlined by the bar. To my left, along the short side of the L, a cluster of tables held working people of both sexes. The long side of the L stretched ahead of me with a small dance floor to its right. Behind the dance floor were more tables, these only dimly lighted. No customers sat at any of these tables, only rendor.

I weaved to the bar and leaned on it. A thick-set man with a heavy black moustache moved toward me. I said loudly, "A double krish for a thirsty man."

Rumbles of conversation at the crowded tables began to dribble away. Someone stopped the electronic music machine. I said again, "Don't just stand there, man. I'm thirsty. I

want a double krish. And none of your cheap slop. Give me the kind with pits in it!"

"That costs more than a few coppers," the bartender said in a flat voice.

His words echoed through a thick, waiting silence. I took a deep breath and plunged a hand into my belt purse. "Money," I said drunkenly. I threw a handful of bills on the bartops. "Money!" I made the word contemptuous.

At the crowded tables someone half swallowed a soft gasp. A chair made a scraping noise as it was pushed back from a table. The sound came from behind me. One of the rendor was getting ready to move in on me.

The bartender made no move to pick up my money. He stood with both hands flat on the bartop, his dark eyes fixed over my shoulder. I didn't have to wait long. A tall, handsome young woman in the uniform of a local rendor stepped up beside me.

"That's a lot of money for a worker to carry on his person."

"It's my money," I said belligerently. I swept it with the back of my hand, sending it floating along the bar and down to the floor. "But what good is it? I can't buy a krish with it. I can't buy the right to wear decent clothes. I can't—"

It was talk verging on sedition, according to the attitudes of the Igaz. The rendor frowned and lifted a hand. More chairs scraped back. She had called for the rest of her squad.

"You've had a little too much krish already, omul," she said. A strong hand squeezed down on my arm. "Come along." She half turned to the four other uniformed women coming toward me. "Pick up his money. We'll take it and him to headquarters."

I jerked away from her hand. "All I want is a decent glass of krish. Is that too much for a thirsty man to want? Krish with pits in it!"

"Come along," she said again. Her hand reached out for me.

I knocked it aside. The rendor's cheeks flushed. "Watch yourself, omull!"

I put my head down and tried to ram my way through the group that had now formed a semicircle around me. A leg tripped me, sending me sprawling. Strong hands caught my wrists and dragged my arms up my back. I stopped pretending to fight. Not even to make this look genuine did I want to risk a pair of dislocated shoulders.

I was led out through the same thick silence. No one at the crowded front tables looked at me. As the door shut

behind me and the three rendor—the leader and the two gripping my arms—the music started up again.

We stopped at the edge of the sidewalk. "Signal a patrol vehicle," the leader said.

One of my arms was turned loose. The rendor who had been holding it took out her belt transmitter, but before she could open a channel a lithe female in the forest green uniform that marked her as a special member of the Igaz-rendor came striding around the corner.

"Something has gone wrong," she said. "Commander Potkil is not at her post. Has this omul said anything?"

"Only the passwords we were told to listen for," the leader of the squad said. She added, "Forgive, Hadnaj, but nothing has gone as planned. Those inside did not fight."

"Did this one?"

"A small bit, Hadnaj."

Hadnaj. It was a title that placed the woman as a top ranking junior officer. She stepped forward and looked closely into my face. The lights from Horty's revealed her extremely attractive features—and eyes cold enough to freeze a polar ice cap.

Her voice matched her eyes. "Where is Commander Potkil?"

"If she is not at her post, Hadnaj, I assure you . . ."

She grabbed my free arm. With a sudden motion, she drove her fingers down through flesh and muscle and into nerves in such a way that the pain jolted me from groin to skull. I went to my knees, the breath gushing from my throat.

I had felt that kind of pain only once before—on Rigel VII, when I had been forced into physical combat with a member of Gal-Mil. The Chief later told me that Gal-Mil training techniques utilized an electronic device that gave temporary power to the muscles. Once that power was spent, then the user had to wait for a tiny implanted battery to recharge before he could exert the same kind of force again. I had lost that fight on Rigel VII, but after hearing the Chief's explanation, I'd sworn to myself that if the same thing happened to me again, I'd use some of my own muscles before my opponent had a chance to recharge his battery.

Only now I had to renege. In the first place, I wasn't dealing with a male; I was dealing with a female. But more important, I couldn't risk retaliation. This was a member of the Igaz-rendor. She could be my contact.

If she wasn't, I was headed for trouble. She said crisply

to the squad leader, "Take your rendor back inside. I'll find out from this one what happened to Commander Potkil."

"If we can help, Hadnaj . . ."

Her voice dripped with ice. "I have my own personnel." She jerked me erect. "Come along, omul. We will go to where the Commander is supposed to be. And you will explain why she is not there."

I said humbly, "Agreed, Hadnaj. But I do not know—"

I broke off. She was not bothering to listen to me. The three rendor were returning to the saloon and the woman in the green uniform was busily calling for her patrol vehicle. I could feel the sweat coming out all over me. When she had used that grip on my arm, I'd been almost certain she was the Gal-Mil plant, the contact who would lead me to the Neo-Politico leader. But now she was calling for her assistants and I began to feel less sure.

They came, three of them, in one of those silent, tiller-controlled electric cars that the Ujvilans had perfected. It slid to the curb. "Yes, Hadnaj Lori?" the driver said.

"This one claims he does not know about Commander Potkil. He may be telling the truth or it could be a plot by the Neo-Politicos. Patrol this entire area carefully. Set your scanners on the frequency of the Commander's homing device."

"Should we not take the omul to headquarters first?"

"I'll take care of that. I want him to retrace his path and show me where he last saw the Commander. Quickly." She pointed in the opposite direction from the way I had come here.

The woman beside the driver adjusted some dials on the dashboard of the car. It swung around and slipped silently away. The Hadnaj gave me a shove. "Start walking," she said loudly. "Show me where you think the Commander was to be waiting."

We reached the far side of the street and stepped into shadow. "Here," I said. I pointed to a spot of darkness. "It was my understanding—"

"You can drop it," she said in Intragal. "We aren't being monitored."

I rubbed my arm and almost forgave her for using that power grip as a way of signaling me who she was. I said, "It's about time. This whole thing has been ridiculous. Why did I have to go to Horty's at all?"

"To give me a reason to contact you," she said pleasantly. Then her voice changed; the inevitable military crackle

came into it. "Don't forget, Vernay, you're under my orders while we're on Ujvila."

"Your orders? You're . . . ?"

"That's right. Name, Lori. Rank, Captain, Galactic Military Forces, Political Rehabilitation Corps. So don't tell me what is ridiculous—just obey instructions."

"Yes, Captain." I paused and added, "As your subordinate, I respectfully request permission to ask a question."

"Drop that too," she said icily. "What's the question?"

"If those Igaz-rendor of yours are tuning in on Potkil, aren't they liable to find where she's been taken? Some of those pick-up devices have a fantastic range."

"No," she said. "There's no chance at all." She started up the street. "Hurry up. We haven't all night."

She didn't explain further but started marching. I fell in step beside her, mocking her stiff stride. She didn't like it but she ignored me after one cold glance and kept on until we had covered half the distance back to where Enfil Street and Draca Road met. She stopped and made a sharp turn to the left. We were on Draca Road and, I judged, at a point directly opposite the place on Enfil Street where I had contacted the sexless voice a short while ago.

We went down stairs to a doorway. But instead of stopping and waiting to be contacted, Lori opened the door and led me into the thick, smelly darkness of an ancient hallway. The door clicked shut behind us. Lori turned on a tiny palm light she carried, letting us see enough to follow worn carpeting down the hallway.

"Look," I said, "I've been working blind ever since I came here. The few messages relayed to me explained nothing. That may be Gal-Mil's idea of efficient coordination with Anthropol, but it isn't mine. I want to know what, where, when, how, and why. And I want to know them now."

"Anthropol personnel never did understand the meaning of discipline," she snapped.

"No, but we understand the value of being able to think and act for ourselves, without having to check every move in a manual of regulations."

"We can argue philosophies later. Just follow me."

I said politely, "Go to Pluto."

She turned around. "By Aries, Vernay!" Then she gave a tiny shrug. "We're going to see Rosid, the leader of the Neo-Politicos. The change of plan was his idea. I managed to get it to Potkil in such a way that she thought it was her own."

"Why?"

"Because the original plan involved identifying too many members of the Neo-Politico group. It was decided to be too risky. The Neos can't afford to lose any members. Things are too close to take-over. Satisfied?"

"No," I said. "Where is Potkil? You haven't had time to get her to your communication center and up to the Gal-Mil ship."

She said blandly, "There was a mistake made. The long-range stunner that was supposed to knock Potkil out when the signal from your plasticard came through was set at the wrong frequency." Her voice dropped slightly but it held no sound of apology. "And apparently the plasticard was of the wrong type."

I felt ill, physically sick in my intestines. I said angrily, "You mean it was a thermal unit, not just a signaling device."

"I'm afraid so. Potkil burned up."

Simple words, spoken matter-of-factly. But they carried more than a simple meaning for me. They meant that Potkil had literally been turned into a tiny pile of ashes almost instantaneously—ashes that the slightest breeze would scatter into invisibility. The thermal plasticard was a recent Gal-Mil gadget that Anthropol had unsuccessfully tried to get outlawed by the Federation Council. It looked exactly like a signaler but a particular frequency turned it into a frightful weapon.

And there was the basic difference between the philosophy of Gal-Mil and that of Anthropol: Potkil was a problem—so Gal-Mil got rid of her permanently. If I had been working under Anthropol control, she would have been removed and kept out of the way until matters were settled and then released.

I said, "Just who set off the activator?"

"I did. Those Neo-Políticos aren't very trustworthy. They don't follow orders much better than you do. Now are you satisfied?"

I didn't answer that. I said, "Let's go see this Rosid and find out how to take care of this mess."

"Mess, Vernay?"

"Potkil is too important for the Igaz to ignore her disappearance. What do you think they'll do to me in an effort to try to find out what happened to her?"

"Since you're innocent, what can they do?" Lori asked blandly. "You followed orders. You have nothing to worry about." She started on down the hallway.

She was lying. We both knew it. I was an omul. I had been the last person of record to see Potkil alive. My

cover, built from the actual records of an Ujvilan "liberated" by Gal-Mil, had been accepted up to now. But the Igaz would no longer be satisfied with mere records. They would begin an investigation that would end with their discovering I was an interloper. And while they investigated, I would probably sit in one of their unpleasant jails, useless to Gal-Mil, to the Neo-Politicos, and to Anthropol.

"That's one way for Gal-Mil to get rid of the Anthropol agent assigned to them, isn't it?" I asked.

She turned, and in the faint glow from her palm light, her smile was amused—and with no warmth at all.

"If there has to be a sacrificial lamb, Vernay, you'll be it."

She did a military about-face and started walking again. I had no choice but to follow.

VI

OUR TRIP was a short one. At the end of the hall, we passed through a door and down a flight of concrete steps to a damp smelling basement. The darkness seemed to thicken and grow mustier as we descended. Only Lori's palm lamp kept me from stumbling on the uneven flooring.

Then a thin line of light appeared at the far side of the room. Lori held up her hand, palm out, and by alternating opening and closing her fingers winked out a brief signal. The line of light widened until it became an open doorway. A masculine voice said, "Come forward. It is safe now."

We went into a lighted room. To the left a long table held a row of four portable viewscreens, none operating. A swivel chair was placed where a monitor could watch the screens or face any part of the room. The remainder of the floor space was taken up by conventional—rather shoddy—Ujvilan furniture: a scatter of chairs near a large table of pre-Inundation design and a long, backless padded bench against the far wall.

The swivel chair was filled by a tall, thick-set man with most of his features hidden by a heavy cinnamon beard. Face hair was not too uncommon an adornment for the Ujvilan male, especially for those workers who had almost no direct contact with the ruling class of female. Those who did not wear beards went through a daily anachronistic ritual of depilating their whiskers by applying a cream.

One of the most difficult problems the Anthropol medico-engineers had faced in preparing me had been to devise

facial hair that seemed to grow. They succeeded by implanting tiny hairs in the skin of my face, making them and my head hair blond to be less noticeable, and then providing me with a powder to put on in the morning. The powder hid the tiny hairs so that in the mornings I looked clean-shaven. But as it was absorbed throughout the day at a slow, steady rate, by evening I began to show what the Ujvilans called "stubble," and by morning again I was obviously "in need of a shave." Seeing this man's heavy crop of whiskers made me glad my role hadn't called for a full beard implant; the thought of thick face hair in the Ujvilan climate was enough to make me sweat. But he seemed oblivious to any discomfort.

The door we had come through closed behind us with a soft, pneumatic hiss. The man studied me with eyes of a blue so dark as to verge on the black.

"You are the one called Vernay."

"He is," Lori said. "I can vouch for him."

"There is no need. The sensitizer tells me that he is the same one contacted earlier. His accent was put through the analyzer. There is no question that he is a non-Ujvilan."

He nodded at me. "I am Rosid." And when a slender, dark blond girl suddenly came through the room's only other doorway, he nodded again. "And this is Tiska." His voice held a strong current of respect as he spoke her name.

She radiated a peculiarly elfin beauty, not a common quality in the usually large, rangy Ujvilan female. Her smile was genuine and lovely as she came toward me.

"I wish to thank you personally for coming to Ujvila to help our cause." Her accent proclaimed her as definitely upper class; yet there was none of the usual upper-class condescension by the female toward the male when she spoke.

I was too busy worrying to be equally gracious in return. I said, "There may not be a cause much longer if the Igaz-rendor get close enough to this place to snoop it out. It isn't very well hidden."

Rosid chuckled, but whether at my abruptness or my naïveté I wasn't sure. "Speaking of Igaz-rendor, the indicator is announcing that someone or something has arrived outside. I suspect it is Lori's group." He flicked on one of the viewscreens. I was surprised, knowing the quality of Ujvilan electronics. I expected a dim picture because of the darkness, but this was clear and sharp, as if the pick-up beam contained an invisible floodlight.

Rosid was right. The patrol car Lori had sent chasing off

in the other direction had drawn up to the curb. One of the women was getting out, holding an instrument of some kind in her hand. While we watched, two other cars came up, each filled with Igaz-rendor. One group was armed with heavy-duty stunners; the other operated an electric snooper, one of the big, powerful models.

Rosid's pick-up beam also contained an audio channel. We heard the driver of the first car say, "Our signal comes in strongest here. We also get additional signals as though someone close by is operating illegal electronic equipment."

The woman with the hand instrument was moving toward the entryway of the building. "I continue to pick up a growing signal on the frequency of the Commander's homing device. I believe the Neo-Politicos have taken her into this building."

I said, "I thought you, ah—took care of Potkil."

"I did, but she must have dropped her signaling device out front. She was no fool, Vernay, and I know she suspected one of these buildings as being tied in with the Neo-Politicos."

It was a rather lame explanation, I thought. With her access to any of a dozen electronic instruments the Igaz used for marking suspected areas, why would Potkil give up her own homing device—one of the few protections she had when on a special operation? But neither Rosid nor Tiska questioned Lori's explanation. Perhaps neither had heard it. Both had their eyes fixed on the viewscreens.

The second screen had taken over as the women holding the instrument led the way into the hall. She was followed by two carrying the heavy-duty stunners. They stepped up, flanking her, and the remaining three armed Igaz-rendor brought up the rear.

I said, "They're heading right this way. What are we waiting for—to trap and kill them?"

I was looking at Lori, but Rosid said gently, "The Neo-Politicos do not believe in taking over by violence. We use it only when all other forms of action are unavailable. They will not be hurt."

Tiska made a half laughing, half giggling sound. "But they will be bewildered. Come, it is time to leave."

Rosid nodded and activated the two remaining viewscreens. One showed the outside of Horty's; the other gave a view of the empty basement room Lori and I had crossed to reach this place. I stood, looking from the viewscreens to the other three, not understanding—and no one seemed interested in enlightening me. They simply walked to the padded bench set against the wall and sat down side by

side. Rosid reached it last. He walked slowly, almost limpingly, stiffly.

Lori said impatiently, "Come on, Vernay. You can watch the fun from headquarters."

I went to the bench and sat beside her. "I thought this was headquarters."

"We hope the Igaz-rendor will think so too," Rosid said. He put a hand up to his wrist and the whole affair, floor, wall, bench, and the four of us, dropped. We went down a good thirty meters very quickly and very silently. We ended up in a stone-walled room with the lingering odor of an ancient wine cellar. Rosid did something again to the instrument on his wrist and the bench shot back up. I was almost too slow, and Lori had to pull me to my feet at the last second.

"If we hurry," Rosid said, "we can watch them break into the room above."

He used his wrist control to open a panel in the stone wall. We went through and the panel closed behind us. Tiska said, "Now we are shielded. The alloy on this side of the stone will repel any Ujvilan tracking device."

It was nice to be given some information. But that was all I got for a while. A small pneumatic wheeled car barely large enough to hold the four of us hung from an overhead suspended rail that disappeared into darkness down a long corridor. We crammed into the car and Rosid played with his control gadget again. We took off, slowly at first, but gathering speed until there was nothing but the rush of darkness and air battering at me. Had there been light, I doubted if the corridor walls would have been more than a blur. Suddenly we began to slow and then we stopped, and another stone wall faced us. Rosid's control unit swung a section of it aside.

This time we were in an elevator. But not one of the slow, cable-controlled Ujvilan type. This was more akin to the modern air column kinds that are found commonly in the galaxy. The platform on which we stood dropped silently and swiftly down a good fifty meters and then stopped with only the slightest jar. We stepped into another corridor, this one paneled in wood and having three doors opening from it. We went through the central door and into a large, airy room.

There were viewscreens here too, a full ten of them. But these were obviously permanent installations, set in the wall, and guessing from the control panel beneath them they were far more sophisticated than those we had recently left. All

of the screens were activated, each showing a separate picture. The one that interested all of us was following the progress of the Igaz-renderor. They had reached the basement room and had brought up powerful hand lamps while they worked their way cautiously around what appeared to be solid concrete walls.

Tiska waved us to chairs that gave a good angle on the viewscreens, and we sat down. I said, "They didn't get very far. Do you have some kind of electronic barriers set up?"

"Very simple ones to deactivate," Rosid said. "Simple for two reasons: we do not want the Igaz to know how sophisticated our equipment really is, and we do not want to impede them too much in finding what they think is our headquarters." He chuckled a fruity sound. "Each time they discover our 'headquarters,' they relax their vigilance for a time. That enables us to consolidate more of our plans."

Tiska let out a soft sigh. "Only a few more steps and we will be ready for the final one."

"And it will be Kalauz Tiska," Rosid said.

I didn't waste my time asking for an explanation. I assumed I would be given one when necessary. Meanwhile, I was enjoying myself watching the Igaz-renderor work their way persistently through the two obviously low-power electronic barriers and through the pneumatic door and into the control room containing the four viewscreens.

The one who had been driving Lori's patrol car was in the lead now. "See," she cried in triumph. "Commander Potkil was right. This building is a Neo headquarters!"

"But where is she?" the woman with the instrument demanded. "The signal I'm getting indicates her homing device is here—within five meters of us. But there is no sign of anyone."

"Those viewscreens," the driver said. "See. They are focused so that our progress has been followed. The Neos have escaped and taken Commander Potkil with them. And perhaps Hadnaj Lori and the omul as well!" She seemed to be in command. Her voice snapped now. "Find them! Tear apart the walls, the floor, everywhere. And keep hunting. If we have to tear apart every building in this district, we will. But the Commander must be found."

I said to Rosid, "Your little trick didn't work this time. It sounds as if they're going to increase rather than slow down their activities."

He frowned. "The accident to Potkil was unfortunate. And

without a body to satisfy them, they may temporarily delay a number of our immediate plans."

Lori said, "If you'd let me do it my way, there wouldn't be any need for all this rigamarole. I can have Tiska in the Kalauz' castle by morning."

"It is not our policy," Tiska said in her soft voice. Soft but stubborn, with a thread of steel as strong as any made on Vulcan IV.

Lori snorted. "You aren't strong enough to do what you want the way you want. Don't forget that the Kalauz still controls most of the planet, most of the industry, most of the population. She has a thousand spies to your one. And she doesn't hesitate to use weapons when she wants to. Look what happened to that original Anthropol crew and to the two Gal-Mil personnel she caught."

"She fears all non-Ujvilans," Tiska agreed. "But if any of us—the Ujvilans here, I mean—are caught, she will not destroy us."

"No, she'll send you to one of her joy-labor camps. Do you think that's better? Less cruel?"

"I am sorry," Tiska said. "I appreciate your concern and your great assistance, but we will accept your violent method only as a final resort."

And from the way she said it, that put a seal on the argument. I sat back and enjoyed the frustration mirrored on Lori's face. And I felt a true kinship with these Neo-Politicos for the first time. Until now they had been amorphous, a cause in the abstract. But here was their leader in the flesh; and here was their philosophy laid out plainly and simply—and agreeing with that of Anthropol.

Tiska rose. "I shall see to some food." She left the room by a side door, a graceful girl in pale cream clothing with red piping. That, I assumed, was some kind of distinguishing badge. Rosid too wore cream-colored clothes, but his had no piping.

We sat and watched the Igaz-render take apart the view-screens, the walls, the floor, and finally locate the elevator-cum-bench.

"They'll need a long time to get much beyond the old wine cellar," Rosid said. "Their instruments will be useless from now on. And the shielding alloy behind those stone walls is impervious to anything the Kalauz or her scientists have yet invented."

I moved my eyes to another viewscreen. It and the three next to it gave me sharp interior views of Igaz headquarters—one of them First Officer Elna's private office.

I said, "Obviously your equipment is more sophisticated than most on Ujvila."

"I presume you ask for an explanation," Rosid said. He gave me his beard-hidden smile and fruity chuckle. "It is very simple. Many of the best minds on the planet are Neo-Politicos, all of them weary of the harsh regulatory hand of the Kalauz. This is especially true among the male scientists. And it is they who have come up with the improved devices, particularly these past few years."

That made me blink. "How can a male get a scientific education on Ujvila?"

Tiska came back. "The food will be here presently. And allow me to answer that question. My family has been in revolt against the Kalauz for many generations. But until the present, when we were discovered, the Igaz was not aware of this. They accepted us as one of the loyal families which supported them—with funds and power."

"A kind of aristocracy without titles?"

"Yes, one based on those families most powerful at the time our people made planetfall so long ago," she said.

"When your family was discovered to be Neo-Politico, what happened?"

Tiska said quietly, "I went into hiding. My parents were sent to joy-labor camps, where they died. Our factories and other income-producing businesses were confiscated by the Kalauz." She smiled. "Of course, there were really very few. Most had long since been put in the hands of unsuspected friends, also Neo-Politicos. It is from their profits that we can operate."

"But what about the education of the men?"

"Neo-Politicos do not believe in the superiority of either sex," Tiska said. "One of the steps taken some generations ago was to give secret but complete scientific educations to those males capable of absorbing it—those who could be trusted, of course."

Rosid added, "And few of the men are in favor of the present policies of the Igaz."

That was almost too obvious to need stating. I said, "Since I'm here to help, would you mind telling me what your plans are for taking over?"

"After we eat," Tiska said, and for the first time she sounded a bit doubtful at having spoken so freely.

I said, "If you're thinking that I might have succumbed to some kind of pressures from the Igaz—brain modification or some such thing—forget it. The only reason we haven't

been in direct contact before is because I had to wait for Lori to set up my contact with you."

Lori said defensively, "And I had to wait until I could see the Igaz' plans shaping up. When Potkil started this last action, I knew it was time."

"He is no danger to us," Rosid told Tiska. "I can assure you that he is even more sympathetic than Captain Lori here." He turned his smile on her. "He too is a disbeliever in violence."

Tiska's expression flickered relief. "So often we have come close to being betrayed."

The food came then, interrupting what could have been an embarrassing few moments. It was brought by two bearded men, both of whom had stiff walks similar to Rosid's. I learned that this place was the true headquarters of the Neo-Politicos and that there were more than thirty people, counting scientific researchers, working in a honeycomb of chambers around us. Other cells were scattered across the planet, linked by a communication system that neither the Igaz nor our ships in orbit had been able to tap into. It was, to say the least, sophisticated electronics.

The food was plain but good, ending with the inevitable kaf. Tiska joined us in the meal but Rosid took only kaf, adulterating it with a pea-sized grayish pill. Noticing my obvious interest, Tiska said in her soft voice, "Like many of my followers who have suffered under the Igaz, Rosid cannot eat as the rest of us do."

I wondered what particular indignities Rosid had suffered from the Igaz; I could think of a number of possibilities. But I said nothing, nor did Lori. If Rosid wanted us to know his background, I assumed he'd tell us in his own time.

After the meal, we discussed the obvious problem: what effect the hunt for Potkil would have on Tiska's plans. I asked the question, and she said, "We must be careful. Investigations always mean that many people are questioned. If someone should betray us—"

"If you let me handle this, you won't have to worry," Lori said.

Tiska was firm. "When I become Kalauz, the people mustn't feel that there was outside intervention but that the change was wholly an internal affair. Otherwise, there will be a period of unrest."

I stopped Lori's argument. I said, "Let's face the facts. Both of us will have to go back to Igaz headquarters and make a report."

"I might be all right, but you'd be too suspect," she said.

I knew that, but an agent in hiding isn't of much value. I said, "I'll just have to trust you to give me what help you can." And, I thought, from a Gal-Mil officer that wouldn't be very much.

VII

AFTER THE MEAL, Tiska was supposed to discuss the Neo take-over plan, but events showing on the viewscreen drove all thoughts of that from my mind.

The driver and her crew had left the supposed Neo-Politico headquarters and were making for Horty's. The driver said, "We have been tricked." She held up her hand, revealing the tiny homing device Potkil had worn until—apparently—shortly before her destruction.

The driver was in audio contact now with Igaz headquarters. She spoke briefly, outlining what had taken place up to this point. She asked for instructions.

Rosid pointed to the viewscreen revealing the communications room at Igaz headquarters. Two Igaz-rendor were feeding data into Potkil's beloved computer. On the other viewscreen I watched the driver impatiently drum her fingers on the tiller of the car as she waited for the computer to digest this information and come up with new instructions.

It did finally. The communications operator received a printed sheet and began reading into her microphone: "You are correct in assuming that the focal point of tonight's trouble may be at Horty's saloon. Data indicates that it, as well as some of the buildings fronting Draca Road, were high on the Commander's list of suspected places. You will bring all found at Horty's here for questioning."

There was a pause while the computer worked to print out a second sheet. I asked Rosid, "How many of your people will they pick up at Horty's?"

"There are always a few, including Horty himself," he said.

"How much chance is there that they'll break under interrogation?" I asked.

Lori answered that with a short, harsh laugh. "Haven't you ever seen some of their techniques, Vernay? The strong-willed ones won't break, but they won't be much good afterward, either."

"Not only that," Tiska said in her soft way, "but if there is any hint of suspicion left after the questioning, the ones suspected will be sent to joy-labor camps. And we can't

afford to lose anyone. Not now. Not when we're so close. We need all of our people."

She broke off as the computer finished its print-out. The woman at the microphone read, "The data indicates that there are three equal probabilities based on the information received: the omul Vernay is in league with the enemy and has destroyed the Commander and taken refuge with the Neos, and he has rid himself of Hadnaj Lori as well; or Hadnaj Lori is one of the enemy and has been seeking to mislead you, perhaps destroying the Commander and Vernay herself; or the Neos have trapped them both, perhaps destroyed them and the Commander. Questioning of those found at Horty's—or in the vicinity—will reveal which of these probabilities is correct. The order is therefore amended. Bring in all individuals found at Horty's and all in the buildings on Draca Road."

Tiska's gasp of anguish told me the danger to her people that the new order had brought. I said quickly, "We'd better get out there and do something to stop them."

"How?" Lori demanded. "You heard that Pluto-born machine. I'm a suspect too!"

"You won't be if you show up with me—and claim that you believe I'm tied in with the Neos," I said. "That will take the pressure off you."

"Sacrificing yourself, Vernay?"

I ignored the sarcasm in her voice. "Not at all. But I think I can prove that I only followed orders. You can always recant and say that in the excitement you made a misjudgment."

"That still won't stop them from running you through the interrogation process."

"I'm conditioned to blank out under too heavy pressure," I said. "There's nothing they can get out of me that will hurt anybody's plans."

"It might not leave much of you," she warned.

"I'll have to risk that." I pointed to the viewscreen. "It's try my plan or have these people lose important personnel—maybe permanently."

"I still say my way would solve everything."

"I do not want to see Vernay hurt," Tiska said, "but I cannot yet accept your plan."

"We're arguing in circles," I said, getting up. "Rosid, if I ever need to contact you again, how can I do it?"

He rose too, in that stiff way of his. "I'll explain as I lead you out."

Lori looked at the viewscreen showing her Igaz-rendor

almost at Horty's, and with a shrug she stood up and followed. Tiska's goodbye was a smile that did nothing to hide the concern in her eyes.

Rosid led the way. "I'll return you to the surface on Enfil Street." We took another elevator ride and another trip in one of the small, swift cars. As we rode, he told me, "Throughout this world, in the two cities and in the larger villages, you will find saloons with the top half of the third letter of their signs missing. When you need to find me, go into one of those places and find a bartender who is wearing either a moustache like Horty's or a bit of beard on his chin. Say to him, 'I'm too poor to buy krish. How about some old pits for me to suck?' If he answers, 'You bums are all alike. When will you learn to try kaf instead?' then you know you have the right man. You will answer, 'All right, give me some kaf, but slip a krish pit or two in it, eh?'"

We were nearly to the surface. Rosid added, "But be careful. Remember, if they turn you loose—or let you escape—they just might have a homing device planted so they can follow you."

"I'll know it if they do."

He bobbed his head. "If you know you're being scanned, warn the saloon man once you've established yourself. That way, he can get you behind shielding quickly. But be sure the ones following are far enough behind to give him time to hide you. Otherwise, you'll be revealing one of our contact points."

I casually said, "Of course," but it was advice I was going to recall very soon.

We left lighted corridors and wound our last dozen meters upward through darkness. Rosid disappeared and we found ourselves on Enfil Street, only a short walk from Horty's.

I said to Lori, "And what if I have to run for it and need to contact you? Do I go to the communication center?"

She laughed at me. "When I want you to know where it is, Vernay, I'll take you there. You leave the contacting up to me. I can always find a way of getting a message to you. If not through one of my own people, then through one of the Neos."

She stopped short of the street that ran alongside Horty's. "If we're going to use your plan, let's make it look good." She activated her communication device, calling for her driver.

When the answer came, Lori said crisply, "Hadnaj Lori here. I had omul Vernay in custody but he escaped from me. Report at once." She gave her location.

To me, she said, "Duck back inside. I'll put out a call for another patrol—with one of my own outfit in charge. You'll think she's a lower echelon Igaz-rendor but her name is Pinder, Sergeant Pinder, Gal-Mil. I'll lead this crew away. When Pinder picks you up, follow her instructions."

I asked. "How is that going to take the pressure from you?"

"You'll see. Now get out of sight."

As I started back into the smell-ridden building we'd just left, I heard her sending out a call in Intragal—obviously on a wavelength the Igaz hadn't managed to tap into. I caught the name of Sergeant Pinder. Then the darkness gulped me down.

I stationed myself where I could see the street. Lori barely had time to get her speech made and her device hidden away before the Igaz-rendor car came wheeling around the corner. She stepped in and it took off, moving as fast as it could manage up Enfil Street, with Lori gesticulating to punctuate her obvious orders.

Within five minutes another car wheeled into sight. This one contained only one Igaz-rendor—Sergeant Pinder, I hoped. I stepped into view. A low voice called my name in Intragal. I answered and moved up to the car.

"Get in," I was ordered. Sergeant Pinder was big and burly and no nonsense; male or female, anywhere in the galaxy a sergeant was a military-generated phenomenon no one could mistake for anything else.

She said crisply, "We're to drive into the area south of Horty's. Presumably that's where I found you after you 'ran' from the Captain." She began driving. "They'll home in on us, of course, and just before they reach us, you overpower me, push me from the car, and try to get away. They'll catch you. They'll probably be a little rough, but you look strong enough to take it."

"I can take it," I said sourly. "Being roughed up doesn't bother me as much as trying to explain to the interrogation officer why I ran in the first place."

"The Captain thinks your best chance is to plead panic. You know—an omul who followed his orders but can't prove it and who went into a blind panic when he realized something violent might have happened to Potkil."

It wasn't a bad idea. I worked it over as we twisted our way through narrow, dark streets into an area of sagging warehouses and dilapidated low-level dwellings. By the time Pinder said, "I just got the Captain's signal. They're about

three minutes away. Get set," I had my panic story pretty well thought out.

We were sitting side by side. Pinder took her stun gun from her belt. Her eyes were fixed on the mirror that gave a view to the rear. "They'll be coming around the corner pretty soon," she said. "When I say 'Now!' knock my gun arm up and neck-chop me. Then push me out and try to drive away." She paused and added flatly, "And don't be tender, Anthropol. Don't just make it look good—knock me out."

Her tone of voice said that she doubted an Anthropol operative had the ability or the taste for that much violence. My anti-violence conditioning didn't stop me from enjoying proving her wrong. When she said "Now" I brought my left arm up under her gun, which went flying into the street. Without breaking the movement of my body, I swung my right hand, cutting the edge against the side of her neck at the precise point I wanted. She wasn't faking when she slumped over the tiller.

Her heavy chest pushed the tiller to the right and the car swerved in that direction, half climbing the low curb edging the sidewalk. I reached over, opened her door, and pushed. She half slid, half jerked, and then hung with her legs caught under the tiller and her head centimeters from being bounced on the pavement. Her leg striking the tiller had jammed it even farther to the right, and now the car leaped completely onto the sidewalk and rammed a warehouse wall. The jolt threw me. It also sent Pinder the rest of the way out of the seat. The car was spinning its rear wheels and whining as it tried to get enough traction from the sidewalk to push the building wall down.

I tried to clear my head as a splash of light caught me from behind. I turned and ducked my head against the glare. The Igaz-rendor car couldn't have been ten meters away. I slid behind the tiller, put the car into reverse and backed away from the wall. I backed far enough to miss Pinder, who was sprawled motionless on the sidewalk, and then started forward. Ujvilan vehicles had no acceleration potential. I hadn't gone five meters past the Sergeant when the Igaz-rendor car came alongside.

"Halt, omull" It was Lori's voice.

I jerked the tiller, aiming the left front corner of the car at their middle. Neither of us was moving fast enough for there to be much of a collision. All I managed to do was make myself a perfect target for a stun gun beam. I felt the nerve-wrenching agony of the impact. I opened my mouth

to suck in air, but my muscles had no life in them. There was that momentary sensation of dying by suffocation and then everything was blotted out.

My last thought was that if Lori had used her gun on me, she had set the power considerably higher than I would have under reverse circumstances. That was something I wanted to remember when I came back to life.

VIII

I HAD UNDERGONE interrogation-resistance as part of my indoctrination training early in my Anthropol career. I had had "booster" training for my job on Ujvila, but nothing I had been subjected to had prepared me for the methods used by the Igaz-rendor. I felt as if I had slipped back in time, as if I were reliving ancient history—a millennium before the Inundation.

I had witnessed Igaz-rendor interrogations during my probationary period under Potkil, and I had assumed that all of their questioning sessions would be like the ones I had seen: a kind of psychological attack launched simultaneously on three fronts against the victim. I needed only a few minutes after my own session began to realize that I was facing something entirely different. My realizing that the inquisitor's actions were based on a conviction—unproved though it was—that Potkil had been destroyed made me understand what was happening; it didn't help me enjoy the experience.

I came out of the stun gun blackout to find myself strapped in a very hard straight-backed chair. Two supports held my arms straight out in front of me and two others held my legs lifted at an awkward and painful angle. Wherever my skin touched the chair I could feel the coldness of metal. Even though I couldn't move my head in any direction, thanks to a biting clamp at the back of my skull, I knew I was naked. I awakened to icy air being blown in a strong blast directly over me.

When my eyes came open, a rumbling but definitely feminine voice said, "Turn off the wind machine."

The cold blasts stopped. I rolled my eyes in an effort to locate the source of the voice. It laughed. "Save your energies, omul. You can see me when I wish and not before." The laughter faded out and a thread of ice colder than the blast of the wind took its place.

"Where is Commander Potkil, Vernay?"

"As I told the Hadnaj, I do not know," I said.

"Why did you try to escape?"

"I was frightened."

"Of what? That we would find you destroyed the Commander?"

"It is not true!" I thought I would have to force myself to sound panicky, but it was no trick at all. The feel of the cold metal on my skin; the knowledge that I was being watched by an unknown number of angry Igaz-rendor, trained to be without sympathy for any male; the lack of defenses induced by my total nakedness—these and more made panic come very easily. My worry became controlling that panic.

The questions came again and again. The same questions and the same answers. I held to the story I had decided on earlier, and I managed for long, agonizing hours to stay with it. Over and over, the voices—three of them took turns—probed, tried to trick me, tried to make me contradict myself. But it was a logical story; it fit the personality I had developed as an omul willing to serve the Igaz in exchange for a few more comforts than the average male received. I clung to it with the desperation of a meteor-break repairman clinging to the lifeline that held him to his spaceship.

I kept the story simple, telling exactly what happened as it had happened up to the time Potkil and I parted. Then, I said, I had followed instructions, going to Horty's, giving the password, fighting the rendor, being led outside—leaving out only my brief sidetrip down into the areaway. Outside, I went on, I was taken in charge by a Hadnaj, who demanded to know why the expected fighting hadn't taken place inside. She seemed suspicious because I didn't know and because I couldn't explain Commander Potkil's absence. She ordered me to retrace my steps; I did so willingly. But we found no sign of Commander Potkil. Her suspicions became threats; I grew more and more frightened as I realized she believed I had somehow managed to do away with the Commander. Finally when she called her patrol car, intending to take me to headquarters for questioning, I became panic-stricken. I pretended to see something in the darkness. When she turned to look, I pushed her off balance and ran. I was seen later by an Igaz-rendor in a patrol car and picked up. I tricked her too and knocked her gun away and struck her. I pushed her out of her car and tried to get away when I saw the Hadnaj and her patrol coming for me. But I failed. I realized my crime, striking not only a dwamna, but a member of the Igaz-rendor, was great, but I could

only plead panic. I was innocent, but I had no way to prove it.

That was my story and nothing the interrogators could ask shook me from it. I was growing hungry, but training helped me shut that from my consciousness. My muscles ached from the strain my position placed on them; I was able to shut that away too. Finally they grew tired of using only their voices on me.

A bright light, hot and violent, struck me in the eyes. I tried to drop my lids against the glare but a sudden jolt of electricity against my hips made me lift them fast enough. Now I knew the meaning of the metal touching my body: the chair I sat in and the supports that held my legs and arms and head were electrified.

But not just for quick, short, stinging jolts. That would have been easy enough to handle. No, those metal electrodes were also capable of generating sudden, searing heat, or sharp, vicious cold.

And now the first voice I had heard came back. But it was no longer directed at me. It said, "Subject him to the cycle until I order you to stop."

The cycle began—heat that blistered my skin; cold that made me feel as if the flesh would freeze and chip away; and then the short, hard jolts of current that seemed to dig at the sensitive end of each nerve in my body. It was repeated ten times, twenty times. Her voice snapped and it stopped. If I had been able to move, I would have collapsed to the floor.

"Now, let me hear your story, Vernay."

I told it, croakingly, my throat aching and dry, my vocal apparatus trembling from the shock and pain, from the hours of strain. But I told it exactly as I had told it before—not in quite the same words, not fluently, because that would have made it sound memorized. But the essence was there, and through it all my innocence—the point I kept thrusting up again and again.

The voice was dry, committing itself neither to belief nor disbelief: "Begin again."

I braced myself for the heat, the cold, the jolts. But instead the icy wind struck me. I could feel my skin pimpling and turning purple. Then the wind became wet. A fine spray, blown with the velocity of a gale, battered me. The spray was cold; suddenly it turned hot, scalding. I heard my own voice rise against the pain and then break. My physical circuitry had had all it could stand. The protective devices took over; I blacked out.

I came back feeling nothing but knowing I was still strapped into the chair. The voice said, "He is awake." It shifted direction, aiming itself at me. "Let me hear your story, Vernay."

I discovered that my mind was back but my body was not. I had no control over my muscles. I tried to speak and could not. My jaw and lips moved but I couldn't generate even a faint croak.

"Do you want the process again, Vernay? I can make it even more unpleasant. I can—"

Another voice, cool, calm, quiet, controlled—and completely authoritative—broke in. "That will be enough. You are a fool. Who gave you permission to deal with this omul in such a fashion?"

"Forgive, Kalauz, but he is the one who was with Commander Potkil when she disappeared."

Kalauz! The supreme ruler of Ujvila was interceding for me! My first reaction was relief; my second, a flicker of caution. Only a handful of women had ever seen the fabled Kalauz except on the viewscreens; and as far as I knew no Ujvilan male had ever been in her presence. Yet she had been watching me, concerning herself with my fate.

The big question was Why?

The cool, controlled voice said, "I have listened to his story. Do you think he could continue to lie under your interrogation?"

"I do not believe him, Kalauz. Forgive. But the Commander has disappeared and—"

"You mean you want someone to blame for the inefficiency of your forces, and you think that if you can make this omul admit guilt just so you will stop torturing him, you then will escape personal blame."

She had not raised her voice in the slightest. The words were said as dispassionately as if she had been discussing a pleasant but inconsequential topic. But I could feel the impact on those in the room. When the harsh voice that had been questioning me spoke again, I might have been listening to a different person. There was no assurance, no bullying—but there was fear, naked, abject.

"Cure him. Your punishment will depend in part on how quickly the omul is made normal again."

That was all, but it was enough. I was removed from the chair and carried, on a stretcher, into what was obviously the personal hospital for the Igaz-rendor and other female members of the administration. Every touch was gentle, even the pricking needle that put me into a deep sleep.

Whatever their medical techniques were, they worked. I awoke from my sleep feeling stronger, more refreshed, relaxed, than I had since before coming to Ujvila. I was in fresh clothing, my hair trimmed, my body without any signs of the ordeal it had undergone. I was in a firm but comfortable bed, in a room by myself. I sat up and tentatively put my feet to the floor. Tiny tingles along the insides of my arms told me I had been fed intravenously. I had no feeling of weakness. I simply stood up and walked.

A mirror showed me myself clear-eyed, rested looking—and with the dark shadow of the implanted beard stubble showing down my cheeks and along my jawline. I rubbed my fingertips over it, wondering how I could get my belt purse and the special powder to make it look like I had shaved.

The door opened and four women came in. I recognized the cool blond beauty of First Officer Elna, second only to the Kalauz in authority.

The other three were more Potkil's type—big, powerful women with those strong, almost masculine features set in what seemed to be perpetual scowls. They were the three interrogators, I guessed. Their concern for me was obviously more for themselves.

"I am First Officer Elna," the tall, slender woman said. Grayish green eyes measured me. She nodded. "You look well, omul."

"I am honored, First Officer. And I am well. I am grateful for your concern."

She turned to the three women behind her. "The Kalauz wishes to see the omul for herself. That he has responded so well to your treatment will mitigate in your favor when your punishment is decided."

It was said formally, almost as if a judge were pronouncing sentence. The biggest woman, the one with the voice I remembered best, said, "He has a strong body. Stronger than the usual run of omul. I shall take him to the projection room so that the Kalauz might see for herself that he is well."

"No, she wishes to contact him personally. I will take him to her."

Their shock was no greater than mine. I—an omul—was to meet the Kalauz face to face. The flicker of suspicion I had felt earlier flared up hotly. The three Igaz-rendor said nothing. They merely saluted, did military about-faces, and marched away, leaving me with Elna.

"Come," she said abruptly.

I went, silently. At the end of a short corridor, an elevator lifted us to the top of the administration building. From there a moving walkway carried us over a bridge and into the tall tower that was the equivalent of an ancient ruler's castle. Here the Kalauz and her court lived.

Another elevator took us to the top of the tower where, I had often been told, the Kalauz had her private apartment. So far Elna had not spoken. But as we stopped in a warmly carpeted anteroom, she said, "Stand directly before the carved doors ahead of you."

I did so. A pale beam of light reached out and swept over me. That was all. It disappeared. Elna said, "All who come here are scanned for weapons." She stepped in front of the doors herself.

I said, "Forgive, First Officer, but even if I were mad enough to desire to injure the Kalauz, I have hardly had the opportunity to get a weapon."

"It is a routine," she said. The pale light flooding her changed to a deeper tone, almost red and a buzzing sound came from above the doors. Elna removed the stun gun she carried and tossed it to a nearby settee. The buzzing stopped.

"You see?"

I saw. The Kalauz evidently saw too. Her voice came to us from a speaker above the doors. "Enter."

The doors swung open. We walked into the first really attractive room I had seen on Ujvila. It was almost severe in its decor, and the emphasis on silver and gold and off-white tones should have made it garish; yet the over-all effect was one of softness and warmth, a pleasant, relaxing atmosphere. It was large but the scatter of comfortable looking furniture made it seem intimate.

And it was empty. From somewhere above, the Kalauz' voice said, "That is all, Elna. You may go."

"Thank you, Kalauz. Forgive, but may I remind you that the omul's cure required eight days."

She turned and left, the doors shutting silently behind her. I stared at the closing panels. Eight days! And now fear tugged at me. For eight days I had been unconscious, subjected to Irena knew what probing.

There were no other doors visible except those I had come through. But suddenly a section of wall shimmered and seemed to dissolve. It was a simple electronic trick, but I knew it would impress the Ujvilans. Through the opening came the Kalauz.

I had seen her before on viewscreens, but in the flesh she was not the same—she was much more. Taller than

Elna but in many ways similar. She had the same cool, beautiful features, her face long and narrow. Her hair, worn simply, was deep gold; her eyes were the same grayish green; her mouth mobile, beautifully shaped.

I thought that she and Elna must be related. But there was more assurance in the Kalauz, more of that quality that can be described only as majesty.

"Seat yourself, Vernay." A slender hand indicated a nearby chair.

"In your presence, Kalauz?"

"I so command."

I sat down. The chair was deep and soft and enfolded me. I thought how difficult it would be to get out of quickly. She sat too, directly opposite me, and less than a meter away.

"I apologize for the eagerness of the Igaz-rendor, Vernay."

Not "omul" but "Vernay." I was supposed to be honored. Instead my wariness increased. The upper-class Ujvilan female did not apologize to any male, whatever the provocation.

I said, "Forgive, Kalauz. They were only doing their duty out of concern for Commander Potkil."

"Potkil was a savage sadist," she said flatly. "But, then, she was conditioned for her work from childhood."

She was obviously waiting for my reaction. A trap? I wondered. I said, "Was, Kalauz?"

She smiled at me; it wasn't a smile guaranteed to take away any of my wariness. She said, "Let us not waste time, Vernay. I have seen your medical reports. You are very strong, much stronger than any omul we have record of."

"The Great Egg was kind to give me health, Kalauz."

Her expression told me what she thought of the Great Egg, the godhead of the religion of Ujvila. For the first time I caught a thread of emotion in her voice: sarcasm. "Your parents must have been strong also."

"I have no memory of them," I said quickly. "I was raised by kind neighbors. I—"

"I am familiar with your records." She lifted a slender hand languidly. She was obviously enjoying this interview, even if I was not. "Let us stop this verbal fencing, Vernay. You are not an alien. Our photographs of your internal organs show that. But neither are you Ujvilan—they show that as well. What organization do you represent? The one that sent those so-called traders to us many months ago? Or another bent on conquering us?"

"Forgive, Kalauz. I do not understand . . ."

"You are of Earth-originated stock, Vernay. But you are not Ujvilan. Must I make it any plainer?"

I had no answer for that, nor did she seem to expect one. I sat silently wondering if I was to be given a preference as to the method of my disposal. If so, it would be more than Sirat, Covid, and Reah had got from this woman.

IX

NOW SHE WAS mocking me. "You have nothing to say, Vernay? No protestations? No denials?"

"It is not my place to argue with the Kalauz," I said formally.

That smile again. "Very good. Whoever trained you knew much about our customs." She leaned forward and now the grayish green eyes were intent.

"That's one of the questions I want answered: who trained you? There are many other questions, too, Vernay. How did you learn so much of our culture when we have been isolated from our Earth ancestors for millennia?"

I reacted without thinking; I couldn't hide my surprise. Her smile changed to a light laugh. "Come, Vernay. The mass of the people may actually believe in their descent from the Great Egg, but the Kalauz and the lesser aristocracy have always read the ancient records. True, some are missing, but tradition, handed down from Kalauz to Kalauz, has filled in the gaps. We at the top of the Igaz are aware of our origins."

I tried again. "Your speaking to me this way is frightening, Kalauz. Why should I, a mere omul, be so favored?"

"Nicely put," she mocked. "But shall we stop the pretense?"

I had two choices—to admit I was not Ujvilan and trust to her mercy, which I guessed was zero; or to continue the bluff. I said, "Forgive, Kalauz, but if I do not misunderstand, you believe that I am alien to Ujvila."

"Not alien in the sense of those who sought to invade us less than a generation ago, when I was a child."

I had to fight hard to keep from dropping my role as an Ujvilan male and start throwing questions at her. Aliens! The Chief had mentioned Ujvilan concerns with aliens as one of Gal-Mil's arguments in favor of taking over the job of rehabilitating the planet—protecting it from non-Federation invasion, as it were. I had tended to discount the claim as another ploy on Gal-Mil's part. And during my time on Ujvila, I had heard nothing—not even the whisper of a

rumor—that the people or the Igaz were concerned with the problem. Nor had Lori mentioned it during our brief contact.

But the Kalauz' simple statement brought the problem to the front of my mind. As I had told the Chief before I left Earth, we had no record of any alien culture with a technology high enough to explore space, nor of any with the incentive to do so had they the ability. Still, for all of our many centuries of exploring the galaxy, at first haphazardly and then systematically, Federation people knew we had barely scratched the surface of life possibilities. A highly technically oriented alien civilization with the same kinds of aggressive drives that had sent Earthmen climbing from caves to the stars in a period of time that was no more than a flicker in the history of the universe—such a civilization was far from inconceivable.

I organized my thinking and said with just the faintest touch of disbelief, "I have heard rumors that there are other living beings beyond Ujvila, Kalauz, but . . ."

She leaned forward again. "You are clever, Vernay, in your methods of getting information without actually admitting your true identity. I like cleverness. Perhaps I can put yours to use." She settled back, nodding to herself.

"So for the present," she went on, "I shall pretend you are what you claim—a credulous, Ujvilan omul."

"Believe me, Kalauz . . ."

She waved that protest aside. "When I was a child, as I say, two aliens were discovered masquerading as Ujvilans. They were revealed purely by accident when the female was injured severely enough to be taken to the hospital. A routine examination revealed that she was not only not Ujvilan, she was not even human. The body she inhabited was of synthetic flesh; she herself occupied the space taken up by human internal organs. The details of her construction and control of the synthetic human organs are not important now."

They were to me but I was in no position to press for information. I said in a half frightened voice, "These—these things were trying to capture Ujvila, Kalauz?"

"Under questioning, the female revealed that she and a lone male were members of an advance group seeking to learn enough of our culture so that a large number of their kind could come later and infiltrate us—and finally take over."

"But those others never came, Kalauz?"

"No. My mother took the necessary steps. Every Ujvilan was subjected to a photographic analysis of her or his

interior. Since that time all Ujvilans must go through the checking process at maturity. That, along with our identity system, has prevented any recurrence of alien invasion."

Her smile was faintly sour. "But it doesn't seem to have prevented an invasion from non-alien peoples."

I didn't point out to her that the man whose place I had taken had been chosen precisely because he had passed all of his preliminary tests, had made a mark for himself in the southern city, while at the same time never having been near Fovarosh nor having had contact with any of the upper members of the Igaz. My assuming his identity had been carefully planned, down to the altering of every record on him that might conceivably cause me trouble—thanks to the techniques of Gal-Mil, I had to admit.

And if it hadn't been for my having been put in the hospital, I would still be accepted as an Ujvilan.

I realized suddenly that she was expecting a comment from me. I said, "When I first came here to Fovarosh, Kalauz, I heard stories of people who came from space. Forgive, but that is all I know of this. I am not one of those people. I—"

Her beautiful lips parted and an Ujvilan obscenity usually heard only from the lower classes slapped out at me. Then she smiled again. "Let me state the evidence, Vernay. In your head, beneath the earbone, is a tiny metallic device. The medical skill required to put it there is beyond us. Further, you lack a vermiform appendix or even the vestiges of one. Before the self-proclaimed traders were sent back to their spaceship, we photographed them internally. In each case, they displayed the same lack as you."

She was implacable, almost unanswerable. "Nor did they—or you—show any signs of many of the ills that still beset our people. Samples of tissue taken by my doctors from the so-called traders indicated that their bodies could not even be hosts to many of these ills."

My respect for Ujvilan reasoning rose. For over a millennium, Earth-originated peoples subjected to Federation science had been immunized to many of the internal diseases which had so long beset mankind.

I didn't have much defense, but I tried to offer one. "Kalauz, I can only say that I do not understand. Perhaps I was born without an appendix. I do not remember having had it removed. As for the other things, I have been fortunate in possessing good health."

I took a deep breath and made the only point I had left. "Surely, Kalauz, had I not been born on Ujvila, my

papers, my records would have revealed me before now. When I came from the south, honored to be employed by the Igaz here in Fovarosh, I was checked thoroughly. And when Commander Potkil saw fit to make use of me, I was again checked."

I had made a small dent in her assurance—by attacking the perfection of the system. Now she was on the defensive.

"Papers and records can be forged," she said. "Neo-Politicos have done so more than once."

"But forged well enough to withstand an investigation by the Igaz-rendor themselves?" I realized I had been almost abrupt. "Forgive, Kalauz."

She said softly, "Tell me of your childhood in the south, Vernay."

On the surface, it was a simple request, calling for a simple answer. But if she knew the tiny details of the life of the young man I had replaced, then she could trip me up. Because no briefing—short of a mind transfer—can provide an agent with all of the little things of someone else's existence.

I said, "My father was killed in an industrial accident before I was born. My mother died at my birth. I was reared by a kindly couple in Delsak. They were intelligent people and for reasons I do not fully understand chose to spend their time educating me beyond my station in life. As a result, I did not spend my childhood playing games with neighborhood friends but in learning to read and to cipher. The dwamna even taught me the rudiments of electronics. It was these aptitudes that brought me to the attention of the Igaz in Delsak during my school years. They removed me from the regular school and trained me for their service. Just this year, I came to the attention of the Igaz here and was transferred."

"Because First Officer Elna decided that a few intelligent males were needed in the fight against the Neo-Politicos," she said.

I said quickly, "If Commander Potkil were here, Kalauz, she would vouch for my loyalty."

She made a slight movement of her shoulders. "My mind was made up. But now there are doubts . . ." She stopped and started again. "As I said before, you are clever. Whether or not you are an Ujvilan, I intend to put that cleverness to use—against the Neo-Politicos. At the same time, I will be testing your loyalty."

This time I said nothing; I merely waited. She went on.

"The burden of proof is on you, Vernay. With your cleverness, you should have no trouble infiltrating the Neo-Politico movement. Once you have, you can clear yourself—show yourself as my loyal subject—by bringing me the information I need to crush them once and for all."

"But I know nothing of them beyond what Commander Potkil told me, Kalauz. Forgive, but I do not see how I can—"

"I said you were clever, Vernay. Don't pretend otherwise. The Neos have spies among the Igaz, of this I am sure. That means the Neos will know that you have been subjected to torture. When you are turned loose, as you will be shortly, it will appear only logical that you seek them out. You will be in a position of having nowhere else to go."

She kept telling me how clever I was, but in many respects, I was a babe in the bush compared to her. She had almost persuaded me that my protestations had brought doubts to her mind; she had almost persuaded me that if I proved my loyalty, she would accept me for what I claimed to be—an Ujvilan. Almost, but not quite. She overdid it, and that was not quite in character with her. To admit doubts, to admit that she might have been wrong—this was not something the Kalauz would do with her female subjects, let alone a mere male. I had almost believed she was genuinely on the defensive!

I tried to let my expression show that the bait she dangled in front of my nose was worth any effort. She said, making that bait just a bit more attractive, "Tomorrow, you will find yourself disbarred from the service of the Igaz. You will be turned loose with nothing more than the clothes on your back—no money, nothing you can sell. To avoid starvation, you will have only two choices of action: you can try to live by your wits, criminally, or you can volunteer for service in a joy-labor camp. I suggest the first. The Neo spies here will alert others to have you watched. Once they see that you have become one of the dispossessed, they will try to recruit you. Then you will have your opportunity to prove yourself to your Kalauz."

A signal of her hand and I struggled out of the chair. The interview was obviously over. She had left a lot of her questions unasked and a lot of mine unanswered. But I had the feeling that everything she had done and said, or had left undone and unsaid, had been deliberate. The turns the discussion had taken had not just happened. She was not only beautiful; she was intelligent. And she was devoid of any emotions that might interfere with her complete control of Ujvila and its people.

She used her communicator to summon First Officer Elna. She said to me, "You will leave as you entered and wait in the anteroom to be escorted back to the hospital."

"I thank the Kalauz for considering my case," I said formally.

As I neared the door, she called to me in a too soft voice, "Vernay, when you were protesting, you forgot to explain the small bit of metal implanted behind your ear." She paused and added, "And I forgot to mention that you are the only Ujvilan on record whose facial hair remains at a constant length. You will find the special powder you use to hide this still in your belt purse."

She obviously expected no answer. It was just as well; I didn't have one. I went into the anteroom and waited until Elna came. In complete silence she escorted me back to my hospital bed and waited while I was given an injection. My eyesight was growing hazy as I watched her leave the room.

I thought as I went under that they would put some kind of homing device in me. That much I expected; the Kalauz was not one to overlook the opportunity. But I wondered what else were they planning for me.

When I awoke the next day, I found out all too quickly. It wasn't a pleasant discovery.

X

THIS WAS NOT the world I had known as a subordinate in the Igaz. There were none of the privileges—small as they were for a male. There was none of the security of knowing that food, drink, and shelter were waiting. And the Kalauz had not lied: I had no money, nothing to sell. My belt purse contained only one item—the powder for my false whiskers.

The obvious solution was for me to find some kind of work and try to live while I figured a way to avoid the constant scanning I was subjected to.

The first two nights I slept under a tree in a small park at the edge of the city. I had no food except for a lunch I managed to take from a rendor car while the owner was making a check in a building. The third day, I reached one of the small manufacturing plants that was permitted to function without the Igaz having a controlling interest. It was a grubby place, in a grubby building buried in an ancient section of the city. But I knew from my work with the Igaz that it made very fine and very specialized elec-

tronic equipment for communication networks. I had no doubts that I could handle any job that might be open. I said as much when I presented myself to the sharp-eyed female sitting behind the personnel desk.

"You do not look as though you could do anything, omul."

"I have not eaten much lately," I said. My only choice was to be frank; a quick check would show up any lie I tried to manufacture. "Until three days ago I worked for the Igaz, for Commander Potkil. But when she disappeared, I was held suspect, and I was turned into the streets."

"Your name?" I gave it to her. She sat with her heavy lower lip thrust out while she continued to study me. Then she said slowly, almost reluctantly, "I doubt if you will be of use to us, but it is not my decision to make. Go through that door on the left."

I thanked her and went into a small, sterile looking room with the kind of furnishings that labeled it as an infirmary. I sat on the one chair and watched the room's other door. Inside of five minutes a man in the white coveralls of a medical orderly came in.

"You are Vernay?" I admitted I was. He made a show of giving me a haphazard physical examination. This allowed him to get close enough to me to talk in a whisper.

"Why were you released by the Igaz?"

"Suspicion of disloyalty."

"Not for incompetence?" I shook my head. "Nor for drunkenness?" He was staring directly at me. I thought I detected a flicker of interest in his eyes as he waited for the answer. But when I said, "No, not for drunkenness," the flicker changed to hesitation.

He stepped back. "Stand before the lamp in the corner."

I did. He turned the cup of the lamp toward my face and snapped a switch. I felt nothing. He turned the lamp off. "We can't help you here," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Let me do something, if only for today," I pleaded. "Anything to earn me money enough for a meal."

His face mirrored genuine sympathy. "I am only an omul," he reminded me. "The management would refuse." He opened his belt purse and handed me two of the small bills used as the basic currency of Ujvila. "Here are two rany. I can't spare more."

I thanked him and turned for the door. He said quickly, "Not far from here are two other plants not controlled by the Igaz. You might try them."

I looked back at him, wondering why he expected someone else to hire me when his own plant wouldn't. But he was

already going out through the rear door, as if eager to get away from me.

I knew about the other two plants he mentioned. Each was about a kilometer from this one, in opposite directions, and each did much the same type of work as this plant. I chose the one to the west since there was a small saloon on the way. Saloons served the cheapest food.

I spent the two rany in the saloon, one for a meal of tired stew with questionable meat and the other for a half loaf of bread and a slab of strong cheese. The proprietor wasn't happy with me when I refused to buy liquor to go with my food, but by law he couldn't refuse to sell anyone food.

My interview at the second plant was so much like the one at the first that for a moment I wondered if I had slipped back a notch in time. The woman at the personnel desk asked the same questions and sent me into the same type of room to wait. The medical orderly was male and he performed the same rites in the same way as had the first orderly. And he asked me the same two questions: had I been discharged for incompetence or for drunkenness? I gave the same answers and got the same reactions. I was also put under a lamp, and sent away again, but this time without money or advice.

I walked the two kilometers to the third plant very slowly. I passed a small park on the way and took time out to help myself to a drink of water and to eat a little of my bread and cheese. I also turned up my detector long enough to make sure that the scanners were still pinpointing me. They were.

By the time I had reached the third plant, the food I had eaten managed to take hold enough to give me a clearer mind than I had had before. I devised a tentative plan. And when the same routine I had undergone twice that day began to develop, I made the plan more than tentative.

I waited for the inevitable question. It came: had I been discharged for incompetence? No. For drunkenness?

"No," I said. "But I admit I like a bit of krish now and then. Not the cheap kind, but the high quality stuff, with pits in it."

A look of pure relief crossed the orderly's features. "Why didn't you say that before—at the other places?"

So they had been in touch with one another. Now I knew I was on the right track. I said, "I hadn't eaten enough to have a clear mind. And it took me a while to figure out why I was asked that particular question."

He nodded. "Stand in front of the lamp."

I did. "This I don't understand," I admitted.

He turned the lamp and me so that I faced a wall mirror. "Watch your forehead," he instructed me.

The lamp was turned on.

Involuntarily, I said in Intragal, "What in Pluto!"

There, blazoned across my forehead in letters over a centimeter tall was the single word *ATOK*.

It took me a moment to remember. *Atok* meant anathema. It was like a curse that some of the peoples of the more primitive planets place on those of their society they wish to rid themselves of. In my work with the Igaz I had heard of *atok*. Anyone so branded was beyond the pale—unemployable for even the most menial work. He—or she—had been marked by the Igaz. They had only one refuge, the joy-labor camp for life.

The Kalauz had seen to it that the last possible door was closed against me. I now had either to volunteer for the living death of a joy-labor camp—where I would be useless as far as my work on Ujvila was concerned—or I had to turn quickly to the Neo-Políticos.

I said, "I'm being scanned. I don't dare try to make contact with Rosid. But I need to see him."

"So I know. There has been a message circulated concerning you. He wishes you to make contact as soon as possible."

"And lead the Igaz-rendor right on him?"

He smiled. "You have seen one of his dummy headquarters?"

I cursed myself. I still wasn't thinking too clearly. "But what of the contact I have to make through the saloon? Won't I get someone in trouble finding out where the headquarters is?"

"That's the risk we all take," he said. "I could be in trouble. The length of time you're spending here is being recorded through the scanner." He shrugged. "And you have no choice. Rosid's message was marked 'Urgent.' That means that there is some great trouble. You are needed desperately."

He gave me three rany. "Leave now. And if the rendor stop you for questioning, tell them you were here so long because you were pleading for food and for work to earn food."

I gave him quick thanks; it had to be quick, since he was out of the room before I could reach the door. Outside I walked two blocks and then turned on my detector. The buzzing was more than just present; it was excessively

loud. That could only mean that an Igaz-rendor car with a portable scanner was closing in on me.

I didn't know whether they would take me or not. I guessed that the Kalauz had ordered a hands-off policy until I made my move to join the Neos. But I couldn't risk being picked up by some overzealous Hadnaj. From the sound of the orderly's message, Rosid's need for me was genuine—and immediate.

I found an areaway that ran between two sagging buildings, turned down it and began to trot until I came to a brick wall that stopped me from going further. On my left was the solid rear of some kind of factory; on my right a scatter of garbage cans, stinking in the heavy air. I tried the door beside the cans. It let me into an equally noisome hallway. At its end was a street, and across the street was a saloon. I looked at the sign, hoping to find the top half of the third letter missing. It wasn't.

In this kind of neighborhood, I had half expected to find all saloons allied with the Neos. But I twisted and trotted my way down a half dozen streets, past ten saloons, before I found one with the top half of its third letter missing.

I was beginning to stagger. Sweat drenched me so that my coveralls stuck to my body. The food I had eaten had long since stopped providing my system with energy. I didn't dare stop and eat any of my bread and cheese. The buzzing from my detector told me just how close the Igaz-rendor patrol was.

So close, it seemed, that they would be at the saloon almost before I could get my message to the bartender. But I had to take the risk. I had to take it now.

I stumbled into the saloon and up to the bar. It was dim and cool. At this hour, just before the end of the work day, there were no customers. But there was a bartender with a tuft of whiskers sticking out from the point of his chin.

I said quickly, trying not to pant at him, "I'm too poor to buy krish. How about some old pits to suck?"

His expression showed me nothing. But he said, "You bums are all alike. When will you learn to try kaf instead?"

In my relief, I almost shouted at him. I swallowed back the desire and said softly, "All right, give me some kaf, but slip a krish pit or two in it, eh?"

Now he grinned, showing a broken tooth. I said, "The Igaz-rendor scanner car is right behind me. I understand Rosid wants to see me at once."

"You're Vernay?"

"Yes."

He jabbed a finger at a dim corner in the rear. "Go to the restroom." As I started for it, he strolled toward the front door, wiping his hands on his apron. I stood in the tiny cubicle, trying to ignore the odors for what seemed endless minutes. Finally I heard his footsteps.

"They're on their way," he said. "Step out here and knock me down. Quick."

I stepped out. He nodded at a small window at the end of the corridor. "First hit me—a good one—then go kick out that window so I can tell them you escaped that way. Then go back in the restroom. Turn the flush tank handle the wrong way. The wall to your left will open. Go through it quickly and push it shut."

"Their scanners will track me," I objected.

"Not once you're through that wall," he said. "It's scan-proof. Move!"

I moved. I hit him on the point of his chin whiskers, driving him back against the wall with a thud that shook the building. I ran to the window, took off a shoe, and smashed out the glass. Then I hurried back, carrying my shoe, and went into the restroom. As I turned the flush-tank handle up instead of down, I could hear the bartender shouting, "In here! Help! In here. Thief! Help!"

The wall swung open. I went through it, hurried by the sound of running Igaz-rendor feet. I pushed the wall closed and leaned against it, panting and trying to fumble my shoe back on. I looked around when I finally had my breath back. I was in a long, dim corridor. I started along it and within ten meters found what I was looking for, one of those small cars on rails.

It took me where I wanted to go—to Rosid. In fact, he was waiting at the end of the line. He helped me out. "I thought you never would hear my message."

"What's the trouble?"

"Your Captain Lori. Apparently she wasn't believed when she returned to Igaz headquarters. She has been sent to a joy-labor camp."

XI

I SAT IN relaxed comfort and looked at the bank of view-screens Rosid was busily monitoring. Slowly I was becoming aware of more than just the immediacy of survival. The buzzing from my detector had mercifully stopped. My stomach was full, and I could feel the strength of the food

flowing into my muscles and helping clear my thinking processes.

But my awareness extended in the opposite direction too. Despite the urgency of Rosid's messages—and the risk getting them to me involved—he had said virtually nothing since my arrival. "Time is important in the over-all picture," he told me, "but there is no immediate danger. So first you must eat and gather your strength again."

Now I sat and watched the viewscreen that revealed the inside of First Officer Elna's office. It was late and except for a shadowy figure quietly prowling the room, there was no activity.

"The Igaz could be monitoring that office too," I said. "Your agent is taking a big risk."

Tiska came in with steaming mugs of Ujvilan kaf. "It must be done," she said. She handed me a mug and smiled. She was as lovely, as elfin as I remembered her. "We haven't yet found the joy-labor camp where Captain Lori was sent. Our agent is hoping to find that information in Elna's office."

I set the kaf aside to cool. "And when you find Lori—what then?"

Rosid was speaking into his communicator. He frowned as he turned off the connection. "Delsak reports they have no word on where she is." He turned more toward me. "Before we located you, we needed her to make contact with your ships waiting in orbit. But now . . ."

He broke off abruptly. I frowned. It was obvious that, whatever he had been going to say, he had suddenly thought better of it. I didn't like it; this was no time for them to go secretive. Despite my feeling of security here, I could sense the tension, the pressures, and I was sure that something was coming to a head.

I said, "But now . . . ?"

Tiska said, "The time for us to make our major move—to do what we planned for so long. If we fail, we will lose everything we have gained."

I began to understand. "So even though you don't want armed help from Gal-Mil, you want them to stand by just in case."

"Only as a last resort do we want that kind of assistance," Tiska said. "It was more in our minds that she could show us how to contact your Anthropol ship. It is help from your people that we need the most. Help in coordinating after the plan has become operative."

She wasn't talking like herself, but more like an executive at a planning session, I thought. I said, "But when you

couldn't find Lori, you hoped I could substitute for her." I shook my head. "I hate to disappoint you, but Lori wouldn't tell me the location of the communication center either. She felt holding back the information gave her more control over me. Without her, I'm as helpless as you."

Neither Rosid's voice nor his expression ever showed the emotions that churned inside him. Even now, when my words were an obvious shock, his expression was calm, his voice flat and almost unaccented. "Then we must not only find her, we must get her away from the camp."

"In a way, that is better," Tiska said. There was a strong current of relief in her voice. "I did not like the other plan."

I found the kaf cool enough to drink and took a deep swallow. I sat silently for a minute, fighting to control the anger I could feel building up inside myself. A second swallow of kaf helped. I said with more calm than I felt, "You're both talking in riddles. I've gone through a great deal of pain, both mental and physical, to help you people—not only because it's my job but because I believe that the government you plan will be closer to the Federation's demands than is that of the Kalauz; that it will give the people a chance to a decent life instead of keeping them in fear and virtual slavery."

"From the information Anthropol was able to get through Gal-Mil's expository missions here, I understood that you wanted our help and that you wanted to join the Federation—to share in what our technology has to offer."

"This is true," Rosid said. "We very much wish to become a part of your Federation. In no other way can Ujvila overcome the centuries of backwardness and take its rightful place with other planets. But I do not understand your concern. Under the circumstances, you can do nothing. The problems are ours now. We must solve them."

I said, "You might let me judge that. If I knew what your plans were, there might be something—some way—I could help." I didn't waste breath pointing out that this kind of situation was one I had faced before, that I had been sent here because of my experience.

But Rosid only said, "There is too much for us to do, and there is no way you can assist." His communicator buzzed. He spoke into it, listened, said, "Continue," and cut the connection. "Still no clues," he told us.

I didn't know why he and Tiska were so reluctant to reveal their plans to me; at our previous meeting she had been willing enough. But until I knew them, I was helpless—and I was a prisoner here.

I played my last card. "You realize, of course, that your acceptance as a provisional member of the Federation will depend a lot on the way in which you gain control. Using Igaz-type tactics would hardly look well when your case comes up for judgment; neither would refusing the assistance you asked for originally. It would create the suspicion that you were trying to hide something from me."

"But your Captain Lori was willing to supply direct armed help," Rosid said. "Surely she was acting with the knowledge of your Federation."

"She represents an outside force, beyond your control," I said. "And the fact that you refused that help is in your favor. You will be judged primarily on your own actions, not those of outsiders."

Tiska said softly, "We must become a member of your Federation. It means everything to us." Her voice took on more force than I had ever heard in it. "The lot of all males and most females on Ujvila is hopeless under the Kalauz. Our people are in a state of stagnation. The only scientific advances in the past centuries have been those our males have made secretly and which have been found and stolen by the Igaz."

She looked directly at Rosid. "We must explain everything to him."

It was a command, not a request. Rosid bowed his head. "If that is your wish. . . ." He glanced at the viewscreens. There was nothing worth watching on any of them and he turned to face me.

"Tiska's major plan is basically a very simple one."

"The idea was yours," she said quickly. "I only implemented it."

Even when she talked like a Federation bureaucrat, she was charming. Rosid made a shrugging motion. "This does not matter." He paused and thought a moment. "But first let me go back in time so that you will understand Tiska's part in the Neo movement."

He told his story well—briefly and clearly. Generations ago, a male ancestor of Tiska's, a geologist, had discovered a crashed shuttle in the northern desert. He had no idea what it was since the ancestors of the present Kalauz had, since their first coming to power, propagated the story that Ujvila and Ujvilans originated from the Great Egg. Except for the Kalauz and the aristocratic group around her, no Ujvilan knew that the Great Egg was actually the starship that had brought the first settlers from faraway Earth.

But Tiska's forebear was an intelligent man. He found

nothing of importance in the shuttle except for a load of books written in an ancient form of the language and therefore difficult to read. But he managed to decipher enough to realize the meaning of the shuttle. He also realized the meaning of his discovery's being found by the Igaz, and he took the books home and spent years translating them into the Ujvilan of his day. The most important of the books were those on political theory and on the history of rebellions against tyranny.

"All starships were equipped with such books," I interjected. "The hope was that the peoples would be less likely to drift into totalitarianism. Sometimes it worked; sometimes it didn't."

"Here it failed," Tiska said. "My ancestor circulated the ideas he learned to a small group of trusted friends. They passed what they learned to others. Finally, of course, the Igaz heard. Many people were sent to joy-labor camps, where they disappeared. The books were found and taken."

"But the seeds had been planted," Rosid pointed out. "And those seeds have never died. Through sheer chance, Tiska's ancestor's part in the movement was not discovered, and so for centuries her people were able to carry on the work he had started while at the same time growing wealthier and closer and closer to the hierarchy—until the time of her parents."

"The Kalauz knows the history of the Neo-Politicos, of course, and she realizes just how dangerous they can be. Once the people are given a chance to learn the truth—about the Great Egg, about forms of government that do not force them to live in fear and ignorance—they will never be satisfied to bow to the rigid controls of the Igaz."

"How many of there are you?" I asked.

"We number four thousand," Tiska said proudly. "In all levels of society—male and female."

"Four thousand fighting ten million," I said. "Most of the ten million aren't actively against you, but their training would make them side with the Kalauz in the beginning."

"Most of the ten million will do as before—as they are told," Rosid said. "That is the essence of Tiska's plan—to take over the functions of the Igaz, become Kalauz, and then by directives change the peoples' ways only as rapidly as they can absorb the changes."

"Histories of similar revolution-evolution plans show most of them successful," I said. "But the problem with the others was the same as yours. How does Tiska get to be Kalauz?"

"Once you know that, we will have no protection against you," Rosid asked.

Tiska made a gasping sound. "Rosid!"

"It is true," he said in his expressionless way. "One of our major worries now is that Captain Lori knows our plan. Our information has made it clear that the Kalauz is aware that she knows and sent her to the joy-labor camp as the best means of breaking her down, making her tell what she knows in exchange for getting away from the place."

I had seen this type of thing on other planets. I said, "Then until you found out that you still needed Lori, your plan was to locate her so you could destroy her."

Tiska said, "It was not a way I liked. But we saw no other choice. We are so close. For the Kalauz to have warning now would mean the end of us. The plan has started. It cannot be stopped."

I said, "But now you hope to rescue Lori—only because she has information you need."

"You need it as well."

I fought to hide my anger. "Besides that, she is a fellow human being. A fellow Federation member, if you will. Even if she didn't have the information we need, I'd try to save her."

"Commendable," Rosid said, and his voice had a hint of dryness in it.

I said, "I can't agree with your rationale but I can understand it. Even so, it doesn't explain why you're afraid to trust me. I'm not in the Kalauz' hands."

"No, but you will be," Rosid said. His eyes met mine. "Isn't it in your mind to go to Captain Lori and try to bring her back—once we find where she is?"

"That's my plan," I admitted. "But as far as the Kalauz getting information from me, she didn't before and she couldn't now. I'm programmed, as I explained. Too much pressure and my mind blanks out. I couldn't give the information if I wanted to."

"But that is not true of Captain Lori?"

I had to admit he was right. "Their training methods are different. They rely on quick contact with waiting forces to come and help them out."

"Only," Rosid said, "the situation here made it impossible for her to maintain contact with her ships. To play her role in the Igaz, she had to set up a hidden communication center and rely on messengers."

"Maybe she contacted one of her people before they took her away."

"No. She was taken suddenly, without warning. That **much** we know."

"Then I have no choice," I admitted. "As soon as you locate Lori, my job is to go to the same camp—and try to bring her back."

"From some of the camps that's possible," Tiska said. "But from others—no one has ever returned. Not unless the Kalauz herself ordered them back."

I had the feeling it would be from one of those other camps I would have to try to take Lori. It was more than a feeling; it was a conviction.

XII

IN THE DAYS that oozed themselves away while we waited for news of Lori's whereabouts, I learned a great deal about the past history of Ujvila and why Rosid remained hesitant in trusting me.

Gal-Mil's earlier expeditions to Ujvila had brought back some information, enough to give Federation researchers a starting point in hunting through the early starship records. They had found that one of the first of the great floating cities had been christened Ujvila by the one hundred thousand colonists who sailed in it. Most of them were from Central Europe, a pre-Inundation political division that had succumbed to the Inundation early in the twenty-second century.

I had that information and all that could be gotten from the man whose place I took in Ujvilan society. As a result, I knew the basic history of Ujvila and the quasi-religious concept the ancestors of the present Kalauz had built their power on. Once Tiska filled me in with what she had learned as a child, when her family was still part of the hierarchy, I was able to reconstruct the history of not only the Ujvilan culture on the planet but what had taken place during the millennium the starship wandered through the stars.

It was not a unique history. Over the centuries, the same kinds of changes that had always been part of the pattern of man's development took place in the ship. Within a century after sailing, revolt displaced the descendants of the first group of officers. After that, a series of power struggles—political, religious, economic—kept generation after generation in a state of chaos. And when one group finally became dominant long enough to bring stability and to found a dynasty, much of the technology and political theory that

was to aid the colonists in establishing a bit of Earth on a new world had been irrevocably lost.

As was the case with many of the early starships, only the automatic devices that provided basic foods and air, utilized wastes, and generally saw to the necessities of life prevented the loss of the colony. And when planetfall was made, it was more fortuitous than deliberate. The starship went into orbit about a planet, scanned it for suitability in terms of Earth-originated life, and then either remained in orbit or—if the planet was unsuitable—moved on. All of this was automatic. But there the starship's responsibility ended. It was not designed to land; shuttles were provided for that purpose.

Apparently the ancestor of the Kalauz had access to enough information so that she and the members of her court could make use of the shuttles. But without skilled pilots, many of the little ships crashed. Others landed their human cargoes safely enough but at widely scattered spots. Ultimately all of the shuttles crashed, probably from lack of fuel.

Finally the rulers, according to Tiska, wanting to retain the power that having Ujvila itself would give them, tried to land the massive starship. The automatic controls slowed it down enough to prevent its burning up in the atmosphere but beyond that there was no way of controlling it. The ship crashed, burying itself deep in swampy soil and finally sinking out of sight. The result was the loss of much of what remained of the technology the people needed to rebuild a civilization.

"The Kalauz herself was killed," Tiska explained. "But her daughter was a grown woman, and she took over."

Since Ujvila had only two fertile belts of land capable of supporting Earth-originated life forms for very long, I wondered what had happened to the thousands that must have landed in the great swamp, which girdled the center of the planet, or on the great, high deserts that rolled from the edge of the fertile belts to the polar zones.

"Many perished," Tiska explained. "And the little technology that their shuttles carried with them. Some made their way to the north or south fertile lands. When the descendants of the Kalauz who first ruled on the surface learned how to travel through the air, they were able to find all of the living colonies and bring them under their rule. There were few; it was not difficult. And as only the Kalauz or her chosen circle have the secret of flying, keeping control is not difficult either."

The religious element had helped the family of the Kalauz

keep control too. When the starship crashed, it did so where the southern edge of the north fertile belt met the beginning of the great jungle. A number of shuttles had deposited a fair-sized colony close by, and thus there were over a thousand witnesses to the "miracle."

The ship crashed. Its great hull split like the shell of an egg. And before it disappeared into the ooze of the swampy jungle, out stepped the remnants of the group that had tried to land it—led by the daughter of the Kalauz.

And as the first to hatch from the Great Egg, she became not only the political but the spiritual leader of that first colony—and then of all other Ujvilans as she spread her power.

"We know now that she was a clever woman who took advantage of having witnesses and used this to keep power for herself and to set up a dynasty for the future," Tiska said. "But when I was a child, I believed in the divinity of the Kalauz as deeply—and as unthinkingly—as most people do today."

"You never give her name," I said. "Hasn't she got one?" I tried to think back but I couldn't recall ever having heard anything but "Kalauz."

"The name of the Kalauz is sacred—and always the same," Tiska said. "When she gives her name, it means that person becomes a member of her highest circle. It's a very great honor to have the Kalauz tell you her name." She added softly, "My mother knew her name. Before the exposure, she was very high in the Kalauz' favor. The name of every Kalauz is Kontara. To know it is to have a passport to her."

It was a bit of information I might find useful or I might not. But I had long before learned that any special knowledge could be of value when I was in a hostile environment. And at the moment I couldn't think of any I'd found more hostile than Ujvila.

I had more questions to ask Tiska, but one in particular I didn't want to ask in front of Rosid. When I had the opportunity, I said bluntly, "Since you plan to give men and women equal opportunity when you become Kalauz, I presume that means Rosid will get a top job."

"That's an odd way of asking a question."

"Rosid is an odd man."

"He is dedicated to the cause," she replied softly but firmly—almost challengingly, I thought. "Without him, I would have failed before now. I would be in a joy-labor camp or dead."

She didn't wait for me to ask more; she told me. "Rosid

was one of the males chosen by the computers to be prepared as mates for the hierarchy," Tiska said. "Most of those chosen accepted their fate as an honor—even though they knew they would be destroyed once they'd fulfilled their function. But Rosid was different, even as a young man. He escaped from the special quarters where such males are kept when he learned that he was to be the mate of the Kalauz herself—the mother of the present Kalauz.

"He was hunted, of course, even more than an ordinary male would have been. Finally he had to take refuge in a joy-labor camp. He spent many years there before he found a way to escape. When he did he came to me to offer his services. He had known my parents," she added in her soft voice.

I thought that now I understood Rosid a little more: a male so chosen is usually taken by the Igaz when he is about sixteen. In addition to being kept in top physical condition, the boys are given intensive training in two areas—science and devotion to the Kalauz and all she stands for. The purpose of the second was obvious; that of the first I had not understood clearly until Tiska explained it to me.

"By educating the males in science, the Kalauz hopes they will make discoveries of value to her. And many have. In fact, that is where many of the male scientists I spoke about came from—escapees from the school."

Considering how advanced Rosid's technology was in some respects compared to that of the Igaz, I thought he must have learned even more than the Kalauz would have wanted. I thought of him, still a young man somewhere between the ages of twenty-three and twenty-five—considered the best mating age—knowing he had been chosen for the highest honor an Ujvilan male could aspire to, mate of the Kalauz, and knowing too that once he had fathered a daughter, he would be destroyed.

That was the system. The Kalauz had first choice; the others chose in accordance with their rank. Male children of these matings were given no special privileges but were sent to foster homes or orphanages. They were, however, watched carefully, since the chances of their being of high intelligence were good. As soon as the female member of the hierarchy had a daughter, her "husband" was destroyed.

Although Tiska assured me she had said nothing to Rosid, he seemed to know about our discussion of him, and I finally decided that he had some kind of constant electronic bug focused on me.

When I saw him next, he said, "Now that your questions

have all been answered, it's time for you to give us information."

I said, "All questions but one—the details of the plan."

Rosid stared silently at me. I said, "Ask your questions. Maybe my answers will convince you that I'm not a secret agent of the Kalauz."

"We would like to hear the history of man's spread throughout the galazy, of the philosophy behind your Federation—and behind Anthropol."

"Lori didn't tell you anything about the history of Earth?"

"Only that her organization was the most favored—and the most important—element of the Federation."

"Fortunately, that isn't true," I said. "The Federation is like any other political body operating in a free society—its members are subject to pressures from their constituents, from lobbyists representing special interests, from all kinds of sources. Each branch of the Federation is a special interest, of course, and each tries to make the members of the council see its side—and so give it more power and more money for operations. At present—or when I left Earth—Gal-Mil was in better favor than Anthropol. But that could well have changed by now."

I saw that neither of them understood me very well. They couldn't comprehend a government representing the people of a single planet, let alone one representing many planets scattered over endless space. I decided to start with history and work my way to the present, hoping that somewhere along the way they might begin to understand.

I stopped at the beginning of the Federation, and the hopes for tracing down the Earth-descended peoples, when a signal came through Rosid's receiver. He activated the transmitter.

He said, "Rosid waiting. Yes."

He listened for a brief time. Then he said, "Good. Keep on the trail. Report every possible clue." He switched off and turned to us.

"They think they will have the location of Captain Lori within the hour."

XIII

THERE WAS NOTHING to do but wait. I was anxious to learn of Lori's whereabouts but I was also grateful for the hour respite. I still didn't have the information I needed from Tiska and Rosid. I had an ironic vision of myself charging

to Lori's rescue and then helplessly standing back while she—knowing the plan—was able to use Gal-Mil's strength to implement it. Score one for her philosophy as far as the results would look to the Galactic Council. No, above all I needed to know the details of the plan.

And not just for the sake of the prestige of Anthropol. But for the sake of Ujvila. Because Lori might have the best of intentions and even promise not to use force to help the Neo-Politicos. But if one small hitch occurred, one brief blockage, the channeled military mentality would take over and her troops would be swarming down to the surface.

But bluntness had got me nowhere before; I still had to pin my hopes on convincing Rosid that Anthropol's philosophy was sincere, that I had told him the truth about our way of helping. And I could do that only by indirection. When he went on with his interrupted question, "And then what do you do when you find such a totalitarian culture? Do you try to force it into your mold?" I said, "We learned long ago that you can't simply destroy a people's beliefs. It often takes generations to bring a backward colony to the level where it can join the Federation. We work through education—and we work almost exclusively through native peoples. We don't try to impose more than discreet advising from the outside."

"But ultimately you force all Earth-originated peoples to join your Federation?"

"We couldn't if we wanted to," I said. "Actually, we make membership in the Federation rather difficult. But we try various methods to orient all Earth-originated cultures so that they'll be qualified for membership."

"Qualified—in what ways?"

"Politically, culturally, technologically—and, as a result of these, economically. For example, we would try to help the new rulers of a totalitarian culture such as this to move toward a more liberal political structure. We would also try to get them to broaden their technology, to give the people a higher standard of living, to enable them to compete in the galactic markets. Each planet has something unique—that seems to be a law of the galaxy—and with a high level of technology, a planet is always able to maintain sound trade balances.

"We don't always succeed," I admitted. "There are planets whose rulers have refused to accept the restrictions the Federation insists on—mostly they balk at economic safeguards. These planets go their own ways, developing along their own lines. Frequently some of them try to fight us, to take

planets into their sphere of influence. Many are highly technologically oriented, and if they weren't as busy fighting one another as they are the Federation, we'd have worse problems to face."

Rosid's voice stabbed another question at me. "What of non-Earth-originated peoples? What of alien civilizations?"

"That depends," I said. "The Alien Division of Anthropol was set up just to deal with those living in environments that support Earth-type life. We try to get them into the Federation—with the same rules, the same privileges, and in the same way—first through probationary status and then with full membership. But the choice is theirs."

"And if they choose membership, you share your science with them?"

"Of course."

"And you aren't concerned that alien thinking will contaminate Earth-type thinking?" He was worrying it like a thirsty drunk would worry a krish pit. I thought of the Kalauz' story of the aliens. And I remembered that both Tiska and Rosid had been of the upper classes and would know the details. He was of an age where he might well have been involved in the discovery of those two aliens.

I said, "We've never found reason to fear aliens. None are as aggressive as Earth-originated peoples. Very few have technologies to match ours, and most of those are turned toward peaceful development. On the planets where our people landed and found established alien civilizations there has been trouble occasionally; but we've usually managed to effect a compromise and bring about a satisfactory arrangement."

"But what of those aliens whose environments are not Earth-like?"

I shrugged. "Our contact with them has always been minimal. We can seldom make contact and even less often maintain it. And then their psychologies are so different there is seldom a common basis. We leave them alone; they leave us alone. But plans for them exist."

"This may be true to the present," Rosid said, still bothered. "But despite your ability to move swiftly through the galaxy, you have yet to discover all of the inhabited worlds."

"We've had the By-pass for over a thousand years now and we haven't even found all the colonies that went out in the two hundred years of the starship period."

"Then it is possible for you to find a humanate—or otherwise—civilization that is highly technologically oriented—enough to join your Federation. Yet it might not qualify

because it would refuse to conform or because it showed too aggressive traits."

I began to get the feeling that he was indulging in intellectual exercise for its own sake. Normally that would have been fine; I enjoy a good discussion that can end nowhere. But the time was passing and I had little of it to waste.

I said, "If you fear aliens, there's little I can say to reassure you, except that the odds are against finding overly aggressive non-humanate peoples. The case here in Ujvila is the only one of its kind I know about."

"Where did you hear of that?"

"The Kalauz told me," I said.

"Why would she?"

"I don't really know. She used the term and I asked a question. She answered it. But I'm sure she had some devious reason. I got the feeling that nothing she said to me was without meaning."

Tiska spoke for the first time in a long while. "She makes no move that lacks meaning."

Rosid went back to his worrying. "Let us assume a hostile non-humanate alien civilization. And let us assume that the people of this civilization want Earth-originated science, and so they pretend—falsify, if you wish—to conform to all that the Federation demands. They would then be admitted to the Federation. Once their probation was at an end, they could take the science given them and use it against their benefactors."

I said, "Why would they? They couldn't make any more use of Earth-type environments than we could of their environments. They'd be more likely to use their knowledge on other aliens with whom they could coexist easily."

"And you would object to this?"

"Of course," I said. "We've already had to fight Freebooter groups who tried to sell weapons to non-humanate alien civilizations or who've tried to exploit them. Any tension in the galaxy we find objectionable. That's why an alien group would have a long probation. But stop worrying about aliens. They have yet to be a problem."

"I am not worrying, as you call it. I am seeking in my own way to understand your psychology—that of Anthropol."

"And I'm trying to make it clear to you," I said.

"Then permit me one more question: what exactly is this By-pass that enables you to move across great spans of space in a short while?"

"I doubt if there are a thousand scientists in the entire

galaxy who really understand it—and half of them couldn't explain it. All I know is that some two centuries after the first starships were launched, a moon scientist came up with the first concept. His device was crude, but it did allow a ship to make jumps up to a light-year in distance. And even though in actual time consumed the jumps cost nothing—except for the time required to get into free space from the origin and from the point of entry back into normal space to the destination—even so, our horizons were limited. But now a jump can go half across the galaxy. Someday we may be able to make single jumps and cross into other galaxies. But so far that's a dream."

"You do not know the principle behind the By-pass then?"

I sent my mind back to my school days, but I am far from being a trained scientist. The ideas came out slowly, hesitantly. I said, "Assume a plane with an infinite number of points. Let this plane be an analogue of our space—call it finite space. Then assume another plane so positioned that the points on it intersect the lines joining the points in our finite space. Call this second plane non-finite space. Also assume that the points in the finite space intersect lines joining the points in the non-finite space."

Rosid nodded. He seemed to be with me; Tiska was obviously lost. I went on. "Moving along a line in one space will jump you from point to point in the other space, and vice versa."

Rosid said, "Ah!"

"Now, if we translate from a two dimensional plane to a three dimensional concept—"

Rosid was ahead of me. "It becomes a matter of being able to transfer a physical object such as a spaceship from one plane to the other—or from one three dimensional space to the other. Then a traveler moving from one point to another in one space might be moving equivalently along a line in the second space."

I nodded. "And two points in the non-finite space that might be infinitely close together can represent a long line—or a great distance, if you prefer—in the finite space."

"So the spaceship—or sound wave or whatever it might be—moves from finite space to non-finite space, goes from one selected point in the non-finite space to another in almost zero time and then moves back into the finite space to find itself possibly many light-years from its point of entry into the non-finite space."

I had explained it badly, but Rosid seemed satisfied. He asked no more questions—to Tiska's relief. And the com-

municator helped. It signaled that a transmission was coming through. Rosid turned on his control.

But this time a viewscreen lit up, showing us the tired figure of a female in Igaz-rendor uniform. "Captain Lori has been located," she said. "I must talk quickly; I believe I am suspect."

"We are listening," Rosid assured her. For all the excitement in his voice, he might have been asking for a mug of kaf.

"She is in Camp Two," the woman went on. "Only this morning a report came from there. She has not yet broken, but it is said she is weakening under the conditions. Soon they expect her to tell them everything they wish just so she can get relief from that accursed place."

The viewscreen went blank so abruptly that I wondered if the woman had been discovered. Rosid seemed unconcerned. He looked at Tiska. "Camp Two," he said.

"It is in the jungle," Tiska told me. "It is the most terrible of all camps. The work is cutting special kinds of trees and preparing them for shipment to the Kalauz' mills. The heat is terrible and there is no escape."

Rosid explained, "There is no way in or out except by air. All food, all people, even the logs are moved by air. The camp is in the midst of a swamp. No one has ever escaped from it."

"Then there'll have to be a first time," I said. "We can't wait until Lori talks and is brought out. Then it will be too late to rescue her."

"Too late for us, but not for you or her," Rosid said.

"My job here is to help your people," I answered. "Not to rescue Gal-Mil personnel. Naturally I would try to save her even if she had talked. But if I did succeed, I'd still consider the mission a failure."

"Despite the fact that she could bring troops down and take Ujvila from the Kalauz by force?" Rosid asked.

"She'll do exactly that," I said. "In fact, she might try to do it even though I get her out before she is forced to talk. That's why I need to know your plans. I may have to circumvent Lori and stop her from communicating while finding the center and talking to my people. But how can I if she knows more of what will happen than I do? What can I tell my people waiting up there?"

It was a persuasive argument, especially now that they knew Lori was close to breaking. They had little choice except to trust me or to destroy both Lori and me and try to

go on their own—and I was sure they both feared that attempt would fail.

Rosid and Tiska looked at one another; she nodded. He said, "Very simply, we need four more weeks to make our final preparations. Then we will give the signal and our people in the Igaz will begin a carefully planned systematic sabotage operation."

I stared at him. "Sabotage!" I fought back a desire to laugh—or curse, or cry. "Do you think those loyal to the Kalauz will stand back and let a handful of Neo-Politicos sabotage their system?"

"They will have no choice," Rosid said. "The system itself will win for us. It is rigid, inflexible, crystallized. We have studied it for years—why do you think we took so long to begin our plan?—and we know every main point of weakness. Our people are getting in precisely the right positions so that they can check and double-check each move they are to make and dovetail their activities; then each separate force will add itself to all the others until finally the entire system will collapse."

"And then you step in and take over—and put Tiska in the Kalauz' palace?"

"We will already be in a position to take over, as you put it," he said. "Our people—those who survive—are in positions of power now, remember. And Tiska will assume her duties as soon as she can."

I thought that they just might do it. In essence, the plan was simple and, if I'd been in a humorous mood, delightfully ironic. What Rosid had done was to devise a systems analysis to apply to the destruction of a systems management control pattern that had itself been set up long ago by a process of systems analysis. But over the years the flexibility supposedly built into any good system had been lost; I knew from observation that the Igaz had no room for change. The pattern was set and it was followed to the point where I had found myself wondering if it hadn't become instinctive.

"It's a clever idea, but it will take time," I said.

"That is one reason we are so badly in need of your organization," Tiska said in her soft voice. "We are not experienced in government. Once we have gained control—or when we see that victory is to be ours—we will have to have guidance."

I understood the meaning she couldn't quite bring herself to put into words: with the present Kalauz and Igaz gone, there would be a period of disorganization, almost of chaos. It would be easy then for the new regime to impose to-

talitarianism again on the people, if only to insure their maintaining control.

I understood too their concern that Lori and her Gal-Mil forces might move in to "help" them when there was bound to be chaos; that was the kind of thing Gal-Mil used as an excuse to take over.

In his emotionless tones Rosid told me, "You can understand why we did not wish to share our plan. We are afraid we erred in telling your Captain Lori. Should there be any idea in the minds of the Igaz that the Neo-Políticos are ready to act, that they have the power to threaten the present system . . . even a hint of such an idea would send the Igaz-rendero into action. There would be indiscriminate arrests, torture. Some of our people would break; they could not help themselves. We would not only have failed, we would be virtually wiped out as an organization."

I said, "You'll have to trust me on two counts, Rosid—that I'm telling the truth about being programmed so that I couldn't reveal this information to the Igaz, no matter what they do; and that given some help, I can get Lori out of the joy-labor camp before she talks."

"From any camp but Two," Rosid said.

I tried to curb my impatience. "She hasn't broken yet. If I can get to that camp soon enough, I can ease the pressure on her—enough so we can gain a little time anyway. Enough time for us to escape and for me to contact Anthropol before your four week deadline."

Tiska whispered, "Believe us, Vernay. Camp Two . . ."

I was in too big a hurry to worry about the protocol of interrupting the future Kalauz. "Let me worry about how I'll get Lori away. Just let me know who at the camp can help and how we can get back here once we're away from the place."

Rosid spoke so quickly that I knew he too had been thinking of the possibility that I just might get Lori free. He said, "If you can get to the mill town of Malan—that's where the logs are made into lumber; it's a seaport and the lumber is brought from there on ships to Trivo—if you can get to Malan, we can take care of you. But from Malan there'd be ten to fourteen days, depending on how long you had to wait for a ship, before you'd reach Trivo."

Trivo was the seaport for the capital. I said, "That leaves me two weeks to get to the camp and get Lori to Malan."

"We can give you no more time. If we tried to stop the operation now, we would lose too much."

"How much time do you need to set up an escape route for me?"

"It will be ready long before you could possibly reach Malan. And we have a guard at Camp Two, a female named Draca. She'll be made aware of your coming right away. But don't count on her being there too long. Camp Two is so deadly that no guard is ever forced to stay over six months, and they can leave any time they request transfer."

He added, "And no inmate has ever been known to survive for two years. Most of them die their first year there."

XIV

ONCE AGAIN the long, dragging days of waiting were suddenly ended. I left Rosid's headquarters in mid-morning, and by late afternoon I was an inmate of joy-labor Camp Two.

Getting into the camp was frighteningly simple. I was led underground by one of Rosid's men to an ancient, crumbling building. I came into the hot, thick daylight just one block from a joy-labor camp recruitment station. I stood on the sidewalk a moment, listening for the signal that would tell me I was still being scanned. But there was no familiar buzzing. I found it hard to believe that the Igaz had given up on me so easily, and I continued to stand and wait. But no sound came.

Finally I walked the block to the station. It was one of many scattered in the two cities and the numerous villages on Ujvila. I had seen a number of them in the capital during my work with Potkil. This one looked no different. It was a small store with a single display window beside the entry door. Behind the window glass were tired-looking posters illustrating the pleasures of escaping the responsibilities of life by volunteering for service in a joy-labor camp.

I doubted if the signs would have much effect on the hopeless, the hungry, the tired in body and spirit who daily passed this window. But the odors piped from a duct above the door and drifting down through the thick air were a lure many couldn't resist: odors of rich food, of high-quality krish; odors to set bellies grumbling with eagerness and salivary glands working.

Again I stopped and waited, but there was still no warning buzz from my detector. I went through the doorway and into a squarish room divided in two by a waist-high railing. On my side of the railing a dozen or so people sat

dejectedly in straight-backed chairs. Behind the railing was a series of small desks, each with a stiff-faced female in the uniform of a lower rank member of the Igaz clerical service. Behind the desks was a row of blank-faced doors. On each desk was a neatly lettered sign, identifying the uniformed female as the representative of a particular joy-labor camp. There were seven altogether. Six desks had applicants being interviewed. The one for Camp Two had no one but the clerk.

I walked hesitantly to the railing, found the gate in it, and pushed my way through. The woman looked up. Her eyes were as tired as those of the waiting applicants. After a moment of examining me, they registered surprise. I wondered if it was because she had been told to watch for me or because I had come to her desk.

"You are applying for entry to Camp Two, omul?"

"Yes."

Her voice was as tired as her eyes. "Why? You look young, well-fed, strong."

"I am atok," I said, and touched a finger to my forehead. "What good is youth or strength or a full belly to me any longer?"

The surprise had left her expression. She took out a card and a stylus. "Name?"

"Vernay."

Still no change of expression. She punched the stylus through some marks on the card. "Go through the door straight ahead." She laid down the card and pushed a button so that the door unlatched and swung open.

I went into a cell-sized room. The door snapped shut behind me with a mouth-drying sound of finality. I looked around. The cell had only one piece of furniture, a chair set against the far wall. From a grille in the ceiling a metallic voice said, "Sit in the chair and wait. Place your hands on your knees and press your spine against the back of the chair. Look directly at the center panel of the door."

I followed instructions. The door panel was blank and it stayed that way. I waited, wondering if this was some kind of test or if some form of subliminal hypnosis was being used on me.

Nothing happened in front of me at all; but a great deal happened behind me. The piece of flooring where the chair sat tipped upward and the wall opened. I was flipped back through the opening. I struck a padded chute and found myself sliding wildly through darkness, headfirst. The suddenness of it brought a scream bubbling into my throat,

but the sound was never released. A sweetish smell flooded my nostrils, clogging them. I fought to breathe—and lost. The emptiness of darkness swallowed me.

I awoke to the lingering scent of the same sweetness. I was lying on a cot under a blanket of heat so dense I felt I could push my hands up and grasp it. A heavy-bodied woman in crisp white shorts and bandeau stood over me with a glass of greenish liquid in her hand. I could feel stinging pains in both arms and thighs. My head was thick, my eyes blurred.

The glass of green liquid found its way to my mouth. "Drink, omul."

I drank. The liquid was virtually flavorless but it was definitely effective. The sweetness clogging my mouth and nostrils disappeared. The thickness left my head and my eyes cleared. Only the stinging of what I guessed to have been injections remained.

"Thank you, dwamna," I said. In five minutes I was strong enough to pay attention to my surroundings. I became more aware of the oppressive heat and I could smell the mold that streaked the once white walls of the room I lay in. Sunlight filtered through a screened opening and burned where it struck my ankle. I jerked my leg aside.

"That will be nothing to what lies ahead," the woman said. She was painfully cheerful. "But you've been injected for the usual jungle diseases, fungi, internal disorders, and heat prostration. But not against the snakes and insects. Watch out for them." She stepped back, signaling for me to get up.

I was clad in a pair of drab shorts and nothing else. Beside the cot were thick-soled sandals. When I put them on, I had the feeling that I was as dressed as I ever would be at Camp Two.

I stepped to the doorway and pushed aside the screen. Stretching in front of me was a flat, barren compound of dusty, packed dirt. It was separated from towering, thick jungle only by the low, flat-roofed buildings that formed the four sides of a rectangle. I had seen more unprepossessing places but only on lifeless planets.

The woman followed me outside. She seemed impervious to the heat, and I wondered how she kept her clothes so crisp looking. She was friendly in an easy, relaxed way; I wondered if she might be my contact here, a woman named Draca.

If so, she gave no indication of it. She said, "The building directly opposite is the food and recreation center. You will

take your morning and night meals there. The long building on the left is divided into three sections. At each end are the sleeping quarters; the washing facilities are in the center. The far end is the cooler."

I glanced to the right. I didn't need to have the buildings opposite the dormitory identified; they obviously held machinery of some kind. And on the side where I stood, the definite higher quality of the structures told me that the administration lived here.

I thanked her for the information and decided to probe a little. "How did I come here, dwamna?"

"By air, of course. It is the only way to reach this camp." She paused and added without maliciousness, "There are two ways of leaving it--by being put underground in the swamp or by being flown out." She evidently thought of it as a joke. There was a chuckle in her voice. "In the first case, you'll be dead. In the second, you'll be going to visit the Igaz. I would hope for the first if I were you."

She waved me away. "Take any empty bunk. Evening meal is in two hours, at sundown." She turned and went back into the building. I started through the vicious sunlight toward the dormitory.

I ducked into shade as soon as possible by entering the dormitory at the near end. I was in a long narrow room with two rows of cots butted against the walls and their ends barely far enough apart to leave room for walking. Above each cot was a shelf. There were fifty cots in the room but nearly a third of the shelves were empty. The scatter of things on the others was pitiful: a rusty razor, a stick chewed at one end to form the semblance of a toothbrush, a broken-toothed comb.

A doorless opening at the far end of the room let me into the washing facilities. I could smell the plumbing well before I reached the room itself. I stared around, finding it hard to believe that even a society like that of Ujvila would treat other human beings in such a fashion. Against one wall was a line of stained basins, each with a single water tap. Across from them was a long board with a series of holes cut into it at intervals. The far end of the room was marked by a sunken, sloping floor. A series of open-ended pipes jutted from the ceiling. Those, I assumed, were the bathing facilities.

I found out. When I stepped onto the sloping part of the floor, water gushed down on me, tepid and odorous. I sputtered and hurried across rough concrete to the dryness of the rear half of the building. Here were more cots,

another fifty but with more of the shelves holding personal property. I soon saw why: a faint breeze floated in the open, unscreened doorway at the far end. It was a hot breeze, even against my soaked body. But it was moving air.

This room held two people, both lying on their cots. A dark-haired, emaciated woman looked up at me from empty eyes. It was not hard to see that she was dying. The other was a man. He had his left leg encased in a crude splint. Pain twisted his face. He didn't bother to see who had come in.

I located an empty bunk as far as possible from the stench of the washroom. The woman said thinly, "It smells better there but the bugs are worse."

I said, "Where do I find dry clothes?"

The injured man laughed harshly without looking up. The woman said, "Those are your clothes. Let them dry on you or take them off." She shut her eyes as if talking had exhausted her.

I was feeling thick in the head again, whether from the heat or from the wearing off of the green liquid, I didn't know. I lay down on the bunk I'd chosen. There were no covers, only a thin, rough cloth spread over a hard mattress. An equally hard pillow supported my head at a slight angle. I closed my eyes and slept.

The noise of machinery roaring into the camp awakened me. I rose groggily and went to the doorway. Three huge vehicles with endless tracks were lumbering out of the jungle and into the compound. Each carried two females in an enclosed cab and a packed mass of mixed men and women in the open back section. When the vehicles lumbered to a stop, those in the back of the truck half-jumped, half-fell to the ground. They walked wearily, dragging themselves toward the food hall like people tired to the depth of their bones. The woman said, "You'd better go eat before it's all gone."

I found it hard to believe but those sweat-stained, dirt-encrusted inmates were going to feed themselves before they washed off the day's work. I looked for Lori but the crush was too great. Finally I went into the food hall, jamming myself near the end of the sluggishly moving line.

Inside, the food hall was almost as primitive as the dormitory. A long table at one side held stacks of bowls and a pile of spoons. Farther along were great pots, sending out clouds of unappetizing steam. Beyond the pots was a pile

of mugs and alongside it two cauldrons that sent the smell of cheap kaf into the air.

I followed the pattern of those ahead of me, taking a spoon and a bowl and dipping the bowl into the first pot containing any food. I came up with some kind of thick gruel. When I reached the kaf, I took a mug and dipped it into the cauldron. Then, my hands filled, I turned to find a place to sit and eat.

There were no tables, only rows of wooden benches. Most people dropped to a bench, set their kaf on the floor between their feet and began spooning the gruel into their mouths as if they hadn't eaten in days. A few stood, propping themselves against the wall while they ate. I found Lori standing near a corner, an empty space beside her.

I propped my back against the empty wall. She turned her head and looked at me with eyes that were too bright. Her fair skin was reddish from the sun. Like the other women, she wore only shorts and bandeau and her exposed skin was dirt-encrusted with runnels of sweat streaking through it. In common with all of us, male and female, her hair was cropped about an inch long. When she lifted her spoon, she did so with the slow, agonizing effort of the utterly weary.

But she had strength enough to talk. She said, "You fool. Why did you come here instead of alerting my troops?"

There was a kind of wildness in the low pitch of her voice. I thought that the report Rosid had received was close to being right: Lori wasn't far from breaking.

I said, "How? You never told me where the communication center is. Besides, my job is to help the Neos, not call an army in."

"Dying here won't help anyone," she said.

"I didn't come to die. I came to get you out."

"I can get out any time I want. All I have to do is admit that the Igaz is right. They'll take me back fast enough."

"Sure. Then they'll get the information they want and send you back here."

"Once I'm there, I might have a chance of escaping. . . ."

"Rosid heard you were ready to break."

"Break! Go to Pluto," she snapped at me. "If I leave, it will be because I want to. These primitives can't break a Gal-Mil officer."

I said, "If you get out, it'll be because I take you. Face it, Lori. You haven't got the strength to escape if they turned their backs on you."

"Nor will you in a week."

"We have two weeks at the most to get from here to the seaport." I said. "Can you hang on that long?"

"Aries! I can hang on longer than you, Anthropol!"

"Save the inter-agency fight for later," I said. I glanced around. "Now let's shut up. We're being stared at."

We both turned to eating. The gruel tasted better than it smelled, but not much. The kaf was bitter but strong enough to give me a momentary lift. Overhead a single naked light bulb had been turned on; outside it was dark. The bugs flocked to the light and spun away to fall in our food.

"Let's go wash and get some sleep. Dawn comes soon enough," Lori said.

I followed her to the doorway. A wide-mouthed tube with steam curling from it accepted our eating equipment. After Lori tossed hers into the tube, it took a good ten seconds for the sound of water splashing to come back. I wondered what the poor devils buried down below in the kitchens must look like, and what kind of crime it took to get put down there.

I asked Lori as we walked slowly to the dormitory building. "Disobedience," she said. "Any refusal to obey a guard, or sometimes, when they're shorthanded, just obeying slowly." Her voice was losing its former vigor, but she had enough spirit left to add with heavy sarcasm, "Or trying to escape."

Those were the last words she said that night. Her cot was three down from mine. She flopped down on it, her eyes closed, and she was asleep. She had forgotten about washing away the day's filth.

I saw that the cot next to her was empty. I appropriated it. If anyone noticed in the dim light that glowed weakly from above, there was no comment made. I followed Lori's lead and shut my eyes. I had long ago learned a number of tricks to help me get sleep when I needed it. This night I had to use every one of those tricks before I finally dropped off, all of the questions churning through my mind still unanswered.

XV

SOME OF THOSE answers I got in the morning. A raucous alarm bell blasted us from our cots with the first light. I sat up, startled by the noise. People were rolling to their feet and staggering down the aisle toward the washroom. Lori was one of them and I fell in behind her. Each person stood a moment under the tepid shower before staggering

on to the line of washbasins. Some stopped there and made vague efforts at brushing their teeth or combing their stubby hair; others simply walked on and outside.

The shower helped waken me a little; more, it washed off the sweat from the hot night's sleep. I followed Lori through it and took the basin next to hers.

Her voice was low but sharp. "Don't be so attentive. No one here cares, but one of the guards might notice."

"One of the guards will help us," I said softly. "A female named Draca."

Lori made a face, but she said nothing. I stayed away from her during the morning meal—which was a repetition of the previous night's menu—but when the guards herded us onto the trucks, I managed to position myself so that I was put with her. I asked her which guard was Draca.

"The biggest one," Lori said. She moved a little away from me, turned and faced the slatted wall that made up the side of the truck. Reaching out, she grasped a slat with each hand. When the truck started, I understood why.

My work had carried me to many planets, among many peoples representing the total spectrum of social structure. A lot of times the work had been unpleasant; sometimes, dangerous. But I always had the knowledge that it was temporary to sustain me. Sometimes only that knowledge kept me going.

It was the same now. Before my first day in the joy-labor camp was half over, I knew that I had to keep uppermost in my mind the thought that this too was temporary—very temporary. Otherwise, I realized, it wouldn't be long before I either tried to rebel—which would cost me my life—or turned into one of the half-zombies my fellow workers had become.

We were packed into the truck solidly. Those of us at the sides were the most fortunate; we had something to cling to as the jouncing vehicle rattled through the forest on an incredibly rough track. The others were forced to brace themselves, shoulder to shoulder or back to back. Occasionally someone fell. If they couldn't get back up by themselves, they lay helplessly, taking the bruising shocks of the roadbed with every heave of the rough flooring.

We went through thick forest, across shallow swamps, down into steep-sided hollows and up onto already sun-seared flats. Every meter of the five or so kilometers we traveled was bone-jarring. By the time the heavy tank-truck came to a stop in a huge clearing, I felt as if I'd already done

a day's work. I wobbled to the ground when it was my turn to get out.

The door to the cab opened and a tall, thick-bodied guard stepped out. "To your jobs!" she shouted. "Move! Do you expect to waste half the day?"

Those around me melted away. I remained where I was, watching the workers move toward the edge of the clearing. The entire area had obviously been forest not too long ago. Now the trees had been cut back to form a roughly circular space about a hectare in size. The center of the clearing was filled with two piles of logs: one pile was made up of tall and very thick-butted trees that had been felled, trimmed, and peeled; the other was made up of much smaller logs also trimmed of their branches but not peeled.

I watched as some of the workers began hacking and sawing at standing trees while others worked at trimming branches and still others at peeling bark. The tall trees got a lot less gentle handling than did the short ones, I noticed. I was amazed at the primitive tools being used—ancient hand axes and saws—tools that I had last seen in a museum, in a display of pre-Inundation culture.

The big guard came alongside me. She carried a metal rod and when she prodded me with the tip, I felt a light jolt of electricity run through me. I jumped.

"Get to work!" Her stiff movements reminded me of Rosid.

"Your indulgence, dwamna," I said quickly. "This is my first day. I have no assigned task as yet."

She prodded me again, then she glanced quickly around. The other guards were near the workers, watching and now and then prodding a low-moving one. My guard said, "I am Draca."

"Vernay," I answered quickly.

She nodded. "When I prod you, do not misunderstand. But we can take no chances. I will keep the charge low." She made a face. "Don't do anything to make another guard prod you. Some turn their power up high. They like to see the tired bodies jerk."

I nodded. She said, "Walk with me slowly. I will try to give you work that isn't too tiring. Maybe you will still have strength enough after six days to make your escape attempt."

"Six days?"

"You haven't been told? Every ten days, there is the day of rest. It will be your only opportunity. The next one comes six days from now. After that, you would have to wait ten days more."

Sixteen days—and I had fourteen at the most. I nodded. “You know I’m to take Captain Lori with me?”

“I know. If you fail, we must destroy her—and you too. We cannot risk having either of you talk to the Igaz in the hopes of getting out of this place.”

It was said matter-of-factly, and with as much emotion as she might use to ask for a cup of kaf. We were nearing the guards at the edge of the clearing now. Draca said softly, “I will speak to you more later.” She raised her voice, and went on with instructions.

“Listen carefully, omul. The long slim logs are prual wood. They are very tough, fire resistant, and can be treated without fear of harming them. But the smaller logs, handle carefully! They are frun wood.”

Frun wood, the most delicate, highly prized wood on Ujvila. Treated correctly, it made furniture and wall paneling of incredible beauty, having a radiant inner glow that actually gave light in a darkened room. Its grain was never the same for more than a few centimeters. I had seen pieces whose complicated sworls and curves and spins outdid anything an artist might paint. Only the most highly placed could afford frun wood in any amount.

“The Kalauz owns the rights to the world’s frun wood,” Draca told me. “To injure a piece is to strike at the Kalauz—and to receive punishment accordingly.”

“I’ll remember,” I said. I saw Lori not far away. She and a scarecrow of a man were astraddle a frun log, delicately trimming its branches with tiny-bladed hand saws. Draca started toward them.

“Look at the thin one,” she said loudly. “His hands are beginning to shake.”

One of the nearby guards laughed. “If he makes a slip, he can do his shaking on kitchen duty.”

Draca’s effort to answer the laugh with one of her own was obvious. She said to me, “To work in that steam is slow death. I will see what I can do.” Again she raised her voice. “You, take your palsy to the prual trunks and trim those for a while.”

He looked almost grateful as he crawled from the frun log. As he passed us, Draca took his saw and handed it to me. She said, “Get Captain Lori to answer your questions. But don’t talk too much or the other guards will give you trouble.”

I thanked her with a nod and joined Lori. Draca called out, “You, female. Show this new one how to do the work. And tell him his quota.”

Lori paused in her sawing and carefully held the saw away from the tree before she lifted her head and nodded, looking at me. "With prual logs, it doesn't matter. They're taken to the mill and squared and then sawed into planks for building. But the slightest scar on a frun log means that the entire layer—the depth of the scar—has to be peeled away."

She set her saw daintily into the cut she had started. The blade was held parallel to the trunk and just above the smooth surface of the paper-thin bark. Her movements were quick but as accurate as those of an artist. The branch she was trimming off she held in her free hand, pulling gently to keep the saw from binding but not so hard that there was a chance of the butt of the branch tearing from the trunk at any time.

"Try it," she said.

I followed her pattern. The hardest part was getting the saw cut started at the base of the branch. The result had to be a smooth surface without any branch sticking up at all. I did an adequate job but I was sweating violently before I was through and every muscle trembled from tension.

Draca came over. "Good enough," she said. "But don't be so slow, omul. You'll never make your quota!" She went away.

Lori said, "The quota is two logs trimmed and piled by noon meal, and two more by stopping time."

I glanced at the frun logs lying around us, some still in the net cradles used to lower them to the ground once they had been cut. It seemed to me that every one had at least a hundred branches. Fortunately most of them were small except near the butt. I learned how to trim the little ones with a few strokes of my saw. The bigger ones caused the trouble. For all the delicacy of the wood, they were tough and wiry.

Lori and I worked in silence for a good hour. I stopped and stood up, stretching tension-cramped muscles. I heard twigs crackle under a heavy foot, but before I could turn the metal tip of a rod caught my bare ribs and a violent jolt of electricity jerked me half off my feet.

I caught my balance and turned to meet the joy-filled eyes of a squat, hard-faced guard. She reminded me of Potkil. Her voice had the same harshness. "Do your resting at mealtime, omul!"

I could have taken it and gone back to work in silence. But the concentration needed for sawing the branches had

built too much tension in me. For the first time since coming to Ujvila, I forgot my role of subservient Ujvilan male.

I said, "These are the trees of the Kalauz. That means they're to be treated with the greatest care. Human muscles can stand only so much strain before they lose their control. Have you asked the Kalauz if she'd prefer to have perfect trees or if she'd prefer you to get your pleasure by using that rod?"

Her hard face turned as red as Lori's tortured skin. I saw heads come up around me. I hadn't bothered to keep my voice down. Lori's gasp registered on my ears but I ignored it. The guard raised her rod threateningly.

I said, "Don't be a fool, dwamna. To force anyone beyond endurance is to risk injuring the precious wood. You know that."

Draca came hurrying over, flanked by two other guards. She said quickly, "This one is new. He doesn't yet understand. . . ."

I was wound up and I knew I had gone too far. It was plunge on now—I had no other choice. I snapped, "I understand. But does the dwamna here? I was the confidant of Potkil herself. How does this dwamna know whether or not the Kalauz herself sent me to see how her frun trees are handled?"

The guard still held her rod high but she made no move to use it. Her face had lost its redness; I could see uncertainty in her eyes. It was the biggest bluff I had ever tried to run—and I knew that to fail in it now meant at the very least persecution; at the most it meant the living death of the subterranean kitchen.

I went on. "Making quota is my concern. If I fail, then you have the right to punishment, dwamna. You do not have that right because I take precautions with the property of the Kalauz."

I left it there. The guard's expression was both uncertain and wary. Obviously, she wanted to jab a full charge from her rod into my hide. But I knew that more than one joy-labor camp guard had become an inmate because of mistakes; Potkil had told me of three cases during one of her rare bursts of chatter.

The rod lowered. The guard started away, Draca talking to her in low tones. I straddled my tree and began sawing again. Lori whispered, "I don't know whether you're an idiot or a brave fool, Vernay." She spoke in Intragal.

I said, "It was try the bluff or be persecuted. I have too much to do to waste time having a guard like that bothering

me." It was said steadily enough, but inside I was shaking. The more I thought about it, the more I realized how much risk I had taken.

Nothing more happened. Soon a siren announced the noon meal. It came from large metal cylinders strapped to the sides of the trucks—a doughy bread-like substance we washed down with bitter kaf. The guards had their own food and they ate it in the coolness of their truck cabs. Except for Draca. She seemed delegated to watch duty and she carried a thermos and mug to a shady log and seated herself where she could watch us as we ate. I was a little surprised when I saw her take a pill from her belt purse and drop it into her kaf.

I said to Lori, "Are all Neos afflicted with stomach trouble?"

"Wouldn't you be, with the kind of tension they face?" she demanded. She was silent a moment. Then she said, "Watch Denil, the guard you talked back to. She killed a man yesterday for spitting on the ground after she ordered him to speed up his work."

"I'll watch her," I said. "But right now, tell me how this operation works. Tell me everything you can."

My rebellion seemed to have heartened her. At least she didn't waste time arguing about the hopelessness of our being able to escape. She said, "We've been in this one clearing since I arrived. We cut and trim and peel and stack logs for ten days. Then there's the day of rest. When we come back after it's over, the piles of logs are gone."

"Gone where? How?"

"To the mills at Malan," Lori said. "I've never seen it done, but I understand they're taken away by big helicopters. There's no other way to get them out of this swamp."

"No chance of walking out at all?"

Lori made a snorting sound. "You saw what we came over in the trucks. And that's the driest part. They say that in some places the water is five meters deep and thick with savage fish and reptiles. If you can figure a way through that, there are the swamp flowers." She looked ill. "Last week, a woman tried to escape to keep from being stabbed with a guard's rod. Some of us were felling frun trees close enough to see what happened. She fell into a swamp flower. It ate her."

I didn't ask for further details; I didn't want them right now. I said, "The way the frun logs have to be handled, the helicopters must be specially equipped."

Lori nodded. "Padded slings pick them up and only a

few go at a time—three at the most, I understand. And only three prual logs can be hauled at once.”

After the meal, I understood why. The frun logs were so light that Lori and I alone were able to pack the trimmed ones to the pile in the center of the clearing; they were so light that an air-truck type of helicopter should be able to lift and carry fifteen or twenty. But they were also delicate. We handled each one as though it were a thin shelled egg, cradling it in the palms of our hands and setting it down precisely a half meter from its nearest neighbor with all the care an archeologist gives precious pottery.

The prual logs were something else again. No two men nor a dozen could haul one from the trimming area to the pile in the clearing. Each log was roughly a third of one of the great trees in length; in thickness the butt end was more than two meters while the top was a full meter through. And they were as tough as they were heavy. Cranes attached to the snouts of the trucks jerked them rudely from the ground, swung them about and dropped them carelessly on the huge pile.

That night I lay awake trying to visualize the way an air truck would carry the logs from the clearing to the mills at Malan. Just as I fell asleep I realized that there was only one way the job could be done—unless a special type of helicopter was used. And I was sure I had seen all of Ujvila's transportation devices.

My next problem was to figure a way for Lori and me to get a free ride to Malan. The answer came to me by midday. But it wasn't a very good answer. By my most optimistic calculations, it gave us one chance in ten of reaching Malan alive.

XVI

THE MORE I thought of our prospects of going by air to Malan, the more I wondered if there wasn't a way out on foot—through the swamp. Everybody spoke of it as an impossibility. But had anyone actually ever tried it?

The answer came in mid-afternoon. Lori and I were well back in the forest, in an area of newly felled frun trees. Near us, one of the other trimmers stopped his work and straightened up as I had done the day before. A guard came out from behind a tree, her rod held high.

“Back to work, omull!”

I could see his eyes. They were burning bits of black

coal in his sun-scorched, emaciated face. His hands shook from tension and the muscles around his mouth began to twitch as he fought to hold back words. But either the strain had grown too great or my rebellion of the day before had made him bold.

The man cried, "Az ordognek Magavall"

It was a curse that would have delighted our Anthropologist linguists; it was almost pure, ancient Magyar. But the guard obviously wasn't interested in archaic forms. "Fostos omull" she hissed. Her rod darted out at him like a rapier.

The man stumbled back. The heel of his sandal caught on the trunk of the tree he had been trimming. The bark tore. The guard's voice rose to an unintelligible scream. The man twisted away from the rod stabbing at him and began to run in wild, mindless panic.

A sodded path lay clear and open to his left. Straight ahead was a black patch of swampy ooze. Blindly he ran straight for the swamp, the guard close behind. Mud caught him up to the ankles. He half fell sideways, toward a patch of heavy leaves that looked like oversized water lily pads. The guard stopped at the edge of the ooze. Suddenly the man screamed.

I was standing, trimming saw in my hand. When I saw the cause of his scream, I started forward. Lori said sharply, "Stay where you are! It's too late to help."

I saw what she meant. A long tendril had risen from between the sprawling lily-like pads and wrapped itself around the man, pinning his arms. With a sudden jerk, he was hauled full-length across one of the big leaves. It folded around him, the way cabbage is folded around stuffing by an Ujvilan cook. He disappeared completely. His scream stopped. The rolled up leaf disappeared under the water it had been resting on. A few bubbles perforated the dark surface.

The guard swung around. "Back to work, all of you!"

Lori said, "That was a swamp flower having its lunch."

I didn't answer. There was nothing to say. Nor was there much to think about at the moment. My choice of escape routes had become all too obvious—it was ride the air-truck or not go at all.

That night I was half asleep when a guard loomed in the dormitory doorway. "Is there one called Vernay here?"

Someone muttered a curse at her for disturbing our sleep. I shook myself and stood up. The guard said, "There is some irregularity about your entry record. Come with me."

Beside me, Lori whispered, "The guard Denil has figured a way to get even with you."

I didn't answer but walked to the door. Groggy from being jerked out of my doze, I didn't recognize the guard until we were well into the compound. Then I saw that it was Draca. She stopped in a patch of darkness.

"Five nights from this one is beginning of the rest time. Have you a plan yet?"

"You woke me up to ask that?"

"It is important. I have been in contact with the Malan branch of our organization. The Igaz has tripled its forces. Everywhere the hunt for Neo-Politicos has been intensified. The Igaz has become so watchful that Rosid fears the great plan may not work. Your help or Captain Lori's may be needed soon. The operation is to start!"

I didn't like that bit about Rosid's considering help from Lori. I said, "I have a plan. But it's pure guesswork based on the way the air-trucks carry the logs to Malan."

"The air-truck grapples them to its belly and flies them away," she said. "How else would it carry them?"

"But how are they carried? Crosswise to the body of the helicopter? Lengthwise to it? I understand three logs go at once. Why three?"

"Because even the biggest air-trucks can lift only three prual logs, and the smaller ones that carry the frun logs have cradles for only three. But I do not see why you need to know all this."

I said, "I need to know a lot more. About the procedure during the rest time. About how the pilots lift the logs. About the number of men in each air-truck."

She answered my questions and others that I asked. Finally, she sent me back to bed. "If anyone asks, tell them it was a mistake. Curse us for our stupidity—but not too loudly."

Apparently no one had been concerned enough about me to stay awake. Not even Lori. But now I couldn't sleep, as badly as I needed the rest. I lay thinking of what Draca had told me, trying to fit my plan into the pattern of existence here.

Rest time, I had learned, was a euphemism for an orgy—or as much of an orgy as the bone-weary, dying workers could manage. It began after work the night before the rest day. You had your choice that night: you could eat the usual slop or you could drink a kind of cheap, sour mash liquid. Most people chose to drink.

It was vile stuff, Draca had told me. And it was doctored so that weariness of both body and mind were temporarily

sloughed away. The drinker felt strong. And he continued to feel that way as long as he—or she—kept enough of the liquor in his system. Strong enough to fight, to run around shouting, to make love, to kill sometimes. But at sundown of the rest day itself, the liquor was taken away. Within an hour every drinker lay exhausted—in his bed if he was lucky enough to be near it; on the ground otherwise. And the next morning it was work as usual—work for bodies that had burned up a month's energy in one twenty-four hour burst.

The wise ones, Draca said, learned to eat as usual and then drink in moderation, if at all. But many simply lived for rest days, not caring that half a dozen such periods meant that their bodies would be used up and they would most likely collapse and die in the middle of their seventh or eighth drinking bout. But then, I thought, what else did most of them have to live for anyway?

My interest in the rest day was that discipline was lax. The guards simply shut themselves away in their cooled quarters and let the workers run riot until the period was ended.

The next morning I managed to ask Lori, "What do you do on rest days?"

Her look was scathing. "I don't turn myself into an animal, if that's what you're hoping, Vernay. I use the time to rest, to try to get back some of my strength."

At least she had retained that much desire to live, I thought. I said, "This next rest time you won't get the chance to sleep."

"We're going to escape, I suppose." She was mocking.

"Yes."

"How? Do we walk out or fly?"

I acted as if her question had been serious rather than sarcastic. "We fly," I answered. A guard came toward us and I stopped talking. But I saw that I had succeeded in doing what I wanted—arousing Lori's curiosity.

That helped sustain her for the rest of that day and the next. But after that I could see the weariness creeping back, the hopelessness settling into her mind again.

The last night before rest time would begin, I left my bunk and knelt beside Lori's. I whispered, "Awake?"

"Go away."

I kept my voice barely audible. "I have to talk to Draca.

She's on outside duty tonight. If a guard comes in to check, cover for me."

"What do I do?" she demanded savagely. "Tell the guard you've gone sleepwalking?"

"Tell them I'm in your bed for all I care," I snapped. "But cover for me." I got up and moved away. My anger was gone by the time I reached the door and stepped out into the thick, still night air. If I'd been here as long as she had, I doubted if I'd let myself believe in the possibility of escape—especially when that possibility was dependent on someone I considered a member of a bumbling organization. I knew that part of Lori's trouble was the way she regarded Anthropol—and thus regarded me. That wasn't her fault either: Gal-Mil indoctrination saw to it that she had nothing but contempt for the "peace" lovers, as we were sometimes called.

Outside I stood in shadow and waited. Ultimately the guard on night patrol would pass me on the way to checking the dormitory. That guard was supposed to be Draca tonight.

It was, but by the time she arrived I was barely awake enough to be aware of her. The sound her bootsole made on gravelly dirt woke me from a doze. I straightened up and waited until I was sure who the guard was. Then I whispered, "Draca."

She stopped. "Vernay! I was going in to talk to you. The Igaz has found some of our members in the capital. Sooner or later one of them will talk." She said it matter-of-factly, without excitement.

"We're leaving tomorrow night," I said, trying to make my voice light. "By air, of course. I have the tickets."

She had no humor in her. "Just be sure of yourself. You'll get no second chance." For the first time I realized how like Rosid's her voice was in its lack of expression. And I thought how dedicated these Neos were—allowing themselves virtually no emotional outlets. No wonder they needed pills. I asked, "How much help can you give us tomorrow?"

"I'll do all that I can," Draca said. In the thick darkness, her eyes seemed to glow as if some inner fervor had been lighted. "We are too close now to fail. Whatever the consequences, I will do what I must to help. Despite the Igaz, the plan is now in operation."

I appreciated her willingness to be a martyr. But that kind of attitude could breed fatal mistakes. I said, "Don't risk getting caught. Even if we do get away and you're made to talk—"

She didn't give me an opportunity to finish my warning. "I will not talk, Vernay. I have a quicker method of dying." She sharpened her voice. "Quickly, what must I do tomorrow?"

"When the air-trucks come for the logs, Lori and I have to be waiting," I said. "That means we stay behind when everyone leaves the clearing for camp. We'll need some food, some kaf, and maybe some clothing."

Draca didn't hesitate. "I can arrange everything but the clothing. I have no way of getting that for you. Look for me tomorrow at the midday meal, not before." She turned and continued on her rounds. I went back to bed.

Lori was doing a fine job of covering for me—she was sound asleep.

I said nothing at all to Lori the next morning. Only after I had a chance to talk to Draca did I tell Lori what I had in mind for us. Draca came with two other guards to do relief duty for a trio that had been working under the pressure of forcing their crews to meet their quotas by loading time. The three tired ones went off in a small, enclosed car. Draca waited until Lori and I were back trimming before she managed to work her way to me.

She spoke quickly. "You will find the food in that small stand of uncut prual trees to your left and behind you. Hide in the thicket between the trees at leaving time. I will create a diversion."

I continued trimming, not indicating that she had been talking to me. She whispered, "Serenchey," and moved away, shouting at a worker who had conveniently slowed his axe swings.

Lori paused briefly to glance at me. "What was that all about?"

"She was wishing us good luck," I said. "Now listen carefully. At leaving time, Draca will divert attention to herself. Then we make a run for it—into that thicket between those prual trees behind me."

"And then?"

I caught a glimpse of movement from the edge of my vision. "Later. Here comes Denil."

The hard-faced guard had been looking for an opportunity to get back at me ever since my outburst against her. But so far she either hadn't found a good opportunity or she was afraid that I hadn't been bluffing—that I was a spy for the Kalauz. Usually, her attitude toward me was one of un-

disguised hatred and obvious frustration. But as she came up now I could sense the smugness clinging to her.

"There'll be no resting your muscles today, Vernay." Her voice was thick, almost gloating. "Word has come from Malan. Two frun logs were injured in shipment. That means there must be two above your quota on the pile before leaving time."

I glanced at the logs Lori and I had left to trim. "I can manage one extra," I said.

"I said two, omull!" Her rod came up. I saw her left hand manipulate the control, increasing the charge.

I didn't stop to ask her what information she'd got that changed her attitude toward me. I ducked. Her jabbing rod missed me. It went back and shot forward again. I was astraddle the log and when I tried to duck again, the heel of my sandal caught in a pile of trimmings. I tried to catch my balance and fell onto the tip of the rod.

The vicious jolt of electricity sent a cry bursting from me. I went backward, my arms flailing. The sharp edge of my trimming saw came down on the delicate skin of the log, cutting into it deeply. Denil's curse had a ring of triumph in it.

"The kitchen for you, Vernay—after you trim three extra logs!"

And she came at me again, rod jabbing. I was on the ground, on the far side of the log. I rolled. She caught me again and the power of the charge almost paralyzed me. I did the only thing I had strength for—I curled into a ball and lay quaking like a frightened animal.

Denil managed to jolt me twice more. I don't know what would have happened if Draca hadn't managed to come over and stop Denil. I could hear their angry voices but I couldn't make out the words through the ringing in my head. The voices faded and then hands lifted me. It was Lori.

The paralysis was leaving me. I managed to say, "Get back to work. One of us in this condition is bad enough."

"I was ordered to restore you," she said. "Sit still." Her fingers began massaging, bringing life back to shocked muscles. Her voice was soft, almost pitying. "I'll give you credit for courage, Vernay. But now you know—you can't beat the system."

"I'll beat it," I said. My throat ached with the effort of talking. "I'll beat it—or die trying."

"And take me along with you," she said sourly.

It was time to tell her something I had wanted to keep to myself. "You either take your chances with me or you'll be

executed," I said. "If I hadn't come here, Rosid would have had you killed by now."

Lori took it with something of her old Gal-Mil attitude. "In that case, we'd better get to work. We have three extra logs to trim."

Three extra logs and less than two hours before leaving time. If I had been an Ujvilan of the almost constantly hungry lower classes or if I had had to live very long in a joy-labor camp, I wouldn't have had the physical resources to fight off the residue of Denil's attack. As it was, I managed to stagger back to work. I picked up my saw, took a deep breath, and tried to steady my still shaking muscles.

I wondered what would happen if I didn't make the extra three log quota by leaving time.

XVII

I COULD TELL within minutes that I would miss the quota by two logs. Lori worked as swiftly as she could but without my help the first hour, she was barely able to keep to our normal schedule. I finally recovered enough to be of some use, and as the leaving call came, I had managed one extra log.

Lori straightened up, pressing against the kink in her back muscles. I followed suit, mopping the sweat from my eyes with my forearm. I glanced toward the trucks being readied for loading. Most of the workers were hurrying toward them instead of moving at their usual exhausted shamle. Tonight promised temporary relief and they were eager for it, even though most of them knew that a day and a half from now they would be dangerously nearer death.

I said, "Denil is coming. Move toward the truck."

"What are you going to do, fight her?"

"If I have to," I said.

Lori stayed where she was. "Then you'll need help, Anthropol."

I grinned a little despite the tension I could feel building inside me. Despite proof time and again, Gal-Mil personnel refused to believe that Anthropol people could fight when they had to—that we were, if anything, better trained in hand-to-hand combat than they. We seldom had weapons to depend on.

As Denil moved our way, I saw Draca break off from the edge of a group of workers pushing their way onto a truck. Her long stride carried her alongside Denil just as

they came in range of our hearing. Draca said, "It's rest period. Let it go until after they return to work."

Denil's voice was harsh. "I gave my order. It must be obeyed."

She came to the edge of our work area and began stepping carefully through the tangle of trimmed branches scattered about. Draca cried suddenly, "Snake—chorgekidyo!"

There were half a dozen kinds of snakes in the Ujvilan jungle, but only the chorgy, as most people called it, was truly deadly. It was about the size of an Earth fer-de-lance, with the flat head of a cobra and the speed of a king snake. Wattles at its neck, if a snake can be said to have a neck, gave off a rustling, rattling sound as the chorgy slithered through the brush.

I had heard no telltale rattling. Denil didn't either, because there wasn't any. But she didn't wait to make sure. She leaped back and sideways. Draca leaped at the same time and cried out in apology as the tip of her rod struck Denil. Obviously Draca had the full charge on—Denil screamed and fell heavily to the ground. I could see that she was out.

Draca snapped, "As soon as everyone takes their eyes away from this spot, run!" Scooping up the smaller woman, she started for the trucks.

"Quickly," she bawled. "Make way. Accident."

A guard popped out of a truck cab. "In here. We'll lead the way out. What happened?"

"She jumped to avoid a chorgekidyo and caught herself with the tip of her rod—the juice turned on full," Draca cried over the sounds of the excited workers.

Lori said, "No one is watching us."

"Get down behind the log we just finished," I said. "We'll wait for them to go before we risk walking in the open."

Once behind the log, we couldn't see, and only when the last echo of the rumbling trucks had faded did I poke my head up. It was virtually dark now. There was barely enough light for us to find our way to the thicket in the prual grove. Lori got to her knees and peered through the heavy gloom.

"Where in the thicket?"

I pushed the branches aside. "Follow me." I crawled forward, not concerned about snakes now because they had the courtesy to go to bed at sundown. After a few feet of fighting through face-slapping branches, I broke into a small clearing, roughly two meters square. A darkish lump in the center showed where Draca had left the supplies.

Lori settled beside me with a groan. "You and your plans. What do we do now?"

"Eat," I said. I fumbled in the pile and located a small electric lamp. It gave only a faint, hooded glow but that was enough for us to see to eat. Draca had done us well—the food was not the usual workers' slop but solid chunks of bread and meat, obviously from the guards' larder. There was more than we could eat in three days. In addition, we had four thermal jugs filled with kaf and one with chilled water.

Lori tore at the meat with no pretense of manners. Finally she stopped. "Aries, I never thought I'd taste real meat again!"

I poured mugs of steaming kaf. Then I packed the remaining supplies in the cloth sack Draca had provided. It had straps so that it could be carried on my back.

The whine of helicopter blades burst onto the thick night air. I handed Lori my mug and slung the supply sack on my back. "Let's get out where we can watch the loading."

Either she was too full of good food to argue with me or she had decided that anything was better than the joy-labor camp. She followed, cursing softly and cheerfully as kaf slopped out of the mugs and onto her hands.

We worked our way to the edge of the clearing in time to see the first of the air-trucks arrive. It came in at a height of some fifty meters and dropped straight down. Blinding lights sprayed out over the piles of waiting logs. We were well beyond their periphery and so we sat, sipping kaf and watching the operation.

The air-truck was a small one and I said, "It should take the frun logs."

It did. The pilot and whoever was helping her were definitely skilled. The air-truck dropped to within two meters of the frun logs. Padded grapples came down and picked up a log and carefully pulled it into a padded slot lying lengthwise along the belly of the air-truck. A second and a third log were fitted into slots parallel to the first. The air-truck switched off its lights and rose, moving away in a sweeping curve. As it left, a second one appeared and began to drop down.

We sat silently, watching until all the frun logs were gone. On the last one, the pilot had to make an extra maneuver to get in position: it was our last one, that we'd forgotten to take to the pile.

There was a period of silence. Lori said, "Now what?"

"Now we watch carefully," I said. "They'll bring the big trucks in for the prual logs pretty soon."

The first one came some five minutes later. The process

was much the same, only now the grapples weren't padded nor were there three slots in the belly of these trucks: each one showed only two slots; the third log was lifted up so that it was pressed up against the first two. It was this I had counted on.

I said, "Watch that third log when it goes up. Our seats are on the last one in the pile."

"You're mad!"

"It beats walking," I said. "Notice that the diameter of the logs is big enough so that there's a fair-sized space between the top of the third log and the point where the two above it come together."

Lori didn't say anything; after all, a captain of Gal-Mil couldn't refuse to do what an Anthropol man was willing to try.

We watched impatiently as the trucks lifted their loads, swung away, and disappeared. One had a peculiar whine; when I heard it for the third time I was sure of what I had only suspected before—every fifth truck was a repeater. That helped me calculate the time of the trip to Malan—about twenty minutes.

When only six logs were left to load, I said, "Get ready." We watched as the massive air-truck grappled up its load and started away. Lights went off. I hefted the supplies. "Now!"

We sprinted into the open and dropped behind the last log. The other two were half across it. Because of them and the curvature of the great log, we couldn't see; we could only hear. The sound of the 'copter coming down was frightening. Dust swirled around us, dancing in the glare of bright, harsh lights. The grapples made clanking noises as they were lowered. Unlike frun logs being loaded, these were treated with no gentleness whatsoever. The grapplers were sunk deep into their ends with a deadly thudding sound.

The first log went up. I could hear it being fitted into place and secured. Then the second. I whispered, "As soon as the grapples are set, climb aboard and find something to hang on to. Once we're tied up, there won't be any danger of rolling off, but on the way up they jerk these pretty hard."

"I can figure out what to do," Lori said. She sounded almost like her former self—the Captain instead of the captive.

The grapples clanked down. They thudded heavily into the ends of the log under which we lay. I said, "Move!"

We moved, scrambling up the rough sides, using the stubs

of fortunately poorly trimmed limbs as handholds. The log started off the ground when we were halfway to our positions. I saw Lori slip, reach up and grab a stub and pull herself to the top. Then I was alongside her. I was counting on the solid belly of the truck to keep us from being seen; no one shouted, nor was there any lessening of the upward movement of the log. So far, at least, we were safe.

As safe as we could be trying to belly down on the rough bark of a prual log. I looked up and the space I had counted on for us to fit seemed terribly small. We lay head to head and I could hear Lori easily when she said, "Vernay, you'll never have room for that pack on your back."

I saw that she was right. With an effort that nearly cost me my hold on the log, I slid out of it and flopped it forward, between us. Lori gripped one end; I gripped the other. The log kept going up. It struck the pair above it with a grinding sound. Despite myself, I tensed. Then the grinding stopped. The 'copter began to swing away. I humped my back tentatively. Lori had definitely been right about the pack. Another twenty centimeters and there wouldn't have been room for us.

We rode in darkness, walled by the curving sides of the great logs. But in addition to cutting out the possible chill of the rushing air, our "house" also lowered the high frequency pitch of the whirling blades. We were able to talk easily.

Lori said, "Is there time for a meal on this flight?"

"Sorry. That service has been suspended."

She sounded almost gay—on the verge of euphoria. "I have to give you credit, Vernay."

"Thank Draca too. If she hadn't stepped in when Denil was coming, I'd be down in the kitchens by now and you along with me."

Lori said thoughtfully, "Did you notice how easily Draca picked up Denil? Ujvilans, even big ones, aren't usually so strong."

"Let's be glad she is," I answered.

Our talk went along the same lines, more or less pointless chatter, as we worked off some of the tension still holding us. Then, suddenly, we began to descend, and it was time to stop talking and start thinking again.

I said, "This might be the dangerous part. If they drop these logs from any height . . ."

I didn't need to finish; Lori got the message very clearly. There was nothing to do but wait—and hope. The truck stopped and hung momentarily. Then it moved forward a

short distance and stopped again. It began to go straight down. Suddenly our log parted from the pair above it. I could see a blur of lights. They began to make sense after a moment. We were directly over a log pond attached to a huge mill running despite the lateness of the hour. I leaned to the side. Below us the pond was filled with prual logs, all floating half submerged. Fortunately, each log was let down by grapples and not merely dropped.

I said, "When we touch water, slide off and go under. Swim to that dark bank away from the mill lights."

"Why do you always have to tell me the obvious?" she snapped.

I didn't answer. I was too busy wriggling into the pack. Then when we were less than a meter above the water, the grapples were released. The log dropped, struck hard, sent up a great geyser, and rolled. I had time to close my mouth and that was all. Then I was engulfed in thick, stinking water. I took a guess as to the direction I wanted and went deeper. I began swimming. Finally my lungs told me I had to come up. I went with one arm extended. I felt the rough bottom of a log. My hand slid along the curved side for what seemed an eternity before I found open water. I surfaced and gulped at the night air. It had the tang of salt on it as a breeze blew in from the great sea.

I pulled myself up the side of a log and looked about. I had been going on an angle and I turned to face the dark shore, less than fifteen meters away now. I ducked down again and began swimming. A second time a need for air forced me upward. But now as I surfaced, the last logs were behind me. A weedy shoreline lay directly ahead. I swam a short distance and then felt bottom. I walked the rest of the way through clinging mud until, finally, I was able to haul myself into the weeds on the bank and lie panting.

A stir behind me brought me to my knees. Lori came out of the water and flopped down beside me. "We made it!" she gasped in a wondering voice.

I said, "Get your breath and then we'll move away from here. Those mill lights are too close to silhouetting us."

We moved across ten feet of dry land and almost fell into a lake. It was dotted with dim lights, indicating pleasure boats, I guessed. Along the left side and some distance down was a string of lights—the town of Malan. To the right was darkness and the breeze carrying the smell of the sea.

"What now?" Lori whispered.

"We get into town and find one of Rosid's contacts—if the rendor haven't got them all."

"Speaking of rendor—" Lori said tightly. She broke off and pointed.

Weaving toward us, searchlight spraying the water and stopping now and then to fasten on one of the slowly moving pleasure boats, was a launch. There was no doubt: it was a rendor boat.

Lori said, "They're coming this way. Look how they're searching the shoreline."

I flopped down into the weeds. She joined me. We lay watching the sweeping searchlight probe the shore, coming nearer and nearer. Lori echoed my thoughts: "Somehow, they've found out we're missing. Those rendor are looking for us."

And if we couldn't find someplace better to hide in less than five minutes, it would find us.

XVIII

I DIDN'T INSULT LORI by asking if she could swim. I said, "Into the water, slow and easy. That dark spot to the left looks as if the bank has been undercut. Let's try for it."

She still seemed willing to let me lead. Silently, she oozed forward and slipped headfirst into the dark water. Her body made the barest ripple as she went under. I followed suit, wriggling forward to the edge of the water and then down the bank. But the rendor light was sweeping in my direction and I hurried more than I wanted. I could feel the splash as my trailing foot hit the water. I did the only thing I could—I went down to the bottom and worked my way along it in the direction of the undercut bank.

I was totally blind, not only from the darkness but from the mud my groping hands were stirring from the bottom. Finally I felt the bank in front. Cautiously I came toward the surface. No reflected glare of light showed above me. I broke water and looked about. The undercut portion of the weedy bank was a dozen feet to my right. The rendor launch was standing off the spot where Lori and I had entered the water, its light playing on the bank. Two rough but feminine voices floated the ten or so meters separating the launch from me.

"It was only a fish jumping, I say."

"But look at the matted weeds."

"A pair of mill workers, most likely. You know what animals they are." A snorting laugh followed. "Besides, how

would two half starved workers get here from joy-labor Camp Two in an hour? How could they get here at all?"

"Nevertheless, our orders—"

"Our orders are to patrol this lake and to report anything suspicious, out of the ordinary. I see nothing of that nature."

"Besides, it's almost time for our kaf stop," the first speaker said sarcastically.

I blessed the second speaker; someone more imaginative could have caused us trouble. I ducked down as the launch swung its bow in my direction. The glow of the light passing over the water above my head came and went. I eased back to the surface. The launch was moving purposefully toward the nearest of the pleasure boats.

It drew alongside. "Curfew in less than an hour."

"Yes, dwamna. We will leave soon," a respectful male voice answered. The launch went on, obviously heading toward a pier I could see faintly in the distance.

I turned and worked my way to the undercut. Lori was waiting. Even in the very faint reflected light that came from the mill and the town I could see the change in her expression. She was out of the joy-labor Camp. She was in control of herself again.

She said crisply, "I appreciate your assistance, Vernay. I'll take command now."

I swallowed a desire to laugh. "My pleasure, Captain." I waited. Silence. "What next—Captain?"

More silence. Then for the first time I learned that there was a genuine human being, with genuine emotions, beneath that Gal-Mil veneer. She began to cry softly.

The crispness was gone, so was the rigid, military expression. She was just a very tired, still a little frightened, woman. "Oh, to Pluto with it. I suppose Rosid laid out an escape route for us."

I said, "Our contact here is supposed to have made the arrangements. So the first thing is to find the right saloon. It'll be in the workers' district. My guess is it'll be on the street leading from those downtown lights to the mill."

"That's almost directly behind us," Lori said. "And this looks like some kind of park. Why don't we just cut straight across it?"

"In these clothes? The first citizen that saw us would yell down the rendor on our heads."

Lori said, "I'm not thinking very clearly, Vernay. Aries, but I've never come apart this way before!"

I touched her bare shoulder. "No pieces are missing.

You'll fit back together soon enough." I shifted her attention from herself to the problem. "Our only chance is to borrow some clothes. And the nearest source of supply seems to be that pleasure boat drifting this way."

Lori got the message, and we began swimming slowly, using a sidestroke that kept splashing to a minimum. When we were within a few meters of the small boat, I signaled for her to come up on the near side. I prepared to dive under it and surface on the far side. It wasn't much of a boat—a kind of cockleshell with a cloth cover over the fore half. I could make out two heads very close together, and I could hear a soft giggle.

What I had to do next wasn't the most pleasant job I'd had that night. But it had to be done. I came up on the far side of the small boat and put both hands on the side. Lori appeared opposite me almost at the same instant. The woman opened her mouth, obviously ready to scream.

I said, "No noise and you won't get hurt!" Her mouth closed. Both of them—young, a bit embarrassed at the fact that their coveralls weren't quite doing a full job at the moment—just stared at me and then at Lori.

"We're from the joy-labor Camp," I said. "We aren't asking you to help us voluntarily. But we need your clothes and the loan of this boat."

The woman whimpered. "If the rendor come back and see us with you, they'll think—"

"Not if we knock you out and tie you up," I said. Before they could answer, I pushed my side of the small boat, sending the pair sprawling off balance toward Lori. She lifted one hand and chopped, catching the woman in the neck. The man tried to rise and as the boat settled back, he was thrown toward me. I murmured, "Sorry," and hit him the way Lori had hit the woman. He was tougher. I had to crack him twice before he folded into the bottom.

I said softly, "I'll steady it. You climb aboard. See if you can steer it into that dark patch on the shore over there."

Lori skinned easily over the side and into the boat. There wasn't much room. She had to sit on the man while she fumbled around for the controls. Finally she found them and the boat moved slowly and silently toward the nearby shore. I hung on, letting it drag me.

Once there, I held the boat against the shore until Lori found a line and tied it to a small tree. Then we both climbed ashore. I glanced down the lake. The rendor launch was at anchor at the pier, its occupants obviously enjoying their kaf time.

I said, "Almost all the other boats are gone. This one's going to be conspicuous in a few minutes."

She needed no more urging. Together, we dragged the pair to the grass and worked them out of their coveralls. The man was smaller than I, but I managed to work myself into his clothes. Lori and the woman were closer in size. We had stripped off our soaking camp clothes and now we used them to tie up the couple. I could feel the weariness beginning to work in me as I lifted the man back into the boat and helped Lori put the woman alongside him. Then, untying the tiny craft, we aimed it away from the shore and gave it a light push. Its electric motor carried it slowly away from us.

We turned toward the dim lights shining through the trees and started walking. We reached the edge of the trees and grass. A narrow sidewalk and a wide street separated us from a darkened block of ugly buildings that had the look of warehouses about them. I glanced to the right. The brighter lights of the main section were that way. So was a cruising rendor car—coming our way.

Lori turned as if to run, but I caught her. "They're too close."

A sweeping light was almost upon us. I pulled Lori against me and fastened my lips over hers. She was hard and unyielding. I pulled back. "Take your choice. This or headquarters."

She melted against me. The rendor car came alongside, the light full on us. "Curfew doesn't wait on lovebirds," a rough voice said.

I lifted my head. "We will soon be leaving, dwamna."

"My 'southern' accent was an advantage here. There was no suspicion in the rendor's voice as she said, 'Soon is now, omul. Or does love give you wings so you can fly instead of walking the kilometer to your quarters?'"

Our quarters! Which way were they? I knew what would happen if we started off in the wrong direction. Lori, facing toward the mill, whispered, "There's a big block of dormitory-like buildings ahead of me."

There was certainly nothing resembling workers' quarters in the direction of the main section of the city. I said, "You are very understanding. But you are right. It is time for us to leave." Taking a deep breath, I put an arm around Lori and started in the direction of the mill. The rendor car drifted alongside for a few meters and then moved on. I could feel Lori's weight sag against my arm.

The rendor car reached a cross street and turned. Be-

yond the corner, across the street from us, I could see the winking lights that indicated a saloon. The sign read ZIMAC, and the top half of the M was missing.

Lori said, "I hope you enjoyed yourself, Vernay."

"We can discuss that later," I said. "Our contact is ahead and across the street."

With the curfew so close, I was afraid the place might be shut up for the night. But when we reached it, a trio of old men occupied a front table and a moustached bartender was serving them. I led the way in and we took places at the empty bar. The three old men stared at us, frowning. The bartender hurried behind his bar and came up to us. His concern was obvious, though it wasn't in his voice.

"It is too late to serve mill workers. And begging the dwamna's pardon, but this is a place for omul only."

I said, "We're too poor at the moment to buy krish. How about some old pits for us to suck?"

"You young workers are all alike," he said. "When will you learn to try kaf instead?" They weren't Rosid's precise passwords, but they were close enough.

I said, "All right, give us kaf, but slip in a krish pit or two."

He said quickly, softly, and as expressionlessly as Rosid and Draca talked, "Go down the side street and up the alley. The door by the three garbage cans will be open. Go in and wait. Do not put on any light." He raised his voice again, but only in volume, not in emphasis. "It is now too late even for kaf. The curfew is here."

I tossed him a mild curse and led Lori out. As we went through the door, the bartender moved stiffly to the old men's table. "Drunks!"

The street was still empty. We found the corner and turned. It was dark but the alley was easy to find. It stank. The stench grew worse as we groped along a slippery surface. The three garbage cans were quickly located—they were the only ones not overflowing. A door beside them yielded and we slipped into blackness heavy with the odors of ancient cooking. Closing the door, we stood silently, waiting.

Lori sagged wearily. I put out an arm and supported her. She made no effort to draw away but leaned on me for long, aching minutes. Finally the sound of someone coming straightened her away from me. The bartender appeared, cupping a small hand lamp.

"This way." He led us in a stiff, almost limping walk

through the kitchen and past boxes of preserved food and cartons of liquor.

We moved after him through a door and down a twisting flight of stone steps into a dank, stone-walled cellar filled with great casks. The bartender did something to one of the wall stones and a cask slid forward, revealing a narrow passageway. He led us along it and into a cell-like room containing four bunks. He turned on a dim overhead light.

"That first door leads to the toilet facilities," he said. "The other to a small kitchen. There is food and kaf." His eyes measured us. "I will try to find better fitting clothes for you, Vernay."

I said, "Your name is Zimac?"

"I am so called here in Malan." He turned to go. "I do not know how long you must stay here. Tomorrow I will find out when the next ship is to sail. I will return and tell you."

He left us, closing the door on the corridor. Soon we heard the faint crunching of the cask fitting itself back into place. Lori glanced around in obvious distaste.

I said, "Let's go see what the kitchen has to offer. I can't recall where I lost my pack, but it's probably at the bottom of the mill pond."

"I'm glad to know you aren't perfect," Lori said sourly.

I knew what was bothering her. "There are four bunks," I pointed out. "And each is barely big enough for one person. Now let's find some food."

She was tired enough to be cross. "Remember that, Vernay."

"I was going to say the same to you," I answered. I couldn't help laughing a little as she stalked away, fighting for a military bearing.

I followed, wondering how long we would be cooped up together—and what her attitude toward me would be once she was thoroughly rested.

XIX

WE WOKE about mid-morning and I found out quickly enough what Lori's attitude was now that she'd had some rest. She said in her best spit-and-polish military voice, "You did a good job, Vernay. But I'll take command now."

I had expected this but it still annoyed me. I said, "Use your wits. The escape route was set up for me, not for you. The Neos helping us will be mostly males and they'll expect

another male to lead; they aren't your downtrodden omul, remember."

She wanted to argue about it. I said, "In the first place, I was the last one to talk to Rosid and Tiska; and I have information vital to the whole mission—information you'll need to run this part of the job."

Her voice was overly heavy with sweetness. "And in the second place, Vernay?"

"In the second place, I may be nominally under your command, but that doesn't make me one of your personnel."

"I see no difference—as long as you are under my command, you'll take my orders."

"There's a great deal of difference," I corrected. "I've been trained as a thinking individual, taught to reason, to use my own initiative; your soldiers haven't. And right now reason tells me that I'm the one to lead this affair for a while longer."

"And I say give me your information at once!" she snapped.

"When we reach the communications center, it'll be all yours, *Captain*." I smiled at her. "Until then, no."

She went after me verbally—Gal-Mil and female fashion. I just waited her out. Finally, she cursed me in half a dozen languages and stalked into the kitchen. To my surprise, she came back with breakfast for both of us. I can't say that she served me very graciously, but she did serve me.

She set the food on a small table. "Here, Gogos!"

I laughed. *Gogos* was pure, low-class Ujvilan, meaning approximately "big shot," but with less polite connotations. She said nothing more, neither during the meal nor afterward. The day dragged on and finally both of us took to our bunks to soak up some badly needed rest.

In late afternoon the sound of someone coming down the stone steps awakened me. I left my bunk and went to Lori, touching her gently on the shoulder. She responded by coming up and swinging a judo chop at the side of my neck. I managed to back away barely in time.

"When I want to be pawed, I'll let you know!"

I said, "Someone's coming. Zimac from the sound of the walk. Stop flattering yourself and make us all some kaf."

She stared angrily at me. I had been doing some thinking as well as sleeping, but now wasn't the time to explain to her. The crunching sounds outside said that someone was coming to our cell.

"Humor me," I said. "I have an idea."

She went into the kitchen. Zimac came into the room and nodded to me. "The dwamna?" he asked.

"Making us kaf."

"Ah, good. It is needed. The rendor have questioned everyone about two fugitives missing from the joy-labor camp. Finally, they have gone."

Lori came in with the kaf. Zimac took his mug, dug a pill from his belt purse and dropped it into the hot liquid.

"Stomach trouble?" I asked.

"The tension sometimes grows severe," he admitted. He sipped his kaf and nodded. "But it will soon end. I bring good news. The next ship will not leave for five days. Its journey northward takes ten days more. As you know, the operation has begun. We cannot wait fifteen days for your assistance. We must get you to the communication center quickly. These are the words of Rosid which came only moments ago."

"How do we get there?"

"We have managed to get an airplane. Tonight you will be flown north." He made it sound simple, as if managing to get air transportation that was rigidly controlled by the Igaz was an everyday occurrence.

He went on. "It will be dangerous, of course. But we hope to keep the theft of the plane secret until you have reached your destination. The plan is to leave two hours after curfew. We will slip you away from here somehow despite the rendor. The airplane is perhaps six kilometers from here." He finished his kaf and left as quickly as he had come.

I sat and sipped my drink and did some more thinking. Lori started away with Zimac's empty mug. I said, "Let me have that," and took it into the kitchen. I put a little water in the bottom and swished it around, dissolving the dregs. One taste was all I needed. Its bitterness was beyond description.

I went back to face a triumphant little smile from Lori. "So the operation's already started. Was that your precious information, Vernay?"

It had been, but now there was more. I said, "It was a small part. The rest you'll get when the time comes."

"And when will that be?"

"As soon as I'm sure that your learning it won't send you off half-cocked and cause you to blow everything to Pluto."

It wasn't an answer she liked but she had to accept it. She stalked away. I went back to my thinking. The results of it didn't make me very happy.

I made a bet with myself that the flight would be uneventful; I won. We could have been members of the privi-

leged Igaz for all the interference we had. Two hours after curfew we went into the alley and climbed into a small van. We were taken into the country and put aboard a waiting plane. A packet of food and the inevitable kaf were handed up by Zimac and then the plane lifted silently and headed north.

Halfway through the trip, the pilot asked for kaf. Lori had a lapful of food so I poured him a mug of kaf and took it forward. He locked the controls and dropped one of the now familiar big pills into his drink. He turned, nodding his thanks and showing me a fine moustache.

I went back to my seat. Lori and I ate and then dozed. Later, as the first edge of daylight began to show, the pilot called, "I'll need directions to your communication center."

Here was my chance to learn exactly where that center was, but right now I wasn't interested. Before Lori could answer, I said, "First, we must talk with Rosid."

Lori's head jerked toward me. I made a quick signal with my hand, silencing her before she could get her protest out. The pilot glanced around. "But that is impossible. It is too dangerous."

"We've been gone for some time," I said. "We have to find how matters stand before we proceed."

He seemed about to argue. Then he turned away and began to activate his communicator. I could hear the low mumble of his voice and the lower, even less intelligible sounds of the speaker at the other end. Finally he closed off the communication.

"I am ordered to bring you to our headquarters."

Lori whispered, "Are you mad, Vernay? What difference does it make whether we see Rosid or not? Once I make contact with my troops—"

I said, "Later," and settled down to think some more.

The final leg of the trip, to Neo headquarters, was as uneventful as the flight. The pilot made another contact with someone on the ground and when we put down in a clearing, a car and driver waited for us. The driver came forward with arms full of clothing.

"Here are Igaz uniforms," he said. "This car has official markings. But take no chances. The disguise was hastily applied."

When we drove off, I was in the front seat with the driver; Lori sat in the rear, as befitted a female. Strictly speaking, my uniform was nothing more than a marked pair of coveralls such as I had worn when I worked for Potkil. But it identified me as Lori's assistant, and, short of a thorough

scrutiny, that should be enough to get us past any casual inspection.

We weren't inspected at all. In fact, we saw no sign of a rendor car, city or Igaz. We simply proceeded into the city, down dark streets to the front of an ancient building, and inside it and down to the lowest level, and finally along to Neo headquarters.

Nothing seemed changed. Rosid sat before his viewscreens, his head tilted slightly as he listened to an earplug monitor. He nodded to us and after a moment disconnected the monitor.

"What do you plan to do?" He directed the question at me.

I knew what he meant even if Lori didn't. I sat down. "Nothing until I hear your side of the story."

"I am sorry," he said. "But from all I can determine, your philosophy doesn't include acceptance of me—of us. That means you will have to be destroyed."

"What in the name of Aries . . ." Lori began.

I said, "Sit down and listen." I turned back to Rosid. "Before I pass judgment, I want to hear your story."

"Earlier, you spoke to me at length of the attitude of your Federation," Rosid said. "I question whether anything I might say could change those attitudes." He paused and then added. "And I question whether anything you could do now can change what is taking place. The chaos grows hourly. Already throughout Ujvila there is a lack of coordination."

"That's why we didn't have any trouble?"

"Partly," he admitted.

I said, "Tiska—how much does she know?"

"Nothing as yet," Rosid said. "Nor will she until she has been installed as Kalauz. Then, of course, she must be told. She will adjust."

"Told what?" Lori demanded.

I said, "Told that Rosid—and the universe alone knows how many other so-called Neos—aren't Ujvilans at all. They aren't even humans, as we understand the term. They're alien life forms that have somehow managed to inhabit human bodies."

"No," Rosid corrected. "These are not the original bodies. They are duplicates which we have made. Duplicates of real Ujvilans." He sounded quite proud. "Perfect synthetic flesh."

I said, "In other words, when you wanted to get one of your people into a particular place, you took the Ujvilan

occupying that place, duplicated him—or her—and then occupied the body you made?”

“That is correct. You are very clever, Vernay. How did you learn about us?”

I said, “The pills in the kaf. None of you ever take food; you just doctor your kaf—with a food compatible to your digestion, I presume. And then there was Draca’s strength, greater than that of any Ujvilan. But when I really got to thinking about it, two things stood out pretty sharply.”

“And those?” His voice was still expressionless.

“Your ability with electronic equipment,” I said. “You have a communication system not even our ships have been able to tap into. And your bodies—your stiffness in moving, your lack of expression, the narrow range of your voices. These were the big clues.”

“Our great weakness,” he admitted. “But we are working in the area and soon we will be able to move easily, to show expression, and even to ingest human food.”

Lori suddenly came to life. “Aliens!” she cried. She swung on me, her eyes hotly angry. “You fool! Why did you bring us here? We could be at the communication center now. My troops would have arrived and we could take care of these—these things!”

I said, “Rosid has a right to tell his story before we pass judgment. Just because you find intelligent non-human life doesn’t mean it should be destroyed.”

“Anthropol idiot,” she said. But she had enough sense to know that she wasn’t in control here. She subsided.

I asked Rosid, “Where is Tiska now?”

“She is perfectly safe,” he assured me. “Affairs have moved more rapidly than we hoped and she is standing by, ready to step in as Kalauz at the first opportunity.”

I said, “If everything is going so well, why the urgency to get us here?”

“My hope was that you would contact your Anthropol people. What better way for us to gain favor with the Federation than to take over the government under the guidance of your organization?”

I didn’t relish being a dupe; my expression told him as much. He said, “Of course, that is no longer possible.” He turned away and activated a viewscreen. It showed the interior of First Officer Elna’s office. She was not there. He shifted to the waiting room outside the Kalauz’ quarters. Elna was there, pacing back and forth. There was no sound but her footsteps. I wondered what was going on behind the Kalauz’ doors.

"I see that there is a lull in the action," Rosid said. "I believe it will give us sufficient time."

Time for what? I wondered. For him to tell his story? Or to let us live a little longer?

XX

I PUT THE QUESTION to him bluntly. "You will soon understand why we must take you over," Rosid said with equal bluntness. Only I didn't quite know what he meant by "take you over"; and the brief story that he told didn't help much.

Rosid and precisely three hundred others of his kind had come only recently from a small system some seven light-years from Ujvila. Since this part of the galaxy was still virtually unknown territory to the Federation, the name he gave to his sun and home planet meant nothing to Lori or to me. The planet's name sounded something like Ngign as nearly as my ears could record his phonemes.

He explained that although his people were fairly skilled in technology, they had never succeeded in space travel. Their first awareness that other life existed elsewhere came when one of our early starships ended its long journey by malfunctioning and crashing to the surface of their planet, unfortunately in an inhabited area and therefore obliterating an entire suburb of the capital city of their largest country.

According to Rosid, less than a hundred Earth people survived the crash and they were forced to remain in the wrecked ship. Those who ventured out died from an atmosphere that lacked any trace of oxygen.

"Ngign air is not breathable to Earthmen," Rosid said. "Nor can we survive any atmosphere that contains oxygen or the carbon dioxide that Earth people exhale. Furthermore, communication was impossible at first since our speech frequencies are well above the level of your hearing."

"In other words," I said, "you can sit there and apparently be silent while all the time you're communicating with other Ngignans on Ujvila."

He managed that faint smile at my rendering of his native word. "I have often done so," he said, then continued. "We are a pacific people and despite the loss of life and property the crashing of the ship caused, none of us—my ancestors, that is—assumed we were being invaded. Instead, the scientists of our several countries joined together to save the lives of the survivors."

He described briefly how a domed city was built and provided with an acceptable atmosphere not only for the Earth people but for the growing of their food. And finally, Ngignan technology managed a mechanical speech machine that made communication possible. It was only then, of course, that the concept of an inhabited galaxy began to mean something to the natives.

"We are an old people living on a dying world," Rosid said. "Naturally our leaders then had visions of relieving their population problems by expanding into space. And for the first time, they turned their attention seriously to astronomy. It was their idea that with the help of the Earth people, they could develop space travel. Obviously, since neither species could live in the other's environment, there would be no fighting for territory."

But the dream failed to be realized for centuries, it seems. The Earth people, Rosid explained, began to die off, apparently from some kind of bacteria in the soil of Ngign. But before the last one expired—during the lifetime of Rosid's father—it became apparent to the Ngignans that Earth peoples would not accept them, if only because of the extreme differences between the two types, differences not only cultural and psychological but physical as well.

If Rosid could have registered bitterness with his voice, I knew he would have. He said, "During my father's lifetime, the secret of space travel was solved. He was one of the first on an exploratory journey. An attempt was made to contact what by that time was a galaxy filled with Earth-originated beings. Receipt of messages was acknowledged; but once explanations were made, once our physical presence was known through video transmission, communications were broken."

The result was that the next generation of the influential, Rosid among them, made a pact. They would break down the barriers by becoming physically "human"; then they would be able to have some of the widespread, advanced technologies of Earth-originated peoples. He explained how, one by one, the problems of adapting to our type of environment were overcome: their breathing apparatus, that took all but the nitrogen from the atmosphere, was installed in the equivalent of the human skull; ocular and aural equipment was electronically tied to human eyes and ears. Speech machines that enabled them to reproduce a close facsimile of Earth speech frequencies were built into the lungs and throat portions of the human body.

The body itself was devised, but with the flaws that had

enabled me to learn the truth. Now, as I watched Rosid with new understanding, I noticed another factor. As he turned from light to shadow, as his face was alternately lighted and shaded by the on and off flickering of the view-screens, his eyes remained the same. There was no contraction of the pupils, no reaction to light or to dimness. It wasn't a piece of information I imagined myself being able to use, but automatically I filed it in my mind.

"Our first human replicas were crude," Rosid said. "But they enabled us to make sufficient contact to know what we must do to improve. The first group that came to Ujvila—which we found to be the nearest inhabited planet—was discovered and destroyed. But another group managed to make sufficient contact with Earth peoples to learn of the Federation and what being a member of it could mean to the future of our dying world."

And so they had come in force to Ujvila, to take advantage of the anti-government movement and do exactly what Rosid was managing to do—take over the planet in the name of a progressive political system, one that the Federation would approve of and accept. I pointed out that he had a misconception; the Federation did have room for alien peoples. He retaliated with an argument filled with more misconceptions, but ones he had no intention of letting loose of.

Finally he said, "You must admit that as Earth-originated people, we would gain more from your Federation and gain it more quickly than as aliens—even should we be accepted in our natural state."

I had to agree. I shifted the subject. "One point I'm not clear on. Once you made the equivalent of human bodies, how did you manage to pass yourselves off as Ujvilans? What of the cultural traits, the memories, the personalities?"

Rosid took a pad of paper and a pen. With those stiff movements so characteristic of him, he sketched something that resembled a four-limbed insect-like creature with the limbs growing at equidistant intervals from a roundish lower body and with a smaller upper body attached to the "top" of the other.

"It repels you I see," he said to Lori. "But note that we are endoskeletal—as you—that we have four limbs—as you. . . ." He touched the pen to the paper. "All of our limbs are mutually usable for locomotion or manipulation, each having fingers and an opposable. The lower body houses our internal organs; the upper our vocal apparatus and our brain as well as the ocular, aural, and other sensors. The brain

takes up a large percentage of the space, but like most other intelligent life, much of it remains unused.

"Or," he added, "remained unused until we discovered a way of filling it. Simply, we found an Ujvilan we wished to become and through electronic means extracted from his brain and entered into ours the cultural, personality, memory, and other elements necessary to pass ourselves off as that individual."

"In other words," I said, "there is somewhere a real Rosid, a real Zimac, an real Draca?"

There was a cry from the inner doorway. Tiska stood there, disheveled, a look of horror fixed on her elfin features. "Don't believe him," she cried. "There once *was* a real Rosid, a real Draca. . . ." She came and stood between Lori and me as if for protection. "I just escaped from the cellars below," she said in a lower voice. "I—I saw them preparing to take over one of our people."

Two "Ujvilan" males appeared in the doorway. Rosid waved them aside. He must have spoken to them, although we could hear nothing. They turned and disappeared. To Tiska he said, "I am sorry you had to learn, my dear. I had you held in the cellar until the time came for you to become Kalauz. But stop and think. Once the idea is accepted, you will see its wisdom. Don't you realize how ineffective your tiny, clumsy organization was? How little it could have done? How little it did do until we came?"

"I don't care," Tiska whispered. "You don't just take the minds of my people—you destroy them in the process!"

"That is unfortunate," Rosid admitted. "But physical death is better for them than living in mindless idiocy. And," he argued implacably, "what are the lives of three hundred people compared to the good that will come to the millions?"

Tiska wasn't having any logic—not yet. She was still horror-ridden. She said, "But I saw it—I saw the mind transfer; I saw one of my own people killed!"

"Unfortunately, one of ours was injured beyond repair," Rosid said. "We had to replace her quickly for the present operation."

I said, "That makes three hundred and one Ujvilans, then." I stared at him and added challengingly, "And two others—Lori and me."

He nodded. "You're right. You have to be transferred. Your bodies are all prepared, of course. While you were here before, we made holograms of them. I am truly sorry, but you can understand how much easier it will be for us

to enter the Federation with your personal recommendations."

Lori said, "If you intended to transfer us to—to whatever you call those shells you're hiding inside, why did you order the pilot to take us to the communication center?"

"Only to learn its location quickly," Rosid said. "Once there you would have been rendered mercifully unconscious and brought here for transfer."

He seemed to read my mind. He said, "If you're thinking of violence, don't waste time, Vernay. Under these skins we have protected ourselves with armor plating that will repel even a stunner."

I had assumed that much: they would need not only protection for their small, fragile bodies but also the necessary weight to make them move in human fashion. Even so, I thought of the one who had been injured beyond repair. There was a vulnerable area, then. The question was where.

I said, "If you'll allow us the time, perhaps Tiska can make us some kaf before we're transferred."

Tiska stared at me. Rosid said, "Of course." I met her gaze squarely, trying to tell her to do as I asked. She seemed to get the message. Woodenly, she rose and went into the kitchen. I called, "Bring a jugful, please. And some krish to doctor it with—for me, at least."

Lori said angrily, "Krish! What are you going to do, Vernay, drown your fear in liquor?"

"Can you think of a better way?" I asked.

She turned away from me. Rosid went back to his silent communicating and watching the viewscreens. He turned on the one in Igaz headquarters. First Officer Elna was still standing outside the Kalauz' quarters, but now obviously on guard duty. There was little activity elsewhere. Rosid's creating chaos had apparently immobilized things, at least for the present.

Tiska returned with a tray containing a heavy jug of kaf and four mugs. She filled each and passed them around. Rosid thanked her, doctored his kaf with the inevitable pill and began to drink. Tiska went away and returned with a bottle of krish. I poured a thimbleful in my kaf.

Lori said, "You'll take all night to get drunk at that rate."

"I am sorry I cannot give you that much time," Rosid said. "Two mugsful at the most. By then the situation will have reached the point where we will be ready for you—your replica, that is—to call down the Anthropol advisers. The take-over by Kalauz Tiska is imminent now."

I could see nothing on the viewscreens to indicate that it was time for a take-over; but presumably, his "voice" com-

munication was feeding him the information he needed. I merely nodded and began to gulp my kaf as quickly as I could manage. I succeeded in scalding my tongue and my gullet thoroughly.

I refilled my mug and then carried the jug to Tiska, who waved it aside. Lori likewise. I went to Rosid. "Are you ready for more?"

He held out his half empty mug, at the same time reaching into his belt purse for a pill. I swung the jug up and brought it straight down on top of his cranium. The sound of plastic and thin metal splitting was much like that of a ripe melon popping. The stench of a suddenly overloaded breathing machine filled the air. Rosid's body lifted from his chair. He took a single step forward and collapsed. And then the body split like a halved fruit. From it scrambled a creature like the one he had sketched for us—about the size of a six month old Earth child. He fought suffocation for no more than two seconds. Then he turned from a dullish red to a bright blue—and died.

Tiska screamed. Behind Rosid's chair the viewscreens went wild. I thought that somehow the other three hundred were connected to him. They knew what had happened.

Lori said, "We'd better get out of here before the others find . . ."

I was ahead of her. "Grab something heavy—anything. We may have to fight our way to safety." I added, "And that means only one place—we have to reach the Kalauzi!"

XXI

TISKA AND LORI were searching for weapons; Lori stopped to gape at me. I said, "The Kalauz already told me how she felt about aliens. She has plans for dealing with them. Maybe we can get her to mobilize her forces enough to do something—once she knows what she's fighting." The irony of my advocating violence escaped her.

The sound of movement coming up from below sent Tiska scurrying into the kitchen. Lori said, "But the Kalauz—she'll have us all killed!"

"We can bargain," I said. "Then we can get you to the communication center and you can call your troops. . . ."

I broke off as Tiska returned. She carried a meat cleaver, a wooden meat pounding mallet, and an instrument I had seen only in museums. It was round, a long cylinder with a handle at each end. I believed it was called a rolling pin.

tarsi took the rolling pin and I took the mallet. The cleaver was better for Tiska with her lesser strength.

A nearby door creaked open and we ran for the hall. A pair of them were coming down it toward us, a man and a woman. I remembered Draca's strength and I wanted to avoid direct combat. I ran at them and jumped aside suddenly. They couldn't turn their stiff bodies fast enough. My mallet went up and came down on the man's head. The sound again reminded me of a ripe melon splitting. I turned at the sound being repeated at my side. Lori had just finished battering down the woman.

Again the bodies split and two tiny alien forms crawled out to die. We turned and ran down the hall toward the tramway. Behind us came half a dozen males who had been in the cellars. But they were no match for us in speed. We reached the tramcar and raced away before they could get within a dozen meters of us.

I said, "Every Ngignan in the city will be converging on this place. We have to find a car and try to outguess them."

"No wonder we had so little trouble getting here without interference," Lori said. "Rosid's Ngignan must have control of the air and the ground render as well. Pluto knows how many of them there are in uniform right now."

"Most of the local ones are his people, I think," Tiska said. "So many of my people," she added in a whisper. "So many destroyed."

Then, as if she remembered who she was to become—or to have become—she straightened up. "But now that we know, we can fight. I can get a car, and I know a way to avoid the main streets in getting to Igaz headquarters."

For the moment, I stepped aside and let her lead. At the end of the tram ride, she led us down a long, dusty corridor that had a long unused stench about it. Tiska explained that it was a tunnel built by a previous generation. She had almost forgotten about it; as far as she knew, Rosid had never known of its existence.

It led, it seemed, to the home of a relation of hers, one still in favor with the Igaz, who possessed a car. I never met the relation; I presumed she was somewhere fighting for the Neos. But her car was in its stall. Like all Ujvilan vehicles, it had no keys. After all, only the privileged drove them; there was no problem with theft.

Tiska drove. She did it well, taking us by dark back streets, by narrow alleyways, by twists and turns and what seemed doublings until suddenly we were in the great square with the Igaz building looming up beside us. Tiska

sent the car down the ramp and drew it up at the discharge station at the end of the corridor. Two Igaz cars had been in the square but neither seemed to have noticed us. Lori thought it was a lucky sign; I preferred to worry about it.

Nor were we stopped in the corridor leading to the elevator, nor on the ride to the top of the building where we walked across to the Kalauz' tower. We saw no one. Only an eerie, thick silence met us wherever we went . . .

Until we reached the waiting room before the Kalauz' doors. There First Officer Elna stood, stunner in her hand. "So you did escape," she said. "The story from Camp Two was a true one!"

"We have a message for the Kalauz," I said.

She lifted the stunner a bit higher. I said, "Remember, the Kalauz sent me out to get information about the Neos. I have that information now."

Elna's expression told me I was a fool for wasting my words on her. Then the voice of the Kalauz came from the speakers above the doors. "Let them enter, Elna. Have them leave their weapons—or whatever those objects are."

We laid down the cleaver, the mallet, the rolling pin, and when the doors swung open, we stepped into the Kalauz' quarters. Elna started to follow, but the Kalauz said, "Remain outside as before." The doors closed, shutting us away from Elna and her stunner.

The Kalauz was in the room this time. There was no hocus-pocus of her appearing through a shimmering wall. She stood beside a table that held a lamp—the only light in the room. It was focused on us, leaving her in shadow, and leaving us helplessly half blinded.

The Kalauz looked at Tiska. "Well, Cousin?"

Tiska drew herself up. "I long ago blotted our relationship from my mind." She was queenly as she spoke, though death must have been very close in her mind. "Nor will I acknowledge it now!"

"Not even if I promise reforms?"

"Don't mock!" Tiska cried. "And don't think you can survive. Even if you can get rid of the aliens, it is too late to stop the humans who have waited for this moment—for the chance to destroy the monstrous world you force them to live in."

"I am aware of this," the Kalauz said. "Do you think I've ruled all these years by being a fool? For some time I've seriously considered making the changes you Neos have advocated. And since Vernay's coming as a representative of Anthropol, I have thought about it even more."

"And of the threat imposed by Captain Lori?" I murmured.

"The Federation's military forces are obviously stronger than mine," the Kalauz agreed.

The more she spoke, the more convinced I was that the hunch I had when Rosid was still alive and when the Igaz outside headquarters ignored us—the more convinced I was that the hunch was right.

"How do you propose to fight the aliens?" I asked.

"With Gal-Mil troops."

"Wouldn't it be simpler just to call off your Ngignans?" I stepped in front of Tiska. "How many of you are programmed to take over the leadership when something happens—as it happened to Rosid?"

There was a silence, long, heavy, deadly. Then the Kalauz said, "Are you mad, Vernay?"

"You made three mistakes. The first was lighting the room this way. It made me wonder why you wanted to avoid being seen too clearly. The second was in knowing about the aliens. You showed no surprise at all when Tiska used the term. Yet the Kalauz I spoke to before was deathly afraid of an alien invasion. And the third was your knowing about Lori and me. You couldn't have learned that from the Anthropol team that came here before—and was destroyed. But Rosid knew about Anthropol and Gal-Mil and the Federation. And through him, the other Ngignans knew."

I saw her hand move. I dove forward and reached for the lamp. I caught it with my fingertips and jerked it from the table. A stunner beam slapped at the air where I had been. I rolled behind a chair and lifted the lamp, focusing the light on the Kalauz' face.

And there it was—the stiff expression, the staring eyes not contracting under the glare of the light. Somehow Rosid had managed the greatest coup of all—he had prepared a body for the Kalauz and had managed to make the transfer. No wonder he knew that his plan would work. And no wonder we had not been stopped on the way here. This Kalauz wanted us alive. I doubted if her stunner held more than a knock-out charge. We were still useful. We were still transferable.

Lori swore in clear Intragal. The Kalauz swung her stunner. But Lori and Tiska had both disappeared behind high chair backs. The Kalauz cried, "First Officer Elna, at once!"

The doors came open. Elna stepped into the room, her stunner held high. "Vernay has gone insane!" the Kalauz cried. "Stun him. But do not kill him. Not yet!"

I didn't waste time trying to tell Elna that her Kalauz was not even human; she had no experience, no basis for accepting my belief. Besides, there wasn't time. Both she and the Kalauz were moving now, seeking to get a bead on me from two different angles.

I turned off the light. Then I threw the lamp where Elna had been standing. I heard it strike her, heard her curse, and heard her stunner strike the floor.

I came up from behind the chair and followed the lamp. Elna and I collided. We went down together. I had a hand on the stunner and then it was jerked away from me. I clamped my fingers on Elna's wrist. We lay that way fighting silently.

There was a scuffle, a cry, and then the ripe sound of a melon splitting open. I said, "Wait. It's all over."

A light came on. Elna was facing toward the Kalauz. I turned my head. I felt Elna stiffen. Her scream rose, choked in her throat, and then burst out wildly. I didn't blame her. Seeing a body split in half, seeing a tiny creature crawl out, and seeing it die was unnerving no matter how often it was witnessed.

Elna kept on screaming until I slapped her back to sanity. I looked once more at the scene as other lights came on. Tiska stood behind the body, a heavy vase in her hand. Lori was still halfway across the room. She said dryly, "It looks as if Tiska earned the job of Kalauz."

Tiska dropped the vase and drew her small body up in that regal way she had. "I thank you all for your help. But I am no longer to be addressed as Tiska. I have now taken the name of Kontara."

The revolution was over quickly enough after Tiska declared herself Kalauz. Once Elna was able to comprehend the truth, she moved with the efficiency that had made her second in command to the former Kalauz. Operating under Tiska's direction, she sent her trained Igaz rendor troops out against the aliens. Since Tiska knew where most of them were, and whom they were impersonating, and since there were a good many more Igaz rendor than three hundred, within two days there wasn't a Ngignan left on Ujvila.

Only after a semblance of order was restored did Tiska permit Lori and me to go to the communication center; she further frustrated Lori by sending along a guard to insure that I got my Anthropol team down to the planet and into action before any Gal-Mil troops landed.

To make sure that Lori didn't try any Gal-Mil tricks, I

put a priority call through the By-pass to Anthropol headquarters and reported directly to the Chief. He got the message without my having to spell it out; so did the Council. Gal-Mil was ordered to cooperate with the new government, to use its strength only if matters got out of hand.

They didn't. Elna was wise enough to know when she was beaten, and she took the lead in assuring the people that the new Kalauz had the full support of the hierarchy; that, in fact, the entire Igaz was behind the new Kalauz in initiating certain social and political reforms. The old Kalauz? Elna explained that she had been killed by the invading aliens and that, as custom had it, her nearest relative—since she had not yet born a female child—had become the Kalauz. Tiska then stepped before the video and was view-screened throughout Ujvila as she outlined her program of reforms.

The reforms were neither complex in nature nor hurriedly concocted. Tiska had thought out the obvious ones long ago; Anthropol suggested others based on experience and also laid out a way of easing Ujvila into its new social and political status.

Inside of three Ujvilan months, Gal-Mil forces were able to withdraw, and shortly after, Anthropol went, leaving only the standard advising teams necessary to prepare Ujvila for probationary status in the Federation.

My last memory of Lori for some years was her getting into a car to be taken to the embarkation field. "I hope we meet again, Vernay," she said too sweetly, too softly. "I hope we meet under circumstances that will give me the chance to have you sent to Pluto's deepest mine!"

My cheerful goodbye didn't help either.

XXII

EPILOGUE

FIVE YEARS to the month later I found myself remembering my parting with Lori, because we did meet again. I was leaving the Council chambers after giving a report; it was my last official act before starting a long-overdue vacation. Lori was going by in a ground taxi. She had it stop and stepped out to greet me.

"Vernay!" She sounded suspiciously pleased to see me. Also, she was out of uniform, in becoming civilian clothing. "Where in the galaxy have you been? Every time I get to

Earth, I ask, but you're always on some hush-hush mission."

"I've been to Ngign, among other places," I said.

She seemed to have forgotten her desire to consign me to one of Pluto's mines. "Ngign! That I want to hear about. Look, I'm on leave. If you can draw a few days, I know a beautiful beach resort . . ."

And so we lay on the sand with the warm Mediterranean Sea lapping at our toes. I told Lori of my investigatory trip to Rosid's planet.

"Rosid did a good job of lying," I said. "That is, if you define a good liar as one who tells as much of the truth as he can without spoiling his lie."

I explained that Rosid and his group hadn't come from Ngign at all, but had grown up on a neighboring planet with a congenial environment, children of a group of exiles.

Nor had he told the truth about Ngign being a dying world. It was flourishing, a group of countries living in harmony and economic balance. It had not been the Ngignan people who wanted to change the calm way of life, but a group of hotheads led by Rosid's grandfather who disagreed with the benevolently paternal type of political structure that seemed to suit most of the natives. Finally, the several governments on Ngign had to take action. They rounded up the revolutionaries and put them on a nearby planet—utilizing the space travel techniques they had got from the starship. They made sure that the exiles had the wherewithall to survive—excluding space technology—and left them to their own devices. It was considered the most humane solution.

Unfortunately, I told Lori, the Ngignans weren't much as psychologists. They failed to realize that the mind of any form of intelligent life is not only inventive; it is retentive. Among those exiled were scientists and, bit by bit, they put their knowledge together, experimented, failed, experimented again, tested, failed, tested again, and finally in Rosid's youth they succeeded in not only duplicating the space flight of their home planet but developing sufficient speed to range beyond their solar system. They explored, found Ujvila, and ultimately, under Rosid's leadership, concocted the plan that he had almost made successful. Behind their scheming was the desire to get enough Federation technology to go back and take over Ngign itself.

I said to Lori, "After my visit to Ngign, the government set aside their 'humaneness' long enough to go to the prison planet and remove the remaining malcontents. They're in the process of being reeducated now." I added, "Rosid might

not appreciate it, but thanks to his speech machine and to an adaptation of his breathing apparatus, I was able to get around the planet comfortably and to communicate quite effectively."

But Lori had scarcely heard my last words. She said in that familiar, aggressive Gal-Mil voice, "Reeducation! I would have killed the lot! But I suppose it was your mush-hearted Anthropol policy to advise reeducation. Give it a generation, and I'll wager you'll find trouble again."

"By then, Ngign will be in the alien branch of the Federation," I said. "The same thing couldn't repeat itself."

Lori's answer was a snort. Then we argued about it. We argued over dinner, while sunbathing, swimming, cruising, dancing. We argued on glider flights and during an underwater diving tour. We were still arguing about it when the all too familiar signal came, telling me to contact the Chief at once.

I was dressing to take Lori to dinner. I started for her cabin and met her halfway. She had been recalled too.

The Chief said, "That's the picture, Vernay. I'm sorry I couldn't do any better, but as usual Gal-Mil broke our code and reached the Council first. You're nominally under Gal-Mil orders on this assignment. Your immediate superior will be a Captain Lori."

I said, "Yes, sir." What else was there to say? I left.

I landed in darkness, in deep woods a short distance from the capital of Ujvila. A car with a brown-clad driver in the front seat and a female in Igaz rendor uniform in the rear met me. I was handed a pair of coveralls with a familiar insignia on them. When I got into the car, I sat beside the male driver. Behind me, Lori said, "Remember, Vernay, I'm in charge of this operation."

"Yes, Captain—ah, Hadnaj. And where do we go?"

"When the new underground movement was formed, your Anthropol people made contact with it and helped it develop. It's called the Hivkormany. We're on the way to see the leader."

Hivkormany—which was an Ujvilan way of saying "true" or "faithful" government.

The ride had a *déjà vu* quality about it. So did the dark entryway where the car came to a stop, and the long stone steps leading down, and the walk along a dank corridor, and the stepping into a room complete with viewscreens. There was no one to watch the screens.

We waited, spending the time looking at the most inter-

esting screen. It showed a jungle encampment. Buildings were better; I could see mechanical tools—saws and other cutting and peeling equipment—but it was still recognizable as Joy-labor Camp Two.

I said, "Tiska—Kontara, that is—disbanded all the camps the first year of her rule."

A door opened and a woman came in. She was a lovely woman, tall and slender—and familiar. It was Elna. She said, "All of the camps were reactivated this past year, Vernay. They have better food, better quarters, better tools, but they're still unhealthy." She paused and added, "And they're full of people like myself—the ones who want the old ways back."

I stared at her. I said, "Anthropol is cooperating with you in returning to the old system?" I didn't believe it.

"The old system," she agreed. "The one we had the past four years. The system that allowed a man to take a woman out to dine, to dance; that allowed him to be her equal, if not more sometimes. But now . . ."

She turned on another viewscreen and we saw Igaz headquarters. It looked very familiar: the uniforms with markings for high ranks were worn by women; the males were in drab brown, scurrying about, doing the menial tasks. The old feeling came back to me as if I hadn't been five years away.

"I found that I liked men," Elna said. "As people, I mean. So did most of the women of my class." She waved at the screen showing the joy-labor camp. "Many of my friends are in that camp or others, because this movement is made up of those of us who used to be close to the old Kalauz—and of the men who were our companions. In fact, the Hivkormany is run by a man." She sounded proud. "My husband."

Lori said, "When did all this start?"

Elna fed a videotape into a machine and projected it through one of the viewscreens. "This was made just over a year ago. It came gradually, of course, but until we heard this speech, none of us really thought . . ." She broke off as Tiska appeared on the screen. A still lovely Tiska, but not so elfin, not so soft-voiced. She had become wholly Kontara, wholly a Kalauz, direct descendant of the first to step from the Great Egg. I knew the moment I heard her voice.

"My people, as you know, we are facing attack from revolutionaries, perhaps again infiltrated with an alien culture. For the safety of our world, all mills and factories, all

outlets for food, are under the protection of your Kalauz. Read the new rules when they are posted tomorrow. Respect the Igaz. When the crisis is ended, I assure you . . .”

Elna snapped the screen to darkness. “There was no crisis then, by the way. But we thought that if Tiska wanted revolutionaries, she should have them. So the Hivkormány was formed. We intend, with your help, to set up a new government, a better government.”

“With you as Kalauz?” I asked.

Elna smiled. “With my husband and I ruling together until the people can be educated to elect their own leaders.”

I looked at Lori and grinned at her bemused expression. I said, “In Anthropol, there’s a motto that all political advisers have to learn—and remember. It’s a very ancient saying: *Plus ça change, plus c’est le même chose*.”

She murmured, “You forgot it, didn’t you, when you told me there on the beach that the same thing couldn’t repeat itself?”

And with a sweet smile, she snapped, “All right, Vernay, let’s get to work. Elna, can you bring your husband for a conference?”

When Elna left the room, Lori said, “Remember, Vernay, this is Gal-Mil’s operation. And I’m in charge of it.”

I said, “Yes, Captain.” What else was there to say?

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