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# IAN WALLACE Z-STING

Grow young or lose the world!

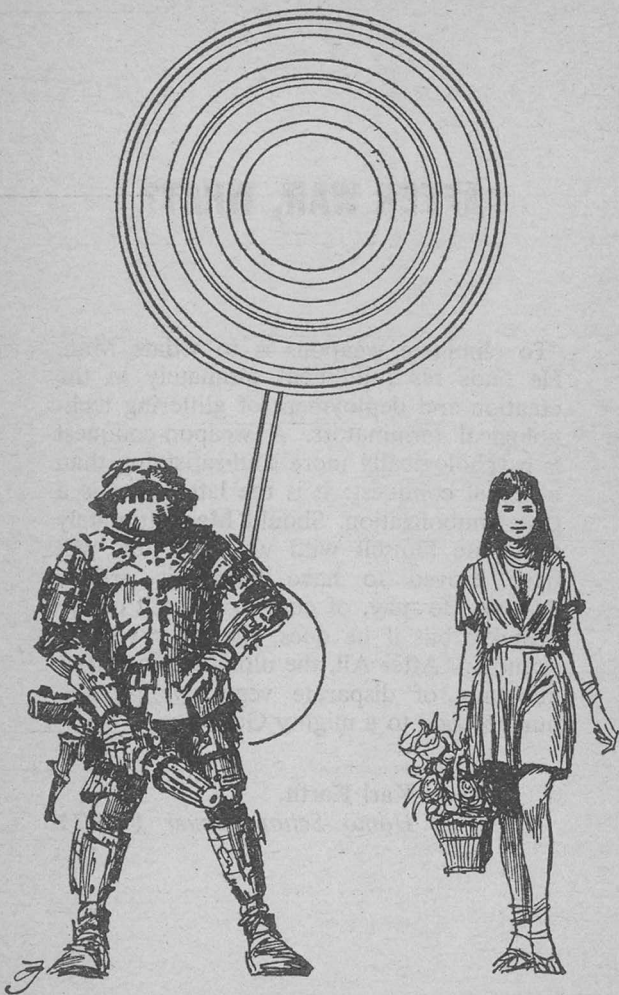




## AFTER WAR, WHAT?

"To eliminate weapons is to vitiate Man. He finds his fulfillment ultimately in the creation and deployment of glittering technological terminators. A weapon-conquest is psychologically more soul-satisfying than a sexual conquest: it is the latter that is a pale symbolization. Should Man ultimately terminate himself with weapons, this will have proved to have been his artistic destiny. He may, of course, bring it off by mistake; but if he does, the error will be Freudian. After All, the ultimate One; after millennia of disparate vegetative growth, human coda to a mighty God-fugue."

—Karl Karth,  
*Homo Schopenhauer* (2362)





# Z-STING



*Ian Wallace*

**DAW BOOKS, INC.**

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, PUBLISHER

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1301 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, N. Y. 10019

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Cover art by H. R. Van Dongen.

To ALEXANDRE DUMAS *père*  
with other prime movers  
replacing *amour* and *gloire*

FIRST PRINTING, OCTOBER 1978

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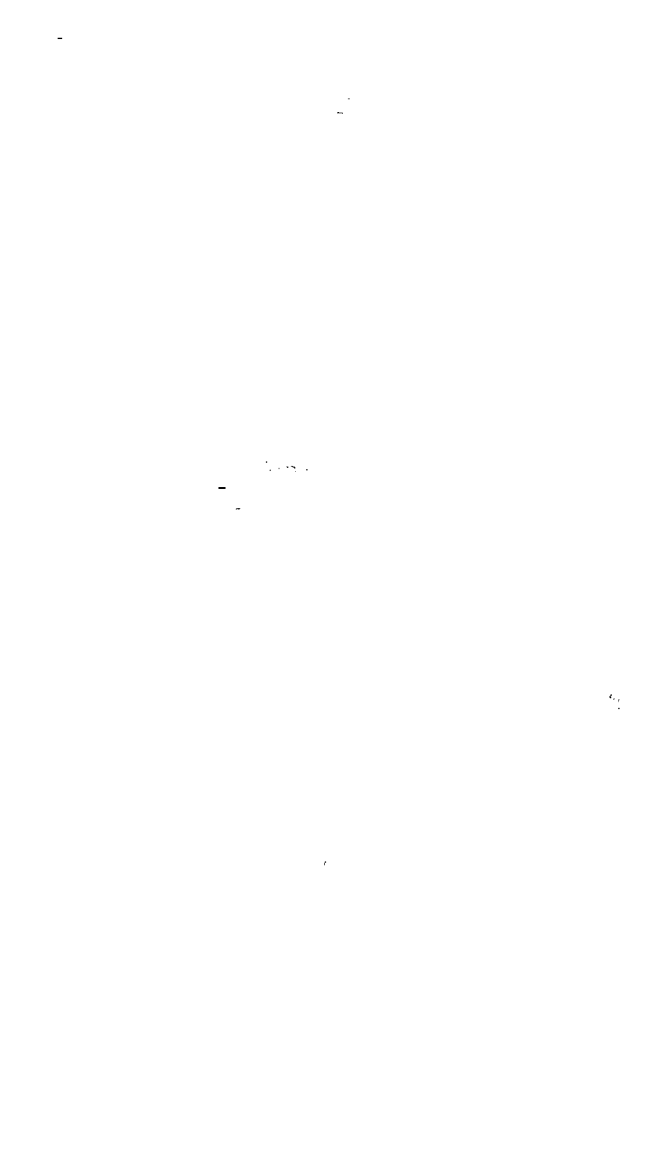
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PRINTED IN U.S.A.

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# PROLOGUE

When Marta Evans greeted Mayday 2475 she had every reason to anticipate a gay May as long-established top bitch of Erthworld and presumptive chief of the forthcoming Interplanetary Union. It was a super-comfortable state of affairs for a virtual virgin in her eighties who had dedicated her life to the accumulation and manipulation of power.

Marta didn't often take time to reflect that her power depended on an automated balance of Erthworld international powers, an automation called COMCORD, which had been set up by her great-grandfather almost a century earlier. Not often did she give thought to the almost inconceivable possibility that the COMCORD balance might someday fail, with a hideous outcome; this possibility was pure fantasy, her great-grandfather Thoth Evans had planned and executed too thoroughly well with COMCORD. On COMCORD's eternal interpower balance Marta Evans could thoroughly rely; and so could all the peoples everywhere on Erth; and when, very soon, Marta would become leader of the Interplanetary Union, she would see to it that COMCORD would be extended to all the Union's planets.

Only, *while* Marta was so greeting Mayday 2475, all innocently she was facing that inconceivable COMCORD imbalance, manipulated by a small combine of guilty fear and fanatical zeal. This localized mini-imbalance could mechanistical-

ly cocoon one-sixth of her planet and could consequently destroy the viability of Erth. It was a threat of shroud.

Intimately involved in the critical events of May-June 2475 were two people totally unlikely for Marta. One was a handsome young woman of Senevendia named Keri Andhra. The other was Marta's own great-grandfather.

Keri started it, perhaps, with a retroactive prayer. We'll go immediately to that.

The great-grandfather, however, unquestionably finished it.

# Rehab Action One

## A THREAT OF SHROUD

*Senevendia City, Erth, 18 May 2475*



Keri Andhra was an exquisite vivacious twenty-fifth-century blend of all the geographical race variations among the priest- and warrior-class Caucasians of the Vendic sub-continent, her naturally dark skin burned ne-groid-black by zesty outdoor living under the robust sun of Senevendia. Her watchers, who constituted a full spectrum of costumes and colors, were charmed by her cosmopolitan beauty, seduced by her personality and her unaffectedly sophisticated handling of the tricky situation. She was dressed in a neatly tailored blue-trimmed white uniform with conservative armlets and a conservative miniskirt (bare legs flashing good, no hose to diminish or phonily sexify them) and a blue-visored white képi saucily perched on a cloud of black hair. No forehead caste mark: except among zealots, they had been out for three centuries.

Situation: she was conducting two dozen visiting dignitaries of the Senevendian nations on a guided tour of the Constellation Chancellor's Palace at the capital city called Senevendia.

All VIP tours are tricky. This one was going to turn up cosmic. Perhaps luckily, Keri had not been warned.

During all the remainder of her life, Keri could not be persuaded that the Croyd salvation of Erth and the

Marana salvation of Keri had not been answers to her complex desperate prayer in the personal crisis which overwhelmed her in the course of this tour and its aftermath.

After a reception by the Vice-Chancellor, jauntily for two hours she had paced the visitors through corridors and conference rooms and throne rooms and ballrooms, discussing period architecture and purposes and paintings, satraps and statuary, displaying unpretentiously a prodigious memory made luminous by a flair for the shining feature, meeting every curve-ball question (and there were many) with a serious-witty answer that handled it or parried it but invariably pleased. Her contralto, only slightly amplified by invisible micro-portables, purled over lecture and sharpened on repartee: she smiled often, showing classically white teeth, and occasionally let them have a brief throaty chuckle when the timing was right. The men, ages thirty to seventy, were enslaved; the women, ages twenty-five to seventy, admired the men for their good judgment. "Call me Keri," she had invited at the start; and they were at pains to say "Keri" often.

"If we are ready now," Keri asserted, "I should like to show you the Constellation Grievance Room."

She led them single file out of a moderately large ground-floor room down a narrow flight of stairs. They emerged into a spiral-tiered subground room: here several dozen men and women of many complexions labored at desks on the variously elevated tiers, immured in a cylinder of translucent walls which were glowing charts and maps with continually shifting computerized and posted data. This was in fact an adaptation of a war-plot room, but that was not precisely what it was.

Keri assembled them in a glass-paneled soundproof observation booth on one side of the room at floor level. Having given the visitors a few minutes to watch and wonder—or, in some cases, to watch and partially understand—she began to lecture. A few people reflected that Keri's very presence in this diplomatically sensitive place, quite apart from the crisp comprehensiveness of her lecture, signaled her status as a guide: of all the millions of

annual visitors to the Chancellor's Palace, rarely did as many as fifty reach this room.

"As you all know," tactfully began Keri Andhra, "about five centuries ago our world reached nuclear stalemate, with first Vespucia and Moskovy, and then a number of others among the political autonomies called nations, holding poised upon each other enough destructive power to ruin Erth. Of course, nobody could use this power for fear of jerking his own rug out from under himself. Yet nuclear power kept being built up in a compulsive *laissez-faire* balancing interaction that was known as *nuclear deterrence*.

"Fortunately, the nations and the developing international constellations had to come to determined grips with the impasse. Nearly two centuries ago, nuclear bombs went the way of spear and broadsword, all of them disarmed and their warheads reprocessed for power stations. Among the constellations there was a humane agreement outlawing, except for internal police purposes, any weapon which exceeded a specified scope of heavy damage to facilities or personnel. Erthworld Council, which had succeeded the old United Nations, was the policer.

"Unhappily, the human power urge had not been destroyed; and in 2350, only five generations ago, the world was threatened again by Cathay under the disastrous Weng Ho dictatorship. Weng made use of an enormous computer which was able to soul-enslave the world.

"Fortunately, at this time-point emerged a vital historical figure, Dr. Thoth Evans, who succeeded in subjugating this computer. Afterward, Dr. Evans invented and installed the worldwide peace computer named COMCORD, whose Senevendian center we are now inspecting. And he also invented the concept of the *international government corporation*; and as you all know, the corporation which he organized, Mare Stellarum or Sea of Stars, has moved ahead under his great-granddaughter Marta Evans until now Mare Stellarum governs our world and is the major contender for governorship of the forthcoming Interplanetary Union.

"Any questions or comments to this point?"

Mute gazing and a few head-shakes told her that they wished to press ahead.

"Very good. Well. COMCORD, whose operations you are beginning to view, has guaranteed the peace of Erth, if not good will among men, during the past seventy-five years, and presumably will continue to do so indefinitely into the future. COMCORD ensures peace by two methods:

"First, COMCORD coordinates interconstellational grievances, so that every constellation knows at every instant exactly how its credit or debit of good or ill will may stand with all other constellations. This knowledge is not mere political opinion; rather, it is objectively expressed in a mathematical index.

"Second, COMCORD assures that if any constellation exceeds a critical imbalance of grievances, to the point where war would have been the result in the old days, there will be no war. Instead of war, the offending constellation will suffer the penalty called—Z."

Keri paused for effect. The effect was paralytic shock.

Turning the screw, relishing the horror which had to be a mere fantasy thrill, she added: "As you all know, the computerized Z-effect, the *Z-sting*, would cocoon the constellation away from all communication with the rest of Erth, and even with the stars, during a full decade. And that is quite a penalty—"

"Merely enough," snapped a listener, "to drive half a billion men, women, and children totally and irrevocably mad. Please, Keri—can we get back to the tour?"

"COMCORD, then," Keri continued. "Short for Computerized Coordination of Interconstellational Grievances.

"At each of the constellation capitals on Erth, including this one, there exists a Constellational Grievance Room similar to this one. Its digests are fed into the Constellational input, which I will soon show you, and are coordinated by COMCORD Central in Manhattan—"

She held-up a hand for silence, turning her back on them to gaze intently through the glass. "A new grievance has just come in. Let's watch it develop and see whether it will be fed in."

They watched this possibly world-significant action; no

sound penetrated their viewing room. A dark young corporal handled a long strip of paper out of an input instrument, reading it carefully as he did so. He tore it off and briskly took it to a dark young lieutenant. The officer read it, nodded, and showed it to a light-skinned female major whose features hinted at Anglian descent. The major read it, nodded, and fed it into a duplicaterpreter: this instrument spat out white copies at one output and pink at another. The major first handed both white and pink copies to a dark general, a dark colonel, and a light light colonel at a concave front desk, then summoned an orderly to pass copies to all at the tiered desks.

Keri, peering, explained. "The lieutenant screened it and deemed it important enough for the major who then made the decision to duplicate and consider. There are firm guidelines for these judgments. All these officers are trained political and economic scientists, many with doctoral degrees, a few with arbitral degrees beyond the doctorate. The presiding board up front could veto consideration if it wished—but you see that the three members are not acting, but waiting, so the matter must be significant."

A dark middle-aged Burmese demanded: "What's with the white and pink copies?"

"The white is merely a copy of the original intake. The pink analyzes the grievance into component issues."

They watched while people worked; some spectators reflected that the grievance might possibly have been filed by their own people. Presently they saw workers pushing buttons, and lights flared on the desk of the presiding board. All workers now sat watching. The general nodded. The major signed to the orderly who collected white slips while another collected pinks.

Keri: "Each has written *Yes* or *No* or *Further* on his white slip. *Yes* means feed-in the grievance to COMCORD. *No* means return the grievance to source, rejected as insufficient or contra-valid or contrary to constellation interests here in Senevendia. *Further* means more data on the grievance are wanted. The presiding board will consider the advisory distribution of votes, and then it will vote mandatorily on what to do. If two of the three members settle on one of three dispositions, that is

the board decision; if there is a three-way split, the general decides, subject to later veto by the Chancellor."

A middle-aged brown man from Pakistan wanted to know: "Why all the screening? Why not just go ahead and feed in a bona fide grievance?"

Keri stated: "Every grievance finally filed by Senevendia must be constellation-worthy, otherwise we lose interconstellational credit. You'd be perfectly amazed at some of the grievances we get. Watch the board—"

They watched. The advisory votes were counted: all but a few ballots went into one heap. The presiding officers bent over the heaps. They looked at each other and nodded. They voted. The general checked their pushbutton lights. He stood and said, "Yes"—you could read his lips.

Keri: "Some constellations utilize complicated screening procedures involving their secretariats or even their legislative assemblies. We in Senevendia find our procedure far more efficient and at least equally representative of the people. Evidently this is a feedable grievance, it will be published tomorrow morning. This ends the action cycle in this room, except that a certified report of this grievance will shortly be fed into that wall input marked FEED. So let's move now to the programming room and watch the consequences—"

"Excuse, please," interrupted the high-pitched Oxonian voice of a very dark young man, "but there is another phenomenon which I have been noticing. The people in the Grievance Room keep looking at *another* screen over *there*: it is featured by a large three-digit number, one integer and two decimal places, and below it there are other numbers which keep changing. Could you take a moment to explain?"

Keri looked where he was pointing and cleared her throat: this she had been instructed to avoid if possible and gloss over at worst. "Of course," she replied, "the Grievance Staff must always know the current grievance indices against various constellations. The large three-digit number is the index against our Senevendia; the next-largest ten numbers are the indices against the other constellations." Brightly: "I hope that answers—"

"It is only," returned the hyper-cultured almost falsetto, "that the Grievance Imbalance against our Senevendia is



now shown as 1.31. I was taught in political science that 0.0 is perfect balance, and that normal imbalances range from -0.2 to +0.2. Is not 1.31 slightly high?"

"A shade steep," Keri admitted, "but it could not be called abnormal. Now shall we proceed to the—"

The index shifted to 1.32. But most of the visitors had turned away; and the dark young Oxonian, who noticed the shift, felt that he had already asked too many questions.

Moving to a dull durundium door at the front of the Grievance Room, Keri made in front of the heat sensitive lock a cabalistic pattern of passes, hiding her hands with her body. The door slid into the wall, revealing a narrow vestibule with another durundium door at the end of it. "Please wait there a moment," she smiled; "I'll be right back." The first door closed behind her. Fifteen seconds later, it opened again to reveal Keri gaily ushering them in: the far door was open now. Anyone who might have intercepted the first combination would still be ignorant of the second.

"This Prime Input Room," she announced, "is divided by the screen which you see in front of you; the Prime Input is behind the screen. Please arrange yourselves along this wall at the hither side of the screen; and at the proper moment I will render the screen transparent to you."

When all were in, she closed both doors and stood facing the expectant visitors. "Your rank and confidence are implicitly recognized by your presence here in the Prime Input Room. You are men and women in whom national discretion is vested, and who therefore should know all—or practically all, if I may quote the celebrated qualification by the revered Vendic matriot Gleya Maya.

"Behind that screen stands only one person: one among the five duty-rotating engineers of general officer rank whose task is to monitor the input-output balance. The general on duty has two major factors to check. One is the gauges which indicate whether the mechanism is functioning normally as an input-output feeder for COMCORD Central at Erthworld Union Headquarters in Manhattan. The other is the system of dials which indicate the world

balance of grievances and redresses as adjudicated by COMCORD Central from inputs such as the one you have just witnessed, originating at all capitals. Should the grievance imbalance against our own Constellation of Senevendia begin significantly to exceed our redressive balance, the general on duty must notify Chancellor Andhra so that further redress can be initiated.

"I need not repeat that if the world imbalance against us were to attain the extreme of 3.0, the Z-sting would be automatically activated. Our constellation would be—enshrouded."

Again she paused for effect. She got it: they knew. And she added soothingly: "Of course, the fundamental theory of COMCORD is that *no constellation is going to let a grievance imbalance reach 3.0 or anything like it; and so we need have no concerns, except the fundamental concern of understanding interconstellational grievances and working to keep them mitigated. And*" (brightly) "isn't this the whole idealistic spirit of human cooperation?"

There was a little round of applause. Keri made herself dimple; and as the applause died, she inserted: "In a moment, I shall render the screen transparent so that you can see the control panel. The general now on duty is Major-General Visiblaze of the Sociopolitical Computer Corps. He will not acknowledge your presence, being preoccupied with tensive duty. This is a soundproof screen, so you can ask questions and I can answer while we watch him operate. Pardon me an instant while I check with the general to be sure that transparency is feasible."

Again she cabalistically palmed a door; when it opened, a greenish glow shone through. She disappeared there-through, the door closing behind her.

They waited in restive silence.

The door opened. She reappeared. The door closed behind her. She was not calm.

"My error," she said a bit breathlessly. "General Visiblaze has been transiently replaced by a civilian inspector from COMCORD Central. This is a perfectly routine unscheduled inspection; and during the general's absence, the inspector functions for him. Therefore I can still give you

the transparency. As you watch the inspector at work, imagine that he is the general."

She had regained composure entirely; but most of them had noticed her transient disturbance, and a hand wavered up to signal a question. She ignored it: "We now go transparent."

She palmed a switch, and the room within became as visible as green daylight. The far wall was Argus-eyed with puzzling dials and leaping lights and oscillating oscillometers. Before these gauges a small white-haired Riponese-type oriental civilian shuffled. The watchers gazed in awe. Gradually they became aware of Keri's unusual silence. . . .

This Keri now broke. "I regret," she remarked with a wan smile, "that I am not competent to explain this instrumentation in detail, but I have told you in general what it does. This concludes the tour, ladies and gentlemen; and it is now my honor to return you to the Vice-Chancellor in the Chancellor's Lounge. Please return as we came, and I will follow—"

### REPRISE:

"Pardon me an instant," said Keri, "while I check with the general to be sure that transparency is feasible." Again she disappeared through a greenish-glowing door, the door closing behind her while she stood stunned and staring.

The small white-haired Riponese-type oriental civilian and a tall broad-shouldered white-haired pallid-skinned Vendic civilian had been in tight conversation, heads together, watching dials. As she entered, startled, they swung around. No sign of General Visiblaze.

Keri did not know the Riponese. She did know the tall Vendic. "Pardon me, Mr. Chancellor," she blurted. "It is the scheduled VIP visitation, I was checking before going transparent—"

The Riponese face was archetypically impassive. The Chancellor brooded over her, his great shoulders drooping slightly forward, his eyes large and luminous with surprisingly small pupils and irises; he exemplified one of several classic Vendic subracial types, with a high narrow forehead, prominent post-orbital ridges, prominent narrow-set cheekbones, sharp nose, long upper lip, long slender jaw.

His voice was a bit high: "I had forgotten, Keri. I may tell you that this is rather embarrassing."

Her composure was wilting. "I don't know exactly what I could do with these visitors—unless *you* wish to welcome them, sir—"

The men looked at each other; the Riponese shook his head just perceptibly. Chancellor Andhra turned back to Keri, saying sadly: "I shall have to hide, although I hate this. Dr. Saguni, it will be necessary for you to behave as a visiting inspector who has temporarily sent the general away while you inspect. Keri, you can tell our visitors that this is the situation, show them this room, and get rid of them as quickly as possible. After that, talk to nobody, and come to my working office within the hour. Are you clear on all this, Keri?"

She nodded, swallowing. Her father the Chancellor was her god.

She seemed to remember the name Saguni. . . .

The office of Senevendian Chancellor Andhra was a salon, really, with an assemblage of paper-littered desk and tables unobtrusive in a window corner. When Keri entered, she found him standing before the picture window that overlooked the river; his hands were buried in his pants pockets, his shoulders were hunched forward.

She came and stood a little behind her father like a little girl who isn't sure whether she has been naughty. "What is the mood, Mr. Chancellor?"

He answered lethargically: "The mood is for you to call me Daddy."

Coming close behind him, she laid a hand on his shoulder.

He said tentatively: "I think you would be faithful to me no matter what."

For answer, she slipped arms around his torso and pressed a cheek against his back. He laid hands on her hands. They stood like that.

He said presently: "This is more than top secret. This is a between-you-and-me-and-Saguni secret."

Her eyes widened; he was mentioning the Riponese in the subterranean room. "Who is Dr. Saguni?"

"He is father, brother, sister, and nursemaid to COMCORD in its centrality and all its ramifications. Including ours."

COMCORD. Enshroudment of a constellation. Couldn't possibly happen. . . . She felt her pulse begin to quicken: intuitively she was catching on to the unthinkable.

She said in a flat voice: "This is a hell of a position to stand in while we discuss dirty work."

He released her hands and stood limp for a moment, while she withdrew her arms and stood erect for a moment. He turned to face her, big frame, dignified head, pale face, pallid lips. "What makes you think it's dirty work?"

She looked up to meet his dark eyes. "The whole feel of the situation. Whatever happened to General Visiblaze?"

"He's all right."

"But he won't be returning to duty."

"That's right." Pause. "You know the strain of the duty. He blew. We have tubed him to Hawaii for an extended vacation. He will be replaced."

"And that is all you are going to tell me?"

"I think you should make us some drinks."

Moving across the salon-office, Keri made visible his invisible bar and brought drinks to the tea table before the semicircular couch where now he sat. Handing him his long soft drink, she inquired over her short hard one: "You said that I would be faithful to you no matter what. And you were right. And I think there is more on your heart than you care to carry all by yourself. Tell me what Saguni was doing down there."

He took a long gulp of his drink, studied his ornate ceiling, sipped, studied. He told the ceiling: "Saguni has given his soul to COMCORD. Saguni has also committed the inadvertency of giving his body and his heart to a very high male official of the Senevendian Constellation. Not me, Keri, O my Keri, not me—but I am one who knows about this; and I have well-documented accusations deposited in certain places where they will become thoroughly public at my command or at my death. This contretemps has caused Dr. Saguni to be uncommonly responsive to me. In our world, the body-business might of itself cause only amusement; but ironically it casts suspi-

cion both on the administrative integrity of Saguni with respect to COMCORD which owns his soul and on the political integrity of the official to whom Saguni has given his heart and body."

Keri Andhra belted hard at her short drink. "So Dr. Saguni is now your blackmail creature. And this seems to make you master of COMCORD which preserves the deterrent balance among the international constellations of Erthworld. Right?"

"Right."

"So what is Saguni doing down there?"

"He is making certain adjustments."

"Excuse me, I can understand this better drunk. How is yours?"

Chancellor Andhra tossed off his drink and handed her the glass. She fixed more and came back. He studied his drink; she drank.

Her father said: "Saguni is delicately stepping up the intensity of the grievance input against us; and at Central he has already stepped down the intensity of other grievance intake and of redress input. And he has been doing a few other not-irrelevant things."

Keri scrutinized her second drink—the half that was left. Then she went instantly to the bar, filled her glass, and lounged back against the bar, alternately gazing at the liquor and at her father.

Andhra frowned into his glass. "Our world is all washed up. You know that, Keri. Our species is a lethally discontented-appetitive species. What the race color may be, that doesn't matter: black, brown, red, white, yellow, we are all *Homo sapiens*, and that means *Homo predator*; and it's in your blood and my blood and all human blood. We have arrived at various compromises, including the Erthworld Union and more latterly the Sol/Centauri League and soon even the galactic Interplanetary Union; but we are only racing time, and sooner or later we are going to gnaw away the universe like termites. It is time to close out the game, my Keri. Shethan is the Father of Rapacity, and Shethan is within us; and we have to shackle Shethan before we end by wiping out nature. I have the will to perform that shackling—and Saguni has the ability."

Keri gazed at him. She drained half her drink. She got hold

of his eyes and demanded: "Precisely what will happen?"

Intently consulting his liquorless drink, her father droned out all the Zeitgeist enormity against Erth.

Afterward, Keri slowly finished her drink. She flung the glass crashing against the floor and came weaving over to her father and sat in his lap and slapped *his* glass crashing to the floor and hooked her arms around his neck and hugged him hard cheek-to-cheek. And Keri said thick: "Why the hell don't you get interested in some woman and forget your Satanic idealism?"

Holding his daughter tightly, Andhra articulated: "My idealism is *anti-Shethanic*. And I have no time for women."

Keri began to shudder.

She stiffened and sat up straight, and her eyes engaged her father's eyes in the perfect interpersonal *agape* that is honest daughter-father love.

"I respect you too much," she told him, "to ask whether you have considered that you are damning me along with Erth. I know that you have weighed me in your cosmic balance, and that you love me, and that I am the final price you knowingly pay. And I am faithful to you, no matter what."

Her prayer came then. It was addressed to any deity who might listen and respond. God, whoever that might be, or any god or goddess in the Senevendian or New Serapian pantheons, or just into the All. It was an agonized prayer of profound cosmic intercession:

*Save Erth.*

*Save my father.*

*Save me.*

*O save!*

*Send meaning into me, to replace the lost meaning of my father.*

*O grant that these rescuings have begun already!*

These rescuings had indeed begun already. It did not, however, seem likely that they had a chance of succeeding.

On the desperation of prayer, we abandon Keri while we inspect an event series which may have been a retroactive effect of her prayer, beginning at least eighteen days earlier.

## Rehab Action Two

# REBIRTH UNDER A FAR STARS

*Rab (Alpha Centauri III), 1-7 May 2475*



"The old man is pale," said Meda. "He needs a ride in the suns."

"They are nearly in occultation," Vanis warned. "A rabquake is probable."

Meda frowned: "Be realistic, your guilt feelings are showing. So a quake kills him—so what? We're trying, aren't we?"

*Good for you, Meda, thought the motionless ancient near-corpse—but do you have to be so bitchy about it?*

"Now will you cut that out!" snarled Vanis. "He's my charge, and I want him protected!"

"Protection, schmection. He needs the suns, he needs a little joy in life. If it kills him, so what, like I said—he's lived, hasn't he?"

*So right you are, Meda. But I haven't lived enough. . . .*

"The truth is, you'd love to see him killed," Vanis challenged. "Your back would lose a monkey. Why else would you pick today of all days to take him for a ride, out from under the best insulated quakehouse on Rab, government-built just for *him*? Needs joy, needs joy—what joy would he get out of a ride? He's a rotting vegetable, he's had no mind in your memory or mine or two generations before us!"



"He's not been able to *communicate*. How do you know he has no mind?"

"Woman, will you pay attention to the voice of reason? You *know* that every five years the government subjects him to every test in the book. It's not merely lack of communication, it's total telencephalic stupor: cholesterol-cancer built up until he is the most complete malignant fat-head in medical history. Only two years ago they found absolutely *nothing* in any coherent function above the medial longitudinal fasciculus. When I say he has no mind, I mean, *he has no mind!*"

*You're authoritative on fatheads, Vanis. It takes one to know one.*

"So if he has no mind, fathead," demanded Meda, "why do you care if he gets caught in a rabquake?"

Vanis got an arm up, hand outstretched flat-vertical, fingers spread taut; and he had his mouth open wide to reply; and Vanis held this pose for perhaps ten seconds. Then the mouth sagged shut and the hand wavered limp down; and Vanis turned his back on her, saying quietly: "Let's take him for a ride. He needs the suns."

With one hand Meda guided the air-floating couch out of the house, raised it slightly by increasing the downward air-thrust, slid it into the back of the roadrunner, settled it in, and anchored it with hand straps, while Vanis took care of the safety belts. Then they stood for a moment contemplating the old man—Meda with pity, Vanis with distaste.

The patient's head was a bald skull, his neck was vertebrae and ossified larynx; his body was a skeleton all covered with tight-stretched parchment-skin for minimum decency. Just now, a sheet covered most of the mummy which breathed feebly about once a minute, all it really needed. The eyes were glued shut—had been so glued for generations, except every fifth year when examiners forced them open. The taut non-lips grinned wide apart. . . .

Meda marveled: "He has all his own teeth!"

"As I keep saying every time you say that—great!" grated Vanis as he seated himself facing backward in the guard seat, so he could watch the old man while Meda drove, and buckled up.

Furious, Meda charged for the driver seat. They burned out of the drive.

The city quickly fell into invisibility behind them. It was a low-built city, quakes being what they were, and largely constructed of rubberized silicon. The sharp ups and downs of the highway, which of course was massively and unpredictably faulted (limitations of road-repair funding being what they were), kept interposing rock masses between them and the city.

Meda stolidly gunned the roadrunner, a long-built ten-venter which they could easily afford because of how visibly the government was subsidizing their care of *him*. (On Rab, antigravs were rare.) Beside Meda, Vanis in the back-forward seat kept eyes on the inert patient, conscientiously checking and rechecking safety belts—for a loose belt might throw this unhumed mummy upward if the car should hit a fault and drop. The mummy lay peacefully on his longitudinally positioned couch which had extended the car length to the ten-vent necessity (six vents were usual). Presumably he was enjoying the suns.

They entered upon a long level stretch; the ten vents beneath the car stopped laboring-wheezing and settled into a soft comfortable *whshshsh*, holding the roadrunner more than a meter above the rubberized silicon pavement while the stern jet drove the car forward. (On Erth, twenty centimeters above the pavement would have been enough, except in a few places like the Baja; but on Rab, you never knew where the next three-meter boulder or declivity would be, and a generous tolerance was needed to handle such hazards.)

Once he had fairly felt the serenity of this road stretch, Vanis glanced around forward, confirmed relative smoothness, sighed, and grumped: "I don't see any damned reason to drive him around. The suns would do him just as much good if we took him someplace nearby and laid him out."

*Pay more attention to your wife, son, I do like the riding.*

Meda countered: "Pay more attention to your wife; Buster—he *does* like the riding."

*"Like, she says!"*

Frowning angrily, Meda accelerated a bit. Overhead, the two suns, Toliman Senior and Toliman Junior, offensively brilliant as a single continuous yellow sun, began to diminish as Senior eclipsed Junior, the two of them glaring remote Toliman Three out of visibility.

Meda was retorting: "You don't have to take it anthropomorphically! Trees like light without knowing why, and jumping beans like warmth without knowing why—and the old man likes motion without knowing why."

"Does it follow that he unconsciously likes *reckless* motion? Slow down!"

"Vanis, Vanis, you've worked too long for the government!" Again she accelerated.

Vanis tightened his own seat belt, clung to the chair arms, and shouted: "I keep telling you that a rabquake can ruin us at the drop of a rock! Slow down!"

Furious, Meda floored it. "So we all three go together. Isn't it poetic?"

Nervously Vanis gazed forward. To their right was a blurring alternation of high-rising cliffs and falling-away ravines, to their left a continuous ravine three hundred meters deep with lofty rock-jags beyond. "Poetry, hell! *You* be realistic! You know damn well that I'm an essential man in a government crisis! I *can't* take these chances—"

"Essential man! Level nine sinecure! If *you* aren't expendable, who is?"

He screamed above the vent whine: "Cool the velocity, Meda! Look, no other cars on the road, everybody else is smart enough to stay home today—"

She smile-snarled like a female satyr. "Good! With no competition, I can do a hundred, and we're sneaking up on that—"

All the world was filled with cosmic rumbling. Possibly Vanis yelled a warning, his mouth was wide open. Meda's foot hit the forward jet brake.

The highway vanished.

Their car did a slow-rolling over-and-over thing through empty space, and kept rolling, and accelerated the space-roll . . .

Utilizing the mind-sensors which he had been labori-

ously redeveloping during the years of growing consciousness, the desiccated ancient heard all the angry high-speed conversation between terrified Vanis and snarling Meda.

More than renewed survival drive was activating the mummy. During the past few months he had listen-learned about a developing Erthworld urgency, and he was more than a parsec away from it here on Rab. . . .

Thrusting his sensors far ahead of the speeding car, the mummy felt the seismic forewarning of the rabquake; saw (without eyes) the highway start to fall away a hundred meters before the car got there; readied a desperate and previously untried tactic.

The car went over the edge and began an accelerated space-roll, following the falling away of the bedrock, but at a lethal distance above it. When the rock would stop falling and the car would smash into it, the drop would have been at least a thousand meters.

The mummy calculated the roll; and as the car came around vents down, he acted.

The car, without changing its own spatial position, up-timed to an instant when the falling rock surface was only a meter below its vents. Using then an accelerating downtime technique, he held the car approximately at that distance from the falling surface until he felt the surface begin to decelerate; he then slowed the downtiming of the car until, as the rock groaned into terminal equilibrium, the car was two meters above it—and the car, with all ten vents whining, cushion-fell and hit the rock with about the same shock as a parachute drop.

Instantly he returned them to actuality, reflecting self-instructively that he had just successfully brought off his first act of will in seventy-five years.

Meda recovered. She was seated askew in the car after some kind of accident, she was in deep shadow. Quickly she took stock: Vanis unconscious and askew, the old man normally useless, the car seemingly undamaged. Situation: car resting on a shelf at the bottom of an abyss with sky kilometers above and rockwalls all around. . . .

. . . Except in the water direction. They were shelved in a canyon with a river far beneath.

Hideously she remembered what had happened.

Unbuckling, she hurried to check her husband: he was breathing rapidly but he seemed unhurt, and he was beginning to mutter. Leaving him, she examined the old man: the skull-face was the same; he displayed the usual deathly quiescence except for an occasional minute half-breath; and all his tube connections—tracheal clearance, intravenous absorption feeding, and so on—were undisturbed.

She went back to her seat, trying to remember details. How could they have escaped death? What to do now?

Having telepathically watched and appreciated all this, the sightless mummy turned his attention from Meda and Vanis. He too was concerned about what to do next—but for reasons broader than personal survival.

His distance-sensors were growing interested in an approaching kilometers-away flying object. . . .

Vanis, awakening, demanded creatively: "What happened?"

"We fell," snapped Meda. "What do we do now?"

"You got us here, you get us out. How's the old man?"

"Normal. We should all be dead. I don't get it—"

The flying object was much closer. The mummy hit Vanis with an idea. Vanis unbuckled, exploded out of the car, searched the sky, spotted the object: a tramp freighter at an altitude of two kilometers. He pointed: "There's help—how do we get its attention?"

Both of them began to wave arms frantically. The mummy threw a thought at the aircraft. It slowed, circled. Accelerated arm action with screaming. . . .

The aircraft entered the new ravine and descended, touching down a little distance away. Vanis and Meda, working their way toward it across broken rock surface, were met by a rough-looking graybeard out of the aircraft. Vanis clutched his arm: "I'm a government official, and we have a very old invalid. You have got to get us back to the city."

Graybeard moved massively to the roadrunner, ignoring Vanis's proffered ID card. Gaping at the practically dead

skeleton on the elaborate airvent couch, he gasped: "Jesus, he *is* old, ain't he?"

Vanis got his mouth open; Meda punched his kidney and pleaded: "The poor old man will die unless we soon get him back to our house where all his facilities are. Please help us; we can pay—"

Graybeard faced her, arms akimbo. "I can't turn back, I'm on a three-day run. Put him aboard, I'll drop you at the end of it. Don't worry, I have facilities. It will cost you ten thou—plus facilities."

High above a perpetuity of dentine mountains the aircraft moved leisurely for a full day and night; these mountains jagged a third of the planet Rab. The mummy, in moments that he could spare from his inward self-reconstruction, appreciated these far-below contours, the infinity of their extent, their phantasmagoria of colors and shapes and shadows, the brute tangible simplicity of the psychovisual field that they provided for his intricate gyrations in convolute privacy.

His mind, at prolonged last, was beginning to regain practical objectivity with respect to his own brain. He was in mind-process of exploring and reconstructing his brain, dissolving the masses of cholesterol which had accumulated around his neural spark gaps, clearing his own brain as one might shovel mud out of a river-flooded house. And with each cleaned up spark gap, he found a new source of energy to send flowing down into his wasted body. . . .

In the morning, Meda cried with distress: "His I-V is all gone!"

The captain grunted: "Hungry old cuss, ain't he? Looks a little better, too, this morning. We're loaded with I-V, I'll send in some bottles; keep that glucose coming, Ma'am—his vein is lapping it up!"

Low the freighter swooped over an ocean. Mountains walled this ocean. The aircraft stayed close to mountains and ocean, far lower than the mountain peaks, gloom-shrouded by the mountains; and although their speed was so high that the waves of the ocean were blurred into glistening smoothness, Vanis and Meda and the mummy were oppressed by a pervasive sense of slow motion along the

oily wave-washed cliffs, as though they were passing eternity cruising purgatorial waters. . . .

"Vanis!" called Meda. "His eyes are open! When were his eyes last open?"

Startled, Vanis came to look. The eyes had lost none of their original sea blue, but they were glazed and clouded, the corneas wrinkled by reason of lost fluid turgescence. Vanis waved a hand in front of the eyes: there was no response. "Oddball reflex," he judged. "He isn't seeing a thing—the eyelids just happened to go up."

After a bit, Meda commented: "He's breathing faster. In the past four minutes he has breathed eight times—and stronger than before."

Graybeard ventured: "It's the extra I-V. Let's keep it coming."

The mummy's eyes, now, were eye-seeingly turned toward the Hell-cliffs which flanked the freighter. His eyes were better than the thalamic radar sensors on which he had depended before his eyes had come back to life. Nevertheless, while he scanned the basalt, he kept his other sensors out; for his other sensors partially penetrated the rock, and he had a growing feeling that there was something within.

Vanis and Meda and Graybeard watched awed. The old man was breathing almost normally, his lips were filling out and had closed over his teeth, his corneas were regaining turgescence and he was blinking occasionally; once in a while he cleared his own throat and swallowed, and the I-V was going very fast. . . .

Meda uttered: "He's getting younger!"

They stared at him. . . .

He vanished. From them, forever.

Although long ago he had learned to make dice and some larger things roll the way he wished, teleportation— instantaneous spatial transfer of a body, oneself or another—was not as yet one of the mummy's talents, nor anybody else's talent as far as he knew. He doubted its theoretical possibility. Nevertheless, physically helpless on his couch aboard the aircraft with three people intently guarding him, while the craft swiftly approached an increasingly electrical node of contact kilometers ahead

along the basalt cliff wall, teleportation was the only recourse that he seemed to have.

Except, of course, *tempotation*. But how could uptiming serve him in this impasse?

Well. . . .

If the node were really as electrical as all that, in the past there had been craft which had not merely approached this node, but had flown into it—seeming to any chance incredulous observer to be entering solid rock.

His tentacular mind searched the uptime neighborhood. And presently he found another aircraft whose course for the node, executed about seven months ago, would in about three minutes intersect the spatial course of *this* craft, so that apart from the time-separation the two flyers would have collided and merged.

His mind catalogued every incident peril to himself. There were two major perils:

First, either going uptime or returning downtime to actuality, he might materialize in a mass. In uptime, as he had pre-theorized and then gingerly tested, stripped atomic nuclei coalesce into a non-reonic rigidity which increases with each passing instant. Massive inertia approaches infinity; whereas the past-invading body (himself, for instance) holds reonic resilience and perishes trapped in the mass. Such a coincidence would be instantly fatal to the mummy, even if the mass should be no more than another human body.

Second, he might be unable to downtime back to actuality fast enough, and he might suffocate. Atmospheric molecules become scattered nuclei in uptime, unbreathable. So uptime was like spacing without a suit. (He supposed you *could* uptime *with* a suit, but he didn't have one.) However, during his early tentative time excursions, he had begun to notice that in uptime he wasn't breathing anyway. Part of the mid-brain mechanism which he had learned to use was an automatic shutting off of the breathing reflexes. And with the reduced metabolism of ancientness, it hadn't mattered during his cautious trial excursions in past months. But now, with his metabolism on its way back up to normal, the peril was grave. He recalled that his maximum time holding breath under water, even in his prime, had been about eight minutes.



He reviewed a thin-chancy defense for each peril and got ready.

When the two aircraft merged (same space, different times), the mummy, couch and half-used I-V bottle and all, uptimed into the other one.

He had hit it lucky. He was on the bridge, and only a corner of his couch was caught in a mass—the captain.

He watched the captain move about containing the piece of the couch, leaving an out-bitten corner. The busy-mobile captain almost immediately threatened to move through the mummy en route to another part of the bridge: you had to be alert, all the time: the mummy nimbly downtimed two seconds, and the captain was safely on the other side of him.

Now the recumbent mummy concentrated on the scene ahead, his vein absently sipping at the I-V. At the top of the curved picture window of the bridge, a bit of sky was still visible above the cliffs, enough to show that the two major suns among the three conjointly called Toliman were at this date parted from each other, barely disparate. Then sky disappeared, and all was black basalt—smooth-ugly, then crevasse-ugly, then jagged threatening planetoid solidity. . . .

Automatic doors, evidently: two hundred meters high and wide. They rolled apart like mighty coconut shells, and the aircraft rushed in; and his subvisual sensors caught the doors closing behind, shutting them within the rock.

The mummy whistled noiselessly. None of his Rab diamond mines had ever been like this! And yet, he had a feeling that he was not far from the place where three generations ago he had hidden his experimental invisiradio. . . .

Almost instantaneously, yet softly, the craft braked in midair and floated in what seemed a vast theater with tier on tier of unrailed loges. Gradually the ship approached a loge and found berth.

The mummy was not far from suffocation. He judged that he had been six minutes in uptime. Poor condition had reduced his tolerance, but his depressed metabolism had compensated: the balanced limit was maybe seven

minutes—he had perhaps a minute of consciousness remaining.

His backmind was thinking: *Must be ways to extend this. Might learn to store fat in buttocks, break it down, feed the oxygen into bloodstream. Better: might learn to break down my own CO<sub>2</sub> output and recirculate the freed oxygen. . . .*

Simultaneously his foremind was calculating tactics. Fast dountiming would risk no masses enroute but might land him in a mass at actuality. Or, he could downtime swiftly to just short of actuality and then feather his way in; but just short of actuality could equally land him in a mass. Or, he could feather his way the whole distance; but he had less than a minute of consciousness. It would be a long downtime jump, actuality being seven months in the future: he might land in the nose of another ship; if he didn't, if the berth were then empty, there would be a nine-meter drop, couch and all, from this bridge level to the hangar deck that the bridge overhung. . . .

Shoot crap!

He dountimed. And at the same instant, telekinetically he activated the airvents of his couch to ease the drop which he *hoped* would come. . . .

Three jogging stevedores nearly fell over the materializing couch: one of them actually bumped it.

The mummy savored the profane chorale that followed their shocked silence.

As it died away, he spoke his first weak aloud words in seventy-five years—mouthed them with care, timing them around the rhythmic soughing of his tracheal vacuum cleaner:

"This is an airvent couch.

"Watch out for the sharp-bitten corner.

"Float me to your leader."

Herod bit thumbs in his throne room. It wasn't really a throne room, although in the Centauri System it amounted to that, but rather a sort of extraterrestrial Oval Office for the chief of a brace of planets. And *this* Herod was neither Sinite nor Ramian, was not even an erthling; Herod was a native of Rab, scion of an indigenous species which

was indistinguishable (when clothed) from the Caucasian variety of Erth's *Homo sapiens*. The thumb-biting signified the anxiety of uncertainty-with-momentary-event-impotence on the part of a physically frail player of four-dimensional political chess, whose intellect habitually ran far ahead of the problems that were soluble while recognizing accurately and avoiding the problems that were insoluble.

In his thirties, Herod was lean and bead-eyed, dark-haired and fair-skinned, competent and nervous. He was Chairman of the Board for Galactic, Ltd., the corporation which governed Rab and neighboring Vash with executive responsibility to the popular wills of Rab and Vash. Galactic prided itself on hewing cleanly to the political ethos projected more than a century ago by Dr. Thoth Evans who now tragically was a just-alive corpse here on Rab under the care of a married couple whose names Herod never could quite remember. Evans had fathered Mare Stellarum which currently ran Erth under Marta Evans and was expected to dominate the burgeoning Interplanetary Union involving some thirty star-systems. Herod, assuming Galactic chairmanship as a boy genius seven years earlier, had purified galactic after the Thoth Evans concepts and was now an unlikely contender against Marta for the Union control spot.

The nervousness of Herod, not unusual for him, was just now intensified by new evidence that the old corrupt Mare Stellarum, under aging-weary Marta, was *not* the corporation to govern even Erth, let alone the Interplanetary Union. Herod's intelligence continually monitored Erth, and with extreme difficulty semi-monitored also Marta's headquarters which was located not on Erth but on Nereid, a satellite of Neptune. Intelligence was telling Herod that COMCORD was now registering a 0.9 grievance imbalance against the Constellation of Senevendia, and that Marta's government appeared quite inattentive to this unusually awkward index.

This inattention was inconceivable to Herod. It was elementary that the perfect COMCORD balance was 0.0, and that normal imbalances would range between -0.2 and +0.2. Marta *had* to be disturbed by a 0.9; and yet, apparently she wasn't. . . .

When his female secretary entered to announce that a

man named Croyd wished to see him, it took Herod about five seconds to return from the cloud castle that he had been tenanting (*beat out that creaky Mare Stellarum, give Marta come-uppance, impossibly command this galaxy*). . . . Once back, he demanded: "What does Mr. Croyd want?"

"I can't tell. I'm confused. He's on an airvent couch."

"How does that confuse you?"

"Sir, I do not know why a man alone on a couch would get this far."

"Is he alone now?"

"No, sir. General Sherman pushed him in. But the general says he does not know exactly why."

Croyd? Unusual name; but a small hintermind bell was tinkling. . . . "Did the general explain to you why this thing had got to the point where it was a general who was pushing this Croyd?"

"No, sir. But General Sherman said that a general has to depend on his staff work, that Mr. Croyd had been pushed into his office by Sherman's number-one colonel."

"Does General Sherman know why his colonel felt impelled to push this Croyd?"

"Sir, you would have to ask the general."

"Why didn't *you* ask the general?"

"Sir, he is a general."

The nimbus that had been padding at the back of Herod's mind abruptly took shape and lost shape again. He probed further: "Did Mr. Croyd give his first name?"

"No, sir."

"Does he have an ID?"

"No, sir, and no money."

"But he came on an airvent couch? What does he look like?"

She shuddered. "Like a mummy, sir."

The species name of Dr. Thoth Evans had been—what? Not *Homo sapiens*, but  
*croyd Thoth?*

*CROYD Thoth?*

"For the love of any saint," Herod commanded low, "push him in—and then go away and forget this."

Still the headskin of the mummy was stretched taut

around temples and cheekbones and eye sockets, but it was no longer ash white; it had a bit of tone. The recently bare cranium already showed incipient fuzz. The eyes were open and clear blue, blinking normally. The lips were perceptibly lips. Nevertheless the skulled body was old, old. . . .

The ancient voice came out with surprising clarity marred by tracheal sough, came in short phrases with labored inhalation between:

"Listen hard, Herod, here is the bare gist. Forget Thoth Evans. Old alias, discarded now. Call me Croyd. Just Croyd. Equally my name. Buy?"

"Buy, Croyd. Go on!"

"I've been awake inside for years. I've listened to talking. Your Galactic is bidding—against Mare Stellarum—for the Interplanetary Union—contract. Here's your chance—to win it. Erth is in trouble—it *must* be. I built COMCORD. I gave it political sting. But they substituted—cosmic death in a Z-shroud. And what's worse—ludicrously worse—they can't control it—hell, they've *lost the sting!*"

Herod frowned in pain. Right! right! even Marta Evans didn't know where the Z-sting was located, *whence it would come if activated*. . . .

The mummy pressed: "Herod, the sting needs tending! How can they tend it—when they don't even know where it is? Something *has* to go wrong! After most of a century—Erth *has* to be in trouble!

"Herod—here I am. I am begging you. Send me to Erth—as an agent of your Galactic. You have about a week—to get me in shape. I have to find—the Z-sting. That's what is lost. I have to kill it—"

He stopped, choking. His breath stopped, his ribs heaved, his lips worked. Herod started for his intercom to call medical help. A Croyd hand came up to stop him—and the thin lips were painfully *smiling!*

Added the mummy: "And I haven't had a drink—for three generations!"

Medical Doctor Fortescue gently shook a shoulder of her emaciated patient Croyd, noticing with professional pleasure that the shoulder was no longer mere skin-on-

bone—it was skin-on-frail-sinew-on-bone. His eyes opened instantly: charming eyes that were steadily regarding her tawny handsome face. What a wonderful old man!

"Get set," she warned him. "I'm going to flip back your bedclothes and carry you to the whirlbath."

He inspected her. It was the second day of this routine, and his tall doctor was dressed normally for whirlbath treatment—in very little. Somehow his voice had become a modulated baritone which, however, cracked too often: "I'd rather do it myself."

She drew back in mock shock. "Doc-tor Croyd! You reject my advances?"

He succeeded in making his skeletal grin look genuinely humorous. "If I ever get strength to reject—I'll have strength to accept." He sobered: "Please, Fortescue—call me plain Croyd. And—let me do this—" Still his breath was short, but there was no more throat-sough: yesterday evening she had decided to seal his old tracheotomy with synthederma which had grown swiftly into normal tissue, its cells adapting themselves sympathetically to the genetic pattern urgencies of their new neighbors.

Wrestling himself up on to an emaciated elbow (she noted a hint of a new Mickey Mouse biceps bulge), Croyd used about five laborious arm efforts to shove back a light sheet, then got a skinny leg up and with a foot pushed the sheet all the way down. He was raw to the waist, and no Olympian. Dropping back exhausted, he closed eyes and opened mouth and breathed hard. Fortescue gazed appreciatively down upon him.

When he had quieted, she asked: "Ready, friend?" It had been his first do-it-yourself sitting-up-in-bed, but she suspected that he would prefer to waive applause.

The eyes came open. He regarded her calmly. "You notice that I recovered fast from that action. This is the morning when I choose to walk. Given the proper incentive, that is."

Her brown eyes went mocking: she had no quarrel with sexism as long as it wasn't occupational. "It would have to be some incentive. You're awfully far from being ready."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "I have less time than you think. Back up there, Fortescue, and I'll stagger into your arms. That's the incentive."

Dr. Fortescue had known many patients and passes. Younger ones amused her; Croyd, oddly, didn't. Her voice went soft: "Like nursie was saying—relax, grandfather: I'm about to make a pickup. No walkie yet: I cradle you in my granddaughterly arms—"

His eyes and voice were steady. "I meant what I said. The psyche is ready to walk, and the silly old body is going to have to do it. Stand back five paces and catch me when I fall. And while *then* you hold me in your granddaughterly arms, let me take time to appreciate my incentive. Or shall I recite the Hippocratic Oath? *All* of it?"

Professionally she examined his debilitated body. Her inspection returned to his eyes and steadied there. His eyes held hers. She made a professional risk decision. She nodded once. His eyes squeezed approval. She stepped back a few paces and held out her arms: he may as well learn his limitations the hard way, she'd stop him before he could kill himself.

Croyd impossibly sat on the edge of his bed, feet on the floor, hands gripping the bed edge, head far down revealing top of curved back with skin-cutting vertebrae and scapulae, rasping-gasping, about to fall forward. With a little cry, Fortescue ran to him and seized his sharp shoulders. They held the pose for half a minute; and then his breath, while continuing hard, ceased to gasp, and his head came slowly up. He stared straight ahead for a moment, eyes not quite in focus; then his head went farther up and back until his focused eyes met hers. And his mouth corners quirked, and he told her: "You're a good girl, Dr. Fortescue. Take my pulse."

She fingered his wrist, timing his pulse with the cutichron on her left small fingernail. She frowned and kept at it. After two incredible minutes, she released the wrist, straightened, and poker-face announced: "First 110, then 100, then 90, now 85 and slowing."

"See what I mean, Fortescue? Here we go, then. Stand back five paces. The incentive is superb."

She backed away slowly, frowning, enormously apprehensive for him. Firming her mind, she said: "Let's go, Croyd."

Again his head went down, and he hunched, and

gripped the bed, and began to breathe deeply. Fortescue was taut. He rocketed into a semi-standing position, teetered with bent shaking legs, strained to straighten. Fortescue set her jaw and waited for disaster. Somehow, necessarily *with his mind*, he slammed his legs straight and locked knees. After another moment of seeking and finding precarious balance, he began to stilt-shuffle toward her, using his arms like a wild apprentice tightrope walker.

Not until the tenth step did he totter. She went stiff-cold: he was far short of her, she should run to him; but she waited, respecting his ancient manhood. His eyes appeared to go inward. She was poised to leap. Miraculously he steadied. His gaze externalized, fastening on the pit of her breasts. Now breathing hard indeed, he recommenced the arduous shuffle.

After another ten steps, he was a pace away. She dared to step back. Nodding approval, gasping, he stagger-shuffled on. She stepped back again. He took another baby step. His arms began to flail. Hoarsing paroxysmal breath, he fell into her embrace.

He perhaps had killed himself. She perhaps had killed him.

Eyes wet, she gathered his featherweight into her strong arms, and carried him back to the couch, and sat there with his body across her knees, clutching him to herself, rocking and crooning: a *pietà*. For a moment his breath stopped, and so did hers; then he breathed again, rattling death.

And stopped. And prolongedly cleared his throat. She snatched tissues from a side-table receptacle and held them to his lips: "Spit!" she commanded. He spat copiously, and coughed, and began to breathe a little better. Crumpling the soiled tissue, she set it aside and went back to comforting him.

She laid an ear on his big bony ribcage. His heart was a pneumatic hammer: she didn't look at her cutichron, her experience timed it: a devastating 140 hurting her eardrums while his heaving chest dizzied her head.

She clutched her moribund hero.

Still terribly fast and hard—but a shade better: 130, maybe?



Now no worse than 120. Breathing less aggressive but still bad.

110.

100.

90.

85.

80—and breathing almost normally after—what? Four minutes?

Her face was close to his, and his eyes were open.

She whispered: "What sort of old man *are* you?"

He told her: "A resolutely self-youthening old man. But still much too old to make an ass of myself. Better drop me into that whirlbath."

"Tell me again," Herod begged, "why I am not merely hero-worshipping you, Thoth Evans alias Croyd, when I commit all this budget to your fishing expedition on Erth and on Nereid."

The old man sipped bourbon, strengthened himself with the conscientious anxiety of Herod, warmed himself with side-contemplation of fascinated-fascinating Fortescue. He warned: "You aren't mentioning the Thoth Evans identity outside this tiny circle?" When Herod looked pained, Croyd nodded: "Well done, and I'm sorry. All right. Why all this budget for fishing? Because my COMCORD has been hooked up to the Z-sting during seventy-five years, and COMCORD is overdue for a critical imbalance. Because you have already spotted a subcritical yet noticeable imbalance: 0.9 against Senevendia. Because, in your judgment, my Mare Stellarum and its leader Marta are senescent and even possibly rotten—and even if she *is* my great-granddaughter, I'm damned if I'll be less than objective about her! Herod, before that imbalance or any other imbalance can go critical, we have got to get rid of the Z-sting and substitute something less Erth-lethal. But we don't even know where the Z-sting is located, and worse, neither does Marta, the boss of Erth! So I have to go fishing—what else is there?"

This evening's conference came at the end of their preparations: not a war-room conference, but a physically relaxed soirée-gumbeating in Croyd's private salon, with

tawny-tall Fortescue wearing her Mona Lisa smile and otherwise only a white satin blouse and a black satin skirt and high-heeled sandals, with Herod and Croyd dressed in conventional black-and-yellow Rab evening elegance. Fortescue now interjected: "I can see a somewhat different approach for Thoth Evans. He is still the owner of all his old interests; by now, after most of a century at compound interest, he probably owns Erth. Why shouldn't he just announce himself and take over?"

Herod studied Croyd while Croyd watched Fortescue's eyes. Presently Fortescue, smiling small, dropped those eyes, concluding: "Because Marta Evans would probably kill Thoth Evans. All right, I'm not Herod's brains, I'm only his doctor; you go ahead and satisfy Herod."

"He already has," declared Herod, "to the tune of an expensively outfitted space-frigate commanded by my most promising young officer, Dana Marana. The *equipment*, Fortescue! Like temposcanners! and an autocrew! and a totally new thing called ivisiradio—and who do you suppose invented *that*? This guy, a century ago. He had the makings hidden in a diamond mine right here in this complex! And even this apartment here, you think I assigned it to him? Hell, it's *his*, he designed and furnished it decades before you and I were born! And again, now at this last minute, I demand of you, Croyd—since you are brushing off the entirely cogent suggestion by Fortescue—*why all this budget?*"

Silence. Then Croyd, ruminatively: "Maybe I just want to make you look good, Herod—to strengthen your bid for the Interplanetary Union."

"Horse, Fortescue should excuse it, shit. You were never so direct, Croyd. What's the *indirect* purpose?"

"Maybe I'm figuring that if you or I were simply to pull off a power play, we still wouldn't be locating the Z-sting. Or maybe I'm playing with the idea that if you put me in a god position with respect to the ownership of Erth interests, then in all reverence I should try to imitate God; and I don't see God stepping in to arrange human destiny by fiat—rather, I see him allowing humans to work it all out among themselves, and maybe gently strengthening the hands of humane humans who ask for his help, but nevertheless staying out of it himself. So maybe I should stay

out completely. But it so happens that I am *not* a god: I am a human, and I hope a humane human. So I have to do what I can. But just maybe, I can do it best by working through others—”

Fortescue demanded: “Tell us what you’re getting at.”

Croyd turned to her, and he was profoundly grave. “Herod has drawn for me a picture of Marta Evans as a woman who has lost power and will. And yet I notice that her organization continues dominant. I am suspecting that her organization is sliding out from under her, that some powerful clique of subordinates is acquiring control and is generating a fascist grab for the power of Erth. At the least, my mission is to get sharp evidence confirming or denying this; and if I confirm it, I must find a way to break it. Herod, who is maybe the villain?”

Herod: “It has to be Dr. Ziska. He is Marta’s Minister of Internal Defense, but more, he’s been playing Essex to her Elizabeth—and by her command, the entire ministry of Mare Stellarum waits for his nod before jumping.”

Fortescue: “Ziska is Marta’s paramour?”

Herod: “He’s her Essex; I say no more. Not gallant, not deft, but magnetic in a Richard Crookback way, excuse the allusion switch, and totally unscrupulous, which Crookback or Essex may or may not have been. If Mare Stellarum is moving into a power grab—a dumb, insensitive, Erth-periling power grab—believe me, Croyd, it is Ziska: with Marta’s acquiescence, or with Marta’s bemused ignoring, but either way, Ziska.”

Croyd: “All *right*. Beginning tomorrow, I have to find out whether; and if yes, then how to break. And here is the vicious relatum. Herod, I’ve balanced all the details you’ve given me against all the prior intimations that I woke up with; and I’m convinced that COMCORD is on the verge of activating the Z-sting and permanently enshrouding Man on Erth.”

Shocked silence. Then Fortescue: “*Why all that*, Croyd? The worst penalty in the COMCORD wiring would be the cocooning of a single constellation—”

“Worse is possible, Fortescue; and therefore, worse *can be*! Maybe tomorrow, maybe a generation from now: a tick in the clock of nature. What’s a generation? Since civilization began, on Erth or on Rab, there have been

only one hundred fifty half-century lifetimes laid end-to-end! COMCORD alone, without complications, is basically unstable through tampering or computer failure without good guardians: does Mare Stellarum constitute a good set of guardians? Is *any* set of guardians good enough for a mechanically fatalistic threat of shroud? And how about that lost Z-sting? Think how long it has been piling up malfunction probabilities without any guardians at all! On one good theory, the accumulated chances of trouble *this year* are now much higher than one in two hundred—and that's more than one chance of a strike *every day!*"

Herod tapped teeth with a thumbnail. "There is something maddeningly suggestive about the time factor. Once a critical COMCORD imbalance has reached 3.0 and has activated the Penultimate Trigger, the interval between the triggering and the Z-strike is—what?"

Fortescue intoned: "Minimum time seven hours fifty-four minutes thirty-six seconds; maximum time eight hours thirty-six minutes fifty-four seconds."

Croyd: "That *is* some kind of cue. And I'm remembering that the Penultimate Trigger is also lost: one more unguarded and unserved device in the chain of potential disaster."

"Which could mean," Fortescue speculated, "that either the Penultimate Trigger relay or the Z-sting is no longer functional. And with either out, COMCORD could go critical and nothing would happen."

"Do you want to count on that benign possibility, Fortescue?"

"I do *not!*"

"Consequently, I am going to Erth for the immediate purpose of learning where the Penultimate Trigger and the Z-sting are buried; and then I have to put both out of commission—"

"Isn't that a little like putting the solar system out of commission?"

"I hope you see that it is tied in with the other part of the errand: looking into the Mare Stellarum power slip-page. The two parts of my self-charge are intertwined. I have to play them both together."

"How?"

Old Croyd took a sip of neat-but-rocked bourbon, let it infuse his auronasal epithelium, and pronounced with a mean gleam: "Dirty infighting. Infiltration. Double agent. *On Nereid.*"

Fortescue stared at him, then took a hard slug of her zac collins and stared again. Herod economically stated: "On, I leave to you. But how *in*?"

"I have a proposal that old Marta Evans can't resist."

"Name of?"

"Make her young."

After a shock period, Fortescue clutched Croyd's arm and talked at him fiercely. "Man, are you *still* senile? Suppose two impossibles: that you do get on, that you do get *in*—think! If you make her young, you restore her power, you *perpetuate* her power; you improve her chances of beating out Herod's Galactic for the Interplanetary contract, so you work against *all* of us—"

"Boy, will I be a double agent!"

"Oh hell." Fortescue turned away, drank zac.

"Herod, you've extemporized about Marta's aged-in-the-brain laocoönian entanglements, of which the major one now appears to be this Dr. Ziska. And yet I remember her as a sharp eleven-year-old, full of driving ideals, irritated at playing the role of pubescent female. Can you make a judgment on her political morality when she was young in power?"

Herod: "Decent, I think—"

Fortescue, eyes wide, slowly swung around to Croyd. "You think you can make her—decent again?"

Herod with a bleak smile: "You think you can make her crack the whip on Ziska again?"

Croyd: "If now she is old indecent, still her corrupt organization rules Erth, and that is bad for Rab and Vash too; and even as is, Herod, she may well beat you out for the Interplanetary contract. Win or lose, better she should be decent and sharp!"

Herod, arising: "I'm reflecting that your little problem is to make her decent and sharp before she kills you. And really, I have to excuse myself now, I'm not as young as I was. Fortescue, I leave you with Croyd who isn't as old as he was."

They were warm friends now, Fortescue and Croyd. Herod had assigned her to him full time, professionally speaking. Fortescue was not only an M.D., but also an R.N. with a certificate in physical therapy. During eight hours daily they had been working each other to death, or rather, to life: rejuvenating life for him, illuminating new life for her: what *were* his inner resources that had brought him down in a few days from mummy senility to the tentative vigor of a remarkably healthy-wispy nonogenarian? Just now, for instance, as they stood barefoot before his photon fire, his reddish-hair-downy skull was level with the top of her high-piled cloud of dark hair, and she was a tall woman; his bony shoulders threatened to burst out his lemon-yellow shirt; and when now she slid a white-satin arm around his waist while he pleasantly reciprocated, the feel of him was skeletal ribs and hip bones, but the ribs were wide apart and the bones were big and he stood as erect as a military youngster. . . .

His photon fire. When Herod had departed, Croyd had tottered to his bar and made new drinks for both of them; whereafter they had kicked off their sandals, and he had touched a wrist-rheostat to lower the room lights to candle-points while the pseudofire had warmed into new life like *his* new life. Fortescue could have loved him; but she was determined not to do so, for at least two reasons: she thought it might be physically dangerous for him, and she was in no mood to enter into emotional involvement. Let their friendship nourish itself; it was good.

He said: "I depart tomorrow."

"I know."

"If I don't ever see you again, I will be sorry. No, I'll correct that. If I don't see you again, it will mean that I am too dead to regret it."

"Don't die on me, Croyd. Come see me. Or send me an address and mention a date, and I will come."

"Unless you're involved?"

"If I'm involved just then, we'll work out an alternate date, and I'll come."

"It's a good thing I didn't know you before I met my wife T'kotu. I'd have gone for you, and it would have been very good, but I'd have missed fifty years of an incomparable thing."

"Marta Evans is your great-granddaughter by T'kotu?"

"No. By a prior marriage."

"Wheels in wheels! And T'kotu is dead now?"

"Seventy-five years dead."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you. I damn near died too, but not quite."

"I repeat, don't die on me now, Croyd—but don't go for possession of me, either. I'm a loner."

"I know. I respect that. Friends, right?"

"Exactly. Croyd—"

"Fortescue?"

"How old are you, really?"

"I think, approximately two hundred and three—give or take a couple."

She grinned up at him: "Impossible! I'd have said, not a day over ninety-five!" She went sober: "I wish I knew a lot more about your inward powers."

"Psychophysical, you mean?"

"Yes."

"More psycho, or more physical?"

"Well—"

"Put down your drink," he said, discarding his.

She obeyed, warning with some concern: "Watch yourself, my friend, I don't want to lose a patient—"

"I am only going to demonstrate my psychophysical strength by lifting you off the floor."

Alarmed: "Croyd, Croyd, I weigh sixty kilograms, you're still only a weak fifty with an iffy heart—"

He swung her aloft, cutting it off; she found herself lying back languidly, hammocked in his arms.

Her hand came up to touch his cheek. "How'd you do that?"

"Another little goody on my wrist rheostat. I can screen off room gravity, too; intentionally not all the way, though—"

"So now I weigh maybe twenty?"

"That's about right, you know. Any less would be too little."

"Croyd—dear Croyd—listen, my friend: only tonight, eh? No long-range ideas?"

"Tonight is what it will be tonight, good lovely Fortescue, with nothing long-range except friendship."

Way back in 2409—when Thoth Evans was a vegetable on Rab, when Herod's father was still in utero, and when young Marta Evans had no clipping bureau—*Science Digest* carried the following as a news filler:

*Crew members of a space freighter forced down for repairs on Neptune have reported encounters with Erthmen who identified themselves as a geodetic expedition. A routine check with Science Coordination at Manhattan's Mare Stellarum headquarters uncovered a Neptunian survey permit issued in 2400 to a Dr. Hidalgo Matonic by Erthworld Council. Dr. Matonic was operating with funds provided by the University of Senevendia. No further information is presently available.*

Neither the *Science Digest* nor any other publication seems to have followed up this minor item. Had this item or a follow-up come to the attention of Marta Evans while she was still youthful and news-nosey, there *might* have been no need for the timely rebirth of Croyd.

A much later clipping, from page one of *Figaro* for 10 July 2431, was however in Herod's knowledge and possession, and Croyd saw it:

*Nereid, smallest satellite of Neptune, is being equipped to house the top executive operations of Erthworld.*

*The startling announcement was made today in person by Marta Evans, energetic young Chairman of Mare Stellarum which has, under the Union President, governed Erthworld since 2419. Marta (she prefers this simple styling) is great-granddaughter to Dr. Thoth Evans who originated Mare Stellarum and invented COMCORD; Dr. Evans remains an invalid under Centauri government supervision on Rab.*

*Marta discounted the distance from Nereid to Erth, which averages thirty travel hours and more than four radio hours. She asserted that the slight inconveniences would be far outweighed by the facilitation of relationships with other star systems,*



*particularly Centauri. She added that the middle administration of Mare Stellarum will continue to be housed in Manhattan. Nereid is four billion kilometers from Erth, on an average.*

*At one point, Marta displayed historical perspective with a wry unsmiling comment that a few hundred years ago she would have insisted on being called Ms. Evans, Chairperson. This remark sent reporters scuttling to libraries. . . .*

For some reason, Croyd in his reading missed the significance of the radio-time factor, possibly because, in this early stage of his youthening process, his psychophysical age still exceeded a century. Younger readers may wish to backcheck (not far) for early inferences relative to the location of the lost Z-sting.

# Rehab Action Three

## SPACETIME INVASION OF NEREID

*Sol System, 8-21 May 2475*



The peculiar imbalance of COMCORD, which was always supposed to keep itself in balance as a matter of well-informed *laissez-faire*, had in fact been engaging part of the attention of Marta's *Internal Security Ministry*, prime component of her *Mare Stellarum* and headed by her chief adviser, Dr. Ziska.

Marta's *External Security Ministry*, a secondary but nevertheless important component which was *not* headed by Ziska, had simultaneously been interesting itself in a mysterious frigate-fitting on Rab. This event had drawn notice because all events on Rab lately were of interest to *Mare Stellarum*, its chairman Herod being Marta's prime competitor for the Interplanetary Union contract.

As yet, Internal and External Securities had not seen point in comparing notes on the two not-evidently-related situations. The leaders of these two ministries resented each other almost to the point of non-communication, despite Marta's general order to clear everything through Ziska.

Nor had either ministry seen fit to notify Marta. Ziska felt that the small if significant COMCORD imbalance merited his own watching but would correct itself; External Security wasn't ready to find that the Rab frigate constituted any sort of threat to anything.

This frigate named *Mazurka* departed Rab on 8 May 2475.

It took a radio message four and a half years to travel from Rab to the Sol System at light velocity. This kind of time the *Mazurka*, with its enormous trans-light velocity, was easily able to beat: it made the transit to the outer Sol System orbits in seven days. But intelligence concerning the frigate *Mazurka* departed Rab six hours after frigate-embarkation in two robot carriers whose speed was not limited by inertial shields potent enough to protect human passengers. These carriers gained on *Mazurka*, passed her, and arrived at Nereid a day ahead of the frigate.

Why two robot carriers? When Marta's intelligence agent on Rab had learned about the frigate, he had restrained an impulse to send a dispatch to Nereid immediately: Herod legally monitored all such carriers, and it wasn't worth offending Herod since the frigate's mission might be legitimate. He therefore called on his opposite number in Herod's organization; and Herod's woman, Herod-coached, agreed that simultaneous independent reports might be politic. So the two parallel dispatches arrived at Nereid separately together.

The dispatch-duality in itself aroused interest, and Nereid's External Security put a special watch on the already visible pip of the *Mazurka* via teleradar pending analysis of the messages. By now, *Mazurka* had traversed the four and a half light years and was passing the thirteenth planet of Sol (Nereid-sized Maya), braked way down to 2 C.

Three hours later, a deputy minister of Mare Stellarum External Security was considering the dispatches with accompanying vector analysis. The messages agreed in every significant detail on crew, cargo, and equipment. The dispatch from Mare Stellarum Intelligence on Rab added: "Mission unknown. Also unknown is a very old man who was frequently with Chairman Herod during the ship's outfitting and who embarked with the ship; his identity was given as Croyd, a superannuated fourth-class custodian, but this appears to be a pseudonym; we are checking."

The dispatch from Galactic specified the mission as: "Studies of megalopolitan tempopatterns and their distur-

bance effects on hyper-laser interplanetary communication, Erth and Moon being obviously the best bases for this type of research. We will conduct a side study on trans-light communication." A flight plan within the Sol System was included, with provision for "flights of opportunity whose plans and purposes will always be communicated immediately to Manhattan, to Moonbase, or to Nereid."

License for such interstellar scientific surveys was provided under the loose linkage of Rab and Erth within the Sol/Centauri League. This registration appeared in order, though a bit abrupt. The deputy minister of Nereid decided that it all looked reasonably kosher except on two counts: there had been these two simultaneous reports; and the estimated costs of ship, equipment, and cruise were exceptionally high. He shot a hyper-laser communique to Moonbase (about four hours two minutes en route, Nereid being a satellite of Sol-peripheral Neptune). He ordered triple-duty monitoring with twice-daily reports to himself. And he notified his chief, the Minister of External Security, with recommendation that Chairman Marta be informed.

No communication went to Ziska, who was growing restive over the COMCORD imbalance which now teetered on 1.2 against Senevendia. The omission was a great pity: Ziska, with his COMCORD interest, could hardly have overlooked the *Mazurka's* tempopattern research. But Ziska, who chronically overplayed his hand with External Security, had brought his coventry upon himself.

By then the *Mazurka* had reached the orbit of Pluto, still braking, now at sub-light velocity.

Entry into Sol System was almost a cut-and-dried procedure: the executive officer, Lieutenant-Commander Pete Mulcahy, could bring it off with precision unaided. The skipper of the *Mazurka*, Commander Dana Marana (tall, dark, sober, young-mature) took occasion to prowl his frigate, inventorying, musing.

Some aspects of the equipment were unusual. For instance:

*I-ray equipment.* It wouldn't work aboard the frigate, it was cargo, they were going to use it in an experimental in-

stallation on Moon. It was supposed (fantasy!) to transmit messages faster than light.

*The megalopolitan tempopattern sampler.* It would work aboard the frigate, indeed it was billed as the central equipment for their scientific mission. But still. . . .

*The autocrew.* Within limits, it would fly the ship without human crew help. Marana well understood the principles and procedures, he could even repair malfunctions; nevertheless, the autocrew device was strictly experimental for anything much larger than a robot dispatch carrier; and so far as he knew, this was its maiden presence aboard a seriously operational starship. He grinned grimly: the unions would be annoyed. He sobered: nobody had briefed him as to when and under what conditions he should use this autocrew. . . .

. . . Except that he carried a superannuated fourth-class custodian, stores, who somehow seemed to enjoy the special confidence of Chairman Herod. This custodian, it appeared, had required the presence of all three pieces of special equipment, along with some others; and in due course, this custodian would be telling Commander Marana how to deploy this equipment.

There were some highly oddball associated considerations. For instance, it appeared that this custodian had invented the i-ray equipment years ago, along with some spin-offs like iradio and ivisiradio, and had stashed the prototypes in a cave on Rab. The custodian and the Chairman had tested it somehow with respect to Sol, making use of precalculated star positions. . . .

It was a weird mission, a *weird* one. But it was Chairman Herod who had personally dispatched it. Under the circumstances, Marana was prepared even to take orders from the superannuated fourth-class custodian, stores.

Up to a point. . . .

Erth was the richest planet among the thirty-nine trading planets of thirty-one stars in Sol's quadrant of the galaxy. Many of these planets had been colonized by Erth since the primitive fusion-drive beginnings of star travel in the late twenty-first century. Moonbase had been essential to these beginnings, because Moon's enormously reduced escape velocity economized on inefficient fusion fuel while

her lack of atmosphere obviated streamlining and the extra weight of heat-resistant hulls. These values of Moon were almost eliminated by the modern repulsor-drive which required no initial blast off and could blimp-nose a starship leisurely upward from a high-grav planet through dense atmosphere into space freedom for high accelerations; nevertheless, for swift economical comings and goings, Moon's value had not disappeared entirely, and she was the most thoroughly established of all space bases. Moonbase was now the prime astronaual base for Erthworld's fleet and, by cooperative charter arrangements, also for Sol/Centauri Cooperative Task Forces.

Astronaual HQ was located near the dry periphery of the Sea of Tranquillity, a convenient yet safe hundred kilometers from the jagged rim of the Julius Caesar Crater. (On the moon of Erth, the mountains *were* jagged.) At a reconnaissance point atop the Caesar rim, a lieutenant-commander identified the approaching *Mazurka* and immediately notified his commanding officer (who was only a captain, a low-Joe at brass-bristling Moonbase). The captain notified a commodore at HQ, who notified a rear admiral, who felt authoritative enough to issue personnel and equipment disposition orders before notifying an admiral, whose lofty rank permitted him to activate predetermined cruising fleet dispositions before informing his fleet admiral, who scrutinized all the dispositions and approved them officially before reporting to his chief of staff, who felt secure enough (he would soon retire) merely to shrug and send word to Manhattan and to Nereid.

When first identified from the mountaintop, the *Mazurka* had been crossing Mars orbit (then and there about 225,000,000 kilometers out), still featherbraking. Even at such medium-close range, while observation and positioning within a thousand-kilometer probability-sphere were possible, positive identification of a silent object was not, because even a laser spreads a little; however, at this time *Mazurka* began to send out self-identifying signals.

Only four hours later (because her incoming interstellar velocity had been greater than you could attain within the Sol System from a standing start), *Mazurka* snarled into Moonbase and nosed like a zeppelin into position at a

mooring tower. (Her contours were teardrop-conventional: she was a Rab ship and had to take off from Rab's gravity and atmosphere; she was three hundred meters long with a forty-meter beam.) Her skipper signaled from within: "*Mazurka* of Rabfleet, Commander Marana commanding, Marana speaking. Request scansion and subsequent permission to report to Headquarters."

"Request granted; stand by for scansion," responded a base captain; and he proceeded to flood the hull of the *Mazurka* with the most magnificent battery of rekamatic internal scanners that Marana had experienced in twelve years of commissioned service. In precisely fourteen seconds it was done; and Marana had an uneasy feeling that every trifling detail from the file marks on the hansel bolts to the contents of his own libido were molecularly immortalized on scanflakes.

The base captain stood now at mast-end of a flyway to the main hatch, flanked by a commander and a lieutenant-commander. In a fine simple old traditional ceremony dating back to the twenty-second century, he bawled: "Commander Marana, pray emerge!" His flanking officers snapped to salute while the captain stood at attention.

Marana—a big flashing-handsome thirty-three-year-old Senevendian darkling—stepped onto the flyway and saluted the captain, who countersaluted. The captain and his flanking officers and Marana then snapped to; and Marana gravely traversed the spiderskein flyway (moon-surface two hundred meters below) and shook hands with the captain and the two officers in descending order of rank. (In cases where both flanking officers happened to enjoy the same rank, a visiting skipper had to make a snap date-of-rank judgment.)

Marana was accorded the unusual privilege of reporting to a bleak skinny iron-grey rear admiral named Stultz who commanded External Security Intelligence at the base. Stultz got his guest seated before his desk and primly offered him a drink; seeing that Stultz wanted one, Marana gravely thanked him; Stultz mixed two bourbons and branch, served, sat and got going. Eventually it came to this:

"Commander, you have already been retinally identified.

What position do you want on Moon for your experimental hypertelecom?"

Marana had been coached on Rab in the best possible way: he knew all about his mission, and he knew exactly what to conceal; he had also been hypnotically prepared to scuttle all secret knowledge by flooding his own memory banks with jamming trivia in event of a threatened psychoprobe. He now instantly gave the recommended latitude and longitude of their proposed station in the Sea of Serenity, adding: "This will place us in optimal position for signals direct to Rab. We hope to achieve transmission velocities as high as 2 C. You are at liberty, sir, to monitor our signals."

Nodding, Stultz went into a cross-check of the major equipment and crew lists transmitted from Rab against the results of the scansion here at Moonbase. The advance equipment included a tempopattern sampler, an autcrew, and parts for the trans-light communication studies.

Stultz concluded: "I may say that all equipment items and crew lists check, right down to a superannuated fourth-class custodian, stores. I have only one remaining question. After setting up your hypertelecom base in the Sea of Serenity, you propose to take your ship to Erth for scansion of megalopolitan tempopatterns; but the orders add that you may take off after targets of opportunity. Give me a hypothetical instance of a target of opportunity."

Without hesitation: "If in a particular megalopolitan tempopattern we should find a pattern variant which might have an extraterrestrial cause, we might make side excursions elsewhere in the Sol System to find and analyze the source of disturbance. We would first notify you of our plan and purpose and would accept guidance or negation."

The admiral stood. "That appears satisfactory, Commander. If you have *quite* finished your drink—"

That was when, having admitted the *Mazurka* to Sol space, External Security routinely handed the matter to Ziska's Internal Security and forgot about it. The transfer of responsibility was effected far below Ziska's level.

The Sea of Serenity had just entered 18 May nightside. The transparent plastic huts which they unlimbered from



the *Mazurka*, inflating them in the flood-lighted area so that the plastic writhed and shuddered into formally shadow-various grotesqueries, were nearly perfect insulators by reason of the gas in their self-sealing quadruple walls. When the station would eventually find itself revolved and rotated onto sunside, refrigeration would gradually replace heat in the atmospheric generator.

Subordinate officers could see to the general outfitting of the installation, but it was Commander Marana who personally supervised the piece-by-piece unloading of the peculiar hypertelem apparatus. The pieces were floated on antigrav: each lift-unit could be massively laden, here on the moon. They were pushed and pulled through the airlock of a vitalite shelter whose basic dome shape was distorted by numerous excrescences. Inside, the swift assembly of these pieces was directed by

eh, it was the superannuated fourth-class custodian, stores. And he was pretty old, too! And the morale of this crew was underscored by the way men who ranked him by several ranks jumped when this old nobody spoke. . . .

After nine hours of uninterrupted labor, it was the old custodian who sat in a bucket seat before an elaborate instrument board that fronted a voluminous array of circuitry (all open, not neatly housed in a patented console but gaping its guts like a mad scientist's improvisation) and nodded to his—assistant? But this assistant to a custodian was a first-class telemetrists! Together they went through an intricate test procedure, while four other specialists scurried around checking details. Through the vitalite, suited Commander Marana watched intent.

Finally the old custodian said in a firm baritone: "Good. Let's try for Rab."

Marana came inside and whipped off his helmet.

The custodian's fingers played controls. He said, without bending to any visible sort of transmitter or microphone or mouthpiece: "Testfox calling Testhound. Come in, Testhound. Over."

Ten seconds of silence. Clear response: "Testfox, this is Testhound. Over."

Seconds of silence, while the men on Moon exchanged awed looks: signal and response across more than four

light years of interstellar space had been effected in ten seconds round trip!

The old custodian was taut. "Testhound, apparently one-way transmission takes about five seconds. Pretty good?"

*Instant* answer from Herod on Rab: "Damn near perfect!"

Shortly afterward, rather surprisingly the entire floor of the shelter—men, machines, all—sank slowly beneath moonsurface to a depth of three meters; a new floor of opaque material slithered out from the ground-level periphery, covered them entirely, and rigidified; and a new crew began moving new pieces of machinery into the shelter and assembling it on the false floor. Meanwhile, rather confusingly, the suited figures of the three telemetricians, two reonicists, commander, and custodian who had disappeared underground emerged from a nearby shelter and moon-loped for the *Mazurka*, disappearing within.

They all hit the sack. Croyd didn't know that they were terminating the day when, in Senevendia, Keri Andhra discovered the 1-31 COMCORD imbalance.

A large moonskimmer appeared next day at 1300 hours, immediately after chow, while Marana was directing preparations for ship's departure. The skimmer bore neither the Erthworld Astrofleet insignia nor the Sol/Centauri insignia but the silver head of a serene woman with stars in her hair: Stella Maris, goddess of Mare Stellarum, Sea of Stars.

Commander Marana stood by while a lieutenant met the craft and saluted seven emerging suited-up civilians, three of whom were women. Monitoring their conversation by helmet intercom, Marana joined the group as soon as the leader identified himself as Mr. Fulatta of Mare Stellarum Internal Security. Vendic Marana saluted African Fulatta, and they touched gauntlets.

Fulatta presented his assistants, four of whom were telecom specialists, and expressed a terse wish to examine the experimental hypertelem installation. Marana led them into the shelter, where they unsuited and began a meticulous inspection of a working device that crudely

resembled the one in the hidden basement. Presently they began questioning the telemetricians:

"Any results yet?"

"Nothing positive, sir."

"It really seems unlikely that a rekamatic impulse could exceed light velocity."

"True, ma'am. But we are trying to generate an integral corpuscle which will travel through space at trans-light velocity as a discrete particle rather than a self-propagated pseudo corpuscle. It is the latter, we theorize, which is limited by the Lorentz equations."

"But the former has to buck the Fitzgerald contraction without the help of a differential mass—"

"A classic objection, we admit." This telemetrists was enjoying his own screening double-talk: he rather sniffed "classic"; and he added: "Ladies and gentlemen, if you would like to see *our* mathematics, we can speed-read them in a nearby shelter—"

But they had no time today, they would return tomorrow.

Even as the visitors were suiting up to leave, a to-them-inaudible voice in the basement was saying: "Testhound, this is Testfox. Our dummy is getting by. Marana and I are leaving now for Erth and elsewhere, my assistants will take over. You'll hear from me soon, I hope—with a result or two, maybe. Over and out."

The *Mazurka* cruised, now on 20 May, in a leisurely harmonic pattern ninety kilometers above the Chicago/Manhattan or Chihattan megalopolis, describing a complete circuit, larger or smaller and in variable patterns, on an average of each quarter-hour. This was an experiment-and-reconnaissance cruising level established long ago by Norwestia Constellational Aerospace, banned to transport and satellites and swept clean of garbage: crews had only to watch out for craft ascending or descending through the zone.

Commander Marana stood on the bridge, peering down through the lower curvature of the broad bay window at the irregular margins of the megalopolis: river-trailing across mountains and clustering on plains and at lake edges, fanning out at seaboard from Boston down to

Charleston, partially obscured by trailing cirrocumulus cloud puffs. Had he wished to penetrate the clouds and see the city-complex clearly, a button-touch would have replaced the window with a visiradar viewport.

Beside Marana stood the superannuated custodian. He was a rangy man, nearly as tall as Marana; his bones were respectable, but most of them protruded, and he weighed no more than sixty kilograms; he looked aged, but healthy and even sinewy. His eyes were clear deep blue, his head long, his mouth big with an upward twitch tendency at the corners, his short gray hair tinged with auburn near the roots (a self-induced change from his old Thoth Evans chestnut brown hair). He wore civilian work overalls rather than a uniform.

"You are not omitting," suggested Custodian Croyd, "to break the pattern down into major components?" His baritone was *not* aged.

Marana responded economically yet respectfully: "As requested, sir, we are taking microanalysis flakes of the following Chihattan burroughs: Boston, Manhattan, Philadelphia, Washington, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit from Toledo to Flint and Grand Rapids, and Chicago from Gary to Milwaukee. These local intensities are additional to the overall megalopolitan pattern. Do you know yet how you will use these samples?"

Croyd negated. "The sampling is our pretext for being here. It happens also to be related to COMCORD, but I don't know yet what that has to do with anything immediate."

They returned their attention to the view below.

A lieutenant across the bridge, seated at a scanner, spoke quietly. "Sir, I think we have a periodical disturbance of extra-terrestrial origin."

"This," Croyd intensely reminded Marana, "is a major part of our mission." They crossed the bridge and bent over the lieutenant, analyzing and synthesizing pointer readings.

Said the lieutenant finally: "I think, sir, Neptune."

Straightening, Marana and Croyd gazed at each other. "By damn!" exulted Marana. "First one!"

Croyd urged: "You'd better have the lieutenant take time to make sure. I have to pay that visit to Manhattan. Keep me monitored—one never knows, with Mare Stellarum."

"Aye aye, sir. Mr. Croyd—"

"Commander?"

"It has to be alone?"

"It has to be alone."

Marana's big chin was up: he had an embarrassing thing to say, so he banged it right out. "Watch it, sir. You aren't young."

It brought up Croyd's mouth corners. Going away, he backtossed at Marana: "Younger than when we left Rab—and you should have seen me on Mayday."

Departing the *Mazurka* in a scouter, Croyd, decently dressed in a gray civilian suit, dropped to the bottom of the reconnaissance band, flashed ship's ID to Astroport, and requested an entry hole. They gave him one, and he eased eighty kilometers to the four-hundred-meter vestibule; there he leveled off, flashing arrival notice, and floated waiting, examining with interest the wild Manhattan skyline—still the loftiest on Erthworld, and subtly changed since his last view of it most of a century earlier, dominated now by the kilometer-high Erthworld Union Tower on East River (its smaller sibling in the same park was the Sol/Centauri Building).

Radio came in: "Arrival of *Mazurka* scouter acknowledged. Furnish plan." It was a computer with a soprano voice, a lingering reminder that human control-tower personnel had been overwhelmingly female by the twenty-first century.

Croyd stated: "Destination Erthworld Union Building, Civilian BuPers. I will take this craft there."

Pause for relays. Then: "Personal identity required for such clearance."

He slipped his retinal ID card into a slot and placed his eyes against the eyepiece for comparison. The retinal prints were genuine; the remainder of the card had been carefully fabricated on Rab to identify Croyd as Hertz, a Civilian Official 7-P (seventh-level, Personnel) of Mare Stellarum, date of appointment 6 May 2475. It was a bit risky: Rab Chairman Herod had clothed Rab with a

completely fictitious identity as part of an organization that was not Herod's. But: "Mare Stellarum BuPers is at least three months behind in programming all major computers with personnel changes," Herod had commented, "and the chances are that anything away from Central has a covering program to admit correlation of a genuine retinal with one of their unforgeable ID's." It now seemed to be working: Croyd-Hertz got immediate clearance at the thousand-meter level—it was a zone fifty meters thick reserved for Erthworld officials. He rose to that level and moved laterally toward the Erthworld Union Tower.

Coming in on the tower-top where it fanned out into a broad enclosed deck, he paused five hundred meters away, while official scouts and helijets at the same level arrived and departed on other radii all around the tower or hovered like himself awaiting clearance; and he signaled for a human counter bypass. This was rare, and in a moment a young officer's face appeared on his visicom. "Lieutenant Carlton here," she asserted in a modulated mezzo much like that of the Astroport computer. "Please come on visual and state why human bypass is required."

He switched on visual transmission. "Civilian 6-P Hertz, accompanying the Rab frigate *Mazurka* as monitor for Mare Stellarum. I pulled this rank a month ago, and I just noticed that some dope at BuPers has associated my retinals with an ID card that says 7-P instead of 6-P" (the latter was higher). "So I want to see Assistant Secretary Fiori immediately, the reduced rank is messing up my operation."

Carlton's pretty mouth tightened: she was skeptical, yet impressed by the claim of 6-P rank. Her lieutenantancy in Astrofleet was equivalent to Rank 9. "Show me your card and your eyes."

Croyd-Hertz repeated the Astroport performance—holding breath, because possibly the Central computer had been brought up to date for a change.

A moment later, Carlton looked impish. "Excuse me for saying so, sir, but apparently you didn't inspect your new card any better than the dope at BuPers did."

So *that* was all right; and now Croyd-Hertz had a snap decision to make, whether to reinforce his 6-P role by

reprimanding her for impertinence. He chose instead to blush and grin. Her humorously twisted mouth broke into a smile; she gave him an entry lane and disappeared to check his request with the office of Assistant Secretary Fiori.

Croyd-Hertz now stood before the window-centered desk of Assistant Secretary Fiori who sat grim behind it, a slight gray sixtyish asthenic with hands folded tightly on his blotter. Fiori's high rank was 4-P, which was why he rated a nonfunctional blotter. His desk was flanked by two flags, the twin stars of Sol/Centauri at his right, and at his left the starry-haired goddess of Marta's Mare Stellarum; centered on the picture window behind him was a third flag, the multi-colored banner of Erthworld Union. Missing no diplomatic bets, this Manhattan-stationed bureaucrat also displayed on the wall above the window the historic fifty-seven stars and thirteen stripes of the United States of Vespucia. Over a Fiori shoulder and through this window, Croyd-Hertz could see a great deal of Long Island.

Also flanking the desk but in front of the flags, standing at severe ease, were two uniformed guards with holsters loosened. Croyd-Hertz alertly surmised that these guards were not standard office equipment.

Fiori said carefully: "I do not know you, Hertz. It is barely possible that there is a new 6-P whom I do not know. However, I have just run a check on all ninety-three civilian Hertzes having numbered rank in Mare Stellarum. None of them is a 6, and none has your retinal pattern."

Croyd-Hertz hit Fiori with a mild shot of projective hypnosis (as a matter of social ethos, Croyd reserved the use of this talent for extreme operational emergencies). He then countered: "I *am* a new 6-P, it is *quite* possible that you would not know me; and it is also quite possible that your files on other divisions are only somewhat more up to date than the computer at the landing stage."

Without changing expression or position, Fiori nodded slightly. "Quite possible."

"Then I suggest you dismiss your guards so we can talk comfortably."

Fiori waved a hand over a shoulder and reclasped hands; the guards snapped to, clicked heels, locked holsters, and departed.

"You might also let your secretary and your aide know that all is provisionally well."

Fiori said quietly into his intercom: "Mr. Hertz is provisionally cleared. We wish to talk privately. Disconnect." He then looked speculatively at his visitor.

"First of all," began Croyd-Hertz, "please do me the favor of personally correcting this ID card and inserting a master engram into the BuPers computer. And then I wish to discuss a man named Croyd—"

It wouldn't always be so easy. People like Marta and Ziska possessed trained shields against projective hypnosis and telepathic intrusion; Fiori probably had a feeble shield, but it hadn't occurred to him to erect it against this Hertz—which was probably one of the reasons why Fiori at his age was only an assistant secretary. Whereas nice guys like that little Carlton shouldn't be dealt with so unfairly: with them, if straight persuasion wouldn't work, the worst his creed would allow was normal human duplicity which their minded brains ought to be able to deal with.

Reentering the landing stage offices, Croyd asked for Lieutenant Carlton and was waved to a transparent cubicle in a far corner where Boss Carlton sat and could survey her entire office when she wasn't bent over desk-work, which she was. Through the glassoid, he appraised the working Carlton. First impression confirmed: young (maybe twenty-eight), petite blonde, experienced, ambitious, decisive, desirable, guardedly friendly. He liked the impression.

Entering by a doorless portal to her left, quietly he held his corrected ID thirty-five centimeters in front of her eyes. She considered it icily without turning. She remarked: "*I thought you'd win.*"

"You have good judgment. And while I can't now see them, I recall that you have also compelling eyes."

She swallowed. Gazing steadfastly at the card, she murmured: "For an old guy, Hertz, you have young retinae." She turned in her chair, studied his face, and blurted: "I'm off at 1500 hours."



"Unhappily," he returned, "I'm off immediately—on distant duty, that is. But I could be back within days. Are you sure this isn't merely impulsive generosity to a senior citizen?"

She reappraised his eyes, shook her head just a trifle, and pronounced: "Phone 9402-8713-2964, extension 702. If I'm out, leave a message—it will be a private recording."

"How old am I?"

"Seventy-five?"

She didn't forget his assurance going away: "I'll be back before I'm fifty."

Returning to the *Mazurka*, Croyd found that efficient Marana had radioed Moonbase and cleared their target of opportunity.

Soon afterward they were accelerating for Neptune.

Impossible purpose: to penetrate Marta's Nereid.

Accelerating through interplanetary space at a 500-G thrust (which felt to the seasoned crew like a lazy half-g because of the 1:1000 inertial shield), the *Mazurka* made for Neptune to check out the apparent source of the extraterrestrial disturbance which had shown up in the tempopattern of Chihattan.

When he had secured Moonbase clearance, Marana had registered a working hypothesis that the cause of this disturbance might be a perpetual molecular tidal wave in Neptune's outer crust resulting from differential spin rates as between concentric shells of the ponderous planet. Moonbase had transmitted the hypothesis to Nereid along with the report of clearance. The plausible hypothesis was cover baloney. Although *Mazurka* was now classified as matter for *Internal Security*, neither the clearance nor the hypothesis got immediately to Ziska, and therefore not to Marta either.

They cut Mars orbit in four hours twenty-one minutes, and (with their accumulating velocity) Jupiter orbit in another twenty-seven minutes: that mighty sub-stellar satellite of Sol, sub-incandescent gaseous cloak sun-gleaming, was brilliantly visible a million miles off and going away fast. In still another five hours twelve minutes, braking all the

way, having loftily ignored Saturn and Uranus, they nosed in on the hither side of Neptune just outside the orbit of hurrying little Nereid which momentarily was on farside but would not stay there long.

The date (Sol/Centauri Convention) was 21 May 2475, three days after Keri's confrontation with her father; and the COMCORD imbalance against Senevendia was continuing to decimal upward.

Neptune had three satellites. Post-medieval telescopes, embarrassed by Erth's atmosphere, by 1948 had found only one, Moon-sized: they had named him Triton. A year later, a second had turned up, far out, having a dinky two hundred mile diameter, and ungodly slow (three and a half years planetary revolution): absurdly they named her Nereid in the face of her lethargy.

The third, the deep innermost satellite, appeared in the course of robot planetary exploration in 2003. She was an irregular rock-jag having sixty-nine kilometers mean girdle thickness and nearly a hundred sixty kilometers of length, whizzing close around Neptune once in two hundred minutes. Almost instantly the cultured astronomers paid homage to the humanities by christening the spritely new inner satellite Nereid, while the old sedate ex-Nereid was rechristened Doris.

It was on swift small inward Nereid, and not on slow fat outward Doris, that Marta had established the seat of Mare Stellarum in 2431.

Croyd sat hunched on a bench near the airlock at ship's maximum beam, a lock that opened on to what was hull-top relative to the orientation of ship's artigrav. He was suited up, with an atmospheric generator that was good for thirty-six hours in space or in uptime. His concentration was deep; and they were letting him alone, although only Marana knew what he was doing, and Marana didn't understand it.

After forty minutes of silence while the ship hovered motionless relative to Neptune's orbital velocity and rotation, Croyd lifted his head. "I have Marta past-located," he told them. "She cut our present position at 0307 hours 35 seconds on 18 January 2431, matching orbital velocity

with Nereid only this far outside. It accords with prior information: she heroically insisted on pioneering the Nereid outpost all by herself. Quite a dame, Great-Granddaughter Marta! On Nereid's previous pass, she wasn't there, so presumably she had just got her capsule into orbit. I'll check the next few times around—"

Three crewmen were befogged and Marana was enthralled as Croyd bent his head again. About a minute later he raised it. "She cut us repeatedly at two-hundred-minute intervals, but very squarely at 0233 hours 28 seconds on 19 January 2431. This is the pass I want. Better move out about a thousand kilometers—I'd hate to be clipped."

Marana issued the order, then demanded: "She cut our present *position*? Our *course*, you mean?"

Croyd already had his helmet on, but the transmitter allowed talking. "Cut our *position*. Passed right through us." He glanced around, smiling inside his fishbowl helmet: "Don't call Damage Control, Marana—we weren't here at the time." He sobered: "I could swing the transfer at the spacetime intersect, but last time I did that I nearly got it, and this time I don't have to. Marana, are your orders clear?"

"Yes, sir. I report to Nereid the loss of a superannuated fourth-class custodian, stores, who went outside with a line to check on a meteor hit, forgot to hook his line, lost his head, and jumped when another meteor hit. Then I send out two scouts to cruise in a fruitless search for the custodian. Meanwhile I move in toward Neptune on close accelerating orbit, and spend four hours in a criss-cross telemetric reconnaissance. I then report to Nereid that I have the flakes I need for the interference analysis, and I pick up my scouts and return to Erth to resume megalopolitan temposcansion."

"On the nose," said Croyd, on his feet. "Excuse me, I'm a bit eager. Did you complete the Chihattan scansion?"

"Yes, sir, while you were in Manhattan. Any special sequence for the other scansions?"

Croyd appreciated Marana's dark skin. "If you had your druthers, what megalopolis would you do next?"

"Senevendia City. My home town. But that's no

megalopolis—only a thousand square miles, and no more than nine million population.”

“It is, however, a constellation capital, and it’s on our agenda, and I don’t have any rationale for a priority order after Chihattan. Get Senevendia City next, then, since it’s your preference, and proceed to the others in any convenient order. And don’t leave any center until you get all of it. And ignore any further extraterrestrial disturbances—this was the only one I really wanted: the point was to get me on to Nereid.”

“Any orders about the ivisiradio equipment on Moon?” That was the proper name for what Mare Stellarum labeled their hypertelecom.

“I checked that crew today by visicom before we left the vicinity. They are going great guns, are in daily touch with Rab, are shooting instant pictures of celestial interest points: two days ago they shot Vega, not where she was twenty-six years ago, but where she is *now*. Their dummy installation upstairs is getting sneak inspections daily, our crew keeps thinking up new bugs to confuse the Mare Stellarum inspectors—”

“Bugs?”

“The latest was a creative dilly: counterspin friction. Forget ’em, Marana: what could you do if something went wrong? Attack Moonbase?”

“Well—”

“I know, you’d like to. Well: if you do finish all the scannings without hearing from me, check the Moon installation and see what they know about me. If they know nothing, have them check with Rab. If Rab knows nothing, find an excuse to go back to Senevendia and kill time with shore leave for a maximum of thirty days—then pick up the Moon apparatus and crew and return to Rab. Got it?”

“Got it, sir.”

“And take some shore leave tonight in Senevendia City. Morale, you know.”

“Right, sir.”

“Sync cutichrons.”

“0216 hours 30 seconds. Beep.”

“Beep. Cheers, Commander Marana.”

"Cheers, Mr. Croyd."

"Just call me Croyd, eh?"

"Thank you. Just call me Marana—or Dana."

The hatch closed behind him: in soundless space, with his feet he heard it clang-to. Then Croyd, for the first time in a long life, stood on the exterior hull of a ship in deep space—stood alone there in total airless night, feet held to hull only by minimal artigrav, facing into the pale glare of Neptune and otherwise in darkness.

His isolated position was only a means to further ends; yet a means situation can have end value, for a while, by reason of its aesthetic depth. Croyd, honestly thrilled yet not exalted but rather minimized, chose to stand there for a long while, opaquing his helmet Neptune-side so that he could visually inhale undistracted the measureless depth of the black star-crystalled universe that he now dwelt naked in.

An almost irresistible impulse pervaded him: tear off the helmet! Stand naked, then! He repressed it: this was not deep ecstasy, it was natural desire, but Man could not fulfill it. *Not yet!* Some day. . . .

He became aware of a puzzling impression that he stood partly upside-down on the bottom of the ship's hull and partly right-side up on top. Soon he understood: the ship was motionless with respect to Neptune, the planet's gravity tugged at him and was just barely overcome by the ship's minimal artigrav: thus Neptune was both above and below him, "down" being most generally defined as "toward the major center of gravity."

Cosmic desire grew potent. He would *not* be content to ride the tame mare *Mazurka!*

A gleam separated itself from the right side of the Neptune disc. He recognized that it was Nereid rushing toward him, pale-inwardly illumined by near Neptune and pale-outwardly by the Sol star more than four billion kilometers distant. Transiently he reflected that if space travel had been possible by fast express train at the twentieth-century close of the post-medieval era, by train it would have taken him nearly thirty million hours to get here from Erth—about four and a half millennia.

Sucking in breath, he launched himself free of *Mazurka*

and accelerated with his minirepulsor suit-thrust ahead of the Nereid-juggernaut, propelling himself at a blood-draining 11-g acceleration. Nereid was overtaking him relentlessly; and his angular thrust was at first only ten percent efficient, with a ninety percent vector diverted to keeping him away from the down-dragging Neptune mass, seventeen times the mass of Erth (but only .29 times the mean density). This rabbit-running ahead of the satellite was an unnecessary gambit, since the *Mazurka* could have carried him into safe flanking velocity before he pushed off, and a mortally dangerous gambit; but he *wanted* to do this. . . .

For a grueling eight minutes he jammed *g*'s into his losing race ahead of Nereid, with his angular efficiency continually growing as his velocity increased—but not, it seemed, fast enough to avoid being crushed by the hurtling rock called Nereid. He felt like a man on a handcar in front of the fast mail. Nereid was close behind him now, and he had let himself be dragged fairly down into her orbit, but she seemed to be gaining on him more slowly; and after two more minutes of exhausting *g*'s, Croyd had attained to her orbital velocity of 59,520 kilometers per hour (well under escape velocity for Neptune) and floated in freefall a scant hundred kilometers ahead of her.

At that near distance, behind him she was a whole planet.

Having won his self-dare, Croyd cut acceleration and braked slightly, dropping to a new orbit of his own about seventy kilometers inside that of Nereid. In this new orbit—safely in the clear of any mass other than a chance meteor—he uptimed to 2059 hours on 19 January 2431.

He happened to have his back to Neptune as he did so, he was gazing into starred space. As he timed in, abruptly space was cut off by the seeming of a gigantic craggy-glowing iceberg dead ahead of him. Cutting thrust, he drifted in orbital freefall. It was Nereid, all right, a mere seventy-seven kilometers outside his personal orbit; he was radially between Nereid and Neptune: he had miscalculated his timing by perhaps thirty minutes—had he uptimed while still ahead of Nereid on the same orbit, she would have engulfed him.

Croyd drifted for minutes, collecting himself. This was

the year 2431, before Nereid's establishment as Mare Stellarum headquarters. The irregular jagged moon rock Nereid was just that, no more: barren, dead, pre-life, an airless moonshard.

He was swept by an irrelevant realization: now, in up-time space, he *could* swim naked!

Releasing the rekamatic fastening of his helmet, he flung the headpiece back on its hinge, deeply inhaling and exhaling the absolute void of uptime space. Deliberately then he unsuited. Clinging to the suit with his left hand as it orbited beside him in freefall, with the other hand he removed shoes and socks and stuffed them into the suit; and he caused his overalls and underwear to fall away, pushing them too inside. Spread-eagling like a space diver, spinning slowly, for many minutes he played raw Dedalus floating between Nereid and Neptune.

Then some mucous twitch made him cough slightly; and he remembered that even his much-expanded uptime potential left him only twenty-five minutes without breathing. He turned attention to his purpose, without forsaking his demi-divine nakedness. Opening the tool belt on his suit with his free hand, he produced a length of cord and lashed the suit to his back in two places, around his upper chest just under his arms, and around his midriff. Gingerly then he activated the suit-thrust at one-tenth g: its twin steering nozzles were located in the middle of the suit's back between his cords. All held fast as he began to move toward Nereid. He picked up acceleration until he had reached two g: Nereid overhung him, filled his sky, began to reveal crag highlights and cave shadows in the Neptune glow. (Light somehow persisted in uptime; and this, with an assumption of rekamatic wave latencies in galaxy-strutted space, squared with his developing i-ray hypothesis. . . .)

Deflecting nozzles, he dodged around Nereid and moved in again on her other side after a swift hundred-mile circumvention of her forty-mile half-girth; and then he had put her bulk between himself and Neptune.

Cutting acceleration, he allowed the gravity of Neptune and Nereid to pull him gently down toward the rock: perforce he did this semi-backward feet-first, using a hand torch for light, spreading his legs and peering down be-

tween them to see where he might alight. (Gravity persisted in uptime; only, nothing but an invader from actuality could be affected by it.)

Partly by good luck, he settled on the loftiest crag that he had been able to see as he came down, and it had a fairly flat crest of some twenty meters diameter. Instantly he cut torch and jets and stood raw, a natural man in space, bare feet planted on barren rock, weight of suit scarcely noticeable on this tiny mass whose freefall orbit canceled the pull of Neptune.

So standing on a place where *down* was just perceptibly where his feet were, he scanned space, waiting for his eyes to adjust. He was neither cold nor warm: in uptime there is neither heat nor its absence. Presently after-images of torchlight subsided, and there was nightblack, and then starpoints one by one winked into being. He looked downward all around him from atop the crag: there was a halo of pallor around the edges of Nereid in one direction, total darkness in the other; and this meant that Nereid had passed around to the night side of Neptune, away from the sun.

Croyd was a man standing naked on the edge of the universe, looking outward.

On an impulse, he launched himself outward with a leg-thrusting leap. It was escape velocity for Nereid. He floated lazily outbound from everything.

A glimmer to his left caught his attention: it seemed to be nearby, and it was the wrong color for a star. Activating jets, he moved cautiously toward it. At about the same instant he felt a vague sense of debilitation, and he remembered that he had not breathed during about half an hour. Cutting jets, he began to fumble with the knots that bound his suit to him—and then he had a better idea. Reaching behind him into the helmet hole, he unsnapped the fastenings of the air hose, brought hose end around to his mouth, activated the generator, and breathed with deep leisure through his mouth for several minutes—reflecting amusedly that he was altering uptime by putting live CO<sub>2</sub> into space here, and that the alteration could have no consequences whatsoever.

Refreshed and ready for another thirty minutes raw,



again he moved through emptiness outward-laterally toward the light point. When it resolved itself into several points, he knew he had located his original uptime quarry. He hit it with his torch—nobody could notice. As he suspected, he was hovering a few hundred meters from a spacecraft that was little more than a cylinder with low-power maneuvering repulsors, released here by a mother craft and to be recovered by a mother craft: at the moment, the repulsors were dark and dead, the cylinder was in freefall orbit adjacent to Nereid, the light he'd seen emanated from a row of portholes along a flank.

Croyd sighed: to enter, he would have to wait until the airlock opened, and whip inside before it could close on him and kill him. It might be a long wait, which meant suiting up. The fingers of his left hand fumbled again with a knot—and then unexpectedly his floodlight revealed a hinge hatch hanging open from the belly of the cylinder.

He jetted toward the hatch and hovered just below it, using his torch to peer into the airlock. The inner hatch cover was closed. This meant that the occupant of the cylinder was now outside. On a sudden warning hunch, he jetted away from the hatch—and just in time, for the eternally destructive mass of the suited occupant whished past him into the hatch and clanged the cover shut.

How careless can you get? How many times on a single space junket can you be so careless? He felt a rare bristling thrill at the nape of his neck: it spread down his spine and dissipated, leaving his legs weak. He hung indecisive beneath the uptime belly of the cylinder.

Too late!

. . . Except, of course, that there is no such thing as *too late* in uptime where recurrence is eternal.

Croyd took time to breathe. Then he uptimed progressively until the hatch reopened in reverse time and the suited figure backed out and crab-scuttled away into space. Putting himself on a time diagonal, he held the figure frozen in space while he moved leisurely thither. He climbed onto its insentient back, wrapped arms and legs around it, and let go of time.

His human steed jetted him violently to the cylinder and into the hatch, the cover slammed silently shut behind them, the inner cover opened, he was pulled through, the

inner cover closed behind them, and he was in the large living-working space of the cylinder, still clinging to the back of its captain. Convulsively he thrust himself away and stood clear, unconscious of his suit-papoosed nakedness, while the captain unscrewed and discarded *her* helmet, revealing a handsome-sober broad-cheekboned fair young Nordic face.

Before him, Marta Evans, already (in this forty-four-year oldtime) Chairman of Mare Stellarum and celibate forty-two-year-old matriarch of the Evans commercial empire, completed her unsuiting and stood like a Valkyrie in bare feet and a diaphanous thigh-length shift, muscle-tone of youth, skin tone of youth, asexually female, as beautiful as a snow goddess and stared directly at him, and considered him.

Croyd, like appled Adam, became stunningly aware of his own nakedness. And she sighed and came toward him, lips parted a little. That she was his great-granddaughter, what did *that* matter? What had it mattered to Enki in the garden. . . .

Just before she touched him, he cursed and leaped nimbly aside: her practically infinite mass passed lethally through the place where he had been, and went on to the kitchen panel where she dialed herself a hot toddy.

He muttered: *Who but a Croyd Thoth or a Homo sapiens could goof so many lethal times in one sortie and live to kick himself?*

He tackled then the cord knots in earnest, and dressed, and suited, and helmeted, and breathed. Then once again he climbed upon the uptime-rigid back of Marta who did not know he was there, who indeed knew nothing since her mind no longer dwelt in this far-uptime body-trance; and he clung to her and let his mind-reach explore the traces of her conscience in the traces of her brain.

Five minutes later, he had confirmed his suspicion that in her relative youth in 2431, Marta had still been an honest idealist.

Well: now he was on the threshold of uptime Nereid, as yet uninhabited—and nearly *on* the tiny planetoid. Tiny; and yet its total surface provided as much space for a top-level governmental capital as a good-sized Earth

megalopolis. And if he *should* get in, the uptime indications were clear: in her youth, in the youngness of her middle age, she *had* been decent and sharp, she *had* cracked the whip.

What might renewal of her youth now do for her? It was a hell of a gamble. . . .

Anyhow, hanging off Nereid in space here, the uptime-exploratory part of his mission was terminated. He would have enjoyed taking uptime time to follow the progress of this courageous woman who had insisted on doing her own solitary stake-out of Nereid as a potential galaxy headquarters for Mare Stellarum, and who had gone on to drive it through and built it up and make it invincible. Perhaps eventually he would do this, if it should stay high enough among his priorities. But uptiming takes actual time, and there was time-tagged work to be done.

Therefore, instead, Croyd uptimed to the hours-earlier moment when Marta had suited up for the sortie from which he had caught her coming in. And as soon as she had her helmet on, he climbed aboard her again and let her take him out through the airlock. But once in space, he kicked free; and while she descended onto barren Nereid, he shot out into space a fairly safe hundred kilometers off Nereid and downtimed to 18 May 2475—three days prior to actuality.

At that moment, in Senevendia, Keri Andhra was being informed by her father of a dismal immediate imminence. Croyd was multi-crossing that date, not knowing its significance.

Holding the time stratum, giving every mass a wide berth, letting uptime flow by at a high multiple of time's actuality rate (to minimize the amount of actuality that he was using up), he moved in on elaborately superstructured Nereid, now long established as Mare Stellarum headquarters, potently bidding also to become Interplanetary Union headquarters, out here where Neptune's leisurely solar orbit apposited that headquarters successively each one hundred sixty-five years to every star system in the universe. And now he clung to one craft or another and one human or another until he had got himself into the private solarium of old, old Marta Evans.

There he observed her comings and goings, sampling

them over a period of several days in the course of a quarter-hour, until he was sure of two pertinent facts: (1) old Marta had settled into fixed habits, and her solarium schedule was among them; (2) one secretary, a middle-aged man named Berber, handled practically all of her appointments and served her confidentially.

Croyd was now ready for the semifinal step. Downtiming to just behind the surface tension of the actuality bubble on 21 May 2475, he sat beside the motionless Chairman of Mare Stellarum on her solarium chaise longue (her bulk left his thin buttocks precarious perch) and relaxed for several minutes, breathing slowly and deeply, until he felt sure that he was ready for a maximum uptime-period without air.

He then unsuited; and he carefully laid out the suit on the floor beside the chaise longue on the side where Secretary Berber could see it when he would enter. Berber would *not* see it, of course, because the suit would remain anchored in this instant of uptime, never to emerge into actuality; but the whimsy pleased Croyd, who had to put the suit *somewhere*.

Actuality is, in some theoretical philosophies and perhaps commonly in naïve supposition, an instantaneous instant, a tempoplane without duration dividing past from future.

In fact, as Croyd knew from experience, actuality has appreciable duration. It is the period during which an event becomes so definite that its outcome is practically certain; and it terminates when the event has become unambiguously definite. Uptime begins at this point; and in uptime the event, already definite, begins progress toward eternal unchangeability as the mass of its trace grows acceleratively more ponderous—and its magnitude deceleratively smaller.

Croyd had now the difficult task of performing subtle alterations upon uptime. What he had to do could not be done in present actuality, for someone would spot him doing it; nor could it be done in hard uptime, for then it would be too late to make any changes whatsoever.

He had therefore to operate on the tenuous margin between actuality and uptime—the indefinite microfractional

second after events had become definite but before their mass could freeze that way. His presence and his operations *then* might cause some vague dis-ease in the minds of the people upon whose brains he was operating; but the foggy botheration would be neither noticed nor remembered.

Marta was here, reclining on the chaise longue. He positioned himself behind her head. His mind reach, more slender than the filament that one uses to dissect a virus, capillared into her brain. Long practice in his own brain during years of inwardly conscious paralysis taught him how to find, systematically, the rank of cells in her memory banks which correlated communications with time references. There he inscribed latent pseudo-memories, easily recallable, of three recent communications from an unknown erthling named Croyd.

The process required eighteen minutes, longer than he had anticipated because Marta's brain was powerful and resisted interference. His unbreathing vitality was flagging, he had no time to lose. Progressively he uptimed until Berber was present; he then latched on to Berber's back and accelerated both of them downtime to the hinterland of actuality, at an instant when Berber happened to be at his desk in Marta's antechamber reviewing commitments for the remainder of her day. In Berber's brain Croyd engraved pseudo-memory of the same three dated communications.

Judging by his acute physical discomfort, at least thirty-one minutes!

Springing away from Berber, Croyd adopted a relaxed stance before the secretary's desk and let himself drift down into actuality.

When the aide saw him, Croyd was breathing heavily.

# Rehab Action Four

## CONFRONTATION WITH ESTABLISHMENT GRANDEUR

*Nereid, 21 May*

Aggression is mammalian-genetic, and Man is a tool-maker, and his most glamorous tools are weapons. If a weapon-tool exists, he will improve it; if an improved weapon-tool exists, he will use it. As long as any sort of weapon at all is permitted to exist, no solemn inter-constellational resolution will prevent a catastrophic development at the hands of some Faust-fool.

—Nike Pan, *Plato and the Stars* (2343)



Marta Evans, Chairman of Mare Stellarum, de facto ruler of Erthworld and potential de facto ruler of the germinating Interplanetary Union, smoothed back the thin white hair that she scorned to tint or thicken or bewig (they never *had* found a reliable way to regrow it in an oldster) and let her hands pass on back to clasp her thick recumbent neck, elevating her flabbily substantial breasts and her muscular pelvis (all decently covered), offering

her otherwise bare body to the reflected pallor of Neptune filtered through the solarium dome and then gently amplified by crystal refractors until this pallor became subdued Florida-type sunlight. Baggy eyes closed, she refrained from listening to the audio newsken that skinny secretary Berber, fully clothed, was playing for her. Instead, with Neptune's glow warming her eyeballs through eyelid skin, she yielded up her brain to semi-hallucinations of strong young men who she had never known.

Marta was eighty-six. Science had retarded her senescence; it had not defeated her senescence.

The newsken ceased. Berber said: "Word comes from outside that a Mr. Croyd is here to see you."

The almost hairless brows of Marta furrowed, the eyes stayed closed. "I seem to remember the name. But I don't know why."

"He has written three times for a private appointment. The last letter came to your personal attention."

Marta's eyes came open. "How the hell did he get out *here*? Who authorized transport?"

"I'd have to check. Shall I—"

"Forget it." Marta touched a button that sprang the chair back and the Marta-back erect. "If he could get here, he deserves to come in—with precautions. What does he want?"

"A job, Madame."

"As what?"

"He specified, responsible and interplanetary. No more."

"In, then," she ordered, seeing briefly to the pectoral and pelvic coverage.

Berber signed. A door opened. Croyd hobbled in.

Seeing his age, old Marta dismissed modesty and dreaming.

Croyd came *all* the way in and stood beside her chair. Had he had a hat, it would have been in hand only by reason of courtesy. He was about as erect as a man his age could be.

Marta, quietly: "We are light hours from Erth and light years from Alpha Centauri. How did you get here?"

"I flew." His voice did not quaver old; Marta got an odd displaced sense of youth.

She demanded: "From where? In what? On whose authority?"

"From Erth; in a ship; on my authority."

She had drawn up a leg, she was leaning toward him. "I take it you're a rich old bastard. What did you want to see me for?"

"I wrote three times. The last time, your secretary replied that I would be welcome if I could get here. I got here."

Marta let her leg sag and breathed out air. "The reply you received was supposed to be the ultimate brush-off. Just our luck that you had to be rich enough to hire a space ferry and bribe your way through our defenses. Get your business done and go away."

Croyd glanced at Berber. "This is confidential—and unpleasant. Is he a confidant? And are we bugged?"

"Talk!" Marta bit.

His hands were in his long pants pockets. "It is three to one that within a month, COMCORD or the Penultimate Trigger or the Z-sting itself will go neurotic and hit Erth with a Z-strike somewhere. But the guardian of Erth, Mare Stellarum, is so riddled with intercompetitive bureaucracy that its chairman has lost control of her own ministries. Consequently, *this* total incredibility: nobody in Mare Stellarum, including its chairman, knows where the Penultimate Trigger or the Z-sting itself are located! Now you know what I know that I shouldn't. Do you still want me to go away?"

She frowned at him. Her lips had not perceptibly paled, possibly because they were rouged.

He added: "I wouldn't advise killing me, either, because of what I can do for you."

"What can you do for me, Mr. Croyd?"

Compressing lips, he stared at Berber. "Go away, Berber," said Marta lazily, "and cut the bug." That was how Croyd knew he had touched her.

Berber was gone. "Sit down," Marta commanded.

Croyd sat on a nearby armchair.

"Drink?"

"Zac and branch." Out here on Nereid, he wondered whether she would use dehydrated water.

She dialed two highballs and half-reached one to him,



making him come and get it. She asserted: "We are private, except that this same dial has activated a tape. This tape will continue to record as long as it hears my voice at least once in thirty seconds. After my voice stops, if I do not deactivate this tape—a thing which only I can do—in thirty seconds it will sound an alarm. So if you choose to kill me, do it an instant after I have said something, and then you will have nearly thirty seconds to escape."

"Very good." He nodded, back in his seat. "Relatively speaking, the allowance is generous. I shall talk in short bursts; pray come in promptly when I pause. Anyhow, I do not choose to kill you. I choose to rejuvenate you."

Marta stared at him. She began to laugh.

He remarked: "I trust your laughter counts as your voice."

She nodded, laughing. Placidly he waited until she quieted. He then inquired: "Amused at me, or at yourself?"

Marta went stormy-browed. "Amused obviously at the notion of a fossil like yourself proposing to rejuvenate anybody. Stop talking nonsense and get to your business. You have won this audience with an illegal entry, two wild charges, and one insane prediction about COMCORD. What are your proofs?"

"First, the question of your control over your bureaucracy. I could break your heart with instances, but let me give you just one. Are you familiar with the frigate *Mazurka* of Rab, and with her mission?"

"You tell me."

"Her announced mission was dual—to plant an experimental hypertelem station on Moon, and to sample Earth's megalopolitan tempopatterns. Were you personally aware of this?"

"Presumably it came to me in my daily summary from External Security."

"Whether or not this happened, should not External Security have notified Internal Security?"

She was gazing at him. "And?"

"And should you not have been advised immediately by both security ministries—and particularly by your omni-

scient aide Dr. Ziska—of any and all departures from flight plan?"

"Well?"

"Then were you advised that a dozen hours ago the *Mazurka* was cruising off Nereid—and that this cruise had been approved by Moonbase?"

Marta's bare feet slapped the floor as she snapped to erect sitting position sidewise on the chaise longue.

"Check it with Ziska," he advised, and sipped.

Marta pressed a button and snapped into the intercom: "Berber—get Ziska on the phone, soonest." Disconnecting, she gazed at Croyd with something faintly resembling alarm. "I am not so naïve," she observed, "as to suppose that you will tell me how you know all this. While we are waiting for Ziska, suppose you move to the COMCORD question."

Leading from probability-inference in a context of factual ignorance, Croyd prodded: "You are already worried about COMCORD. That was what got me this audience."

"It gets you no more, unless you give more. What do you have on COMCORD?"

"Dr. Ziska is your Minister of Internal Security. You are waiting for his call because I put the finger on a failure of this part of your creaking bureaucracy. If there is anything wrong with COMCORD, this is also a failure of his part of your bureaucracy. When Dr. Ziska calls, ask him about COMCORD."

Her eyes narrowed. "You are hedging, and I think you've played out your bluff. What would you do if I were to call for help?"

"There's an easy way to find out. Keep quiet for thirty seconds—no, twenty-five now."

Pursing lips, she waited, watching him. Sipping, he watched her.

At the end of the thirtieth second of her silence, raucous hooting resounded in the solarium. Croyd raised eyebrows and disappeared, zac and all. Marta was on her feet, ogling the point of evanishment, as the army poured in.

"I'm over here," called Croyd from behind the soldiers. They spun and parted to reveal him standing by the door where they had entered. He hobbled forward, not looking

at them. Coming up to Marta, he told her: "That's what I'd do."

She burst out: "What do you want of me?"

"At the moment, more zac—"

Berber came in on the intercom. "I have Dr. Ziska waiting."

Two squads of soldiers continued to stand there, arms at the ready. "Well done," Marta told their lieutenant. "It was only a sneak inspection. Take them away, sir." He saluted, and they left.

She told Croyd, her tone a shade less preemptory: "You'll have to wait a bit for your second zac. Please move over there where you are beyond the range of the visicom."

Moving, he queried: "Are you sure you want me present?"

"Very sure. And the recorder is still going. Berber, put Ziska on."

Dr. Ziska, Minister of Internal Security and second only to Marta in Mare Stellarum power, materialized in the middle of the room, head and shoulders only, the torso tattering like a vignette into nothing. He was dark, long-faced, hard-smile-mouthed, stoop-shouldered, slight. Herod had called him "the most dangerous man in Mare Stellarum—and the most ambitious—and lean-hard, like Cassius or like Caesar." Ziska's voice was a hard-soft semi-hissing resonance: "Ziska here, Madame Chairman—in my office. Do you require retinal confirmation?"

"Do you?"

"No, Madame."

"Then neither do I. What I do require is your report on the frigate *Mazurka*."

"The—frigate *Mazurka*?" He was undisturbed, merely questioning.

"From Rab, Ziska, from Rab—remember?"

"That would be *External Security*, Madame."

"External Security did not routinely notify you when a frigate from Rab entered Erth-space on a research mission dealing with tempopatterns?"

The fixed Ziska smile did not change, but his eyes nar-

rowed. "Madame, there is some point to this questioning. I wish to know the point."

"I will state the point when I am ready. For now, we will disconnect while you get yourself aligned on this question. I want everything about the *Mazurka* right up to the latest report with all the timing details. Get back with me in minutes. Out."

Ziska's image faded. Marta called Berber, ordered a drink for Croyd, then floppily paced, not looking at her challenger. . . .

Ziska came back in, and he was tightly disturbed. "It appears that External Security did pass the matter of the *Mazurka* to middle echelons of my department. They did not bring this rather minor matter to my personal attention."

She froze: "Tempopattern research by Rab in our space? *Minor*?"

Croyd sipped, smiling grim. At eighty-six, his great-granddaughter still could put a clever-powerful subordinate through a wringer. . . .

She cut off Ziska's beginning rejoinder. "Let that go for now. Go on with the activities of this frigate."

Ziska was holding cool. "I can tell you now that when last reported, the frigate was continuing her tempopattern scansion of Chihattan. And I agree that the tempopattern aspect is peculiarly interesting to you and to me; I remarked only that my subordinates considered it minor."

"When was that last report?"

Without expression: "The office of my deputy on Nereid received this report at 2021 hours last night."

"Oh? What was the hour of the direct observation embodied in this report?"

He cleared throat faintly, but his reply was solid. "The observation was made at 1030 yesterday morning. However, we both realize that the report then had to be channeled through Moonbase, and of course that four hours are needed for transmission to Nereid."

"In the interest of full candor, Ziska, is there anything you would wish to add to those comments about time in transit?"

Ziska was cold-grim. "I would wish to add that the 1030 observation could have been transmitted to Moon in

seconds, and immediate transmission to Nereid could then have reached our offices no later than 1500 yesterday afternoon rather than five and a half hours later, and the priority of this matter admittedly should have been fairly high. We have not done well on this one, Madame; we will be doing better, as on other matters we *have* done better."

"Be sure that you do, Ziska. I remind you that all ministries have been ordered to clear through you as my immediate aide; and this confers upon you rather extensive responsibility for the Mare Stellarum organization. And I am suggesting that this organization, which I have so extensively entrusted to you with your eager consent, is possibly too big—or if not too big, at least too clumsy. If your own ministry was bungling this matter, External Security should have jacked you up; and if External Security did not do so, then you ought to feel answerable. My God, Ziska—between 1030 and 2021, that frigate could have got all the way out here to Nereid!"

"Madame, the fleet would have—"

"Intercepted? Notified? Are you sure the fleet would have done? Are you sure *you* would have *known*? I am going to tell you something; and if it is true, it means that your organization *is* clumsy, if it doesn't mean something worse. I have reason to believe that a few hours ago the Rab frigate *was* cruising off Nereid. Did you know it?"

His thin black brows came down hard: "I think it has to be false."

"How do I know it is not true? How do I know you do not *know* that it *is* true?"

"Madame, I am not one who likes to be baited."

"I am not baiting you. Answer my question."

The Ziska face actually managed a faintly rueful smile, and the hands were spread. "Look, Marta, it is perfectly obvious that I can't answer *that* complicated question, and I admit that you are catching me with a lot of egg on my face. And yet I *cannot* believe that a ship from Rab would be cruising off Nereid without my knowledge. May I take a moment to start an immediate check?"

She drummed fingernails on her chaise longue where she had resumed her seat, but with her feet floored; she was looking up at his disturbed midair image. "Pray do,

and we can continue talking while your check takes place."

Ziska gazed at her an instant, then again cut audio and turned to give silent orders into his intercom. Turning back to Marta, he said: "The check is in progress. What is there further?"

"A good deal of possibly great moment. Ziska, don't you find anything queer about the fact that the *Mazurka* was assigned to survey megalopolitan tempopatterns?"

"I beg your pardon?" This time, Croyd thought the Ziska lips had lost a little color.

Glancing swiftly at Croyd, Marta asserted: "I sense a COMCORD connection. Be good enough to state the present condition of COMCORD."

The Ziska eyes narrowed. "Do you perhaps have a guest?"

Marta frowned—partly, Croyd judged, because her eyes had made a tactical slip. "That is my concern."

"You should realize that it is also mine."

"If I say it is not your concern, it is not."

"You choose not to reveal your guest?"

Croyd reflected that if he had been Marta, he would have sent this Croyd away long ago.

Ziska, now brow-frowning viciously while his lips held the frozen smile, reached outside the video. "Madame, I have activated my recorder, I want the situation on record before I respond to you. This is Dr. Ziska, speaking at 1819 hours on 21 May 2475 Sol/Centauri Convention, in visicom conversation with Chairman Marta Evans, both of us on Nereid. Chairman Evans, I understand you to insist that I state the present condition of COMCORD, although my statement will be heard by your guest whose identity you will not reveal. Do you affirm this order?"

Marta said stolidly: "I affirm it. My guest must hear you. But your recorder may not. Disconnect your recorder."

His hand went out again: "It is disconnected, there will be no record for me. Well." He looked down a moment, collecting thoughts. He looked up: "During about two weeks I have been watching a COMCORD imbalance against Senevendia which began at 0.6. Yesterday after-

noon the COMCORD central instrumentation showed that this imbalance had grown to 2·1; and as of 1310 hours today, it is holding steady. It is of course not critical, it should subside in the natural course of interconstellational events."

Croyd twanged deep inside. Hunch hit! But he got no glow from it.

Marta was on her feet again. "A—2·1 grievance imbalance? Only four tenths short of critical, only nine tenths short of strike-activation? And you did not inform me?"

He coughed. "It cannot possibly go critical, and you had given me no orders to inform you, and we are on it. This is entirely a question which the Internal Security Ministry can and should handle."

"If your ministry does not handle it rather promptly, COMCORD may activate the Z-effect, and we will have on our hands an enshrouded Senevendian constellation. By the way, Ziska my trusted all-knowing subordinate—do you know where the Penultimate Trigger and the Z-sting are located?"

"Since COMCORD cannot possibly go critical, it does not seem pertinent where they may be located—"

A low bell tone sounded. "Excuse me," said Ziska; and again he cut audio and listened. His face darkened. He spoke angrily to his intercom; Croyd, who read lips, mentally collected a bet. Convulsively Ziska disconnected his intercom and sat for a moment with his head bowed in thought. Then he turned back to Marta, having mastered himself.

He asserted blandly: "At least in some of its components, my organization is clumsy. Your mysterious guest, who is doubtless your informant, will be maliciously pleased to learn that the *Mazurka* was in fact cruising off Nereid between 0230 and 0810 hours this morning. She was cleared by Moonbase to investigate a temporal disturbance pattern originating on Neptune. As of 1258 hours she was fleet-reported off Jupiter en route back to Erth, broadcasting all the way. The Moonbase clearance was reported to my offices here, the report reached us eight hours ago; it had progressed up three echelons and would have reached me in three more relays, whereupon I

would have informed you immediately. Corrective reorganizational action by me is indicated and will be taken. Anything else, Madame?"

Already the thirty-second alarm was bellowing and soldiers were pouring in. Ziska looked bewildered. Marta waved her hand high in the *halt* signal: "You guys get out of here!" she yelled, and snapped off her tattletale recorder. The soldiers retreated in disorder. Croyd, zac gone, sucked ice.

Sinking onto her chaise longue, Marta looked wearily up at the disconcerted Ziska. "Take your corrective action—and for the love of some god, keep me informed about the COMCORD thing! Out!"

She disconnected. She ran a hand back through her thin white hair.

She snapped on the intercom. "Berber. Find quarters for Mr. Croyd—VIP quarters. And get him to my apartment for dinner at 2000 hours. And arrange the dinner. You get on the phone—he'll come by himself."

She turned to Croyd; terribly distraught, somehow she managed to smile feebly. He was already on his feet. "By 2000 hours, Mr. Croyd," she uttered, "I will again be completely mistress of myself—so watch out. Go away, now."

Croyd was shaken by the blunt confirmation of Mare Stellarum's inefficiency, the ultimate unreliability of COMCORD which after three generations might have somehow gone lethal, and the now-established leadership ignorance as to the loci of the Penultimate Trigger and the Z-sting.

How could such ignorance be possible? Rather easily, as Herod had discovered and communicated to crestfallen Croyd who long ago had tried to avoid such mishaps in his COMCORD designing. The locations, being super-secret, had been known by the Executive Director and Vice-Director of COMCORD, transiently by others who worked technically with the devices, by the President and Secretary-General of Erthworld, and by the Chairman of Erth's governing corporation. This knowledge had always been associated with a hypnotic forget-command implanted in each knower, effective as soon as his knowledge was



no longer operationally necessary; in the cases of the five top executives, they must forget as soon as they had passed it along to successors. At the governmental change-over in 2430, the hypnotic command had malfunctioned in all five top executives, possibly because of unusual tension: they had forgotten *before*, rather than after, passing on the information. Somewhere on Erth, *someone* must know these loci; but evidently that someone was cloaking his knowledge.

While Croyd showered and dressed for dinner (donning clothes which amusingly were Ziska discards), Croyd's computer brain, which had regained youth efficiency far ahead of his body, was almost overheating itself; and his adrenalin was juicing his thalamus to scream at him for fast action. In fact, as he knew, hurry would be the worst possible route. Nevertheless, many times his thoughts turned to the ivisiradio installation on Moon: were *that* at his disposal now, he could instantaneously communicate with Marana aboard the *Mazurka*—though what he would tell Marana was hard to imagine. Ironically, Marana had chosen to go, of all places, to Senevendia—against which, as Ziska had just reported, a grievance imbalance was developing. And Marana would take shore leave there.

Just now, however, his action was with Marta. . . .

"How did you do it?" she asked over terminal wine.

"Do what?"

"Disappear."

"I uptimed."

"What's that?"

"To put it cheaply, I went into the past, and I returned to actuality at the right moment for a theatrical reentry."

Mara mused over her wine. "You are a remarkable old man."

"Thank you."

"What do you want of me, Croyd?"

"Shall I ask for money and power?"

Faintly mocking: "Not women?"

"The kind that money and power will get, money and power will get me. The kind that money and power won't get are in any case my problem."

Her brows softened slightly. "Is this to you a serious problem?"

His poker-face did not change. "Not unless I become interested in the latter sort of woman."

Her brows softened more. "Have you ever known a woman whom money or power could not get?"

"At least three."

"What about them?"

"One married another man. Two others died of old age—one after the other."

Down came her brows hard. "You pursue old women?"

"When I first knew them, they were young women."

Marta digested this. Then Marta began to look as though she would have been pale had it not been for the rouge. "Are you—*quite* old?"

"Crowding one hundred fifty-two." He overlooked the prior years for reasons of a BuPers identification which overlooked the prior years for reasons of credibility, and for other reasons.

"You look," she said slowly, "no older than I—or slightly younger."

"Then you should have seen me three weeks ago."

"You looked older?"

"Crowding one hundred fifty-two."

She thought a while about that. He refilled their glasses, she did not notice. At length she inquired of her wine: "Can you really rejuvenate me?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Just as I am rejuvenating myself. The process is accelerating, soon I will be in my middle thirties. I will stop there, it is a good age. Meanwhile I have learned how to project the process."

"That's where I want to be—in my middle thirties. How long would it take?"

"A few weeks, a few months. It is hard to say. Less than a year, for sure."

She looked up warily. "Are there—any special entailments?"

"No male-female obligations."

Flushing, she looked down. "I know that seems a silly question from an old woman. But you say you are getting

younger, and you wish to make me younger. Either your proposal is silly, or my question is not silly."

"Your question is not silly. But that is not in my mind."

She looked up to meet his eyes, and hers were hard. "Then what *are* my obligations?"

"To give me responsible assignments for which I report directly to you."

Marta lit a long cigarette with an expensive old-fashioned match and considered the flame. Blowing it out with exhaled smoke, she stated: "Among the many factors that complicate your proposal, I will mention five. Such an appointment would create personnel jealousies. Your identity, your past, has not been cleared. Responsible assignments are usually dangerous assignments. Responsible assignments require information that not everyone should have. Finally, if you go skylarking, when do you make me young?"

"Among the many factors that simplify your complications, I will mention five. There is nothing you can ever do that will not create personnel jealousies, so you may as well do this. My identity and my past are matters of full record at your BuPers, indexed with retinal identifications: take my retinal index, shoot it to Erth, read the record. This afternoon I demonstrated one competency with respect to danger; and I have some others, including just plain nerve-and-muscle stuff. If you want to, you can feed me any necessary secret information with a hypnoformer, associating this input with a timed or situational moment for complete erase and an inhibition against revealing it to any except selected persons. Finally, to make you young, I do not always have to be physically with you, provided only that we set up certain rapport conditions."

Marta silently smoked.

He leaned toward her. "What I want to do is to clear away the cholesterol from your physiology—and at the same time, to clear away the cholesterol from your Mare Stellarum."

Marta smoked the cigarette all the way down. Dropping her hands dead, she stared at the table, querying: "What is your connection with the Rab frigate *Mazurka*?"

"I was carried aboard as a fourth-class custodian, stores.

I was lost off Nereid. That's how I managed to get out here."

"How did you get aboard in the first place?"

"Connections. Herod admires Thoth Evans; I knew Dr. Evans."

"You *knew*—"

"I think he was your great-grandfather?"

"He *is* my great-grandfather. He is alive."

"But still in the tank?"

"As of my latest information, yes."

"I understand that he went into the tank in the same year as I."

"Possibly. For him it was 2400; I don't know yet about *your* tank. Fascinating that both of you have been tanked!"

"It is a queer sort of linkage between old friends. However, at age 152, I am considerably younger than he."

She mused.

She told him: "As to my five difficulties, you have satisfied me on three. I will now check the fourth, and then we will test the fifth."

Her hand flashed into her cleavage, produced a palm-fitting device, aimed it at his right eye, and flooded his retina with light. "Good," she grunted; "you did not blink. How did you inhibit the blink?"

"By not being surprised. But you'd better telesend immediately, since the round-trip information between Nereid and Erth will take about eight hours four minutes at this time of year, without counting BuPers search time. Too bad you don't trust me—I have a device which would make the round trip practically instantaneous."

"Oh? How instantaneous is practically?"

"You couldn't clock it with a cadmium timer."

She shrugged, arose, went to a wall, removed a tiny capsule from the retina photo gun, inserted the capsule into a wall receptacle, replaced the gun in her bosom, returned, sat, lit another cigarette, thought.

He suggested: "If that's bruising your breasts, you may as well take it out—you won't be needing it again."

Absently she removed the gun and laid it aside.

He asked her gently: "Do you know how COMCORD works?"

She glanced up, defensive. "Of course. There are—" She paused. She looked down. "Not really." She sucked on the cigarette.

He pressed: "We've established that you've lost both the Z-sting and the Penultimate Trigger. But granting that, do you even know *how* the Z-sting imposes the Z-effect on a particular portion of Erth?"

Resolutely she looked up. "When an imbalance reaches 3-0, COMCORD activates the Penultimate Trigger, which activates the Z-sting, which emits Z-waves targeted on a particular metropolitan or megalopolitan tempopattern—"

Her mouth clamped shut. Her eyes widened. Her cigarette fell to the nonflammable tablecloth. Slowly she rose to her feet, gripping the table, leaning toward him.

"I know," he said quietly. "The *Mazurka*."

She rumbled: "It may be the merest coincidence. Nevertheless, if your ID comes through stainlessly, I am going to assign you to Ziska."

"And if it does not?"

She sank back into her seat. "Regretfully, I shall have to have you killed."

"Will I die," he inquired, "before you understand the relationship between the Z-effect and the *Zeitgeist*?"

She straightened in her seat. "This is a *new* riddle. The *Zeitgeist* is the Epoch-Spirit, the Timeghost. How is that old idea connected with the Z-effect?"

"You are well informed, Madame Chairman. Here is some further information. Zeelof, in a late memoir obscurely published, confessed that the old idea of the *Zeitgeist* had put him on the track of the Z-effect, on the principle that many an old superstition can be distilled into scientifically operational theory. He made an analogy between wound-healing moldy bread and penicillin. The Z-effect, he concluded, was a kind of homogenization of negative *Zeitgeist* analyzed by science into its inexact random causation and distilled into precise controllable results. Madame, your concern about the Z-effect appears to be concern about a spirit. Do you then believe in spirits?"

Her eyes were narrow. "The *Zeitgeist* was *then*

*comprehended* as a spirit. The Z-effect, however, is scientifically real, and therefore it is material."

"It is scientifically real, but I would not count on its materiality."

"Why not?"

"What do you know about Plato's world-soul?"

"That Plato was a mythopoeic ass."

"He was a myth-making philosopher, but no ass. Some of his intuitions have suggested modern discoveries of tremendous significance. One such intuition was his concept of a world-soul. He thought that the Creative God or *demiurgos*, having created the world, installed a soul in it, to make it a perfect animal; and this soul, in the center of the world, pervaded the world to its outer bounds. The soul, said Plato, was the finest of all created natures, akin to the gods. Are you seeing anything, Madame Chairman?"

"Nothing."

"Well: should it be that this world-soul, like human souls or minds, shifts its interest and world views from time to time or from epoch to epoch, then its predispositional contexture at any given epoch might be called a *Zeitgeist* or Spirit of the Time."

"Some university seems to have taught me in my childhood that there was once such an idea abroad in Europe. But I do not remember that it was hooked onto Plato."

"It was not; I am doing so. Now. Plato's primary reference was to the universe when he spoke of the world; but I am going to apply this compound *Weltgeist-Zeitgeist* to the planet Erth. Recall that every planet which has been adequately investigated has proved to be alive, not in a biological sense, but as a plastic unit undergoing holistic change. Erth, for example, consists grossly from the center outward of a hard core so rigid as to be plastic-hot, a fluid epicore-layer like molten lava, a dense mantle of extremely hard materials which again are semirigid plastic, and a crust which like an epidermis is relatively brittle and therefore highly seismic. So even beneath its biologically vital surface, Erth is alive—"

"Hideously you are stretching the meaning of the word."

"Not too hideously, when you consider that every particle of its matter is atoms of energy. And I really should proceed on outward: hydrosphere, troposphere, stratosphere, mesosphere, ionosphere, Van Allen radiation belts—all must be considered as quasi-organs of the pseudo-organism, since all interact in its total behavior."

"I am listening." The voice was bland, bored; but she was wholly attentive.

"Suppose, just as a wholly material hypothesis, that the interaction of all these components should produce a field which would be particularly sensitive to and reactive with the *biosphere* and above all the *noosphere*. Suppose that when the intake of this field from the *noosphere* with respect to a developing human trend would cross a field threshold, abruptly this field would go practically total on that trend and would force most of the *noosphere* either to bow to the trend or be broken—a thing that has seemed to be happening time after time in history, producing the catch phrase *It's in the air*. Would it not be appropriate to call such a field a *Zeitgeist*?"

"But wouldn't that require that the *Zeitgeist* be intelligent?"

"Not at all, merely responsive-reactive. The proposition is that a world constellation can maintain viability only when the *Zeitgeist* is affable, and it can dominate only when the *Zeitgeist* is enthusiastic. In our twenty-fifth century lore, the tone of the *Zeitgeist* is set primarily by the gestalt of megalopolitan tempopatterns. When a tempopattern alters, this influences the mood of the *Zeitgeist*. The lost vicious Z-sting is designed to use programmed rekamatic waves to alter the tempopattern of a target-constellation, with its ten or fifteen COMCORD-satellites, in such a way that a homogenized *Zeitgeist* will enshroud that constellation for up to ten years.

"It is, Madame Chairman, a technological use of suprafine field mechanics to invoke what amounts to an Irish curse; and even if penalties are merited, an Irish curse strikes me as being a bit on the stiff side—especially since the Erthworld President and the Mare Stellarum Chairman are helpless against it and don't even know how it works or where it is."

She brooded over the last clause. She came heavily to her feet; he rose also.

With dignity she told him: "Be in my office at 0600 hours. You are excused for this evening."

"Thank you, Madame," he returned, bowing slightly; and he headed for the exit, remembering to hobble.

"Croyd—"

He paused and half-turned.

Still standing, she allowed her face to suggest the first touch of restrained whimsy that he had seen. "Now that I have played an unusually attentive Socrates to your garrulous Timaeus—are there any other Platonic ideas that you favor?"

"Yes, Madame. I like his ideas about Guardians. I don't think they need to be quite as ascetic as he proposed—but I do think that people like you and me and Ziska are required to set the good of people and animals and plants above all other considerations."

Her whimsy faded.

He hesitated a moment longer—then turned and departed.



# Rehab Action Five

## KERI AND DANA

Senevendia City, 21-22 May

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Braking toward Erthspace, during several hours Commander Marana and his crew had been taking turns at the nuclear showerheads. No sooner had they, at 1900 hours, parked the ship in Senevendian space than two-thirds of the crew piled into a system of shuttle-scouters and headed down for shore leave in the city. Marana, by order of his executive officer, rode down in the first scouter for fun until 1200 hours tomorrow: the skipper, by God, averred the exec, had some leave coming—he'd skipped his last three chances.

Marana, a lone wolf, promptly shook his companions and entered upon a prowl which was not necessarily sex-oriented. Senevendia City was a tangle of streets and alleys and boulevards, huts and skyscrapers, all modes and all centuries from this twenty-fifth AD back to the forty-fifth BC. There was no part of Senevendia City that Marana had not prowled, and no part of it that he felt he thoroughly understood; and what he understood, he was not sure that he comprehended—or was that backwards?

It was early evening. Marana had chowed with a couple of his officers before shaking them by the simple method of going to the head and losing his way back to the table. At the moment, with night darkness nearly complete, he sauntered along the building-marge of a cobblestone alley-

street with no sidewalks and a central sewer ditch, trying hard to get back his childhood acceptance of the stench so that he could forget it and concentrate on the aesthetics of human city-meaning. . . .

"Stinks, doesn't it?" remarked a girl, matching stride with him. Her voice was low, agreeable.

It was a new sort of approach. Marana said guardedly: "I can get along with it." He kept walking.

"I'm not one of those girls," the girl offered, "and you have three gold bands on your cuff and the quintuple loop of the Rab Astrofleet. That makes you a romantic foreigner. Mind if I walk along and hero-worship?"

Marana stopped dead and faced her. It was hard to see much of her face; her figure might be nice; her height was female-ordinary. "You live around here?"

"No."

"Then—"

"—What's a nice girl like me doing in a place like this? What are *you* doing? Prowling?"

Marana considered her a moment longer. "If you want to end up in bed with me, come along and we'll talk about it, and fifty-fifty it won't happen. Otherwise, beat it."

She caught up with him and took his arm. They moved along slowly, he ignoring her to scan doorways and windows and people, she quiet. Gradually he came to notice that she drifted on his arm like a frictionless powder puff.

Minutes later, she said: "I'm a lone wolf too. I'm prowling too. This is my third prowling night, the third in all my life. Already in three nights I've beaten off twenty-seven guys, eleven tonight, but you're the first I've accosted. I'd like your company. If the payment has to be bed, it has to be bed."

He stopped again to inspect her: something was wrong with this. His night eyes were improving, but the deepening night canceled it; and after all, she *was* Vendic-dark. Putting a fore-knuckle under her chin, he lifted the chin: she suffered it. Breathing a prayer to Hygeia, gently he kissed her lips: they were cool-submissive. He thrust hands in pockets and considered her. She waited.

He said finally: "You are a high-caste girl out for thrills. It may be your third night out, but it isn't more than your third. You may have gone to bed with some-

body the other times, but I doubt it; I think you did shake them off. I think you finally found nerve to pick me up because my gold stripes are a security blanket for you. It's a probable twelve to seven that you're a virgin."

Her eyes steadily held his. Her eyes he could see clearly.

She finally said low: "It isn't thrills that I'm out for."

He believed her, whatever it might mean.

The café was cosmopolitan-offbeat in its entertainment but strictly local Senevendian-lowbrow in its clientèle; Marana hoped they might avoid members of his crew—probably none of them knew about the place, although of course a local girl might bring one here. He and his new lady sat at a wall table sheltered by potted palms: sat side by side, their backs against a heavily draped wall: it was on a raised platform, so that they could see the show on the dance floor clearly. They watched, talking little; as yet they had not exchanged names.

Acts ranged from three Kamatic belly dancers (music piping-shrill) through young white Vespuccian period dancers doing a thing named Roc after a legendary bird (music slow hard-beat) and a covey of cobra-charmers (music piping-shrill) through Watusi jungle-dancers (music fast hard-beat) to a fat north-oriental with open shirt collar who sang "Mother Machree" in a high rich tenor. There was one extraterrestrial act: a troupe of meter-long Martian sand-baggers who performed intricate spineless arabesques, having six hundred legs and eighteen eyes among the three of them . . . ("They give me the wriggles," she confided to him with a giggle; and he told her that they were pretty stupid, no franchise in Sol/Centauri, couldn't even read, this was a rain dance that had never been known to bring rain. . . .)

They had been stealing glances in the dimness, sizing each other up and liking what they saw. Marana was increasingly interested in the private discovery that for him her female attraction was merely a glamorously contributory component to her feminine-human allure; this was unusual: he could remember one other such case, a lost love of his middle teens; it heightened her value to the point where he felt he should be far more guarded than

usual; but the guarded feeling partially dissolved into the allure, without however vanishing.

Now he took her right hand in his left and conveyed it to the tabletop: her hand rested palm-up in his hand, delicate beige marged with the dark cocoa that was the back of her hand and most of her skin. She watched their hands attentively. The wiry fingers of his right hand played idly with her fingers: hers were delicate, tapering, the long fingernails enameled elegant in contrast with the flashy golds and silvers that he saw nearby. (The music wailed, an imported belly dancer from north Africa was soloing; their pewter cups of grog sat before them untouched.)

He said: "Call me Dana. That's my first name."

She responded: "Keri—Dana."

"I was right. This is not your element."

"Am I then so gauche here?"

"No. You are blending externally with perfection into this element. But it is not yours."

Her head went down. "It may as well be. *Are* you going to take me to bed?"

The question neither offended nor excited him: it evoked pity, for some reason. He was not sure what the right answer was: he wanted her, but he did not want mere wanting to be all of it: his interpersonal feelings were mixed, and for some reason his ethical coordinates with her were uncertain. To be safe, he answered "Yes"; it would be easy to change his mind and risk making her angry.

Her head went lower. "I'm glad. Will it be soon?"

His right hand clasped her right in his left, and he looked closely at her face. Yes, her color was high. His index finger stole up to her wrist. So was her pulse. And yet he could swear. . . . Perhaps the largest part of her excitement was not arousal at all, but rather, her decision to violate a value that to her was central; and of course, that confirmed. . . .

What do you do when you have a long privation and a high desire, and she is with you and willing—but you like her, and you doubt her judgment, and you don't want to hurt her?

He whispered: "Tell me why you are so eager."

"I just—like you."

"You like the fact that I am a Rab Astrofleet commander and a reasonably decent guy. You don't know me well enough to like me better than that."

Her left hand closed upon his right. "Maybe I find you exciting."

"If you are a virgin, as I think you are, then you cannot be oversexed, because then at your age and with your beauty you would not be a virgin. So it has to be that you want to throw yourself away. Why?"

The north-oriental tenor was singing again with excruciating sweetness: "My Dana boy—"

Her face came up, she looked at him directly and with pleading. "Do not ask all these questions. Just accept me as I am."

He regarded her for a moment. Deliberately he bent and kissed her for the second time, lingeringly, not passionately. Her lips were tender and receptive, but they did not open. When their lips parted, her eyes looked frightened.

Freeing his right hand, he picked up her grog cup and handed it to her. She sipped delicately and set it down, continuing to hold it by the mug handle, gazing at it.

This must be tested to the limit. "Has your mother told you about sailors on shore leave?"

Her smile was tremulous. "How many times do I have to say—"

"Do you *really* understand? Do you know what a woman-starved sailor is like when he gets the woman and cuts loose? Or are your ideas about this restricted to the genteel simplicity of a college course in sex education?"

Her smile gradually vanished, and for a moment she met his direct gaze, and then her head slowly went very low, and for the first time she began to tremble.

Again his index finger sought her wrist: now her pulse was abnormally slow.

She took a great glog of the grog, and choked a little, and cleared her throat, and unsteadily told the table: "I was women's intercollegiate judo champion of Senevendia. I am capable of transposing the skill to another sport. Commander, I have elected your post-graduate course: unprepared as I am, I do not propose to flunk it."

That made *him* glog the grog. . . .

But he slowly set down the cup, having become aware that a tall heavy-set trash-type Vendic stood beside him, while a short heavy-set small-moustached trash-type Polynesian stood beside Keri; in his right ribs Marana felt the dull pressure of a pistol muzzle, in her left ribs Keri felt the needlepoint of a knife. The Vendic said softly: "There is a door behind the wall-curtain just to my right here. You and Miss Andhra get up quietly and follow me through. A third man has a gun on you under his table."

Keri said faintly: "Dana?"

Marana responded, "We get up and follow," and he arose carefully to avoid triggering action. The Polynesian knife-prodded; Keri got to her feet—not trembling, Marana noted, but definitely angry. Marana added: "Don't try anything, Keri. Be intercollegiate-responsive. I mean that." He turned toward the Vendic who was backing behind the curtain, gun visible and pointed.

Behind Marana, Keri said, "I bet you're courageous in bed. But now I'll never know, will I?"

He answered: "Stay tight with me, stay intercollegiate-responsive."

He was following the Vendic behind the curtain, and Keri was being prodded along after him. Light dawned in Keri: she went limber-limp. Marana stopped suddenly, she was crowded against his back. Tornado hit; Marana while dropping to his knees reached back to seize her upper arms and catapult her over his shoulder; going up, she felt a heel kick a chin; coming down, her heels ground into a face, and there was a scream and the zzzzz of a raygun shot, and the floor flamed, and Keri was thrown past a table down the step to the next level; she cat-gathered herself and crouched appraising the action: it was that Dana had the Vendic by the neck with one hand and the Polynesian by the neck with the other: he crunched their heads together—once, twice, thrice—and dropped them where they would quickly be discovered by the waiters who were running up to extinguish the fire (which was all they had seen, having heard nothing), and whirled to find Keri, and dropped some bills on the table, and hurried to her: she was on her feet as he got there, and he rushed her around the top tier by the wall to the front entrance and out into the streetlet, and ran leading her by a hand to

a corner and around it and through a doorway and down a dirty dim corridor and out a back door into a stinking alley and down the alley to a slightly lighted street: there he paused, and looked about, and spotted a cruising skimmercab, and hailed it and got into it, and gave the computer an address, and the cab moved off, and Dana settled back breathing hard and looking at her.

Seated erect, half-turned, she looked at him. Her lips were parted, she was breathing hard indeed—but breathing like an overtaxed young woman in fine physical condition.

Rather soon, her breathing began to slow. Almost as soon as his.

And just about then the skimmercab stopped, and Marana leaned forward to pay and tip the computer; he leaped out, and helped her down, and led her through a door into another dim but clean corridor, and took her into an old-fashioned robot-elevator: he punched the 5-button, and the doors shuddered shut, and she leaned back against him with her eyes closed, finding that his arms about her waist were good arms.

The door of his room closed and locked behind them. It was dark in here.

Keri stood trembling, waiting, in the middle of the room. He came up behind her in the darkness, his hands closed on her shoulders. She stood acquiescent. His hands did not move. Gradually she relaxed in the darkness.

He said: "Your eyes by now are dark-accommodated. Open them."

She hadn't noticed that they were closed. Opening, she made out furniture shapes: there was a minimum of light from a single window. One of the shapes was a big sofa in front of the window. There was no bed.

Keri murmured, "I don't see a—" She stopped.

"Beds are trite." He released her shoulders. "That sofa opens into one—but just now we are going to sit on it."

Disoriented, ambivalent, Keri allowed herself to be led to the sofa, and he sat her on it. "Excuse me, Keri—I am about to ply you with liquor." Going to a cupboard, he took out in the darkness the shapes of a bottle and two tall

glasses, poured no more than a jigger into each glass, added refrigerated water from a *robinet*, came over, handed her one, sat beside her without touching her.

They sipped.

She said thoughtfully: "Three of these might loosen me. But it would take eight to make me helpless. For your PG course, I suggest four. But it would be quicker to sweeten up this one."

His shadow told his shadow glass: "I keep wondering why you are so anxious."

"Maybe I'm afraid you'll get out of the notion."

"If that's your problem, forget it, be easy, in my own good time you'll be rolled. Only, Keri, it's usually the other way around, with anxiety—"

She tensed a bit. "Am I being aggressive? I'm sorry, I'm not very skillful at—" Then, turning swiftly, she laid a hand on his arm: "After what you just did to those two guys—"

She sensed the grin that she could not see. "You don't have to be limp asparagus to reassure me about my manhood. Besides, I hit them *with you*—and I didn't notice you fainting." Then his grin disappeared, and he sipped, and he said wonderingly, "Keri—virgin or not, you've necked; and if the action stopped, you stopped it. So *why* are you so eager?"

After thinking that over for a moment, she began to tremble—so pronouncedly that he quickly took her glass out of her flaccid hand. Setting both glasses on a side table, he turned to watch her concernedly, without however touching her.

He saw that she was quieting.

He took the glasses to the bottle, sweetened them healthily, added only enough water for coolness, returned, sat, gave her a sip. She swallowed, closed eyes, breathed deeply for a few moments. Her eyes opened and she stared straight ahead. "Thanks," she said at length, and took her glass, and gazed into it.

Dana told her soberly: "I like you very much, Keri. Also I want you very much, more than just a sailor with a girl, but set that aside, because I think there is something very deep here. I am not going to cross-question you any more, you have your reasons and I respect them; but I do



want one thing set straight. Am I right in my belief that some inward potent motive other than female desire is driving you into this affair—that you picked me out because I seemed to be a nice guy, but it could have been some other nice guy?”

She stared. She drank. She stared.

“That you are a virgin who has some deep reason for wishing to alter that situation?”

She stared. She blurted a short laugh. “If I say yes, what does it tell you?”

“Won’t I find out anyway?”

“No, because of my athletic youth.”

He drank. He stared. It can happen that a single *bon mot* precipitates a lifelong infatuation which can in some instances be the kind of love that needs no *amour* for its nourishing. He had just heard the *mot*, he would never forget it.

He said slowly, “Let’s drink down our drinks and put the glasses aside and sit here for a while.”

She studied her drink. Tilting her head back, she drank the drink and handed the glass to him. He drank his and put the glasses on the table. Sliding down a little on the sofa, he laid his neck against the back and gazed at the nearly invisible ceiling. After watching him for a moment, Keri did the same.

Abruptly Dana awoke and realized that he had been asleep. His cutichron told him that it had only been a quarter-hour. He turned to Keri; she seemed asleep. He contemplated her with desire and devotion: the latter was stronger, the former scarcely self-identifiable.

Her eyes came open, her head started up. In something like alarm she looked about; then her face turned to his. For several moments she contemplated his face, quieting. Presently she leaned her head back again, but her eyes stayed open.

He laid his head back too, but turned toward her.

Perhaps two minutes later he asked, “Should we kiss, do you think?”

After a moment her face came his way, waiting.

His kiss was ever so gentle. Her kiss was ever so meaningful.

Parted, faces close, they looked at each other.

Keri said with total candor: "Dana, I'm in love with you."

He frowned at her, drumming fingertips on her far shoulder. All at once he knew for sure. Instantly he told her: "I love you too. Enough so, that if you were to ask me to marry you, I would say yes."

Her eyes widened. "If I were to—"

His smile was not entirely happy. "I have this thing partially figured out now. Those goons recognized you, that was why the kidnapping act. Probably they've been casing you ever since you started haunting back streets. Obviously you're high-caste, your parents are probably wealthy. Well, don't you see? *I* can't ask *you* to marry me, knowing this—"

She seized his hands. "You would *marry* me?"

His smile went mischievous. "I'll tell you what it would entail, and you won't like it, so you won't ask me. No dowry—I won't accept one. No big wedding—just us two, right here and now, alone. Now I think of it, I wish that one old man could witness it, a guy named Croyd, only he isn't anywhere near here, so no witnesses, not even your parents. And tomorrow morning you come aboard my ship and travel while I get some pressing duty done, and you scarcely see me aboard because I am so damn busy, and when the duty is done I drop you off on Rab where my home base is, and you won't like it there because of the rabquakes, and you may never see Senevendia again, and during my prolonged absences you will raise five or ten children because Rab has no kind of population-bomb problem—" Releasing her hands, he straightened, and his smile was glorious, and he added, "Now do you see why you shouldn't ask?"

Unsteadily: "Do you really want me to ask—or are you kidding?"

He went serious. "Do you mean that you wouldn't take that kind of kidding very well?"

"From you, not very well. Know me, Dana—here I am—but don't kid me."

He leaned toward her, intently earnest. "Let me tell you what I think about marriage. A guy and a girl fall in love,

and the only goal they have is to be together in their love. Then afterward, where they make their mistake is to imagine that they should keep love as a goal forever and ever, over-and-over sought and reattained. But that is ridiculous, because it already *has been* sought and attained once and for all. So instead, after the delicious exploring of the love, it should stop being a goal, and instead it should be a *climate* for wonderful things further on that both of them can attain together, secure in their lasting growing love. Keri, I want to love you constantly until the *amour* begins to scale off at the edges; but then after that, I want to explore your mind and heart while you explore mine until we know each other almost totally and our confidence in each other is perfect; and meanwhile I want us to be moving ahead on other goals forever, dear friends in the climate of our love. And that is why I would say yes if you would ask—"

Suddenly he leaned back, clenched teeth, hit a fist on the sofa back. "Hell, Keri—*will* you marry me? *Now?*"

She was awash. "Marry you—*now?*"

"I'm a ship's captain. I can marry us, there are seven precedents—"

"But we're not aboard your ship—"

"My quarters are my ship. Keri—"

They were clutching shoulders, eyes to wide eyes, his mouth near her trembling mouth. She whispered: "I did not think of marriage—"

"Think of it now."

"But that is—*forever!* With *trouble!*"

"Sure is."

"You—*want* that? When you don't *have* to?"

"Keri—any kind of a service will do it, we have only to register it later, we can do that in my ship's log tomorrow, but when we declare it, we two here, it is done. Look, we can make it simple. When you kiss me—we are married for keeps." He paused. He moistened lips. He added uncertainly: "*If* you kiss me—"

She stared at him an instant longer. Her eyes closed, and her breath shuddered out, and her eyes opened, and her lungs filled with the wind of life energy, and she covered his mouth with hers.

Midway through a continental breakfast in the small dining room of Dana's hotel, Keri demanded of her bun: "Why haven't you been asking any personal questions lately?"

He told her: "I still need answers to all the questions I asked you last night. But you don't have to answer, not ever, if you prefer. But I hope you will answer, it will be better."

She studied the hard bun. With her front teeth she nipped a small particle out of it, like a chipmunk putting neat fangprints into a crisp haw-apple. She masticated the bread, swallowed it, sipped thick coffee, considered. Then she looked up at Marana and put her heart into a guarantee: "Dana, I *am* in love with you, I *am*. *Always*."

He leaned earnestly forward. "It's a good thing, and it better stick, and I warned you why last night. How much more time do you estimate to finish breakfast?"

"'Bout eleventy-seven minutes. Why?"

"Make it eleventy-six. We have to be aboard ship for noon takeoff. That leaves us about three hours to go to your house and pick up your stuff and confront your parents."

She dropped the bun. "Confront my—"

He was a bit grim. "They aren't going to be happy about this, and you know it. What kind of a guy is your father? Will he try to kill me? I'd better know now, so I can parry without hurting or humiliating him too much—"

She grabbed his hands. "Dana, we *can't*—"

"Keri, we *have* to. Keri, you are going all mysterious again! Keri, *please* answer what I asked you last night. Answer *now*, so we board my ship with everything on the poop deck!"

Her eyes were death. "I *can't*—"

"Why *not*, f'John's sakes?"

Her mouth went small and mischievous. "Because I gotta go, f'John's sakes." It was the other *bon mot* that he would remember.

Rising, she came around behind him, and slipped her arms around his neck, and kissed his spacious back-tilted forehead, and whispered: "I love you. And when I come back, I'll try to tell you what you've done for me."

Two hours later—having checked out the lobby and his room, having even barged into the powder room and peered over stall doors with eye-boggling results—Marana cursed quietly, went to the hotel desk, and began to scribble a note for the clerk to give her *when* she would return looking for him. . . .

Something white in midair drew his side attention. The clerk was gently waving an envelope before his eyes. He seized it and ripped it open. . . .

*Dana—I love you, but this is divorce. Do not try to find me. Call it a wonderful dream, and I shall worship the dream so long as it is possible for me to feel anything. Please make me happy by marrying well next time. And please, please dear, if you love me—get off of Erth!*

# Rehab Action Six

## ZISKA AND THE MOON

*Nereid, Moon, and Erth, 22 May*



Out of sleep-without-dreaming, Marta awoke swiftly. The instantaneous re-entry into life was in tasty conscious contrast to her years-usual prolongation of debilitating early-morning twilight sleep among gobbets of dream-garbage.

Marta lay comfortable. Marta stretched in luxury. Marta suddenly sat up in bed, realizing that she could scarcely remember her last awakening in luxury, so long ago it had been.

Dropping her arms, Marta allowed herself to sense all four limbs. None of them ached, no extremity was asleep.

She was not quite ready to get out of bed. But neither was she dismayed by the prospect.

She swung her legs out of bed, yawned, stretched again, opened her eyes, discovered that they had come almost wide open with a minimum of sleep glue. She thrust herself out of bed and checked her cutichron: 0500 hours on the dot, just the time she'd left a call for. The call came, and she answered, and disconnected, and congratulated herself on the automatic self-awakening after the planned five hours of sleep.

It crossed her mind to go to a mirror.

*Could* her jowls and eyebags be a little firmer? *Could* her eyes be a little clearer? *Could* her blood be moving a

bit more fluidly, suggesting a bit more arterial elasticity? For her arms and legs were not excessively outsleeping her brain this morning.

She looked closer. *Were* there a few visible blonde hairs replacing the white? No, that part was sheer delusion, or an illusion of light: it couldn't happen that fast, it would have to start at the follicles.

She saw a grin in her mirror, but it was cynical. Croyd had her thinking wishfully, that was all. Nevertheless she *did* feel pretty good, for eighty-six. . . .

At 0600 hours she received Croyd at her desk (mahogany, French-curved paneling, area three square meters, a twentieth-century period piece that the rest of the furniture matched) in a richly carpeted mahogany-paneled office whose walls elegantly accommodated a number of original masters (Rubens, Velasquez, El Greco) and one fake (a bogus Rembrandt by Van Eyck). Croyd stood before her at easy attention. "Relax," she invited, indicating a chair near the desk but facing her across it. He settled himself into it a little precariously, as though his joints were arthritic and his equilibrium-feedback uncertain; he was privately grateful that neither was any longer the case for him.

"I have the report on who you are," she informed him. It was already before him, she did not move a hand.

He nodded gravely and waited.

"You are Croyd, an extraterrestrial humanoid immigrant into Anglia. You have an impeccable visible career of fifty years as a traveling international underwriter for Lloyd's of London under the pseudonym Grayn, and at the same time an impeccable and not undistinguished invisible career as a secret agent for M-13." (That was the Anglian subconstellational organization which had succeeded M-7 through M-12, the serial successors to M-5 and M-6.)

"In 2400," she eagerly pressed, "at the age of seventy-seven, you elected for euthanasia. Something went wrong, and instead your animation was suspended. You were kept in a tank at London General Hospital for seventy-four years, until last year when you evinced unmistakable signs of wanting out. Since your awakening you have been idle,

living on your state-invested pension which at seventy-five years of compound interest is a visible contributor to the Norwestia Constellation deficit. Idle, that is, except in writing letters to me: of these there have been three, evenly spaced at two-month intervals—according to Berber's memory, anyhow, since these letters have unaccountably been misplaced in our files. I do remember the last one. These details about your identity and past have recently been certified into the BuPers memory by Assistant Secretary Fiori in Manhattan. Do you too certify them?"

"To the letter." Croyd had dictated these details to half-hypnotized Fiori.

"What in this record indicates competency for responsible missions at the immediate direction of a planetary chairman?"

"M-13. Beyond that, I suggest that you test me on a mission, this being essential to the deal that you know about."

Marta flushed, and that was rare. "What in this record indicates competency to bring off your end of this rejuvenation deal?"

"Nothing except the way I now look and act. If you will check your report, I think you may find there is also a trivisual of me just after I was released from stir."

Marta paled. "I had it blown up from the transmission. You didn't look so good."

"I imagine."

"Nevertheless, if you are really competent for high-level operation, you are shrewd enough not to suppose that I will trust you on anything really sharp until I have some evidence that you can deliver—either on that, or on this." She laid a hand on her breast in the first distinctively feminine gesture he had seen.

"Give me a for-instance."

"I will give you an errand when you give me back my blonde hair."

"Did you look closely this morning?"

"Pardon?"

"Excuse this impertinence, but—" He got up, leaned across her desk, tweaked a hair from her head, and laid it on the blotter. "Try magnilighting that."

She studied him, then the hair. Presently she touched a



button that illuminated the hair peculiarly, making it leap to an apparent eight times its size.

Almost all of it was white. But for a segment extending an apparent three millimeters above the follicle, it was blonde.

As she scrutinized the hair, hands flat on her desk, a soft bell tone sounded once. She ignored it. The tone sounded again. Croyd cleared his throat. She glanced at him, appearing almost frightened. Then she activated the intercom and uttered, "Yes?"

Said Berber's voice in the air: "Madame, I have a top-secret call from Dr. Ziska."

Again she gazed at Croyd, and now she was definitely frightened. Silently he signaled with his fingers. "One moment, Berber," she temporized, and disconnected. "What, Croyd?"

"Ziska's call may possibly concern the *Mazurka*, but it will unquestionably concern COMCORD. Please assign me to him as agent-at-large on the COMCORD imbalance."

"Now how shall I do that convincingly?"

"Madame, it is you who are Chairman."

She stared at Croyd, stared at her hair specimen, stared at Croyd. Into the intercom she snapped: "Put him on, Berber. Two-way visual."

"Madame—"

"Berber?"

"Dr. Ziska said it was top secret. The presence of your guest—"

"Put him through, Berber."

Ziska's hard frailty filled the middle air, and the thin lips of Ziska had lost almost all of their frozen smile. "Madame, I have a later report on the *Mazurka*, and I have also a late report on COMCORD. I sense linkage. If your guest is present again, as I suspect he or she is, I do earnestly recommend, either that you show me this guest, or that you momentarily excuse this guest."

Marta looked at Croyd and jerked her head. He came over to stand behind her chair, in full view of Ziska on the video.

The two men contemplated each other like two leader

wolves of stranger packs. Gradually their impressions firmed into hair-trigger guarded mutual respect. Then Ziska inquired of Marta, permitting himself just a hint of a sneer: "Your long-lost brother, Madame?" Both she and Croyd comprehended the two-edged allusion to advanced age.

Marta responded with chill, her aplomb all back. "In order to get quickly to what is urgent, I will present him to you, Ziska; he knows who you are. This is Mr. Croyd, formerly of M-13. Does my Minister of Internal Security know what M-13 was?"

She was rewarded by faint discomposure. "I do. But M-13 was inactivated before I was born."

"Just so. Now let us hear about the *Mazurka* and COMCORD."

The Croyd face remained bland; Ziska's went dangerous, frigidly smiling. "Madame has not forgotten that I took my assignments by invitation, not by command?"

"By invitation, Ziska, after you had been in my organization for a decade in lower assignments. Will you get to the point?"

She had not tamed him, it was a role of subordinate responsiveness that he immediately adopted: Croyd perceived it, and so did she. "Sorry, Madame. To the point, then. As of 0230 hours this morning, the *Mazurka* was cruising Erthspace in the vicinity of Senevendia, doubtless to sample the tempopattern of Senevendia City. As for COMCORD—the grievance imbalance went critical at 0241 hours, and a countdown has been started."

Croyd noted that Marta did not flinch. Instantly she demanded: "What is being done?"

"The Erthworld Senate is in emergency session. The President of Erthworld has issued orders of absolute secrecy pending more details. The top brass of my Internal Security forces is prepared to move in on Senevendia, before impact in event of public disturbance, and after impact in any event; but no word has yet gone down below general staff level. Our civilian people are concentrating in all Erth-wide megalopolitan centers, and particularly they are concentrating at COMCORD Central in Manhattan. My immediate staff and I are about to depart for Moonbase to supervise operations at close range. Anything else to tell you?"

"Yes. Three things. First, how could this impossible

critical imbalance happen? Second, how will you go about correcting it? Third, remembering that the Z-waves are triggered by the Penultimate Trigger and launched by the Z-sting—do you know *where* trigger and/or sting is or are located?”

Ziska was fumbling. His jaw came up, and he asserted: “The common answer to all three questions is—I do not know. And the counter-question is, Chairman Evans—do you know?”

Her jaw, too, came up. “You know that I do not know. And I *should* know, and so should you. If we fail in this, Ziska—without counting the human cost—it will disqualify Mare Stellarum from governing the Interplanetary Union or anything else. You are directed to stay awake and active until all three questions are satisfactorily answered—and, very particularly, until the first two cease to be questions.”

“I had no other intent. May I depart? My frigate is waiting.”

“You will be delayed just a trifle. Mr. Croyd will accompany you. He is a free agent reporting directly to me. Give him all assistance.”

Pause. Then Ziska's brows came down, and his lips compressed. His eyes burned into the eyes of Croyd—who looked steadily back.

Ziska turned to Marta. “Perhaps you did not quite grasp, Madame, the implicative connections. It is against Senevendia that the imbalance is weighed. The *Mazurka* began to cruise Senevendia just prior to the critical imbalance. The *Mazurka* was sent by your rival, Galactic of Rab. The *Mazurka* has been sampling tempopatterns—precisely the patterns which are targeted by the Z-waves. And I infer that it is this same Croyd who first reported to you both *Mazurka* and COMCORD.”

Marta instantly turned to Croyd. “Ziska has almost accused you of complicity in something against us. Your comment?”

Croyd answered gravely: “Since I departed my tank, I have not been entirely idle, apart from writing letters to you, Madame. I have been using decades of experience as an interconstellational agent in finding, piecing together, and drawing inferences from information related to

COMCORD; and these inferences brought me to the trail of the *Mazurka* via the route of the tempopatterns. I can assure you with a good deal of confidence that the *Mazurka* has no knowledge of an excessive COMCORD imbalance, and that her position over Senevendia is coincidental. Dr. Ziska will understand that my sources must remain confidential. I wonder whether he can speak with equal confidence about the *Mazurka*."

Marta's head swiveled. "Ziska?"

He replied stonily: "I do not have as much confidence as Mr. Croyd, presumably because I do not have his sources."

Marta snapped, "When Croyd is with you, Ziska, through him you will have his sources. Croyd, how fast can you be ready to join Ziska?"

"Assuming that his frigate can supply clothing changes and a dental gun, I am ready now."

Marta arose. "Good. My pullman is just over here—"

"By *pullman*, do you mean a rekamatic matter-tesend?"

"Of course."

"Then I don't use pullmen."

"Everybody else does. Why not you?"

"The small random factor in a matter-tesend might damage my ability to help you."

She sagged a little! Ziska was disguising his own mystification. She rallied and addressed the Internal Security minister: "Apparently your frigate must wait a bit while Mr. Croyd flies to your office in my scouter. Wait for him. Thank you, Dr. Ziska." She disconnected.

She thought.

She turned to Croyd: "What is your plan?"

"I haven't the foggiest."

"But you'll think of something."

"I hope to."

Sitting suddenly, Marta connected and ordered: "Berber, get Mr. Croyd to Dr. Ziska's office immediately in my scouter. No dental gun."

Disconnecting, she thought. Croyd waited behind her chair.

Frowning, she told her desk, "Croyd! Correct the critical imbalance! Find out how it could have happened!

Locate the Penultimate Trigger and the Z-sting! Find out what is wrong with Ziska's organization—with my whole organization. My God, you have only been telling me what I already knew!" She swung around and seized his hands, looking up into his face: "And, Croyd—watch out for Ziska!"

"To the first four injunctions—I will try. To the last—I will."

She got up and faced him, still squeezing his responsive hands. "While you are away—you *will* be able to—you *know?*"

"This I have already started within you. It will work by itself, up to a point. I will try to shoot you a booster very soon. Find a good spot on Moonside of Nereid at 1800 hours daily: I will come through at that hour when I can."

"If you fail in this mission, Croyd—my government will go down, and Senevendia's economy and politics will disintegrate, and by expanding consequence even the humanity of people will be threatened."

"I will make every effort not to fail."

As he went away, he meditated with a blend of sardonical amusement and pity, both referent to human frailty: *Her age—her government—her people. Fascinating order of concern!*

It was the first time he had ever played Rasputin.

En route to Moon, three hours out from Nereid, Minister Ziska called a staff meeting, excluding this man Croyd whom he had meticulously snubbed. Croyd, who had his own thinking to do, accepted this and went to work in his tiny cabin. He was interrupted an hour later by a Ziska aide who asked deferentially if Mr. Croyd would mind joining the meeting. Noting that the time was 1126, Croyd went along: he had half expected this.

Ziska, who sat at the head of a long table, silently motioned Croyd to a chair beside him: it was not a compliment, this was evidently a sort of witness chair. Twenty-three civilian faces turned his way.

"*This* is Mr. Croyd," asserted Ziska, the sibilant drawl faintly nasty. "Mr. Croyd, at several turns in our crisis planning, the question has arisen where you fit. I think we need to face this down. What is your concept?"

Croyd waved his left hand affably. "I know what you all are thinking and feeling—I've faced the same type of situation on your side of the table. Please scratch the idea that I'm some kind of commisar; I just happen to have put in some decades as a free-floating lone-wolf operator, it's a constitutional talent that I have, and the Chairman thought it might be useful to Internal Security. My first reports will always be to Dr. Ziska."

They all looked at Ziska, saw that his smile was stony-fixed as he faced Croyd stonily. Ziska repeated: "What is your concept?"

"Simply that you people do what you do while I find out what I can. You will be the first to be told whatever I learn, and except for the Chairman I will respect our security injunctions—at this sort of discretion I am not inexperienced. In turn I will need to keep knowing what you are doing and what the results are, to prevent me from inadvertently stepping off your catwalk and putting my foot into something."

Leaning elbow on table and chin on knuckles, lean Ziska surveyed Croyd and stated, "This is a thin concept—and you come, sir, with thin credentials."

Croyd made a brief try at saving the minister's face. "Sir, with all respect to our colleagues here, I should appreciate an opportunity to discuss privately—"

"Denied. Speak here."

So this was going to be it. Croyd pointed out bluntly: "I hate to seem to swing weight—but my thin credentials are the Chairman's credentials."

Somebody cleared his throat. Croyd gauged that while all present owed their futures to Ziska, none loved him. Ziska's eyes were smoldering as he riposted: "I walked into that, but you know what I mean. I still feel that we need to know more about your plans."

"Will you tell me first what yours are?"

"Give me a reason for telling you any plans."

"I will give you two. If I do not know your plans, I may wastefully duplicate your work, or I may unintentionally foul up your work. I tell you that I am here on orders to operate freely, and that is what I intend to do. It is best for all of us, and for Mare Stellarum, and for Erthworld, that I do so with my eyes open."

Laying his hands in his lap, Ziska let Croyd have it. "I put it to you that you are a spy for Galactic."

Actually the challenge staggered Croyd, although he did not show it. Croyd was capable of being caught off guard, and Ziska had caught him at his most vulnerable point: a deep-bred compulsion against lying a forthright yes-or-no lie.

Croyd counter-thrust: "What is your evidence for *that* notion?"

They were all taut.

"I have none," Ziska cut. "I want your answer."

"My answer is that the Chairman cleared me and sent me on this mission. And that is enough answer to obviate the question."

"The Chairman did not, however, clear through my Internal Security machinery."

"That, presumably, was her decision to make. She seems to have been satisfied by the channel she did use, which was Mare Stellarum BuPers, an agency which is supposed to be under constant surveillance by your internal Security. I suggest that if this fencing proceeds much further, you will damage my effectiveness and undermine the Chairman's intentions."

"Are you a spy for Galactic?"

"What is my word worth to you?"

"I will not believe a denial. But if you do not deny it, I will believe that you *are* a spy, and I will behave accordingly."

"Defying the Chairman?"

"Correcting the Chairman's ignorance—her ignorance in this case, that is."

Someone coughed.

Croyd commented: "I am sorry that you have forced this showdown in front of your staff. I am afraid that you may lose face."

"If you do not deny espionage, *you* lose face. If you do deny it, I will have forced this showdown-denial, and I will lose no face. And still you are not denying."

"It would be improper for me to affirm or deny to you what has already been established by your executive superior who has issued you orders about me." Croyd knew

while he said it that he was forcing Ziska out of attitudinal ambiguity into mortal and implacable enmity.

Nobody made a sound.

Ziska's face had paled. Ziska stated: "Then finally you have not denied it. I therefore believe that you are a spy for Galactic, that the judgment of our leader has been undermined *in this case* by your seductive tactics. You will proceed to your quarters, and be locked in there, and remain there until our mission is accomplished."

Croyd asserted, "I do not propose to remain in my quarters."

Ziska turned to his staff. "Your several questions are answered. He has no part at all in this mission, and we can move along with it." He nodded at the aide, who came and stood beside Croyd.

With a faint sigh, Croyd stood and walked out ahead of the aide.

Systematically then, Ziska assigned men to physical presence with the several constellational chancellors, with the World President, and with COMCORD Central in Manhattan. . . .

Confined alone to quarters, Croyd resumed his thinking, now with a bit more to go on—namely, that Ziska was flatly his enemy and would desist from killing Croyd only as long as Croyd would desist from menacing the personal purposes of Ziska—which were, obviously now, to tame the COMCORD imbalance his own way, and go on to squeeze out Marta as Mare Stellarum Chairman, and eventually to dominate the Interplanetary Union.

It was on this basis that Croyd had settled himself for double dealing, a behavior which normally stank in his nostrils. Since his entry upon this venture, he had tried out upon his conscience a number of rationalizations. Marta and her crew were double-dealing Erthworld out of control over its government, and their bungling had now double-dealt Senevendia into final jeopardy of enshroudment which would cripple world-wide prosperity quite apart from the decade of death-grimness for the Senevendian people. And so on. . . . No go. There had to be another way of doing these things. However, Croyd hadn't thought



of one; and therefore, the stakes being what they were, he was moving ahead.

He knew that he *could* lie convincingly. In his brain he had tested it, deliberately exciting the related inhibitory shocks (for had not old Bertrand Russell pointed out centuries ago that it is a naïve compulsion to tell the truth and that lying requires sophisticated inhibition?), but as a result of certain countering psychophysical adjustments, a lie detector had revealed nothing abnormal, and neither had a tridema of his face. He *could* have lied to Ziska. But he *would not* lie, not even to Ziska. And so he was in danger: his purposes were in danger.

And yet, he had lied to Marta—had, without scruple, fabricated the lie about his Croyd-identity and certified this lie into the BuPers computer during his recent excursion into the Manhattan and his hypnotic tilt with Assistant Secretary Fiori. He chuckled unhumorously: there was no evident ethical distinction between a delayed-action lie and a swift simple lie; the distinction was psychological, the latter was more traumatic.

His mind drifted to the Sinitic Ten Commandments which still exercised a certain amount of religious restraint in Erth-Westernized portions of the galaxy such as Erth and Centauri, and which found original counterparts on far more distant planets. "Thou shalt not bear false witness"—but it added, "against thy neighbor." There was no flat-out prohibition against lying or double-dealing, as long as you didn't thereby put your neighbor on a hot spot. And yet he found *all* lying and double-dealing unworthy, self-soiling, even when it was aesthetically amusing. Was the commandment too restricted?

On a later religious level, the Jesuitist exaltation of two isolated and obscure passages out of *Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy* took care of it: Love God—and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus had added that everyone is one's neighbor. And if you mislead somebody by lying to him, there must be *some* hurt that you are doing him.

Or consider a secular parallel, five centuries old at most: John Dewey, emended and enriched three centuries later by Nike Pan. Evil is distortion, interruption, or destruction of possibilities for long-range self-educational

growth. Killing sort of does this. Lying more subtly does this. . . .

So Croyd had avoided lying, and thus far he had avoided killing; but now he was deeply mired in double-dealing, and he didn't like it—not even against Ziska—not even for the sake of the good of Erth.

Nevertheless, was he not justified?

Or was he? In seeking to prevent this human tampering with the cosmic *Zeitgeist*, was he perhaps running counter to an Epoch-Spirit which of its own contexture was influencing men to attack itself? Whether he would bring off the counter-attack by sooth or by fraud, would the *Zeitgeist* tolerate his meddling? Was he perhaps even fencing with some form of divine will?

Nonsense! The *Zeitgeist* is only the contemporaneous contexture of the *Weltgeist* which is completely impersonal and possesses no will. It is neither pro-human nor anti-human by discretion, it is merely whatever it may turn out to be. As for individual humans, it exalts them or ruins them impersonally, depending on how they happen to meld with the *Zeitgeist* contexture. All this occurs merely as hyperfine psychological interaction, not by any choosing of the volitionless *Weltgeist*.

Perhaps it is the seemingly hopeless pervasiveness of the *Zeitgeist* which engenders in a man the Existentialist frame of mind, so that if a man be atheistic or agnostic he simply denies that life has intelligible meaning, or if he be theistic he slips into praising God for any condition of the *Zeitgeist* whatsoever.

But it is alternately possible, if a man choose to believe in what epistemologically he cannot know, to seek a *star* (as Plato and Pan metaphored), or to resolve on a *goal* (as Dewey and Pan pragmatized), that is beyond the *Weltgeist* and higher than the *Zeitgeist*, having even perhaps (for all one can know) personal responsiveness; and, without repudiating the *Zeitgeist*, to melt diffusely through the *Zeitgeist* in an intercommunicant spindle gradient between oneself and the star. Through this means, one may gain the strength, patience, sensitivity, and relative clarity to influence the Epoch-Spirit while respecting the spirit: to influence, not necessarily with direct human influence, but just through this melting-through gradient.

For the *Zeitgeist*, not being personal, does not mind being influenced; nor, being without discretion, is a particular *Zeitgeist* wrong or right *per se*. But (and here Thoth slipped into feminine semi-personalization) like a fury does the *Zeitgeist* retaliate on him who attacks her; and like a possessive mother does she absorb him who gives in to her. And yet she can be gentle to one who quietly infuses her with sympathetic new contexturing: perhaps, even, she will allow herself to be inflected, and in time she may begin to change for him. . . .

But not for a lie!

His face firmed. His father had forged a primitive empire of justice on a long-dead planet without recourse to a single lie or double-deal; and that was on a planet contaminated by injustice and violence. Necessarily violence had been part of his father's method; but there was some justification for this, since his father had represented and indeed had constituted the State countering violent enemies of society. His father had never been sneak-violent, but instead he had always announced his threat and fought on equal or inferior terms. Besides, for his father there had been no recourse other than violence to combat violence. Whereas for Croyd. . . .

He was on his feet, gripping a stanchion with a hard fist, slowly beating the stanchion with the other fist, frowning. *Croyd had other recourse*. It might not be sufficient; nevertheless it was other recourse. . . .

The fist that was gripping the stanchion was his left fist. It drew his attention to his cutichron. Nearly 1530 hours: they must be warping into Moonbase. The braking change in acceleration could not be noticed behind the inertial shield. . . .

Croyd gripped the stanchion with the other fist also, and he asserted aloud: "My father, sir, with the added resources that I have, I shall be as bold as you were with the limited resources that you had. And that way I shall become your peer, if I can." He thought about that. He grinned a little and added: "Do you buy it?"

There was no answer, of course; but he was satisfied by the answer that he thought he would have gotten had reply been possible.

Already his airtight cabin was being filled by carbon monoxide intentionally introduced through the airfeed.

Coming groggy-conscious with a sense of near suffocation, Croyd comprehended that he was in uptime hovering on the marge of actuality, had lain here without breathing until nearly his limit. Semi-stuporous, he was about to rescue himself by plopping down into organized *now*, but some wispy intuition stopped him. Turning inward upon himself, he concentrated on his new steatopygous recirculation precEDURE: it wasn't efficient, but it did bring him back to sharp consciousness.

And then he grasped that his airtight cabin was filled with carbon monoxide, presumably introduced through the airfeed. He watched the perishing molecules, he knew what they would have done to him; and he knew also that Ziska's biochemists would have no difficulty in assigning heart failure as the cause of death. Only, in a swooning survival reflex, Croyd had uptimed a bit—just enough so that he now lay perilously close to the forward bulkhead of his cabin, corresponding to the spaceplace which the moving frigate's cabin had occupied.

The monoxide settled all questions about Ziska. Had he been loyal either to Mare Stellarum or to Marta rather than merely to himself, Ziska would not have attempted to murder a possible spy; instead, he would have kept Croyd alive for interrogation. Croyd had been attacked because Croyd personally was dangerous to Ziska personally.

An international constellation facing ruin and multiple human insanity because of some kind of bureaucratic mistake—and Ziska had to play one-upmanship!

Croyd waited no longer. Arising and space-drifting aft to compensate, he uptimed to the moment, hours before, when the aide had brought him back to this cabin; and by-passing his own uptime body, he followed the aide out again. Downtiming to just short of actuality, he awaited hatch opening, debouched on to Moonbase, and lost himself. In a lavatory stall he returned fully into actuality and breathed again.

They would be looking for him aboard ship, not having found his body after the gassing; but he thought he could chance it in the present. Departing the lavatory, he strolled

with deliberation through corridors and doors and down ramps until he found himself in the nearest approach to open non-air that Moonbase could offer an unhelmeted wayfarer—namely, the crystal-domed taxi stand.

Here he hailed down a cab and mentioned a destination. The computer-cabbie responded cautiously: "For that destination, suitable ID is required." Croyd gave it his 6-P Hertz card. "Yessir!" barked the computer; and the taxi took off.

6-P was going to get him *to* his experimental station via logical computer, but it wasn't going to get him *into* the station past imaginative Mare Stellarum inspectors. Nevertheless he made it all right by staying just beneath actuality's surface through the hut with the secret entrance to the underground laboratory. There he reentered actuality and said softly: "Croyd here."

Clarifying the confusion caused by his facial youthening during four days' absence took a few minutes; but then, convinced, they helped him into the control seat of his cockeyed hypertelem that somehow *worked*. He spent a quarter-hour checking it out, and then he was ready for his program:

Marta on Nereid at 1800. Then Herod on Rab. . . .

It was now, however, only 1730: Marta would not be ready. This gave him time to catch Marana aboard the *Mazurka*. Quitting his ivisiradio, he moved to the underground visicom which scrambled messages so efficiently that to Moonbase monitors they sounded like routine equipment checks, while to listeners like Marana they sounded quite different.

Marana joined his ship by scouter at 1123 hours on 22 May, well ahead of the 1200 terminus of his shore leave. The commander went instantly and busily into preparation details for executing the tempopattern scansion of Senevendia—a procedure which could be completed, he estimated, in about four hours, this city being a great deal smaller than Chihattan.

At 1251—all members of his crew having reported in, some with help—he took his ship out and commenced the scansion. During more than four hours, Dana Marana ex-

cluded the emotional trouble of departed Keri by paying acute attention to the tempopattern of her city and his. But all need for his duty-attention was done by 1715, and thoughts of Keri began to crowd in. Dana was not used to the idea of an insoluble problem.

He quit the bridge for his cabin. En route, he encountered his exec, a freckled pug-nosed redhair. Lieutenant-Commander Mulcahy asserted: "Dana, you are dreamy."

"That approach," declared Marana, "earns you a drink, Pete. How are you on potato whiskey?"

In the captain's cabin they nosed the stuff. Marana queried: "How was your leave, Pete?"

"Hot. How was yours? I know—dreamy."

Marana took a slug and frowned into the glass.

Mulcahy leaned forward. "Is there something deep?"

Marana looked up, smiling somewhat helplessly. "If I said I was in love, would you believe it?"

"No stuff! You going back?"

Marana went wholly serious. "Dunno," he told the whiskey. . . .

The phone chimed. Marana took it where he sat, with a two-tone whistle. Switchboard said: "Secret scramble." Marana frowned. Mulcahy arose and left the cabin and closed the door. Marana went to his desk and switched on visiphone and inserted the earpiece.

Croyd appeared in the viewplate, clear but motionless, waiting the necessary 1·27 seconds while the connect signal went from Erth to Moon, *seeming* to continue motionless and soundless during the 1·27 seconds while his responding motion and voice returned from Moon to Erth: this was ordinary laser-rekamatics at 300,000 kilometers per second. Suddenly exploding into mouth motion and voice, Croyd crisped: "Marana, I'm on Moon, at our installation."

"Very good, sir. Go ahead."

"How many patterns do you have complete?"

"Chihattan of course, and completing Senevendia City."

Marana was finding it normal to wait seconds between transmission and reply. On the moon, Croyd was fretting, already spoiled by his instantaneous method which he could not now use with Marana. . . .

The Croyd reply now came through: "As soon as Senevendia is done, get out of there. You might take Moskov next. Keep this top secret, Marana. COMCORD has gone berserk—and the target is Senevendia, and I think the effects may be worse than standard."

Not hearing Marana's "*Why?*" for nearly six seconds because of Dana's paralysis before he yelled it, Croyd sensed some kind of trouble. He replied: "I don't know why, but I have a crazy hunch that Senevendia rigged it, which means there's a lot more to it—"

Marana went taut, and then he rose right out of his seat. Croyd complained: "Marana, all I can see is your belly!"

He heard Marana groaning at him: "My *God*, how much of an ass can a fleet commander be? She's Keri Andhra—*Andhra*, get it? The Chancellor's daughter—I just woke up! She *knew*, all the damn time, and *that* was why—"

Dana's pinched face came back into view as the commander sank again into his seat. "Croyd—I wanted you to be at our wedding."

Croyd blurted: "You and the Chancellor's daughter were going to be—"

Dana jerked his head away: "Aa—" He turned back to Croyd, blazing: "She's trying to commit some sort of psychic suicide with her father! Croyd, do you have any idea *why* he would do a thing like this?"

"Marana, he's the prize paranoid of two star-systems, and that's what gave me the hunch. But my hunch may be dead wrong, so forget it until you hear more. Just go at that Moskov pattern—"

Marana went belligerent. "*Why* do I have to get Moskov?"

When Croyd heard it, he looked a bit disturbed; and then he responded oddly but firmly. "I don't entirely understand my hunch about Chancellor Andhra, but I think it's right. Even less do I understand my hunch about these tempopatterns, but I think Moskov is right. Please don't ask, because I can't answer intelligibly yet. These are educated hunches, Marana—there's nothing mystical about them, they are subliminal associations in a brain which has

served me well for a good long time, and I have to trust them—”

Marana snapped back so fast that Croyd was interrupted by his answer, which meant that Marana hadn't waited for the finish by at least a clause or two. "The hell with old men's hunches! Give me permission to go back there and get her out!"

Dana awaited the reply in agony. It came stern. "Permission denied. You go sample Moskov. Then get Paris, then London, then Peking, in that order, if I don't call you—but I think you'll hear from me off Moskov."

Marana had composed himself outwardly, and inwardly he had recognized his own unkind gaucherie; his feeling was unchanged, but he commanded himself to handle it differently. He said, very steady: "I was angry, I did not mean it about your age—actually you look younger for some reason, and I fully trust your mental vigor. But I cannot say forcefully enough that I must find and rescue Miss Andhra."

Croyd went deadly. "Commander Marana, this is an order. Stay with the scanning mission. As yet I can't tell you positively why. But I can tell you negatively why to stay out of Senevendia. Want to listen?"

Marana's eyes were wild, and the rest of his face was dead. "No," he said dully.

"Because," Croyd told him, "if you are in Senevendia when it hits, both you and your girl will get it. But if you do your job away from Senevendia, perhaps it won't hit."

Tears drowned Marana's eyes. "By *Krishna*," he screamed, slamming his desk with a mighty fist, "what kind of logic is *that*?"

Croyd answered with gentle firmness. "I think it is good logic because of a connection that you don't have and I can only intuit. That's the best I can tell you, Dana—except to remark that just maybe all Erthworld lives or dies on what you do, because of the uncertainties of that ill-tested Z-sting. You have your orders, Commander: execute them. Over and out."

With serious doubtings, Croyd cut out from Marana. His cutichron told him that it was rendezvous time with Marta. He hurried to his ivisiradio and concentrated on



the task of focusing on Nereid which had no i-ray receiver.

Actually it was not imperative that he contact her, for he had already projectively implanted in her central nervous system a biopsychic clock (merely a rearrangement of a local section of her own brain) which would cause her to keep youthening herself in his absence. *He* could not youthen her—she had to do it within herself; but the directive mechanism originated in the thalamus and immediately extended itself to the midbrain as the coordinative-powering agency, below the level of consciousness; and this mechanism he had started, and he thought it would work alone. Having blazed the trail with difficulty in his own body system, he felt that the methods learned could work more efficiently in another.

Nevertheless a contact or two would be good psychology—and not entirely sham, because there was a possibility that he could speed up matters with his i-rays if he could effectively contact her with them at all.

The moment of this possible rendezvous had been set for 1800 hours daily: he *might* come through, he had told her. She was to be somewhere on Moonside of Nereid. At just this hour on this day, the Sea of Serenity and Nereid were *en face* with each other, with no known intervening bodies larger than a dust mote. Excepting only the World Union artificial astronomical satellites Velos in Jupiter orbit, Miros in Mars orbit, and Heros orbiting Erth a neat 900,000 kilometers out: these had always maintained themselves in a direct line between Neptune and Erth since their launchings in 2419, but their diameter of thirteen meters each was too small to be a problem now, and besides, they were transparent, components and shells. (He reminded himself wryly that the functions of these satellites were Union secrets which Croyd had not penetrated, having been dead.) Now he calculated that the best place of rendezvous for Marta would be the solarium of her secondary office in the major governmental complex of Nereid.

Neptune came into large focus on the gross viewscreen. A few more seconds of adjustment brought Nereid into screen-filling close-up. Abandoning the viewscreen, Croyd

fitted over his eyes a set of opaque goggles wired in to the visual, and now it was as though he were floating in space just off Nereid all over again; but still with both hands he had to fiddle blind with instruments in order to improve his control. (An early refinement would have to be a helmet which would allow him to experience distant targets by direct encephalography. . . .)

So peering and fiddling, subjectively he came in on Nereid's governmental complex, and then on the Chairman's solarium, and then close on Marta within. The image was not perfect, it was about like an early snowy television picture: he had nailed her, he guessed, with around a million point-rays (each ray being more of a splash than a dot)—which was pretty good for a raw hit, considering that even a receiver instrument at this distance would have gathered in only around thirty million from this crude transmitter.

Marta again lay on a chaise longue, except that this one was no period piece with legs, but a modern layer of resilient plastic floating on a force field. As yesterday, she was dressed or undressed for sun-bathing—genuine sun this time, direct from Sol (not reflected off Neptune) and therefore requiring higher amplification for the Florida beach effect, Sol being visible only as a nova-bright star. (Mighty Neptune reflected more collectible Sol-photons than tiny Nereid could catch direct from Sol.)

And Marta looked distinctly younger already—after a single day! This meant three things: he had been right in hoping that his experience with himself could be replicated much faster in another; Marta must be following to the letter, or more so, his directions about exercise and surplus intake of food tablets; and the *will* of Marta was prodigious, overflowing her diencephalon and cerebrum, radiating into her midbrain and hindbrain and on out into her spinal cord and her autonomies.

He brought in his tight focus on her face and throat (maybe ten thousand rays, the splash effect making form and color definite but snowy). Hair gray-blond all over, with encircling braids. (It wasn't *growing* blond that fast, but he had introduced a photochemical pigment-cell adaptation.) Forehead only fine-lined, temples not at all drawn.

Eyebrows definitely fuller. Eyelids not taut, crowsfeet not offensive, reduced puffiness beneath the eyes. Nose not at all pinched, cheeks semi-full, lips a bit fuller (though still pulled somewhat too tightly over prosthodontal implants), chin better, and near the jaw corners only slight bulges where before there had been definite jowls. Yes, Marta was making commendable progress.

Her eyes opened. Their pale blue was quite charming. He knew that she could not see him, could not even know that there was contact: to establish communication, he would have to try telepathy at four billion kilometers. . . .

Then his brows hit painfully down over his goggles, and he almost felt nausea. Again, as in his cabin on Ziska's warship, he was remembering what a slimy snake he was. She lay there awaiting the meeting, not knowing how or whether it would come, trusting him. Powerful as she was, ruthless as she was known to be, in this situation she was child and he was master. *Could* he bring himself to enter her consciousness as a friend, being in fact a treacherous enemy?

He closed the consideration out of his mind. Nothing about this youthening could hurt Marta personally, and it was part of a necessary task affecting the welfare of a billion men and women in Senevendia—and maybe also billions everywhere on Erth.

He turned his attention to a technique for entry. The i-rays could extend only to a light source, running along the standing gradients created by the stream of photons therefrom. They could touch Marta's face, which reflected light. They could not enter her mind.

His mindreach could, however, extend along the standing secondary beams furnished by the i-rays. It could touch Marta's face. And it could enter.

It did so. And he found himself in telepathic touch with Marta—a communion so intimate that it was as though the two minds were merely two somewhat distinct contextures within the same mind: contextures that might come into fused identity if both of them should wish this. . . .

With one limitation. All Marta's mind lay open to his

mindreach. But with Croyd as the aggressive agent, Marta could know of Croyd only what he might wish to reveal to her.

This thought caused him to pull up short in the exploration that he had begun. If his double-agency on a straightforward man-to-man basis was giving him qualms of conscience, how much more villainous was this ultimate cloaked intrusion into a holy-of-holies!

He resolved on conversation; he wished to inhibit his knowing of her, restricting it to what she might wish to reveal.

He announced himself gently. *Marta, this is Croyd. We are in telepathic contact, but you must formulate your comments in order for me to understand them.*

He felt female-emotional turmoil (the qualitative gender difference is perceptible in a mind), and felt it subsiding, compelled into submission by her own iron-masculine will. With only a trace of emotional background perceptible, her mind responded concisely: *It appears that your treatment is working. Is that what you came to learn?*

*Partly. I had four other reasons for coming. To see you. To test a gadget. To give you another treatment. To report our progress with respect to the Earth crisis.*

He felt in her the following four emotional splashes: pleasure, curiosity, excitement, anxiety—each instantly tempered. She asked: *What gadget?*

*The one I used to set up efficient telepathic contact with you here on Nereid from Moon where now I sit. It works fine. Shall we proceed to the treatment?*

*Leave that for the last. What kind of a gadget is it?*

*Ivisiradio. Faster than light.*

Her curiosity was beginning to be sharpened by practical considerations. *How much faster?*

*If we were using it for ordinary vocal communication between Moon and Nereid, then between saying question and hearing answer there would be no more time lag than we are now experiencing—instead of eight hours four minutes.*

Now Marta was seated taut on the side of her chaise longue, gripping it with both hands, feet flat on the

floor—a tense pose that he had seen before; she was gazing out through the solarium roof into space as though Croyd were out there—as indeed his body was, way out there. She demanded aloud: *Have you succeeded in keeping your device away from Ziska?*

*I have—so far.*

*Good.*

*Why?*

*“He is my enemy. He wants Mare Stellarum for himself.”*

*You are talking aloud.*

Her smile was wan. *Sorry, she said in her mind. Then: When will you place this device at my disposal?*

*When will you have Mare Stellarum organized so that it is unnecessary for the Chairman to keep operational secrets from her Minister of Internal Security—and other top ministers—and the President of Erthworld Union?*

He felt her massive mental wince, and then a flare of dangerous anger: it was a bit mind-searing, and he tightened his defenses to ride it out. Abruptly she demanded: *If you are truly an old man just out of the tank, how did you arrive at setting up such a gadget on the moon—obviously before you called on Nereid yesterday? Who are you?*

He brazened it: *Ziska thinks I'm a spy for Galactic. He imprisoned me and tried to kill me.*

The anger went cold, but its turbulence increased, and it was redirected at Ziska. *Contrary to my orders?*

*He implied that I had seduced you—mentally, at least. He said that by countermanding your orders he was obeying the spirit of your purposes. Which would be true, of course, were I in fact a spy for Galactic.*

*It is an absurd contention, her mind barked, contrived by Ziska to get you out of his way. Perhaps it is time for the progress report.*

*That will be short. There is none.*

*By Ziska, this I assume. How about you?*

*There is none.*

*Coldness: Why not?*

*I just got here.*

Faint thaw. *I confess surprise, then, that you are talking with me instead of acting. What is your plan?*

*Begin by realizing that Ziska and his organization will be using all their resources to clamp off this disaster. These resources are not likely to be sufficient. For me to use other resources, I must first learn what their resources are. Therefore I have no plan yet—only a starting point.*

*Which is?*

*The Mazurka.*

*Why?*

*Ziska has already given you a connection which is happenstantial but may prove consequential. The Mazurka is plotting tempopatterns. I have already made contact with the Mazurka—she is at this moment completing scansion of Senevendia.*

*Mental silence. Then Marta, calmly: It seems a good starting point, and I anticipate fruitful consequences by this hour tomorrow. May we now proceed with my treatment?*

*Croyd suggested: It will require that I put you to sleep, so I suggest you first check your security. The treatment will take ten minutes of my time, and I will then leave you asleep—you will awaken normally in a quarter- or half-hour—while I move into Erthworld operations.*

Still seated on the edge of the chaise longue, Marta said aloud: "I am secure." She stared a moment longer into space. Resolutely she swung herself around and lay supine with eyes closed.

He asked: *Are you ready for sleep?*

She asked aloud: *"Are you a spy for Galactic?"*

"Yes," he blurted.

Her emotion that he felt was rather demotion: total psychic sag. He regretted his impulsive confession. Then he realized that it had not been impulsive, but rather inevitable because of his bad conscience.

Her yawning depressive reaction came into a kind of self-settlement: she was a toughened woman, and his youthening of her had strengthened her resilience. Eyes remaining closed, body remaining relaxed, she responded quietly: *I have three questions. Why are you spying? Why do you confess? What do you propose to do?*

*I thought your first question would be: "How do I know that you are not slowly killing me?"*

*That would be a silly question, since if you can youthen me swiftly, you can kill me instantly. Please answer the questions I did ask.*

*We of Galactic have conscience but little hope of winning the Interplanetary contract. Mare Stellarum will win it. Therefore I have a double mission as a Galactic agent: to help Marta clean up her organization, and to youthen Marta so she will as winner have the force to operate our galaxy with conscience.*

*The hypo-depressive contexture of Marta responded by generating a rich contextural velour: still hypo-depressive, but vital now, no longer dead. Her mind drawled: I can scarcely find that complimentary, but I suppose I have to consider it just and even hopeful in a dreary way. Why have you confessed?*

*You challenged at a time when a good conscience was in bad conscience.*

*You are aware that I can relay your confession to Ziska and have you confined or killed?*

*That would take more than four hours, even if I were to permit it or you finally were to desire it. Besides, Ziska has already tried both.*

*Would you permit it?*

*Yes.*

*Why?*

*I have you unfairly at my mercy. I put you into this situation with the intent to deal honestly insofarforth, and I shan't depart from that. I don't believe in rape without prior consent of the raped.*

*That would not be rape.*

*You apprehend me perfectly.*

*Thank you. Then what do you propose to do, as a spy for Galactic? Or to say it another way—what makes you a spy for Galactic? Why are you not simply my agent?*

*Without interfering with Ziska's operation, I propose to solve the Erth crisis personally in such a way that it will be known who solved it.*

*And when it becomes known that a Galactic agent successfully infiltrated the supposedly impregnable Mare Stel-*

larum, and went on to solve a planetary crisis that *Mare Stellarum* could not begin to solve—

—The world will know that Galactic has great potencies while *Mare Stellarum* has mortal weaknesses. But the world will also know, I assure you, that it was the Chairman of *Mare Stellarum* who knew about the Galactic spy and yet permitted him to operate for the good of the world and the cleansing of *Mare Stellarum*.

Prolonged mental silence. Then Marta, eyes still closed: So Galactic goes up, and *Mare Stellarum* goes down and up, and the Interplanetary contract becomes a horse race, and Marta Vensen gets younger and cleaner.

That's about it.

This has to be truth. It is too sophisticated for fiction.

One objection, Croyd interposed.

Only one?

I could lose.

You are honest.

Finally, yes. So are you, finally. It is time for me to tell you about a feeling I have.

I am sure it is not a good feeling, Croyd. Tell me nevertheless.

Supposedly the Z-sting is programmed to enshroud some constellation—in this case, *Senevendia*—for a ten-year running. What if the sting were to exceed its program?

How?

For instance, by inflicting a permanent curse on all Earthworld?

Pause.

Marta, hushed: It could mean the end of all real values.

Croyd waited.

How? she demanded.

I do not know. I have told you my feeling. Do you think your Internal Security people can save Earthworld?

Frankly, Croyd, no. The computer-deterrent was a hideous mistake that I inherited. At first I was naïve, I accepted it as part of life. Later I kept telling myself that I must do something about it when I could find the time. Actually, a few years ago, I put a task force on the question—headed by Ziska, as I ruefully reflect. But I do not think we can beat it.

Do you think I can beat it?



*I do not know that you cannot—if, that is, I persuade myself to omit notifying Ziska.*

*Then, if you notify Ziska and he has me killed or disabled, you are responsible for crippling Senevendia and perhaps killing Erthworld.*

*Had you not confessed, Croyd, I would not be debating whether to notify Ziska. So you are equally responsible.*

*This is a curious Mexican stand-off, Marta. Two people trying to out-honest each other—and only all people lose.*

*I have always contended that it was possible to find whimsy in the grimmest of situations. Thank you for proving my point.*

*The whimsy, however, is in bad taste.*

*I agree. Only by permitting bad taste does my view hold valid.*

*Dual mental pause. Then: Croyd, are we not wasting time that we could be using to my physical profit?*

*Not as much time as you may think. Check your cutichron.*

*It seems to be running slow.*

*I read your time reading, Marta: it is right. This is telepathy, very efficient: we've been at it only a few minutes.*

*Why are you so concerned for Galactic? Why would you not join my Mare Stellarum?*

*Some day I'll answer both questions for you, Marta. Why are you so concerned for Mare Stellarum? I could twist a few arms and get you a top spot in Galactic—*

*I was beautiful. I am virginal.*

*It rocked him back, the totality of confession. He allowed himself to sense her emotions: they were a raw depressive plunge, the confession had cost her all her female pride. He schooled himself to ask no questions: she had said enough, too much: Mare Stellarum—his Mare Stellarum—was her meaning.*

*For the first time, but perforce, he gave her a shot of reassurance. The emotional chasm gradually filled and leveled, the velour-texture returned. In that contexture he told her, with a deliberate underlay of conviction: Frustration may be a catapult, but the sustaining drive has to be personal energy and the dedication has to be conscience and heart. I comprehend, Marta—and I admire.*

Long silence—almost a tenth of a second.  
Marta said aloud: "Please put me to sleep."

"Herod, my friend, I couldn't stay with it. I had to tell her who I am."

Herod's eyes narrowed. "That you're Thoth Evans?"

"No no, forget that name. But I had to tell her that I work for Galactic." Mutual responses seemed instantaneous on ivisiradio; by rekamatics, in contrast, the delay in each answer would have exceeded four years.

Herod's eyes closed. "Conscience?"

"Conscience."

"That rather clobbers us."

"Herod, believe it or not, I really don't think it does."

"But, Croyd—all other considerations aside—hasn't your confession hamstrung you for saving Erthworld?"

"You have maybe, like me, a hunch that the trouble will overflow more than Senevendia?"

"Right. So how do you get the string out of your hams?"

"I don't see any new hamstringing yet. Ziska had already defied Marta and put me in jail. He even tried killing me."

Herod's brows went up. With a small smile he commented: "But there you still are."

"Well, yes."

The Herod smile grew malevolent. "So it seems that if you hadn't confessed you would have gained nothing, whereas by confessing you have lost nothing. What does that do to the virtue of your confession?"

Croyd recognized the gambit with a grin of his own. "All right, Herod Lucifer. I could claim that it was virtuous because I hadn't previously thought of your sophistry. But unfortunately, I had thought of it. So I won't feel any better now. But on the other hand, now I won't keep feeling worse."

Herod soberly nodded. "Perhaps that's advantageous to us—a man doesn't work well when he feels wrong. Besides—just personally, I see what you mean. The Mare Stellarum people aren't enemies, after all. They're competitors, God bless them. So I cry a benison upon your wholesome stupidity and turn you loose on the action."

# Rehab Action Seven

## CARLTON'S TICKET TO THE ACTION

*Moon and Erth, 22-23 May*



Should the Z-sting so malfunction as to make three simultaneous strikes at sufficiently well-dispersed Erth targets, it appears likely that the Z-effect would homogenize, permanently enveloping the planet. The result would be the sealing off of Erth from outer space: Erth and space would be mutually inaccessible, and all the celestial bodies including Sol and Moon would be invisible from Erth. Diffuse sunlight might penetrate, so that photosynthesis might continue; but because of a reduction in thermal radiation, the planetary climate would be permanently tropical, the polar caps would melt. . . .

—Excerpt from an unidentified and unpublicized minority scientific report to the Erthworld President (2417). Published counter-reports inferentially negated the possibility of such a malfunction.

Fast entree into sensitive locations would be required by the ghost-of-a-plan that he had formed. His Mare Stellarum 6-P Hertz card could get him into most of them; but having confessed to Marta, he was disinclined to continue using these credentials. He wished also to reserve for final contingencies an alternate ID which Herod had

given him, establishing him as Croyd, a 6-U (Unspecialized) for Galactic, Ltd. That card might get him admitted, excluded, or jailed, depending on the mood of his challenger; but in any event, it would get him semi-VIP attention.

On Moon, Croyd broke off ivisiradio communication with Herod on Rab at 1836 hours, 22 May. Requiring almost immediate transportation to Erth, he was for practical purposes marooned underground at his experimental Moon installation; this problem had to be dealt with; and since this dealing could not be simple, apparently it would have to be complicated.

He began by trading identities and clothing with a Rab officer whose name, by the maddest of coincidences, was Lieutenant Vishnu. He next approached a resident Mare Stellarum inspector and requested a taxi to Moonbase. That was easy: why not?

At Moonbase, Croyd-Vishnu explained that spare parts obtainable in Trenton were needed for the hypertelem experiment, and he requested transportation to procure them personally. That was not so easy: Erth was now quarantined; he was advised to present a requisition—the parts would be obtained for him as soon as possible. Why was Erth quarantined? Reason not attached to information. Croyd recognized what Moonbase did not: it was the COMCORD crisis, and Ziska had gone into action.

On the spot, Croyd wrote the requisition (in septuplicate), disclosed that he (Lieutenant Vishnu) had orders for a week or more of discretionary travel, and asked for private quarters at Moonbase with visiphone (buggable, naturally) while he thought things over. This was granted.

In his eighteenth-story quarters, he executed a test: fixing eyes on cutichron, he set himself for five minutes up-time and willed the *twitch*. (It was always a physical-seeming thing, indefinitely in the area of the solar plexus.) Had the twitch come, he would have found himself still rising in the updraft with his cutichron reading five minutes earlier. Instead, the twitchless twitchiness indicated lambent semi-readiness but then went away. No up-time.

Well, what could you do? He'd noticed this over and

over again: there was some special kind of energy involved in uptiming, he couldn't yet tap it with perfect selectivity; apparently he had expended it during the Nereid binge and the subsequent self-rescue; he could only wait until it would recrudescence. Meanwhile this transient uptime disability seriously crippled him for what he had to do. His thought had been to latch on to a moon ferry which *had already* spaced to Erth, and then to a tube which *had already* swifted to Senevendia; to return into Senevendian actuality, there where he was sure the action was, and to go to work instantly on the action. But those possibilities were eliminated by the fatigue of his uptime capacity.

All right; there was a back-up possibility. This, if it should work, would take overnight; but presumably the imbalance would not progress overnight, it depended on bureaucrats who valued their sleep.

He therefore activated his room's visiradiophone (the ordinary rekamatic variety) and voice-dictated a Manhattan number: 9402-8713-2964, extension 702. A few seconds later his visiscreen was filled by a title stating THIS IS A RECORDING; and a familiar, crisply modulated mezzo audio'd pleasingly: "Please specify whether you want to leave a photo—and do leave a message. No time limit; I don't turn off until you do. Carlton out." The sign changed to START DICTATION.

So Carlton perked nicely on tape, suggesting much, promising nothing. He replied: "Well done, Lieutenant. By all means, a photo. Take." He grinned wickedly while it clicked. He then added: "If you recognize me, allowing for new youth, call Moonbase and ask for Transient Lieutenant Vishnu of the frigate *Mazurka* out of Rab. Call any time until 0200 hours tomorrow morning, and then I will have to leave here."

When he disconnected, there was a reconnect; and a nasal female (no video) said: "This is Communications Specialist First-Class Frodo of Moonbase monitoring your calls. Sir, please state the purpose of the message for Lieutenant Carlton in Manhattan."

Knowing that he was visible to Frodo, Croyd adopted embarrassment. "With luck," he explained, "a date."

"Oh. Pardon me, sir. You understand that I—"

"You're doing fine, Frodo. Stay at it. Who knows what you may learn?"

*Click.*

He checked cutichron: 2002. He punched autocom: "I am to be found immediately for any call. Track me through Transient Officers' Mess." Then—having taken time to shower, shave, and get into clean linenoid—he left his quarters and stepped into an updraft that lifted him to a luxurious high-level restaurant.

Seated at the long bar, he peered past bartenders and bottles at a superb view of the Julius Caesar Mountains. A human bartender asked his preference (as a profession they had survived well because robots are dispiriting counselors in times of trouble). Croyd ordered frosted zac in a long frosted glass: it came automatically at his order—but the human bartender had presided, and that made all the difference.

Brooding over his zac, enjoying its textured coolness with the palms of both hands, he reviewed his gamble-planning, measuring its inexact logic, seeking flaws. There was no point in seeking to penetrate COMCORD Central in Manhattan: Ziska's top people would be there, and Ziska had every selfish wish to kill the crisis—that quarter was covered. The action for Croyd would be in Senevendia, with Chancellor Andhra if he could get to him; and even that would be no better than the best possible lead to the cause of the threat and to the heart of the *whole* threat whatever it was—if Croyd's working assumption was right, that Andhra was bringing the Z-effect down upon his own Senevendia in a distortion of paranoid guilt, and that Andhra-type guilt would be so cosmic as to involve a great deal more than Senevendia.

And if all that were wrong, why then. . . .

Call it right until followed down and proved right or wrong. If it was wrong, it was a false track that could somehow lose Erth-world. But it was the best of all hypotheses—and there was time to run down only one.

Time? How much time?

He ordered more zac. COMCORD had gone critical, with a 2.5 imbalance, at 0241 hours this morning. It was now 2029—about eighteen hours later. For all he knew, COMCORD might already have reached the Z-wave trig-

ger point of 3·0; but if so, it was too late for action; whereas if not so, it was unlikely that grievances would multiply by night. Nevertheless, time was thin! *Now* was when he should be in Senevendia. And he could get there swiftly, using the methods that had got him onto Nereid. Once there, though—what could he accomplish by night? He had to work through people at the level of Andhra himself! By waiting, he *might* have an interesting resource.

His ticket was maybe Carlton. First she had to get him to Erth, and then to Senevendia. But if she got him to Erth, it would be Manhattan; and the earliest tube-car from Manhattan to Senevendia would leave at 0710 tomorrow, arriving in Senevendia at 0800—giving him—*how many hours* to find Andhra, choke a lead out of him, follow down the lead, and make it work—with Carlton buying him time?

Best bet available. Erth was quarantined: without military help, he couldn't get in. Senevendia was triple-quarantined: even that 0710 tube was a VIP tube, even Carlton mightn't get him on it. There might be earlier military rocket-plane flights into Senevendia; he doubted it, even if he could somehow latch on to one; and if such a flight were not a great deal earlier, it would arrive later than the tube because of takeoff and reentry limitations along with ballistics. Whereas uptiming-in was now impossible. . . .

No, chalk off those ideas. The best bet was Carlton and an 0800 arrival in Senevendia. And besides—among all the other long chances—there was a delaying action that Carlton *might* be able to perform. . . . (Surreptitiously he touched a zippered pocket, reassuring himself that a certain slight bulge was still there.) But if Carlton hadn't answered his call by 0200 hours, he would simply have to take chancier action. . . .

A soft right hand laid itself on his left shoulder, and a familiar crisp mezzo inquired: "Lieutenant Vishnu?"

Without turning, he took his right hand from the glass and laid its damp coolness on the hand on his shoulder, responding: "Lieutenant Carlton. Please join me."

Not taking her hand away, she swung onto the stool at

his left. "I'll share your drink. Do you think it will make me as fluid as you at the identity shell game?"

He performed the intricate gambit of lifting his glass to his lips with his left hand while his right hand held her right hand on his left shoulder; and he answered, "I can explain all that on a proper date, but this is no place for one. Do you have a better suggestion?"

"I have a place on the Manhattan ferry in forty minutes, and my Manhattan apartment would be an excellent place for a date with an aging man who evidently wants to use me to get to Erth for some nefarious reason. Unhappily I have only one place on the ferry. It was the last place."

"Would you be willing to sit on my lap on the ferry?"

Removing her hand from his shoulder, she took his zac and sipped thoughtfully. "Apart from some other angles—how would that work?"

"Would it fascinate you to find out as we went?"

"To find out as we go?"

"Went."

"We have thirty-eight minutes, and I have to get my bag."

"What room are you in?"

"1807 Southwest."

"I'm in 1815 Southwest."

"Next door."

"Yes. It was rather like phoning Westchester from Yonkers via Frisco."

"We have thirty-seven minutes to compare rooms."

He slapped down money, and they dropped into the downdraft and emerged on 18 and went first to her room. He watched while she flung things into her little valise and snapped it shut. Valise in hand, she straightened and looked at him.

"Nice room," he commented, "But I bet I like your Erth-side apartment better."

"Twenty-six minutes. Let's see *your* room."

Taking her valise, he seized her hand and drew her into the corridor and released her hand to palm open his own door and repossessed her hand and drew her in. Stationing her in the floor-middle, he picked up his ready valise and hers and straightened. "Let's go."



"No fair," she complained. "I've had not time to compare rooms."

"Take my word, they are identical."

"I suppose so. Mine has a bidet—does yours?"

"Affirmative. You'd be amazed what I use it for."

"Congratulations—I found no use for mine. We have twenty-four minutes."

Urgent haste can resemble flip time-squandering when a cool hastener is satisfied that his speed is the maximum attainable. . . .

At the ferryport, which they were able to reach quite normally by depositing two fares into an uninquisitive taxi, Croyd told Carlton: "Walk in front of me and behave just as though you were boarding alone, but let me do all the talking. I'll carry both bags. When they ask for my pass and ID, hand yours over and let the people check your retinals."

She responded: "We have two minutes thirty-one seconds."

Quick-timing down the ferryport corridor, they approached the gate. The gateman asked Croyd for pass and ID. Carlton handed over hers. The gateman nodded at the pass, slipped the ID card into a slot, and asked Croyd for his retinals. Carlton put her eyes to the eyepiece. The computer stated: "Yep, it's Carlton." Croyd nudged her, and she stepped into the antigrav and was conveyed into the ferry. As she started for a window seat halfway back, Croyd caught her arm, sat first, and pulled her into his lap. A moment later, a portly three-stripe matron clumped into the adjacent seat, imprisoning them.

Carlton twisted her head around to whisper: "What—"

He whispered back: "There is room for you to sit sideways on my lap facing the window, with your back to the commander here, and relax against me while I breathe boy-girl secrets into your shell-like ear."

Puzzled, nevertheless she swung-around sidewise, keeping her hand on his shoulder with her elbow spring-taut; and she muttered, "The commander will find my lap-sitting unbecoming an officer."

"She isn't seeing it."

"Why not?"

"Projective hypnosis—the same stuff the gateman got. Nobody is seeing anybody but me, but I am Carlton."

Sharp breath-intake. "Horrors! You, a psychic transvestite?"

"They think I am a man named Carlton. Work out the complications in your own way."

She meditated. She inquired: "Can anybody hear us talking?"

"Nobody is paying attention. I'm screening off interest."

She mumbled: "The air conditioning is a bit chilly—" And she relaxed against him, letting her arm slip around his neck.

Then the ferry was in space—just like that.

They watched the flat moon surface resolve itself into a dark horizon curve.

Croyd told her: "The commander here might however be puzzled at seeing your arm crooked out in midair, as my arm appears to be while it encircles your invisible shoulders. So if you don't mind, I'll just rest my hand in my lap—right here."

The entire moon disc showed now—mostly dark, except for a growing pale crescent glow along one edge.

Carlton commented: "As to the position of your hand, I appreciate the tactic without necessarily approving. How far could you carry this?"

"It would break the spell if I should cause you to scream."

"This consideration, I assume, is restraining you."

"Not necessarily. I believe you would consider it inappropriate for a lieutenant to scream."

"Silently, however, I might claw your face."

"That is the consideration which is restraining me."

The gleaming moon crescent swung away from their viewpoint. Black space was in velvet contrast to the blue pallor of their minimum cabin lighting.

Carlton's head lay silently against his shoulder. Her eyes were closed.

He said softly: "Why did you call me an aging man?"

She said drowsily: "*Mea culpa*—I beat my breast. You are a young man, of course."

"I asked an honest question. I don't want flattery."

Her eyes flew open: she stared at the viewport which was beginning to reveal a three-quarter-gleaming Erth disc. "You *were* an aging man. But right now I'd figure you at sixty from some angles and fifty from others. No flattery: hard appraisal. How come?"

"I'd been sick."

She clucked: "Poor guy." She looked at him sidelong, skeptical: "I figure it differently: you change names, you change identities and ages. You are a Moskovite spy."

"There's an old story about that."

"I know the story. Which age is right?"

"Physiologically, my present age. Psychologically, younger."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Have you been noticing what my left hand is doing?"

"Yes. Nothing. Why? Oh—" She gazed for a long moment at Erth which was beginning to resolve itself into a recognizably clouded planet, mostly in daylight. She closed her eyes, leaned against his shoulder, and again spoke drowsily: "Were you really an old man, the hand would not be doing nothing."

"I have a passion for privacy—and for consent."

The matronly commander lit a cigar and inhaled hungrily, discharging, it seemed, smoke from her ears.

Carlton's fingers touched his ear as she replied: "Privacy you will have. Consent requires a question."

In the small Fiftieth-Street Persian restaurant, over midnight shish kebob, she told him: "I like you better in uniform, Vishnu-Hertz."

"Why?"

"Some stupes think that uniforms erase individuality. Not so, my friend. When everybody wears the same clothes, you aren't diverted by the clothes, you concentrate on the people. True individuality stands out more in uniform. I caught it the time before that you were different—but boy does it stick out now!"

"As a matter of male ego, probably I should pursue that."

"Don't. Just accept it. I couldn't begin to explain it."

"I haven't seen you in civvies—but I am sure I like you better in uniform, Carlton."

"Midge to you."

"Midge."

"As a matter of female coy, I wish to pursue that."

"Don't misunderstand—I should like you best without anything at all."

"You cad!"

"Nevertheless, your point about uniformed individuality is well taken, and you have it. More than that, though, there is a certain piquancy about an utterly female person in a male-type uniform."

"Every man is at heart a pervert."

"It takes one to know one. Eat your shish kebob."

"You—never told me why you are using me."

"I am not using you, except as one uses a friend if the friend wishes to be used. Do you wish for me to use you friend-to-friend?"

"We really aren't friends—"

"But, entirely apart from boy-girl interest, perhaps we may become friends?"

She clanked down her fork and seized his hands, spilling his forkful of wild rice. "I like you, boy or girl. Let's declare us friends right now!"

His face grin-split. "Hell, yes, friend!"

She grinned back. They held it like that, feeling it with internal depth.

Her grin softened into a contented smile, and she released his hands and went back to her food, saying, "I can make the separation that you are implying, one way or another. And somehow I feel awful good about this." Then her fork paused in midair, and her smile went guarded, and she looked up at him, adding: "Please don't be afraid that I would fall in love with you. Unless you wanted me to."

He went grave. "I would not be a good man to fall in love with. I have been married twice, and it won't happen again."

She went grave. "Not good?"

He responded: "Good, but no longer long-range strategic."

She nodded once and looked down, frowning. She

picked up the skewer and with her front teeth slid a chunk of hot lamb up six inches and off; and she chewed for a while, and swallowed, and washed it down with a gulp of saki. Then she looked up with a happy smile. "I want to marry a young guy. Really young, I mean: thirty, maybe. And have a baby or two. So there. I haven't met him yet. And pocket your conscience, I'm a bachelor. But selective. Tell me how you want to use me—and you *know* I didn't mean *that!*"

"You know that there's a COMCORD countdown?"

Her unrouged lips went pale. Deliberately laying down her knife and fork, she drank the saki.

She then said tersely: "Pay the check. As to my apartment, it is not bugged. As to this place, who knows?"

"There is a countdown, as I was saying," he resumed in her apartment over brandy. "I get the sensst that you know about it."

Her forehead was puckered. "Yes. And I get the sense that our mood is not going to be right for what I thought perhaps we both had in mind."

"I can switch moods in a twice."

"Good for you. It takes me a whole trice. So you switch when ready, Vishnu."

"The name is Croyd."

"I thought it was Hertz, Vishnu."

"It is Croyd, really."

"Really?"

"Really enough."

"First name?"

"If my parents ever thought of one, they didn't let me in on it. Just call me Croyd—in a languidly intimate tone of voice."

"All right, Croyd. The countdown. I know how countdowns are theoretically supposed to happen, and that theoretically they cannot happen, and that actually one *is* happening—against Senevendia. Now you know all that I know. Go on from there."

"You make it easy, Midge. It seems I can talk pro."

"Well—yes. And I promise to ask questions if you shake me off at a corner."

"All right. There is a countdown. And some very big

shots in Mare Stellarum are trying to stop it. But they aren't going to succeed. And I have an uncomfortable feeling that somehow it is going to confer permanent noctambulism on the whole planet."

Long silence. Then a *slug* of brandy, with an audible swallow. Long silence again. Then: "I don't know how you know, but you sound authentic. It leaves me with two recourses: total thanatoptic piety, or a whirl of last-minute hedonism. Another brandy may help me to decide—with you grinning at me, there." She went to her bar for the bottle.

He said soberly: "I am not grinning, here."

With her back to him—she was jacketless, open-neck-shirted, un-necktied—she murmured, "I know that." She hesitated. She came to him with the bottle. He held out his glass; half his tot was still in it. She merely restored his tot. Then into her own inhaler she poured a tot and a half. Meditatively she corked the bottle and set it down beside her. She seated herself across from him. Chin in fingers, lower lip out a little, she mused: "There must be at least another day, so we shouldn't increase the per-hour brandy intake. But we should give some thought to avoidance of interruptions."

"I would be with you," he told her, "if I thought it was hopeless."

It jerked up her chin. "But you said—"

"—That Mare Stellarum will goof it."

"Then what's left?"

He frowned into his brandy. "I hate to sound egotistical, but—I'm the hope." He looked up at her: "And you are."

She stared at him. She arose, picked up the inhaler in one hand and the bottle in the other, walked to the bar, set them there, returned, sat, and stated: "I now intend to be sober. Mood switch, yes; liquor, no. But don't let me poop *your* party—you know your own chemistry."

Having nosed the brandy, he sipped, savored, set it down, and told her: "On the Moon ferry, you saw some of what I can do. I have only a ghostly plan, and my powers are not unlimited; but I intend to materialize the plan very fast. For this I need a Mare Stellarum officer. That's you."

"I am surprised that a man capable of projective hypnosis needs anybody."

"As yet I can use it only against people who are totally off guard against it—like gatemens and commanders relaxed on Moon ferries, and somebody else who can use it but is all concentrated on using it against *me*. But in this final phase I will be moving in against people on guard, and I can't trust it—I'll have to depend on normal human-type deviousness."

"Okay, then. So why me?"

"I looked you up for four reasons. The second reason is, you got me to Erth. Third, I want you to get me to Senevendia. Fourth, I want you to buy Senevendian shares like mad, using the name Ford."

Having digested that, she leaned back in her chair, gripping the arms. "I must be transiently in love with you."

"Why?"

"What you are saying makes sense."

"Are you putting me on—or does it *really* make sense?"

She looked at him soberly. "It makes sense. Where do I get the money—or the credit?"

Unzipping the earlier-checked pocket, he produced a sheaf of currency and handed it to her. "Not all at once," he warned, "and not all at one exchange. Take a full morning over it."

Slowly she counted the bills. Halfway through she stopped and inquired: "Are all these bills this big?"

"Same denomination throughout."

"Source?"

"Galactic, Limited. *Not* your Mare Stellarum."

She leaned back, closing her eyes, slapping the wad against her palm.

"I know," he acknowledged gravely. "It's your decision. But I want you to know while you make it that the two very biggest people in Mare Stellarum know about me."

"And are they for you?"

"The Chairman is. I think."

Her eyes opened halfway. "I infer that Ziska isn't. Which makes you my man. When do you have to leave me to do your part of it?"

"I can start operating this morning if I can get to Senevendia on the 0710 VIP tube."

"I can get you on the tube if you can get me to my office by 0530."

"Check."

"When it's all over, will you backcheck with me?"

"White stallions couldn't stop me—if we're both still around."

Swiftly the money went inside her shirt. She arose: "You need a refill. Same?"

"Thinner, I think."

"Zac collins?"

"Perfect."

Taking his inhaler, she went to the bar, got another glass, and went to work on it with her back to him. Presently she remarked: "I need a lot of coaching on how to buy Senevendia intelligently."

"No time like now."

She brought him his drink, handed it to him, stood studying him a bit. "Croyd—"

"Midge?"

"This coaching—will it require vision?"

"Probably not."

"Good, because my eyes hurt. Do you mind if I turn off the lights?"

"Pray do."

Darkness.

"Croyd—"

"Why, Midge! you're right *here!*"

"I know. Croyd—"

"Midge?"

"Do you need sleep to be sharp tomorrow?"

"Probably I'll be sharper sleepless."

"Me too. This coaching—will it require time?"

"If you'll accept my projective hypnosis, I can set up your brain for it in two minutes."

"Good. When I last looked, it was just past two. So we have maybe three hours."

"Right."

"Does it matter where among those three hours we position those two minutes?"

"Not really. Why?"

"I'm worried, a little."

"What about?"



"About our money."

"Go on."

"It— isn't in a very safe place."

Long pause. Then: "Twice."

Longer pause. Then, in a small voice: "Trice."

In the Erthworld Union Tower, at 0530 hours on 23 May, Midge Carlton got on phones and began the complex process of getting Croyd a ticket on the early morning VIP tube to Senevendia. He watched her with a blend of admirations.

At one point she looked up and demanded officiously: "What is your emergency, Lieutenant Vishnu?"

He explained: "I have an old mother in Senevendia."

She punched it into the board. Thirteen minutes later the pass came out, verkotype.

It was 0610. She took his arm and led him out to the vehicle platform, and she drove him to the tube terminal in her privately assigned official scouter-skimmer, a beat-up 2465 model. ("I'll get a three-year-old when I make 1.c. next year, but it'll still be a Chevvy.")

Underground there was an all-night restaurant. They sat in a booth, gazing at each other across the table, mutually total.

0632. Somehow they awoke and arose. A waitress objected: "You never ordered!" Croyd passed her a credit: "You never noticed."

There was a kissing-off room: it had a hundred booths, few occupied at that hour. "Let's use the open room," she suggested, "unless—"

"The open room is fine," he judged; "physiologically I am fifty-five."

She corrected: "Thirty-five."

"Nevertheless—"

"Well, yes. The open room."

They kissed. Conventionally. Gradually they both realized that it was tender.

She drew her lips a millimeter away from his to ask: "Do you think we'll ever see each other again?"

"Making sure that I can see you again is a large part of my incentive."

"You aren't serious?"

"I am serious about *that*."

She laid fingers on his lips. "I wasn't pushing you, our roads are different, but I just wanted to be sure about something—and I *am* sure. *Please* come back. I won't wait for you—but I would instantly ditch anybody if the case weren't serious."

Four chimes gave him one-minute notice.

"Midge—do you understand love that is less than a long-term contract but a very great deal more than arousal?"

"I may not understand it. But I feel it. And I think that within the next month or two I'd better absorb it into my apperceptive mass and consciously forget it. Nevertheless—within the next month or two—try to come back."

She kissed the backs of both his hands.

He kissed the backs of both her hands.

They stood apart, holding hands.

He demanded: "You understand your assignment?"

"Buy Senevendia."

The chime sounded eight notes for thirty seconds.

They squeezed four hands.

He was gone.

She stayed a little while motionless in the open room.

She wandered toward the updraft, telling herself: "Carlton, to let yourself become serious is to militate against your long-range interests."

At 0631 hours on the morning of 23 May, Pete Mulcahy knocked on Commander Marana's door. No answer. The exec knocked again. Nothing. He touched the doorplate: the door disappeared.

Marana sat in his easy chair, dressed, drunk.

Mulcahy entered, closed the door behind him, went to Marana, slapped him about the jowls. Marana's head nodded up. The exec unlimbered two restorative tablets from a shirt pocket and thrust them into Marana's mouth. Lethargically the commander chewed.

"Swallow!" Pete commanded.

Dana swallowed and choked. Pete got a cup of water fast and pumped it in. Choking eased.

Pete waited.

Commander Marana looked up, all alert. "Pete, where are we?"

"Over Moskov. Doing the scansion."

"Are you fully competent to complete it without my help?"

"Yessir." Pete's brows were up.

Dana was on his feet. "Take command. Unlimber my scouter. Keep in touch."

Pete's brows were down. "I have the usual questions—"

"Denied. Take command. Unlimber."

"Yessir," Pete assured the departing back.

At 0810, Mulcahy took a call from Croyd. "Mulcahy, why can't I get through to Marana?"

Guarded: "Maybe he's in the head. A message, sir?"

"Tell him I'm now Lieutenant Vishnu, and I'm in Senevendia, and I need him in the scouter just outside the palace, quicktime. He should air-anchor and activate invisibility and watch for my signal."

Suddenly open: "Sir, Dana must have known, he took off with the scouter about 0700."

Croyd's eyes slitted in the visiphone. "Then what made you say he was in the head?"

"The scouter has one. It's possible."

"If he backchecks, Mulcahy, relay the message. This is deadly urgent. Out."

# Rehab Action Eight

## CRITICAL IMBALANCE

Senevendia City, 23 May



Disembarking at the Senevendian tube terminal at 0800 on 23 May, Croyd-Vishnu came up to ground level and was immediately challenged by uniformed and turbaned sentries who demanded to see his orders. He showed them. At the experimental station on Moon, the Mare Stellarum inspector had fussily cut them to read: "Lt Patrick Vishnu 239640712631297 w/prcd as ncry to obtn indctd mtrls Rb prjct." They passed him—who knows what their interpretation was?

As a Rab officer he made his call to the *Mazurka*, got Mulcahy, was surprised and disturbed, disconnected, proceeded.

He had left his grip at Carlton's, and he saw no need to check in at a transient officers' hotel. Challenging a skimmer, he got himself conveyed to the Chancellor's Palace. Just outside the palace grounds, the skimmer said: "Sorry, guvner—the word his hout to go no closer." He paid it off, and disembarked, and studied the shining white alabaster palace, peering between shining black carmorumbian fence pickets.

This palace, he reminded himself, was the Z-wave target. Not that Ground Zero mean anything special to the Z-sting (wherever it might be) which was programmed to curse the whole constellation; nevertheless, being on the

spot was symbolically chilling. This palace was also the feeder of grievances and the commander of grievances and the submitter of such redresses as might be made. Consequently the key was here. But how did one get in?

The time was 0831. Unless Carlton should gain him some time buying Senevendia, the Penultimate Trigger might be tripped this morning, might indeed already be tripped; whereafter a Z-strike a bit over eight hours later was inevitable. So *maybe* he had minimum time to enter the palace, find Andhra, get his lead whatever it might be, and act on it however he might act. . . .

Damn Ziskal! They might have been working together on this!

How to penetrate the palace promptly? Projective hypnosis? too dubious. Uptiming? If he could do it again now, he mustn't waste it on preliminary approaches. . . .

Going to the main gate, he inquired about palace tours.

"First one at 0900, Lieutenant."

"You mean—even now there are palace tours?"

Puzzlement: "Why not, Lieutenant sahib?" Croyd muttered something lame about the recent death of Erth-world Senator Mfssk; and he wandered across the grass-green skimmeravenue, entering a drugstore to kill a quarter-hour and think.

People drinking coffee, people eating ice cream for breakfast, people buying skimmer parts and nuclear lawnmowers, people gossiping nude in the public bath—ordinary drugstore activity. By now, everybody must have heard about the countdown—but evidently, nobody took it seriously.

At 0855, he quit the drugstore and returned to the palace gate. The queue was normally long, but there was a short preferential queue for visiting military, and he got into that. When the gate opened, his line moved first, passing through a reonic frisk (some visitors were shunted off for weapons check) and proceeding on foot across a half-mile of exquisite lawn toward the gleaming alabaster palace that was modeled ornately after the prehistoric masterpiece at Angkor Wat.

Entering the East Wing, the visitors were broken into groups of twenty-five per guide (mixed fifteen military to

ten civilians until the military queue would be exhausted). A happy-type girl guide welcomed Croyd's group to the palace in the name of Chancellor Andhra, gave them a swift overview of the forthcoming two-hour tour, and launched immediately into a description of the marvels of Vendic and Cathayan and African and Western architecture and statuary in this colossal hall. Croyd would have liked very much to listen attentively; but he had to divide his attention, sizing up the situation, seeking directions for meaningful slipping away, seeking niches where he might do a time shift with small likelihood of materializing in a piece of furniture or a tourist. . . .

Having drifted to the rear of his group, he heard a lady voice behind him and realized that he was in danger of being overtaken by the next group. Possibly the ambiguity would do no harm, and he lagged more. The timbre of the other guide's contralto voice began to interest him: he turned to stare; she was paying no attention to him. She was a vivacious and remarkably beautiful young almost-black Vendic. Her caste? Kshatriya, unquestionably. . . .

His own group moved on away. Croyd dawdled, pretending to study a lofty mural just beyond the next group—an exquisite pre-impressionist presentation of differentiations (bathers in the Ganges, maybe) vaguely emerging from an undifferentiated continuum (the Ganges, maybe).

The next group's guide purred: "Questions, anybody?"

A man said, "I have a question, Miss—"

The guide told him cordially, "No Miss about it—just call me Keri."

The man happily countered, "Ah, Keri—hey, Keri! I *like* that name, Keri!"

"Thank you," lilted Keri. "Next question?" Rippling laughter. . . .

Light flared within Croyd. He waited. Keri's group moved on toward him. Falling in beside her, he inquired: "Mind if I join your group, Miss?"

She gave him a swift experienced size-up and retorted: "My pleasure, Lieutenant—if you don't plan to be the only man who walks beside me."

"I won't insist on that—unless you happen to know a Commander Dana Marana."

With her head down, she continued walking, meditating. A few steps farther on she paused, turned to her group, and announced: "This is the best place in this hall to get full value out of the ceiling. It is the only relief-sculptured ceiling to my knowledge that has been designed since the motif was abandoned centuries ago. Please notice the intricacy, the depth, the splendor, the endlessly interesting variation. This ceiling is the work of the twenty-third-century genius from Rab, Drndl Mischbom, who actually executed it personally without any human assistance—"

Leaving them with their heads up, she turned to Croyd and asked low: "What do *you* know about Commander Marana?"

"When I last talked to him, Moon to ship," Croyd told her, "his exact words to me were: 'My God, how much of an ass can a commander be? She's Keri Andhra—Andhra, get it? The Chancellor's daughter!'"

He stopped. Keri, lips compressed, was breathing deeply.

Croyd added, "He then told me that he had wanted me to be at your wedding."

She stopped breathing entirely. She turned to survey him. She said, "You *can't* be the old man that he said he'd like to have—"

"Thank you. I like Marana, and I think I will like you if you give me a chance." His time was running out, but he didn't dare frighten her away—she was the impossibly lucky key to his key lead.

"But he said *old*—"

"So how old am I?"

"Fifty, maybe?"

"That's got to be old to Marana. Do you want to know the next thing he said?"

She warned, "They are starting to get tired of the ceiling." She announced: "We have to move on now to the next station." She started walking, murmuring, "Please talk."

"You *are* Keri Andhra, the Chancellor's daughter?"

"Yes. What did Dana say next?"

"I'm cautiously leading up to this. What do you know about Z-waves?"

Suddenly taut: "What do *you* know about Z-waves?"

"You and I have reached a Vendic stand-off that is going to take close talk along with some ID exchange—and we can't wait two hours for the end of this tour."

She walked a few steps farther. Then she spoke softly into a wrist intercom: "Guide Central. This is Keri, moving from Statuary Hall into Gallery Hinayana. I have to cut out immediately, please send a substitute. Over." She listened, and Croyd heard the minimal squawk: "Sending Sita soonest. Out."

Walking, Keri told Croyd: "You and I have to drop this mutual favoritism. Fall back into the group. When Sita gets here, I'll make the switch publicly and walk away over *there*. You drop behind the group for a minute or two—then meet me there."

He acknowledged, and fell back. Pay dirt. Only—in time! God grant that Carlton was buying him time by buying Senevendial!

The danger dial at COMCORD Central, Manhattan, hesitated at 2·89 and quivered there for a full minute. Automatic triggering would occur at 3·0.

The dial sagged at 2·84.

Ziska's top man, Grissom, tense, muttered, "Looks like maybe some of our stuff is working. Can you tell me *why* the slowdown?"

2·76. Hesitation. 2·61. . . .

A florid fortyish man named Tannen, Secretary-General of the Erthworld Union, informed him: "The indicator says it is automatic correction of economic grievances. Beyond that, we'll have to wait for a factor analysis."

"How long will that take?"

2·5. Right on critical again, only backwards. . . .

"No telling. Analysis of causal interaction is buried very deep in the coding."

"Now, why in the hell," fumed Grisson, "wouldn't the Secretary-General who bosses this thing be able to tell me—"

Still 2·5 and quivering. . . .

Tannen's melic bass consoled him: "The machine is rarely asked for an analysis of the GB. It is programmed



to handle the GB without human consultation. I have repeatedly protested this, but—"

"GB?"

"Grievance Balance. Sorry, sir." Tannen, whose effective power was greater than that of the President of Erthworld and second only to the power of Marta Vensen and of Ziska, courteously addressed Grissom as a peer—even as a superior. There was no evident need for a test of superiority, so Tannen tested not.

Grissom insisted: "But you are the *boss!*"

Somewhat interiorized, Tannen murmured: "Boss? This thing has no boss. Indeed, this thing is no boss. It has no will, it balances grievances; automatically it triggers consequences. If I survive this disaster politically, I will kill this thing—"

2·4. Hesitation. 2·3. . . .

Silence infused the room.

The dial hovered at 2·3.

The Secretary-General whispered: "Mr. Grissom, the countdown has been suspended."

"Why?"

"The fallback below the 2·5 critical imbalance has exceeded significance at the five percent level. This automatically suspends the countdown. If the dial again rises to 2·5, countdown will resume."

"From where it left off?"

"From where it left off. And that could happen within an hour. I have a feeling about this imbalance, Mr. Grissom, and it is that the machine itself is somehow imbalanced, not the grievances. And if for the instant some mystical spate of compensatory redresses is trending back toward balance, it will not last: imbalance will return. Excuse me, sir, I have thought of some things that this lull could be good for."

Tannen departed. Grissom phoned the moon.

Keri led Croyd through a narrow low corridor to a private updraft. They emerged into a large feminine apartment with salon windows overlooking the River Pradhras which along this stretch was virgin rapids. In the center of her salon she turned and quiveringly lapeled him, pleading: "Let's get on with this!"

He grasped her by her slender strong upper arms, steadying her. "Tell me very fast: what do you know about Z-waves—*what special secret knowledge?*"

Her eyes were wide, her pupils dilated. "You have me in a rough spot, I am trying to think how to answer."

Releasing her, he rummaged in a breast pocket, brought out a billfold, handed her his ID card—the one that said Croyd, 6-U. "I'm an agent of Galactic," he told her, "but working also for Chairman Marta Evans. There is a crisis on Erth, involving COMCORD and the Z-waves and very particularly your Senevendia. State what the *real* crisis is, Miss Andhra."

She stared at the card. She stared at him. Her father was all her concern. . . .

"All right," Croyd snapped, "I think you know but you won't tell me. Then, will you lead me to your father?"

"Perhaps. Why should I—"

"Let me tell you what Marana said next. He said, 'She knew all the damn time, and that was why—' Sound like what you'd expect?"

*She had his upper arms. "Then what?"*

"Marana begged my permission to let him leave duty so he could come back here and get you. But I wouldn't let him, because the nature of his duty just *might* save Erth and you and your father with it."

"Does he *know* this?"

Grim: "I told him this, but I had no clear way to explain it—"

Flanking baritone: "He's right, Keri." They turned; Marana stood just inside an open double window, feet apart, hands clasped behind his back, surveying them hesitantly. Dana added, "Croyd ordered me to stay with my ship's mission. I disobeyed, I had to run out; I had to get *you*, Keri."

"Had you stayed aboard ship," Croyd commented coldly, "you would have been here anyway; I tried to raise you on the ship, to send for you—"

Behind them, a chime. They turned again: a visiphone was flashing. Keri hesitated, then whistled two notes. A dark matronly face appeared on the screen, saying in a deep melancholy voice: "Keri, I have to see you at once."

Keri went swiftly to sit before the phone, turning on her own visual transmission; Croyd and Dana were out of range. "Something wrong, Auntie?"

"I have to see you at once."

"Auntie, I can't see you now. Just tell me what it is."

Tears appeared. "Keri, I want to be with you when I tell you—"

Keri's back stiffened. "Anything about my father?"

Choking sob. "Keri, I want to be holding you when I—"

Toneless: "He's dead?"

The woman broke down.

Keri said sharply: "Auntie! Auntie, *listen* to me—"

Slowly the woman looked up at her, great lips quivering.

Keri's voice, near break, held steady-harsh. "I think it is I who should be holding you. Auntie, come right out and say it. Is he dead—or what?"

The woman bit hard on her lower lip. Ultimately she found it possible to articulate: "Not dead. Took the hundred-year sleep."

Keri, inwardly lacerated, face distorted, swiveled around to the men. Croyd understood. Her father-god had lost courage to face dehumanization with his people, without finding courage to kill himself; he had taken the narcotic that depresses animation below the point of consciousness for approximately a century, assuming continuous body care, obviously hoping to awaken with the trouble gone. But Andhra's Keri too would be gone.

His daughter turned back to the phone with controlled composure, indeed with outgoing sympathy. "Auntie, I can't see you right now, I am doing my father's business. I will be with you eventually, I hope, but don't count on it. Will you be strong, Auntie?"

Helpless staring.

"*Will you be strong, Auntie?*"

The big head nodded.

Keri's voice went broken-gentle. "I realize he's your brother, Auntie. We both love him. Lots of people love him. He's all right, he's found rest. Remember that, Auntie. Will you remember that?"

Again the woman nodded, her face drenched.

Keri disconnected. Keri sat for a full minute while the men watched. In rapid replay she was reliving the time five days ago when she had surprised Saguni with her father, when afterward she had been alone with her father while he droned out all his enormity against Erth. . . .

Dully, she said, "My father wanted to terminate the human race on Erth. He had the director of COMCORD in his blackmail-pocket. Dr. Saguni had a thing going with a male official, and my father knew it. So my father had Saguni arrange a 3-0 imbalance against Senevendia. Also he had Saguni program the Z-sting to make a three-point strike on Chihattan, Senevendia, and Moskov. That would enshroud Erth—permanently. So now, having brought off his sacrificial-Satanic heroism, my revered courageous father has—"

She got up slowly, stood with her back to the men for half a minute, turned to Dana; her eyes were wild. She advanced a few steps toward Dana. She ran to him and grabbed his neck and jammed her head against his shoulder, sobbing uncontrolled, while his arms tried to comfort her.

Her assistance now was indispensable, and Croyd could only wait for her self-control to return. He had been right, but it was no joy to be right: Erth without stars would tear itself apart, with no hope for rescue. . . .

Her sobbing quieted. Rubbing her face against Dana's shoulder, she said in a voice that scraped, "I could stay with *him*—but *he* couldn't stay with *us*—"

Dana gazed past her at Croyd, and Dana was three ways troubled. "Sir, discipline me later; what can we do *now*? My scouter is air-anchored outside the window there, I activated invisibility—"

"Jog her around so she's looking at me."

When her face came around to Croyd, it was contorted by her self-driving into something approaching composure.

"Keri," said Croyd with compassion, "you understand that I have no time for sympathy now, although I feel it. Since your father is now unavailable, instead of taking me to him, can you take us to the constellational COMCORD controls? By a private way, preferably, if you know one."

The men filed after her along the spider-corridor for a distance of fifty short cautious paces. Then they came to a dead end, and her hand magic opened a hidden door. "Downdraft," she cautioned, stepping in and disappearing; and they dropped after her to a deep subterranean level.

Emerging into another passageway, for the first time they encountered armed guards—who merely presented arms, recognizing Miss Andhra and respecting the two fleet-uniformed officers who followed her. She nodded to the guards, and Croyd and Marana responded to the present-arms with curt salutes, and the guards moved apart to let the woman and the officers pass between.

A few paces beyond, Keri paused before a durundium vault door. "This is the rear entrance—my father's private entrance."

Croyd asked, "Can you tell whether people are in there now?"

She pointed to a green light beside the door. "Nobody is in there now, and the main entrance is closed. Shall we enter?"

At their nods, she incantated; and the vault door disappeared into the wall, revealing another at the far end of a shallow vestibule. Motioning them inside, she closed the outer door behind them and opened the inner. Croyd and Marana now stood before the sleepily glow-beeping input-output panel of COMCORD-Senevendia, unmonitored at the moment because input and output had been quarantined and there were monitors just beyond in the Grievance Room.

They stood in precisely the locus where Keri five days ago had surprised her father with Saguni—the one man in all the world who knew *all* about COMCORD, the man whom her Dhurga-paranoid father had soul-blackmailed into tampering with COMCORD.

Croyd inquired: "Might Mare Stellarum enter and surprise us here?"

Touching a button on the control panel, Keri answered: "Not now."

"Good. Keri, have you ever seen Saguni in this room?"

"He was with my father here five days ago, at around 1100 hours."

"All right, we will go there then. Dana, take Keri in your arms. Good. Hang on, Keri. Now I hang on to both of you, like this—" Knee-bending, he arm-encircled both their waists, locking his fingers together; both of them noted his strength, and, surprised, Dana noted also that the short auburn hair of Croyd was now almost innocent of gray. . . .

Abruptly Keri saw her father talking to Saguni.

Highly trained, Keri did not utter a sound. "Well done," Croyd commented, "your self-restraint, I mean. Keri, can you identify those men?"

She uttered: "The tall one is my father. The small one is Saguni."

"Good," sighed Croyd, releasing them and straightening. "Now listen: we are in uptime; normally you can't breathe here, but I am providing you with a rekamatic oxygen substitute." He was field-generating it off the intensified gravity-pull of concrescent uptime nuclei—he'd worked out the theory this morning on the tube. "You two stay rooted to this spot and don't move until I come back to you. *Don't move!* Exception: if you see anybody or anything except me approaching you, dodge it—on pain of contact-death. Got it?"

They nodded, not understanding at all, and therefore ready to obey fully. Keri was gazing at the zombie of her father.

Ignoring Andhra, Croyd went to Sanguni—and appeared to merge with him.

Keri and Dana lost interest in her father and stared at the blurred Saguni-Croyd image. Yet they could see that the Saguni-Andhra conversation was continuing uninterrupted, as though Croyd were not there—and *then*, he had *not* been there. . . .

Marana swung ninety degrees left and gasped. Keri, turning also, choked and put both hands over her mouth. She saw *herself* entering the room, moving toward her.

Keri Two, ignoring Keri One and Marana, stopped short, shocked, staring at Andhra and Saguni while they turned to stare at her (but Croyd continued blurred into Saguni). Keri Two blurted: "Pardon me, Mr. Chancellor. It is the scheduled VIP visitation, I was checking before

going transparent—" By this time Marana understood; but Keri One, cold-pale, watched while *herself* repeated, with her father and Saguni, the entire charged interview of five days earlier.

As Chancellor Andhra finished, "Are you clear on all this, Keri?" Croyd detached himself from Saguni, grasped the situation, manifested alarm, and incised: "Keri and Dana—if she approaches you, back away—under no circumstances let her touch you!"

Keri One was frozen. Dana seized her around the waist with both arms, prepared to move her bodily if necessary.

Keri Two turned her back, departed slowly, vanished.

Croyd let out harsh breath. "That was a close one!"

Live Keri did not move, her hands were still fixed against her open mouth. Marana spat: "Explain, Croyd—I get it, but she's wild with soul-fear!"

Croyd came to her, took hold of her shoulders, gazed deeply into her eyes. Quickly she began to relax, her hands came down, her breath and her heart quickened, her pupil-dilation eased, her lips began to suggest the presence of blood. Croyd released her and stood back. In a moment she licked lips and said: "All I saw was my cinema image of five days ago, and Dana Marana is married to an ass."

While Dana hugged her to him, Croyd returned curtly, "It's understandable, but don't do it again. In uptime, a fear-paralyzed person can be slain by his own double—or by anything else that happens to barge into him. Now you people stay motionless, here alone, a few minutes longer—I want to scout actuality." He disappeared.

Keri told Dana, "You can cut me off right now. I'll understand."

Up went Marana's eyebrow. "If I can love one of you, I can love two of you."

Up stole her mouth corners. Then Keri's hand slipped around his neck, her lips went to his ear. "I have to tell you, Dana—"

"Shh. I know now, I'm sorry."

"No, but I have to say it. There was going to be a quarantining of Erth from space, eternal isolation from moon and stars—"

"Shh—"

"Listen, Dana. It's no good if I don't say it to you, and time is fearfully short. I went out to find a spaceman, so that at least space could give me a child before space would be closed out forever. But during two nights I saw only three spacemen, and them I shied away from. And then I saw you, through God's love! And I said: *NOW, Keri! You have to have meaning!* So I—call it what it was! I accosted you—"

"No, Keri!"

"Yes, Dana! But listen. Two minutes later, Dana, you were the love of my life, and for the rest of the night and into the morning I was thanking God more and more fervently. What god, Dana? The Godhead generally, but special avatars also: Brahma for creating our impossible meeting, and Siva for driving me to you, and Kali for our fiery fertility, and Vishnu-Krishna for the wonderful hero you are, and Vishnu-Rama for the strong child you have surely given me, and Vishnu-Kalki for my redemption between your big hands, and the great impersonal Brahman just for our existence—"

"I love you, Keri."

"I love you, Dana. When I drove myself to leave you, I died in the morning."

Textured silence.

She whispered: "Dana—"

"Keri?"

"Think of me cold and old. It will come. Can you think of this?"

"I asked you for marriage, Keri. My father and mother are cold and old, and they are just beginning to comprehend what love is."

Beside them in uptime, Croyd coughed.

Silence.

Croyd: "There is a frightening old bit about the running sands of time. You two will grow cold in any event. If you wish also to grow old in a cosmos that includes Erth, I suggest attention to questions of immediacy. The actuality of this room is luckily empty, and we have to get back to actuality and cut out in the scouter, we have a job of machine-killing to do."



Keri seemed momentarily to ignore Croyd. "A while back, Dana, I would have kissed you good-bye, I could not have left my father at this of all times in his life and our living death. But now I know that my father would want me to go with you, if he were sane. Which he has not been for a long time."

The Saguni brain-pattern had been blurry for Croyd who had much to learn about reading brain traces in up-time. This much he had gathered: Saguni did know the location of the Penultimate Trigger, at least, although the location itself hadn't come clear to Croyd; and Saguni's intent five days ago had been, for some inscrutable Riponese reason, to hole-out beneath the palace ruin at Knossos on Crest, awaiting Erthdom. The obvious immediacy was to go to Knossos and find Saguni in actuality for mind-milking; but that would be a forty-minute scouter run.

There was a quicker way, if Croyd hadn't shot his wad again. At Keri's window, with Dana and Keri already through it into the invisible scouter, Croyd paused to execute the same test he'd flunked yesterday on Moon. He flunked again: semi-readiness, then subsidence.

That was possibly fatal. In uptime he could have rejoined Saguni, locked onto Saguni, traveled with Saguni wherever Saguni might have gone, emerged into actuality with Saguni wherever he might be, and twisted the truth out of Saguni with practically no time lost by reason of downtime acceleration. But now he was going to have to use ordinary human methods of finding Saguni—who might or might not be at Knossos.

He followed his companions into the scouter. "Travel," he told Dana.

En route, there was hard talk between the men as to whether the Moskov tempopattern had been flaked along with Chihattan and Senevendia. Dana starkly confessed his guilty ignorance, but added unhappy trust that Pete Mulcahy had gone on and done it. But there was also a degree of Marana puzzlement. "Look, Croyd, COMCORD went critical yesterday morning, it should have hit 3·0 and blown hours ago; sure, countdown was suspended this

morning, I caught that on radio a few minutes before I caught you with my wife—only, *why* was it suspended?"

"I have a shrewd theory, Marana, and it has to do with a Manhattan Astrofleet lieutenant who is buying Senevendia."

Keri blurted: "Buying *our* Senevendia?"

"Senevendian stocks and stuff, on pre-selected priority. She and I gambled that it would slow the countdown by dampening or even reversing the economic components of grievance, and apparently it has done so. It won't work forever, though: already she must be running out of credits; this is only a ladyfinger in the dyke. But maybe we still have an hour or two—"

"Listen" Marana cut in; and he turned up volume on the radio which had been providing mutter-background:

*. . . hear this. Mare Stellarum Internal Security Central, transiently at Moonbase, preempting all official bands. Now hear this. All Internal Security units on the COMCORD mission are directed to relax primary vigilance level and stay on duty at secondary vigilance level. Repeat: secondary vigilance level now operative; primary vigilance no longer necessary. We have located the source of the Z-waves. We have neutralized the Z-sting. Site of Z-sting is South Pole, deduced by analyzing COMCORD feedback fluctuations. Waves had in fact been prepared to target Senevendian tempopat-tern. Waves will not roll. Repeat: waves will not roll. Even if countdown is resumed and H-hour is triggered, waves will not roll. Stay on duty at secondary vigilance level. Mare Stellarum out.*

Three-way silence in the scouter.

Keri, timidly: "The sense of the message tells me that we can now forget Saguni and return to care for the self-quieted body of my father. But we women have a thing called—"

Croyd: "Intuition. It is not mystical. It is a complex of subliminal mental connections which cannot be analyzed by frontal logic. And sometimes it is valid, and sometimes it is not."

Keri: "Then my psych prof must have been right, because that is what *he* said."

Marana: "Grabbing wildly at these flying thoughts, I intuit that Croyd still wants to get off at Crest, which is just ahead now. Why?"

Keri: "We don't know exactly why, Dana—but we intuit that Internal Security only *thinks* it has solved the problem."

Croyd, having minutes of flight ahead, was pondering a memorized quote from Neocassandra in a 2474 issue of *The Constellation Critic*:

Is COMCORD an ironical reality—or a bogey-myth brandished by Erthworld Union to keep over-ambitious constellations cowed by the threat of shroud? There is mounting suspicion that the sting of COMCORD—the implausibly hidden Z-sting, activable by a mysteriously concealed Penultimate Trigger when the Grievance Imbalance against some constellation tips to 3·0—either never existed, or no longer exists, or is no longer functional whether the World President knows it or not.

Word about failsafes is added by President Aneed and by Chairman Evans—Marta, that is. Both of them assure us that any of three failsafes can stop the Z-waves *after* the sting is activated and before Erth impact: at Contact minus 43 minutes, at Contact minus 12½ minutes, or even at Contact minus three seconds, should the offending constellation convincingly repent just before receiving its cosmic curse. But such details, by multiplying circumstantiality, reduce credibility.

Humans being what they are, sooner or later some constellation is going to *find out by testing* whether—somewhen between 7 hr 54 min 36 sec and 8 hr 36 min 54 sec after occurrence of a 3·0 imbalance (to lean on the suspiciously and inscrutably meticulous time legend)—the offending constellation is going to incur a ten-year frown from the Zeitgeist, the Epoch Spirit, and cease either to offend or to accomplish.

That sample of Neocassandra's applauded urbane pungency particularly challenged Croyd because its manifest insights gave a certain amount of weight to its baffling allusions. The passing reference to the Zeitgeist or Epoch Spirit: was it merely allusive—or had Neocassandra seen this, too?

More to the present point: how about the failsafes mentioned in the second paragraph? Herod hadn't mentioned failsafes. Were they a recourse which could now be used if needed? And again, with the failsafes, the cryptic suggestiveness of the time-intervals: 43 minutes—12½ minutes—3 seconds. . . . And this had to be factual reporting; for an instant later, Neocassandra was quoting the exact time-interval extremes between which, after trigger activation, the Z-waves would strike. What were those time-interval meanings? Croyd *should know*. . . .

This much he *did* know: they didn't square with a South Pole location for the Z-sting.

In the Bull-Court of Minos it was not unprecedented for a skycab or scouter to drop a passenger, and it might or might not be a VIP, and Croyd had hit on a time during lunch hour and considerably prior to the first afternoon bull-baiting. Consequently there were only a few tourists to gape at the scouter; and when the disembarking passenger turned out to be only a lieutenant for Rab Astrofleet, they quickly lost interest, as he had hoped they might.

The scouter departed, with rendezvous appointed. Croyd hesitated, considering the prehistoric bull ring which was in fact the broad courtyard of the Minos palace (rather than the minor theater down the hill below the north entry stair). He was not losing time, he was planning tactics; but for him, hard thought moved more fluidly in the aesthetic context of a time-stretchout.

The palace, whose restoration another Evans had begun nearly six centuries before, was now fully restored, as was every Minoan palace and small house on Crest: fully so, except for labyrinthine subterranean passages many of which remained virginal. The island had become, all in all, a living museum of remote antiquity, presenting the epoch when (as some said) Theseus had commanded a coalition

of Mycenaean and Kamatic forces to reduce the island empire by fire, or (as others said) a fiery earthquake had terminated the empire's existence. And that had been about 1400 BC—nearly four millennia ago. Now this disastrous history was about to be replicated worldwide, only not by fire but by shroud.

Above him, ranging an impressive distance left and right, gaily the windowed palace erected itself: a masterpiece of alabaster, whose multitudinous windows at bull-baiting time had been crowded with sunburned bare-chested lords, and with beauteous fair ladies in nineteenth-century Paris-type dresses with décolletages plunging so deep that their breasts had been bare until they discovered the superior coquetry of diaphanous dick-eyes. And he knew that far beneath wound a catacomb of not-completely-excavated passages constituting the legendary labyrinth of Minos, a labyrinth once thought to have been the mystical haunt of the bull-headed Minotaur, later thought to have been earlier labyrinthine palaces, now fully understood as a complex ranging of earlier palaces *and* far-reaching rock caverns extending outward and downward to below the level of the sea.

Croyd would have liked nothing better than to be a tourist here, preferably with credentials which would have allowed him to explore all at many-day leisure. He knew what there was in that palace: the broad stairways, the columns of red-stained cedar tapering perversely with broad tops and narrow bottoms (because of the aperçu that you had to plant a tree upside-down to prevent it from growing), the religious craftsmanship which took the trouble to engrave a double-axe symbol in the center of the capital of every column where nobody could ever possibly see it, the unbelievably impressionistic artistry of the murals with octopi and seaweed and lotuses and hunting cats and snake-women, the queen's megaron, the queen's toilet-throne with rushing water far beneath, the oddly awkward-austere throne of Minos, the tapered-section system of drain pipes that still worked enthusiastically when (about six hundred years ago) that other Evans had uncovered them after thirty-five hundred years of burial. . . .

And Croyd knew also the island: he had explored much

of it. The harsh cliffs along the northeastern shore, faintly recalling the gloom-cliffs of Rab. The taciturn harsh-living harsh-customed natives in the shaley western highlands. The central-southern marshes which, until gases had exterminated the mosquitoes, had been the haunts of the malaria demon. The flat irregular southern shores where prehistoric Egyptian sailors had first discovered the double-axe and the snake-godess; the delicate summer palace at Hagia Triada. . . .

But there was no time for exploring, not even for more of the reminiscence that had already used more than thirty seconds of his time while with his hindbrain he had been seeking tactical intuition. He had to go straight for his quarry.

Therefore Croyd reluctantly avoided both the Grand Staircase on the western façade and the Main Staircase hidden behind a bulkhead of alabaster to the east. Instead, proceeding northwest diagonally toward a corner of the great courtyard, he entered a low rectangular doorway created by a row of magical double-horns: entered sunless dimness, moving cautiously along a corridor without artificial lights—it was not a tourist avenue. After a few paces, the left wall was blank stone, alabaster presumably; but he passed five doorways to his right, each opening onto a long narrow chamber without furnishings, these chambers having been storage rooms and containing massive dark shapes which probably were *pithoi*.

Past the fifth door, the narrow corridor rectangled right; and he moved northward about ten paces toward a darkness of dead-end stone—wishing all the time that he knew how to uptime four thousand years into the vitality of Minos—if at the instant he *could* uptime, if he dared now squander his uptime energy; reflecting dismally that so far his maximum uptiming had been forty-four years, cheering himself with the counter-reflection that he *could* uptime *some*. . . .

At the dead end there was a broad opening to the left. This wall-end he rounded, finding himself in an indefinitely long corridor leading straight south alongside and far beyond the one he had just traversed, proceeding possibly the whole length of the palace courtyard's west façade.

Despite mortal time pressure, he moved with care: his time margin was indefinite, but the cost of a blunder would be incalculable. He counted scarcely visible doorways, no more than hand-feelable wall breaks. After fifty paces, finding the third break to his right, he foot-felt his way into it. Having moved ten paces west in total darkness, he came to another dead end, rounded another wall end to the left, inched eight paces east and just missed falling into a downward stairway.

It was as anticipated from his 2399 curiosity study of some archaeological sketch-plans. With infinite caution he worked his way down the stair in blackness, keeping a hand on the left wall; and when he was sure that no random guide or policeman above would be likely to notice, he switched on a pencil-torch and had thin light. Below him, the stair continued interminably downward.

He debouched into the true labyrinth of Minos: the old underground palace built by Dedalus in 2500 BC or thereabouts, recently excavated along lines that the 2399 AD archaeologist had indicated, but as yet obscure and unsafe and therefore not available to tourism. It extended, Croyd was sure, all the way into rock caverns in the cliffs overlooking the Central Sea on the northern shore of Crete.

Saguni, however, would not have penetrated that far in. There was a little matter of coming out for food and water. . . .

Flashing his light around, Croyd found a long passageway and two doorways, one on either side. He called: "Saguni! I know you are here! If you move, I shoot!" It was a wild guess: if Saguni were hereabouts, he might either disclose himself or freeze; if he were not hereabouts, it did not matter.

No motion. Saguni was elsewhere, or Saguni had frozen.

Toe-feeling his way along gravel, Croyd advanced several paces to the doorways, flashed left, flashed right. Barren rooms inadequately disclosed. No motion.

On a chance, he penetrated the left-hand doorway and reconnoitered the cell with his pencil-beam.

Only several *pithoi* deep in the cell. . . .

Momentum hit his back, driving him paces forward while hard arms locked about his throat. He wanted to ejaculate, "*There you are, Saguni!*" but arm-throttling

choked it. Automatically his hands grasped an enemy wrist and twisted it: the wrist didn't twist: Saguni was wiry-trained, he had surprise, he intended to win. Legs and feet scissor-locked around Croyd's hips, and Croyd began to feel neural distress complicated by strangulation. He had dropped his pencil-torch, darkness was complete, defeat seemed certain.

He might have uptimed out of it. He did not; it seemed unsporting. He did cheat to the extent of using his non-breathing procedure which deferred the strangulation but did nothing to help the neural pain at throat and hips, indeed the neural paralysis.

He thought, unable to say it: *Man to man. . .* Reaching backward, he wrapped his arms around the back of Saguni's neck; but then he remembered that he must neither kill Saguni nor terminate the man's consciousness. There remained, however, a little matter of Croyd's own consciousness; and as the scissor-steel tightened on throat and hips, that was wavering.

Now only about one-third frontal and two-thirds parietal, Croyd switched his counterattack: slipping off one of the Saguni slippers, with both hands he attacked the toes.

The arms about his throat tightened. The legs about his hips were possibly loosening a little. It was great agony against small agony, in the context of an imminent Penultimate Trigger. Why was this buffoonery necessary, when a little responsible control by Marta and/or by Ziska might have. . . .

Croyd twisted toes. Saguni's legs went slacker, arms went tighter. Croyd had been unable to breathe for minutes, his neck was racked with paralytic pain that thrust into his shoulders. He dared not uptime to suffocate Saguni, he needed Saguni alive. Between them, no sound had been uttered. . . .

Releasing toes, Croyd gripped Saguni's neck, bent, and flipped. Saguni flew over Croyd's shoulders but hung in midair, clinging to Croyd's neck. Moving to a wall, Croyd methodically swung his own body back and forth, beating against the wall Saguni's body.

Saguni let go of Croyd's neck and fell. Croyd in darkness dropped upon Saguni, pinning him.



Hard two-man breathing during nearly two minutes.

Saguni gasped: "Please let me up. I wish to do hara-kiri."

Through his damaged throat Croyd managed to croak intelligibly: "Talk first, and then perhaps I will help you do it."

Saguni closed his eyes and clamped shut his mouth.

"Then," asserted Croyd whose midbrain was busily restoring control to his larynx, "I will talk to you. President Andhra has a complication of *weltschmerz*, nature love, man hatred, and death urge. Possibly there is also a negative Oedipus; and surely he was toilet trained too soon, which may account for the negative Oedipus. The main thing is, he couldn't face a realistic opportunity to play God. He also has some dirt on you: a too-early toilet-trained man can be good at ferreting out dirt on other people, and doubtless his negative Oedipus had sensitized him to the kind of dirt he got."

The darkness-adapted Croyd eyes saw that the Saguni eyes were open, although Saguni's lips remained clamped. Remorselessly Croyd pressed: "Because of this dirt that Andhra dredged up, and at his bidding, you fixed COMCORD so that grievances against Senevendia would pile up past the critical point. Care to tell me how you did that?"

"I admit nothing."

"*Could* it be done?"

Hesitation, then: "Yes."

"Care to tell me how?"

"It is too technical. You would not understand."

"God help me, Saguni, I was Thoth Evans, *I invented COMCORD!*"

The Saguni eyes went wide, the mouth went slack. Then earnestly: "Please let me up. I want to talk."

"You won't attack me?"

"I tried that once."

"No hara-kiri?"

"Not yet; and if I start, you'll have plenty of time to stop me. It takes time to do it right—and I too was too early toilet trained."

Croyd dismounted from him. "How is your Oedipus?"

"Fine, thank you." Saguni struggled up to a sitting

position, shook himself all over, got his knees Riponese-crossed, and demanded: "How could a young man like you have the effrontery to claim paternity to COMCORD?"

"Later, if you like; not now, there is no time. The real point is, you don't have to talk down to me. I think I let you up to talk straight."

Saguni's eyes went stony. "I wanted to ask you questions. If you have no time for this, I have nothing to say."

"Then I will tell you what else you did with COMCORD. Andhra saw to it that you did not stop with Senevendia: he did not want merely to curse his own constellation, he cosmically wanted to genie-bottle Erth-world humanity: Senevendia is merely the prime target for the salving of Andhra's negative Oedipus."

The eyes were wide again. "What else do you think you know?"

"You fixed it so that the Z-waves programmed for Senevendia would be accompanied by other waves programmed for Chihattan and for Moskov. Three remote Erth-targets: blanket effect for the planet. So the waves will permanently cocoon Erth—which naturally will tear itself apart with species psychosis in the *Zeitgeist* casket. Saguni, even pre-man could see and wonder about the moon and stars!"

The eyes stared, the lips quivered.

Croyd thrust: "But that is not quite enough for me to know, is it?"

"I suppose not."

"Tell me what else I need to know."

"For what purpose?"

"To head off doomsnight."

"Philosophically I agree with Chancellor Andhra. I see no reason to head off doomsnight."

"I am not here to correct your philosophy. I am here to head off doomsnight."

"I do not choose to head off doomsnight. There are things that the world must not know."

"I know. Colossal, guilty things, Saguni. That you put seven lumps of sugar in your tea. That you lost your heart to a high official who happened to be a boy instead of a girl. That your mother was a Moskovite—"

"You know *that*?"

"Some people need more sweets than others. Some people get sexually mixed up. Some people's mothers are even Vespuccian. I fail to see what is so abysmally tragic."

"Nevertheless I will not have it known. If I were to help you to stop the waves—which is impossible—Andhra would make it all known."

"Even about the sugar?"

"Do not make fun of me. I refer to the—unspeakable sin."

"More unspeakable than burying mankind?"

"Mankind needs burying. Mankind also needs no more revelations of human iniquity."

"So you terminate 'em all to keep Andhra from telling on you."

"You oversimplify it, but—yes. And one warning. To know all you know, somehow you must have tapped my brain. This means that you can practice projective hypnosis. Don't try it on me: I know how to resist it."

"Saguni—pardon me for one more simplification—Andhra has taken the hundred-year sleep."

The eyelids flickered.

After a moment, expressionless: "He has?"

"Is he the only one who knows about your unspeakability?"

"I am sure of it."

"Has he written it down anywhere for posterity to read in case he should happen to take the hundred-year sleep?"

"Not in case he should take the hundred-year sleep—"

"Then it seems to me that for a philosophical Riponese, you are remarkably impatient for the world to poop out. The world really can't learn about your total depravity until Andhra awakens from his hundred-year sleep, can it?"

"Nevertheless—"

"Then, too, there is this other way of looking at it. COMCORD should have triggered the Penultimate Trigger some hours ago—but it hasn't yet. This means that a certain delaying tactic of mine is working, and we have hours if not days. In another phrasing, there remain hours if not days during which—once I have left here with my knowledge—the world will know that you take all that sugar and that your heart belongs to daddy and that you

sabotaged humanity. And that your mother was a Moskovite."

Saguni's eyes closed.

A full minute of noisy breathing.

He said without expression: "Index 3·0 denotes H-hour. At H-hour, COMCORD Central will emit a scrambled signal by generalized broadcast, and it will be picked up and unscrambled by the Penultimate Trigger and relayed to the finalizing Z-sting."

"Where is the Penultimate Trigger?"

"Five kilometers along these corridors."

It petrified Croyd. "Here? Under the Palace of Minos?"

"Is it not quaint—and unfindable?"

Croyd was on his feet, pulling up Saguni. "Take me there in a hurry. Talk on the way."

# Rehab Action Nine

## EIGHT HOURS FOUR MINUTES

*Erth, Moon, and Space, 23 May*



Saguni's jet-mole sped them through five kilometers of the rock-bumpy labyrinth in nine minutes flat. The trip would have whitened the hair of Theseus. It thrilled Croyd for Minotaur reasons.

He got Saguni talking, a little, without slowing the mole. The lost location secret had fallen into the hands of the Saguni technician family and had been clutched to its breast as an in-mystery. But even the Saguni had never known the location of the Z-sting, although they knew its theory and design to a synapse.

"Then what was this business about Antarctica that Internal Security is supposed to have—"

"A decoy. Anyway—"

The mole penetrated by pre-activation an impenetrable force-field barrier and debouched into a great room where Croyd half expected scattered human bones and, bobbing in a central pool, the decaying body of Waltari's old Minotaur monster. Instead, the room was crystal-clean as a clinic, and brilliantly lighted by pre-activation; and centered in it was something more reminiscent of O'Neill's old dynamo—a vast neat intricate expanse of computerized telemetricity.

Saguni leaped from the mole and ran for the control panel, with Croyd crowding him. Swiftly scanning the

complex instrumentation which would have teased Croyd for easily half an hour just learning how to read it, Saguni suddenly stooped, peered at a dial, cross-checked with other dials, then turned and somberly informed his captor: "It is too late. The penultimate impulses have already been triggered."

"When?"

"At 1253 hours. Approximately seventy-nine minutes ago."

"Into that mole, and get us back fast to the surface!"

En route in the mole: "It seems that activation of the Penultimate Trigger came considerably before you played Old Man of the Sea to my Sinbad. Be grateful, Dr. Saguni, your guilt is not seriously augmented, you have only delayed prophylaxis. What happens next?"

"The penultimate impulses proceed to the Z-sting, wherever it is, on a direct laser route, reaching the sting in a little over four hours. Then and there the sting releases the Z-waves which proceed toward their Erth targets, engaging their tempopatterns about four hours two minutes later—at this time of this year."

"And that is curtains?"

"That is curtains."

"Exactly how much time do we have for impossible preventive action?"

"Double four hours two minutes is eight hours four minutes. Deduct about eighty minutes since the triggering. You have about six hours forty minutes to save Erth. Give up, sir. Even a counter-impulse could not overtake the penultimate impulse, because all would be traveling at the same light velocity, three hundred thousand kilometers per second. And once the Z-waves are launched by the sting, they are unstoppable—except by three failsafes which I have prudently destroyed."

"So the world is already dead."

"It is, sir." Unexpectedly, and for the first time, Saguni's mouth corners flickered. "You have barely enough time to go out and tell the world about my guilt."

Croyd mused: "Unhappily, neither of us knows the location of the Z-sting—"

Then Croyd went stiff. "Heavenly Isanagi—it *has to be Neptune!* It *always* had to be—*on the timing!*"

"It *did*? But then *that* explains the locations of the three failsafes!"

Carlton, back in Manhattan, had deployed her Rab credits shrewdly enough to hold up H-hour by quite a number of hours. It had bought him time to find the Penultimate Trigger, but not time enough to kill it. Had it bought him time for the Z-sting—four billion kilometers out, on Neptune?

Croyd guiltily reflected that at various places along the line *he* had probably shot the eighty minutes.

Dana with Keri in the scouter picked them up promptly, caught the terminal urgency, made for the *Mazurka*.

Contacting the ship en route, Marana issued rat-a-tat orders and demanded: "Understood, Mr. Mulcahy?"

"Yessir. I should tell you, though, that—"

"Wait, Mulcahy. Repeat my orders first."

"The only problem is, sir, that—"

"What were my orders, Mister?"

"Yessir. Prepare for crash move-out to Moon, maximum acceleration, instantly upon your arrival." He added the other aspects of Marana's orders. Then: "Sir, I have already relayed these orders to crew, but—"

"Very good, Pete. Now what is your *but*?"

"But Chairman Marta Evans is aboard."

"I beg your pardon?"

Saguni huddled chorioned in tragedy.

They braked into the open scouter-hatch of the *Mazurka*. Croyd was out of the scouter, running toward the frigate's bridge. "You're on your own!" Marana shot at Keri and Saguni, and he took off after Croyd.

When the commander caught up, the old man (old? by Krishna, he was *fortyish!*) was already on the bridge—standing in something like paralysis, looking at Marta, whom Marana did not instantly recognize, although he knew her image well from a thousand newskens tridema and didema, motionful and still, because now she was a Viking blonde in *her* middle forties, and because she was

gazing at Croyd in a mood not at all to be expected of Erthworld's ancient chairman. . . .

But then Marana blurted: "Welcome aboard, Madame Chairman, and I'm sure you will excuse my emergency discourtesy. Mr. Croyd, your orders?"

Not turning from Marta, Croyd crisped: "Get us to Moon fast, and make prior visicom contact with Moonbase. You're excused for that, I'll join you in a moment."

Marana moved, leaving Croyd alone with the rapt transformation of Marta. Croyd was seeing again almost the young woman of forty-four years ago, or (for him) two days ago, who had all unawares dragged him into her capsule off the virginal Nereid rock.

He had meant to youthen her, yes—but more than a generation in two days?

Marta mind-swirled. Knowing that she was out-of-hand young again, she felt it but could not believe it. His face told her that he was *seeing* her young again; she could not believe this either. And *he* was young again, maybe a wiry forty-five again, his short hair all auburn without any white, his eyes clear burning blue, his sober face muscular, lean, his wide mouth smileable but just now twisted in bewilderment at her new semi-youth, his rangy body instantly ready for any kind of action; all this embodying a mind-brain beyond anything she had ever imagined. And *he* was the one who had youthened *her*!

The warmth in her throat spread across her shoulders and up into her face: blonde as she was, the flush had to be noticed, and so it deepened. The exquisiteness oversweeping her was like the ineffable fey that had possessed her when at thirteen she had met in visibooks with Sir Launcelot, or like when at seventeen she had been gently kissed by a strong youth who had then gone away leaving her virginal and soul-hurt. But it was not at all like the specific nipple-hardening clitoris-twitch that had belly-puckeringly reanimated her when Ziska had first crouched into her ken and she had dreamed lasciviously about him during months while holding him at stern authoritarian arm's length and finally had come out of it thinking of



Ziska and all other real men only in asexual terms but semibound to Ziska and still and always virginal.

With effort, for her own mind control was not small, she drove down the blood-flush out of her face and neck into her shoulders where it was hidden-existent beneath her long-sleeved blouse; and she stared straight into Croyd's eyes, bringing her mind back into something like Marta-lucidity. She was young again, yes; but precisely by virtue of her new vigor, her self-discipline was all the more potent, her unusual mind was all the more elastic. . . .

She paled, swept by a new weakening. Never had she fully believed the *Croyd* name: because of his abilities and his knowledges, the Thoth Evans remote possibility had been strongly influential in her more-than-tentative trust of him. Now, via two days of intensive research through intricate contacts, she *knew* he was Thoth Evans, father of Mare Stellarum and her own great-grandfather. And she knew by this token that there was a semi-incestuous quality in her now unconditional desire for him, her yearning for *anything at all*. . . .

But this was crazy! he was *artificially* young again, *she* was artificially young. If they should couple, it would be jaded Cleopatra with jaded Antony. Gland-zing was bracing; but what finally counted was the mind-memory contexture, and for each of them that was old, only, he did not *act* old. . . .

The ship was accelerating for Moon at G's so high that they troublesomely penetrated the inertial shield. Marta leaned against the G-wind, considering Evans-Croyd—who considered his great-granddaughter while he leaned against the G-wind. . . .

Cut it!

Marta the Chairman, driving herself back into emergency command-severity, snapped: "I came here on a hunch—and sure enough, here you are. Did you know that COMCORD triggered off H-hour two hours ago?" Her command tactic steadied her, sternly she regarded him, stern inwardly too, glacial in the implacable momentum of her severity: *equal* to him. . . .

She could see him driving himself into meeting her new

mood. It crossed her mind, thawing it, that he *had* been responsive, looking at her. But now he said hard (in her feeling, male-hard): "That's why I'm here. That's why we're moving to Moon."

She shot a withering look at him. "I fail to understand why. Ziska says his people neutralized the Z-sting in Antarctica. One notes also that Erth is still intact. So why all this business?"

Distressingly for her, his face softened a trifle, as though perhaps he sympathized with her dupery; and his voice too was soft as he told her: "The Antarctic site was a dummy. Ziska was took."

*Sympathy? For me?* Her voice went brittle: "Care to prove it?"

His trace of sympathy vanished, he went slightly sardonic. "I brought back the technical master of COMCORD, Dr. Saguni. He did the dire deed, for reasons you'll never get me to tell. Care to interview him?"

It blew her wide open: she came inwardly erect, respecting him; she dropped the command pose and responded low, man to man. "No time, Croyd. I have a feeling that you won't lie to me now." Bitter, then: "So Ziska has goofed up an Erth-mortal crisis. I have difficulty preventing myself from being glad. Pray summarize the facts."

Soberly he sketched the peril. He added: "All this will hit Erth in approximately six hours—unless I stop it in two hours. The Z-sting is *really* located on—I hate myself for being the one to tell you this—"

She knew that he was going to clobber her with something—but sympathetically. In her heart he became suddenly greater than she. Dropping all defenses, Marta directed: "Say it."

He frowned. He said: "Neptune."

During two-tenths of a second she assimilated it; during another five-tenths of a second she wilted; during the remainder of the second she struggled to recover; and at the end of the second she hoarsed: "Right under my god-damned idiotic Nordic nose!"

His hands had her hands; in her chagrin she half-noticed. Now her mind was old again; and it was filled with ancient stuff called *The Purloined Letter* out of a man

named Poe. In her youth, would she have let this happen. . . . Now, would she have. . . . Eh, but it had happened when she had been old, old; and new youth couldn't matter now, for in her earlier old age she had trusted the security of Neptune merely because it was *near*, and so she had neglected surveillance. . . .

Her eyes came slowly up to his eyes: she was making no attempt at releasing her hands. "What about the failsafes? There were supposed to be three of them—"

"They are, as it turns out, the artificial satellites Velos, Miros, and Heros."

"But they are supposed to be collecting astronomical data!"

"In fact, they are potential blotters for the Z-waves. Should the offending constellation chicken out after the H-hour triggering, Saguni could rekamatically command these three satellites to broadcast the tempopattern of the target metropolis. Depending on the time, one of these satellites would then become the target, absorbing the waves and screening Erth—"

*"How much time margin?"*

"If Velos near Jupiter-orbit could be activated in time, 2576 seconds margin; if Miros near Mars-orbit, 751 seconds margin; if last-ditch Heros 900,000 kilometers out from Erth, 3 seconds margin. Of course I am citing averages—"

Her eyes were wild: "Let Saguni activate! I *command* it—"

He shook his head. "At Andhra's orders, Saguni has permanently deactivated these three failsafes. They are dead."

Her eyes died slowly.

Into her apathy came the feeling of his hands pressing her hands, and the sound of him saying: "But now that you have a new life, Marta Evans, it does not follow that you too are dead. We will be warping into Moonbase in a few minutes. I want you to help clear my way with a set of visiphone orders."

Her eyes were closed. Wearily she responded: "I know that you my rescuer are my great-grandfather. Apart from any male-female feeling, the ignominy is exquisite."

After that, she suffered poignantly a firmer squeezing of

her hands. His voice came into her: "On that point, at least, your investigative apparatus is perfect. Knowing it, cancel it. We are psychophysically the same age, both of us are experienced and vigorous, we have a common purpose, and a decade or two ago we would have been proud of each other. Shall we now try to win mutual pride again?"

Space-to-Moon orders from Marta, orders which began calm and ended strident, established what the *Mazurka* was going to be allowed to do on Moon, without interference and with every requested Moon-resource. One specific system of orders: neutralize Ziska—and how to do it. On the lubrication of those orders, Dr. Ziska slid out of history.

Consequently the ship bypassed Moonbase and came in directly on the Rab experimental ivisiradio project. Time had slipped: *Mazurka* had taken nearly as long as the slow Moon-ferry for the trip, because a frigate requires light-minutes of space to build up velocity and more light-minutes to brake down. Between Erth and Moon, for speed there wasn't room.

By the time when Croyd was settled into the bucket seat of his ivisiradio, the penultimate impulses had been nearly three hours en route to Neptune, with scarcely more than an hour to go before they would be stinging-out the Z-waves. Already the impulses were far past Saturn and hurtling toward Uranus.

Clustered behind Croyd in the moon-but were Marta and Marana and Keri and Saguni; the regular crew of the installation stood respectfully back. During turgid minutes Marta, watching Croyd, empathized with him so completely that her mind sailed with his mind while it navigated space. . . .

Croyd asserted without turning, his eyes being frozen into the controls: "I am about a thousand kilometers off Neptune. I seem to have beaten the penultimate impulses by just over an hour. Saguni, give me the coordinates of the Z-sting."

Saguni mentioned them, slicing them fine to the nearest

thousandth of a second of latitude and longitude on Neptune. He hadn't known that the planet was Neptune. This meant that he had no appreciation of the *size* of the Z-sting; but the point was trivial, he was a theoretician.

Croyd hunched over the controls, peering into the goggles that masked his eyes. . . .

Five minutes later he sagged. Pushing the goggles back onto his forehead, he turned to look at Saguni; his expression was that of a World War I pilot in an open cockpit turning to his copilot and trying to think of a humorous clipped way to explain that they were still deep in enemy air with only a teaspoonful of petrol.

He stated: "That location happens to be on the *far* side of Neptune just at the moment. And I haven't yet found a way to make i-rays turn corners."

In the background, Keri, sensing dire trouble, tensed; Dana began to open his mouth; Marta, under tight self-control, snapped at Dana: "Leave this to Croyd and Saguni—we're spectators."

Saguni went slit-eyed. "I see. So then I am after all going to be guilty of polygenocide. You should not have found me, Croyd. I was resigned to my first guilt. I am not resigned to its return."

The semi-comedy had faded from Croyd's face. "I designed COMCORD for humanitarian purposes; inadvertently I created a cause of universal dehumanization. You used the cause for a dehumanizing effect that no planner intended. It would take more wisdom than I have to judge whether you or I or humanity generally is most guilty."

"There is no hope?"

"I can think of no way to speed the rotation of Neptune."

Marta incised: "It may not be necessary, if the penultimate impulses are ultra-high frequency."

After an instant, Croyd murmured: "Curse me, bless you." To Saguni: "*Are* they?"

"Of course, guided on hyper-laser. Why?"

"Why then, they cannot turn corners any more than my i-rays! They will pepper this side of Neptune, and otherwise will bypass Neptune, leaving the Z-sting inactivated in the far shadow of Neptune. . . . Won't they, Saguni?"

"I am afraid not, Croyd. The Z-sting has a secondary

receiver at the antipodes. It is time for us to give up, Croyd. Isanami proposeth, Isanagi disposeth. Can you direct me to the nearest sword and sash?"

Croyd, his eyebrows angling oddly at each other, was gazing at Saguni. Presently he turned back to the controls, murmuring: "You may not need them, Saguni. If the penultimate impulses can use the secondary receiver—so can I, perhaps."

With his body and brain and the matrix of his mind solidly based on Erth's moon, subjectively the conscious mind of Croyd was 4.36 billion kilometers away, hovering above the surface of Neptune not very far inside the orbit of Nereid beneath whose pre-governmental nose the Z-sting had long ago been implanted. And this was Marta's highest humiliation.

Diving in toward the gas-cloaked surface of the enormous planet, controlling his visual zoom by the feel of his fingers, blindly manipulating knobs and buttons on the Moon panel, Croyd took moments to appreciate the vast nothingness of the Neptune vaporscape—unwasted moments, since all the time he was approaching target. He had not needed to ask Saguni for the coordinates of the secondary receiver: it was located at the antipodes of the primary; its coordinates were deducible, on *this* side of Neptune. Only one secondary receiver was needed: necessarily it or the primary would always be positioned to hook impulses from Erth, except on the rare occasions when Neptune was totally eclipsed by Moon, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, or Uranus. On Erth, Saguni now testified, the Crestian Penultimate Trigger had also an antipodean secondary.

Coming hard-in on the receiver, again, as with Marta on Nereid, Croyd had visual problems of ray dispersal; but he reasoned that the impulses from Erth would be at least as widely dispersed as his i-rays, and since *those* were sure to make contact, so were *these*.

As he approached the receiver more closely, senses other than vision seemed to clear. This receiver was of course a rekamatic collector, reaching out to gather dispersed impulses inward, concentrating them upon itself. Although his i-rays were not rekamatic, they did by nature

travel upstream along rekamatic impulses and were therefore experiencing some convergence upon the field of the receiver—to some extent as they had done with Herod's i-ray receiver on Alpha Centauri III, although less efficiently.

He could now sense the secondary receiver clearly, although there was nothing to see: it was all gradients polarized into rock, invisible, of the very essence of Neptune, beneath cloaking methane ice pinnacles and seven-thousand-kilometer depth of methane atmosphere, ensuring that seismic deformation of the planet would have to be catastrophic indeed before it could structurally deform the Z-sting into malfunction. Nereid could have found the device by searching systematically with rekamatic scan-probes, but Nereid had no special reason to look for it there, and Nereid had been much too busy with governmental control of Erth and flirtations with other star systems to pay much random observational attention to Neptune. Erth was too important to be ignored, Neptune too near to be noticed.

Croyd spoke softly to Saguni: "How is the secondary receiver connected with the Z-sting?"

"Direct kamatic gradients through the planetary core." The voice of Saguni came to him from the remoteness of Erth-moon from Neptune.

Croyd was having continuously to readjust his ray controls in order to keep tracking the elusive receiver which was rotating with the planet at a ground-ice velocity relatively triple that of Erth. Luckily Moon's rotation was negligible. He asked, "What time is it now?"

"1631."

"Then I am here only forty-four minutes ahead of the penultimate impulses. I am going in, Saguni. Hold tight when I get in there, I will have more questions."

Now Croyd extruded his mind into the receiver net, boring through the ice and the crust and the mantle into the hard hot core of Neptune (hard enough, but much less dense than the core of Erth): at the far end of a four-billion-kilometer extension along the i-rays, another twenty-seven thousand kilometers mattered little. He thrust past the Neptune center of gravity: technically he was now

moving upward instead of downward, although he sensed no difference because his bodiless mind felt no gravity.

Presently he found himself at the base of some kind of rekamatic three-dimensional delta fanning out above him in the planet's mantle. "Saguni, I think I'm at the connect. What now?" The fact of speaking reminded him that he was really back on Moon, if that was what was real.

Saguni's bland voice instructed him: he was about to enter the second-most-complex computer ever devised, the *most* complex being Croyd's own COMCORD. . . . Saguni short-circuited five minutes of technical discussion by demanding after seven seconds: "But even knowing all this and being mentally there—what can you *do*?"

"A computer is a brain. A mind can operate a brain. Perhaps my mind extension can influence this durundium computer. I am not sure—it will have to be very fine work."

"I withhold my questions to save time. Question me as needed."

Croyd extended himself further and began to feel faintly giddy as the delta diversified into many thousands of main trunk lines. He had encountered no wires or elements—the entire structure was rekamatic gradients. He paused, collecting himself, extremely overextended, not at all strong here. . . .

"Saguni, instruct me further concerning the vital structure."

"There are," Saguni lectured staccato, "482 tempopatterns, counting each subsector of a megalopolis as one pattern—such as Manhattan in Chihattan. Each of these patterns is memory-banked and revised monthly: this is the major task of the Penultimate Relay on Crest. Hence the banks contain the very latest tempopattern averagings: the most recent that I forwarded were, of course, Senevendia and Chihattan and Moskov, involving among them fifty-nine subsector patterns: they are correct as of seven to thirteen days ago. When the penultimate impulses activate the Z-sting, they will do so in such a way as to generate one bundle of waves for each of the fifty-nine subsectors of Chihattan and Senevendia and Moskov. Each bundle, contacting its metropolis, generates a system of second-generation rekamatic waves programmed to



conform their strike to the precise tempopattern of the chosen metropolis—in this case, Senevendia and Chihattan and Moskov; but the triple strike will homogenize the *Zeitgeist* of the entire planet, insulating Erth. Your most economical procedure would be to locate and deactivate the connection between *reception of penultimate impulse* and *fire*. That would be a single connection. If you fail in this, your secondary procedure would be most difficult and time-consuming: locate and severally deactivate connections between the search-impulse and each of the fifty-nine patterns."

"Obviously I will try the first first, I am already moving. What time is it?"

"1648 hours."

"Just twenty-seven minutes left, then. I am feeling my way along what seems to be the main line inward, presumably it will take me to the prime connect. I suppose all those other branches are intended to see that reception of the penultimate impulses will put all four hundred eighty-two patterns on the ready."

"That is correct—and some other things, such as a trifling quintuple system of mode permutations—"

"I understand. What time is it?"

"1650."

"Sorry, I'm asking too often. I do feel a bit head-weak. Do me a favor, Saguni. There's a cabinet in the wall behind me, it has some I-V bottles. Put a needle into my shoulder and feed me, it will take me back to the days when I was old."

Somewhat later he remembered having felt a slight shoulder prick. His energy was increasing, he began to regain something resembling orientation in this endlessly self-diversifying labyrinth of durundium gradients. He felt like Theseus, he yearned for Ariadne thread; but that wouldn't have helped him go *forward*. . . .

"—Croyd—Croyd—" The remote small voice had been calling before he first heard it.

"Saguni?"

"Are you all right?"

"Yes—"

"When you can, tell me where you are."

"Just a moment—"

Ten more seconds passed while Saguni died. Then Croyd—whose body for Saguni was in paralysis, fingers frozen on the ray controls, told Saguni thickly: "I may be making some progress. I have definitely located the Reception/Fire bridge; I found it a while back. . . . What time is it?"

"1659."

"That leaves us—"

"Roughly sixteen minutes."

"I am working while I talk. The problem is to use psychokinetics on rekamatic connections, and we all do this in our brains, but this is the strongest and most resistant of all connections in the sting. It is showing signs of wavering, but it would still pass a message. What did you give me as a secondary resource?"

"Killing fifty-nine individual patterns."

"Yes. I will stay with *this* approach. The other would be time-hopeless."

Croyd's body had not quivered. Saguni sat cross-legged on the plastic floor of the Moon-cave, eyes slitted, mouth compressed, breathing slow, pulse sixty. Croyd he was not seeing; instead, he was seeing penultimate impulses winging toward Neptune. He saw each of these impulses individually as a complex of zigzag pattern vibrations like livid interwound spirilla in space-black: they were continually fissioning so that one became two and two four and so on until by now there were indefinite numbers of them, spread out wider than the diameter of Neptune despite their laser-concentration. They had departed his Penultimate Trigger in the Labyrinth of Minos. During nearly four hours, they had crossed Moon orbit, Mars orbit, asteroid orbit, Jupiter orbit, Saturn orbit, Uranus orbit, unchallenged even by stray meteors or microcosmic dust: traveling at a steady three hundred thousand kilometers per second, the swiftest possible velocity of spatial-impulse propagation. The fastest translight space ship could not overtake them because of the time such a ship would expend in building itself up to light velocity and the additional time the ship would throw away in braking itself down to zero at target in the restricted confines of the Sol system. Croyd's pioneer i-rays, which Saguni did not yet

understand, *had* overtaken and passed these impulses in something like instantaneous travel; but now Croyd's mind was stalled at the far end of his rays, chipping psychokinetically away at robust rekamatic gradients; and meanwhile the penultimate impulses were nearing, nearing. . . .

A dark alarm shook Saguni out of his imaginative trance. He checked his cutichron. He barked: "Croyd!"

"Saguni?"

"Contact minus four minutes!"

"Mm—"

Silence. Saguni stayed taut.

"Saguni—"

"Croyd?"

"I have this titillating gradient chipped raw, it may already be unable to transmit full-go on fifty-nine patterns, but I can't be sure, and I don't see much chance of significant further progress in three minutes. I am working while I talk. Saguni—"

"Croyd?"

"After you've finished with that sword and sash—do you mind if I pick them up and use them?"

"Wipe the sword on the sash first. Why?"

"What time is it?"

"Contact minus two minutes—plus or minus fifteen seconds."

"How again?"

"Fifteen seconds probable error. You are working, yes?"

"Yes."

"Why my sword and sash?"

"I should instead have tried at the start for the fifty-nine individual patterns. Each is probably far less resistant than this main gradient."

"It was the grand chance, Croyd."

"Yes. But—"

"Also your invention of COMCORD was the grand chance. It *could* have been the ultimate solution to international bastardy."

"I know now that you are wrong: it could *not* have been the solution to international bastardy as long as there were international bastards. Whatever can happen, will."

"I have heard that somewhere. Am I distracting you?"

"Not at all, I am making some progress. What time is it?"

"Fifteen seconds."

"Quiet then. Let me—"

Eleven seconds of quiet.

Shockingly the body of Croyd went into galvanic paralysis.

And slumped.

Saguni was on his feet. "Croyd?"

Wearily: "I just had an experience. Something went through me one way—then something went through me the other way."

Silence.

Saguni sagged, understanding how it was. The sting had been stung. The Z-waves were swift-rippling toward Erth. They would confer their gift of shroud upon Erth in four hours two minutes.

Comprehending defeat, Marta and Dana and Keri frowned hard down, each grappling privately with the human-insoluble problem of conceiving the disaster's enormity. Saguni sat cross-legged, impassive, one-by-one meticulously rejecting his own emotional rejections and accepting his own intellectual acceptances of the humanity's-end which he had caused and which even Croyd, even Thoth Evans had been unable to stop. . . .

Abrupt Croyd-bark: "Saguni! I am *damned* if I'll accept defeat on this one!"

All in the hut became hard-focus attentive. Shocked out of impassivity and onto his feet, Shinto Saguni stammered, "What good will cursing do? It is all over."

"Hell, Saguni, I *wasn't* cursing! I was asserting that if I accept defeat on this one, I am damned! Saguni, we have nearly four hours before the Z-waves reach Erth from Neptune, and our arses are going to get pretty badly pooped if we sit on them so long even with minimal Moon gravity! Think, Saguni, think! *What can we still do?* Me, I can't think straight, my brain is still hung up inside the Z-sting—"

Behind Saguni, Marana resonated: "Mr. Croyd, I have tempopattern flakes for Chihattan, Senevendia, and

Moskov." Marana, hypereuphoric with inspiration, was on his feet with two puzzled but ready-to-go women.

Croyd got it instantly. "Suit-up, Marana! Saguni, you stay here. And lay off hara-kiri until you are totally sure that Erth is gone, and you'll know that when Erth disappears. Marana, when we get to the *Mazurka* you are to discharge your crew to guard this base, we'll use the autocrew, there's no point in risking lives on a practically hopeless risk. Except yours and mine. I assume that you are with me."

"Natch. But I'll have a problem discharging Pete Mulcahy."

"Give him a direct order, he'll obey; he has to command the protection of this base. We wouldn't want Ziska and his people to go last-ditch berserk and shoot up Marta and Keri."

They were suiting as they talked, and so were Marta and Keri—but they paused as the implication hit them. While Keri whirled on Dana, Marta roared: "Forget that plan, sir, forget it! Where you go, I'm aboard!"

Croyd, considering her with admiration: "Wrong decision, strong and gutty Marta. You are Chairman of Mare Stellarum, remember? Look, this will be nothing but a desperate final try, basis purely theoretical, chance of success about zilch, probability enormous that the *Mazurka* will blow. If you were to blow with us—who would take over Erthworld? Ziska?"

She hardened, meeting his eyes.

She nodded once.

He nodded once and reached for his helmet.

Keri, practically fused with Dana, internalized his last words: "Hang around Moon, kid, and see what to do. But if we don't—please make a good second marriage, I want a good life for my love, and I value something of ours that you must be incubating."

Aboard the *Mazurka*, Marana wasted no seconds: Lieutenant-Commander Mulcahy received a direct order. Pete began to demur. His commander informed him: "God damn it, that's an *order*!" Two seconds Mulcahy hesitated, staring at the turned back of his skipper who was busy with takeoff preparations involving the autocrew; then

Mulcahy went to the com and sent the crew to the base double-time. Turning, he told his commander: "I'll go supervise. I won't be back. You're a good skipper and a good Joe; I'd like to go along, but I won't ask again. Cheers."

Marana said, frowning, "You're a good exec and a good friend. Remember that. Remember also that you'll be guarding my wife. Cheers."

Pete pivoted and bolted.

When ship-clearance was complete, Croyd ordered: "Batten hatches and take off."

"Right, sir." Marana began punching a series of controls. They felt the vibration of hatches clanging-to.

Mazurka quit Moon, working her way g-by-g up to a gut-wrenching acceleration well over four thousand g in about twenty minutes; only four g behind the inertial shield, but subjective thrust enough. During acceleration, Marana stayed hard on the controls, with Croyd behind him pumping generalized suggestions. They could operate this ruinous maneuver on autocrew if nothing seriously untoward should arise—*seriously untoward* meaning anything from a circuitry problem to a random meteor or a space gale.

By now, the Z-waves from Neptune were approaching Uranus orbit, inbound toward Erth.

Croyd, leisurely for a moment, glanced behind him, spread hands, and turned back to the commander. "Dana—"

"Sir?"

"The girls. They're back. They're here."

"I figured."

"Our ship may blow, Dana. On Erth, Keri would have been safe, and so would Chairman Marta."

"I figure they probably figured."

Swiveling, Croyd mutely questioned the women. Both nodded. He turned back to Marana: "They figured. Somehow, they're here anyway."

Keri said in a small voice: "It was pretty confused around the ship when the crew was leaving. Some nice men helped us aboard."

They crossed Mars orbit and Jupiter orbit in two hours, on a dead line toward Neptune. Marta, stoically in agony from the g-pressure that crept through the shield, worked her head around to look at Keri: the Vendic princess, who normally weighed fifty-six kilo, was thrust back against her hydraulic seat with a force that raised her weight almost insupportably above a quarter-ton. Under these conditions, Marta found it miraculous that Croyd and Marana stayed erect, moving like directionally self-controlled drunken men from instrument to viewpoint. Ship speed, increasing second by second, was about to equal light velocity.

Marana, voice blurred: "What's your estimated interruption range?"

"Five million kilometers maximum. But I don't get optimum scramble before three million."

"Three million would give us ten seconds. That's just enough margin. If it fails, is the screwball backstop ready?"

"The tempopatterns? Yessir."

Croyd turned to the women. "Out of your seats—you may have to jump ship in spitting time."

Keri, articulating with trouble: "I stay while Dana stays."

Marta studied her equally young great-grandfather, wanting to echo Keri by saying: "I stay while Croyd stays." For her it was definite now: he was her redemption, far more to her than Dana to Keri: it had come to the point where Croyd was her meaning, all other meanings having drifted away with her arterial cholesterol. But there was no way for Marta to express this. And so she merely stated, "I stay."

Croyd nodded. "That's their decision, Dana. Good, then. But things are getting tough. Distance now?"

"Nine million kilometers."

"Activate the interrupter at six million. It will meet the waves at three million. Einstein was wrong about that."

Dana pressed the activator.

Five, four, three, two, one—

*Whssshh!*

Silence.

Croyd said dully: "We missed." The Z-waves were already far past them en route to Erth.

Dana asked tersely: "Operation Backstop?"

"Affirmative."

Dana put his frigate into an 180° turn that used up millions of kilometers of space and maximized the apparent *g*'s on the bridge. Marta and Keri closed eyes and suffered forever. Eleven minutes later, the ship came out of the turn and drove radially toward Erth, and there was some relief but not much because Dana had pushed acceleration up to maximum.

Croyd told them in a conversational tone that was just a bit edgy: "The Z-waves at this instant are forty-one minutes out from Erth, and we are far behind them. We are pursuing the waves, trying to catch them. We will hold acceleration at 4227 *g* during forty minutes; the waves will then be only eighteen million kilometers from Erth, about sixty seconds away, while we will have made up most of the space differential at a peak velocity of 1.1 *C* and will be less than five million kilometers behind the waves."

He was bending over Dana at the controls: "That is really as long as I dare wait—"

Although the vital eyes of forty-five-year-old Marta blue-burned into the hard back of forty-five-year-old Croyd, the hard will of eighty-six-year-old Marta restrained her from distracting Croyd. Within her a tumultuous *mélange* of new realizations yelled at her to *launch* her self-fulfillment bid *now*, disrupting Croyd's concentration on his last-ditch roulette-defense of her planetary responsibility. . . .

She suppressed her own urgency. She agreed with him on what counted.

Watching his cutichron, Croyd announced: "Contact minus four minutes. We are overtaking the waves. We will use three more minutes to close the gap, and then we will activate a backstop which coincidentally is a small replication of the three dead failsafes Velos, Miros, and Heros. Our ship will emit a laser-directed amplification of the tempopatterns of Chihattan and Senevendia and Moskov—and, Dana, never ask me why I went for tempopatterns or why I gave top priority to those three. And



if the 4.7 million kilometer distance between us and the waves then is enough smaller than *their* 18 million kilometer distance from Erth, the intensity of our feeble transmissions will overcome the relative intensities of the actual live tempopatterns from Erth, and the waves will think *we* are their targets and will turn around and hit us instead of Erth."

He was busy loading flakes into the transmitter. Absently he added: "*If*."

Both women were grasping both horns. The tragedy for Erth of an *if* that would fail. The finality for themselves of an *if* that would succeed.

Keri said thickly: "Dana—"

Dana turned. "Keri?"

"Kisses."

"Kisses."

"Okay, Dana my love, that's it forever. Go back to work."

Dana returned to his controls, Marta to her self-flagellation.

In a moment, Dana queried: "Croyd, if the waves *do* come back and hit us, won't it take them about fourteen seconds from button-push at 4.7 million kilometers?"

"Something like that."

"Then, for higher success-probability—can we shave it even closer?"

Croyd squeezed his shoulder. "Good boy. Girls?"

Marta's "You are in command" and Keri's "Erth has top priority?" intermerged.

"Well done," Croyd commented. "All right, I will push it to six seconds closer in. And it is now Contact minus two minutes twelve seconds, for us."

Marta: "It is probably an excellent time for this abysmal old woman to die. Thank you for letting me die young."

Croyd, turning, surprised: "But our death is no more than highly probable—"

She didn't really hear him. Her bitterness was mordant.

What Marta had been watching was youth in action. Dana was young, Keri was young; Croyd was not chronologically young, but his insistent imaginative thrust constituted the youth which ultimately cannot age.

And how was it with Marta's new youth? Perhaps she had never been young, really. No man had ever aroused her, except one who had abandoned her, and Ziska whom she had abandoned, and now Croyd. Even in that long-ago time when she had thrust her way up into command of *Mare Stellarum*—had that been youth, or had it been the driving obstinacy which is not necessarily young? Somewhat less long ago, there had been a time when she had catapulted herself into Neptune space in order to pioneer the Nereid outpost of government: had that been delayed youth—or had it been an unsuccessful leap at recapturing gone youth? What had *Marta* ever meant, except power for expediency?

And now, o god, she was young again, and in love more than ever but this time intelligently in love with an altogether human demigod who with humility kept refusing to recognize his own demidivinity but who with insistently responsible sympathy kept operating like the demigod that he was—but she was his great-granddaughter—and a bitch.

And so now it was all done. This Croyd had youthened her sincerely: her youthening was an irony, because in her there was no potential for soul-youth, only a potential for hollow physical vigor. If at this instant Croyd should approach her sexually, Marta was capable of matching him thrust-for-thrust, they would weary each other sweetly; but that would be mere mare-stallion physicality, he could get as much joy from a well-turned android. Should he depth-probe more than her body, all he would find in her when he would look for her soul would be a galaxy-dominating she-computer who had connived and browbeaten herself into total power, denying men and herself, and had eventuated in the hollowness of selfish bitchery. . . .

There is an ultimate depressive mood in which one will brave all obstacles in order to drive oneself to cliff-edge and leap into suicide, hoping all the way down that one will be mourned.

*O Keri and Dana! O Marta and Croyd!*

Monotonously Marta announced: "I perfectly well understand that all four of us go when the waves hit us. Their intensity on our small target will simply evaporate us.

Four people and one frigate are worth a good deal less than Erth, and it is a shrewd bargain that you are striking."

Croyd, his finger near the activator button, replied sharply, "It is not a certainty that we die with the ship. Listen now, all of you. When I press this button, we will have only a whisker more than five seconds to save ourselves.

"Now get these directions, they are simple but vital. Dana, leave the controls now, and sit there between the women. All three of you cling together like the Laocoön: Dana, hold their waists tight; Marta and Keri, link arms behind his back." Dana moved while Croyd talked. "It's easy for me to move back fast with the *g*-wind pushing me back. The instant I press the button, I will whip back and sit on Dana's lap, and I will hold out my arms, and you women use your free hands to lock wrists with me. Good, Dana: your position is just right. And then I—"

"Will uptime?" demanded Marta, whose eyes were wide and smarting-dry.

"If I can. Minus twenty-seven seconds, twenty-six, twenty-five—*Marta, sit still!*"

With all her Croyd-conferred young strength, Marta flung herself away from Dana, fell off the chair to the floor of the bridge, and began to crawl away, gasping: "I failed my Erth, I die with the ship, let me go—" Dana started after her. Croyd yelled: "Commander, *halt!* Hang on to Keri!" Dana obeyed, staring at Marta whose floor-distance was increasing. Croyd shouted: "Marta! Erth *needs* you! Crawl back fast, and when I come, grab my foot—" He broke off, stared at ship's chronometer, called: "Four-three-two-one-ACTIVATE!" Pressing the button, he stumbled back toward them, driven by *g*-wind; fell prone; tried to reach Marta with one hand and Dana's foot with the other; failed; lurched erect, spun, fell back on Dana's lap, extended one arm, felt a hand engage his wrist, clutched her wrist, uptimed five minutes.

Three space-suited human figures clung together in free space. There was no *Mazurka*.

Croyd spoke through their intercom: "Activate your suit drives full acceleration and follow my lead." Letting go of

Keri's wrist, shaking off her hand, he shifted position so that his arm was around her waist on the other side from Dana whose waist he now clasped; and the three surged forward silently during a period of three minutes, moving tangentially to distant Erth.

"Cut thrust," ordered Croyd. His voice was subdued.

In freefall, they turned back to watch in the *Mazurka* direction. All was blackness and bright stars: no sign of a ship, although glaring Sol would surely have revealed any ship.

Moody Dana and Keri heard the nearby expressionless Croyd-voice. "If Erth or Moon survives, we may; it is merely a question of broadcast and pickup. Forget our survival, I am concerned with the *main* thing. By an interesting spacetime paradox, when we uptimed without changing spatial position, our position in space was the place where our ship *was going to be* five minutes from the time we then inhabited: in our uptime plane, the ship hasn't got there yet. We are now in uptime freefall, going away, a safe hundred kilometers from the space locus where the Z-waves will hit the ship—if *they do* turn around and hit the ship instead of Erth. But of course, whatever is going to happen *has already happened*, and shortly we will see it happen. Keri, Dana—do you enjoy being present spectators of past history?"

Dana mused: "Then from the past, some pasts are future. It is a fine irony."

Keri said quietly: "Marta is aboard?"

"She is, or was. I think you understand irony, Keri."

"Dana mentioned an irony. Also, my father is or was an irony."

"Here is another one. If the waves did hit the ship, which we wanted, then their intensity on a small target has driven all thrust out of every reon in every atom of the ship, and the *Mazurka* has disintegrated in a photon flare. In less than a minute we will see this flare, if that has happened; and we will know that Marta Evans, hours after becoming young again, has flared with the ship. But if the ship does not flare, we will know that Man on Erth has been eternally sepulchered—but that Marta Evans, with all her political meaning gone, with all her long-cultivated

***life-*** meaning gone, will live a little while vigorous and free.  
**Keri, do you appreciate this irony?"**

**Keri said low: "Watch."**

**They watched.**

**Stars were glared out by the seeming of a nova.**

# Rehab Action Ten

## HEROD THE GREAT

2 June 2475



The reasoning behind the Neptunian location of the Z-sting may be reconstructed as follows. First, that location was practically unfindable and thoroughly unsuspectable: prior to the Marta Evans Nereid adventure, Neptune was regarded as an economically useless gravity hazard to be avoided by interstellar travelers. Second, the eight-hour round trip for triggering impulses and Z-waves, coupled with the strategic locations of the failsafe satellites Velos, Miros, and Heros, gave a targeted constellation last-ditch time to realize the reality of its peril and avoid it by making significant grievance reparations along with enforceable guarantees for the future. The problem of the four billion kilometer distance, with associated wave-spread and reduced target intensity, was sufficiently overcome by laser refinements; and should a meteor or a planet or even the Sol star eclipse Erth from Neptune, the Z-waves would merely detour the obstacle and return to their programmed course.

As a sort of footnote, it is added that Dr. Thoth Evans, in developing COMCORD, had not envisioned associated use of a Z-sting, but only occupation and economic sanctions. The Z-refinement was added by others. . . .

—*Encyclopedia Galactica*, 2476

There is no evident reason why the good offices of the Interplanetary Union may not end by wiping out war as a primitive-

ly sporting but technologically hideous method of exploiting the territorial imperative and other sorts of ambitions and jealousies. For example, as a result of COMCORD and other aspects of good and insistent planning, the last full-scale war on the planet Erth ended in 2321; although we must qualify that Erth's excellent antiwar measures do not necessarily exclude some other sort of man-made disaster. . . .

—Editorial, *Interplanetary Times*, 13 June 2496

Erthworld President Aneed and Secretary-General Tannen sat at a table four meters from the screen; sat there with an unknown named Lieutenant Midge Carlton and a couple of secretaries. Behind them, crowded against the flexible hut wall, stood Commander and Mme. Marana and a couple of generals and a couple of admirals. No official or board member of Mare Stellarum had been invited.

It was 1300 hours on 2 June 2475. Location: the Rab ivisiradio experimental station on Moon. For the occasion, they had rigged a hundred-centimeter visiscreen to replace the visigoggles that Croyd had used to lock himself in.

Florid fortyish Tannen, a not-yet-portly genial Sinite out of the Gaza Strip, was never overbearing, never prematurely certain, never evidently impatient. Beneath his shambling surface his mind and his glands worked like a dynamo and its powering waters, and he had never been known to surrender ahead of the last chance.

President Aneed—President of the Erthworld Union of International Constellations—was not a Sinite; he resembled Tannen in no way at all except in energy, political competency, and courage. He was fiftyish, he was only on selected occasions genial, he was physically big, he never considered himself confused, and even when he was humble he was overbearing. These were not racial or cultural traits: Aneed was merely this sort of human.

Activated, the screen was filled with snow: it was instrument-to-instrument transmission, but the distance was interstellar and the new gadgetry was primitive. The screen semi-revealed, seated behind a similar table at Rab's Galactic headquarters, three males and three females, fuzzily unclear; if others stood nearby they were indistinguishable from static.

Aneed queried sharply (his voice was big baritone except when he felt frustrated): "Can our people clear it any?"

A technician said, "Sir, I can throw in a filter and brighten the image. It won't really clarify anything, but it may help psychologically."

Aneed got his mouth open to blow. Laying a hand on the President's arm, Tannen told the technician: "Pray do that."

Within seconds the image had significantly clarified. The Rab people, in color image, were seen individually as a tall, lean auburn-haired man, a short, lean dark-haired man, a tall white-haired man, a tall brunette woman, and two other women who might be secretaries.

Aneed reverberated: "That's a *hell* of a lot better! You can't tell *me* it's all in my—"

Tannen squeezed his arm and nodded to Carlton.

She spoke clearly: "Mr. Croyd is the tallish man with auburn hair. Croyd, it's Midge Carlton here; you are viewing President Aneed at my extreme right and Secretary-General Tannen at my immediate right. Please present your companions."

Croyd spoke: "A pleasure, Mr. President, Mr. Secretary, Miss Carlton. I am grateful to you, Mr. President, for allowing Miss Carlton to make these arrangements. My expression is pleasant for the occasion, although you probably can't make it out since I can't make out yours."

Tannen peered at Croyd but could not definitely imprint his features. They would meet in the future; Tannen would not recognize his face.

"We too are pleasant, sir," mused Aneed, going courtly.

Croyd stated: "I have the honor to present three people in protocol order. At my extreme right, wearing white hair, President Bomar of the Alpha Centauri Union, governing the planets Rab and Vash. At my immediate right, with dark hair, Chairman Herod of Galactic, Ltd. At my immediate left, a dark-haired lady, Dr. Fortescue, confidential physician to Chairman Herod.

Aneed's mouth cotton-blossomed. "How kind of you, Dr. Fortescue, to grace our meeting! Of course I know



President Bomar and Chairman Herod, and so does Secretary Tannen—"

He stopped. Frowning heavily, he turned to Tannen and stage-whispered: "Allah be blest, this communication is *instant!*"

Chuckles were audible from Alpha Centauri III; and Tannen replied: "By whatever name, blessed be He: it certainly is!"

The heart of the talking was delayed while both sides entered into affable socializing. Keri and Dana were congratulated on their new marriage; Herod praised Dana for intelligent and heroic conduct of his mission; and the embarrassing topic of Keri's father was avoided. . . .

Abruptly Aneed tore it. Peering at the Rab images, he bellowed: "I want to be told who this Croyd really is!"

The import of his discourtesy produced at both ends a pained hush. On Rab, the four principals looked at each other. Croyd scribbled a note and passed it to the others; each of them read it and nodded affirmation, Fortescue with an enthusiastic smile. Bomar then asserted with dignity: "Mr. President, I am asking Mr. Croyd to lead the discussion for Centauri."

Aneed gazed quivering at the fuzzy Croyd image—which coughed lightly and asserted: "You realize, President Aneed, that you have just precipitated conversation in heavily classified terms; and while we've all enjoyed meeting and talking with your secretaries and with your general and flag officers, may we agree that with one exception, the time has come for civilian leaders only?"

The Erthworld President stared, then nodded. Tannen whispered to Carlton, who quietly arose and whispered with the secretaries and the generals and admirals and with Dana and Keri. While, uncued, the two secretaries on Rab were departing the picture, on Moon Commander and Mme. Marana and the generals and admirals and secretaries were departing, with Carlton following. . . .

Tannen interjected: "Miss Carlton, wait." He turned to Croyd: "Is she perhaps your one exception?"

"She is. She saved your Erthworld—she bought Senevendia."

Aneed frowned viciously. Tannen raised an eyebrow at him; Aneed shrugged. Carlton reseated herself. Suddenly Croyd grinned: it was visible through the snow. Carlton just perceptibly jerked her head at Tannen—who caught it and jerked his head at Carlton. Croyd nodded soberly.

Aneed uncertainly announced: "We're now top-secret at this end—I guess. How is your end?"

Croyd signaled Bomar, who responded: "In my judgment, Mr. President, both sides are now as top-secret as I would wish them to be for any matter that may be injected into this discussion. And again, I want Mr. Croyd to lead for us."

"God damn!" boomed Aneed. "Croyd, who in hell *are* you?"

Croyd said: "Apart from what Mare Stellarum BuPers says about me—my name of legal register is Thoth Evans."

The corroborating nods of Bomar, Herod, and Fortescue were snow-visible.

While Aneed in puzzlement glowered, Tannen murmured to him, "If Carlton owns Senevendia, Evans owns most of the rest of Erthworld. I cannot suggest urgently enough that we proceed on that assumption."

Tannen here made a public point. "Mr. President, let's take account of realities, Mare Stellarum damn near blew Erthworld. Dr. Evans, after most of a century in the tank, somehow pulled himself together, won Herod's confidence, and saved Erthworld. President Bomar and Chairman Herod have given him the con here. In my opinion, we are temporarily the listeners."

Aneed considered. He looked up at the Rab images: "Dr. Evans, prey give us the benefit of your thoughts."

The response was: "Now that you know I am Thoth Evans, I'll appreciate it if you'll simply call me Croyd. From this point on, it is going to be my name. It is true that I was an agent for Galactic, and that I was investigating Galactic's competitor Mare Stellarum. There is no concord about this level of activity in the Articles of the Sol/Centauri League; and therefore, when Mare Stellarum was discredited, there was no fugitive reason for me to flee

Erthworld; instead, I departed Erth because I have current business here on Rab. And I do urge that now we go on to questions of higher priority for both our star systems."

Aneed considered this reply: he was inclined to find it irritating, but the legalism of its construction gave him pause. He raised his long chin and flung a totally different challenge: "State the precise role—the *precise* role—of Commander Marana in the final *Mazurka* flight. And then tell me how Marta Evans *really* met her death, for the love of Ibrahim!"

Tannen shrugged—at the non sequitur, and at the Ibrahim.

Gravely Croyd told him: "I was assigned by Chairman Herod to command Commander Marana. I gave the commander certain generalized orders which he understood to be probably fatal for himself. He responded with alacrity, and he elaborated his orders at a high level of creativity and expertise, and he never hesitated to risk his own life. His account of the last-second events aboard the *Mazurka* is correct. There is no way that he could have prevented Chairman Evans from flaring with the ship. Sir, Chairman Evans was my great-granddaughter. And may we now perhaps move on to priority questions?"

Frowning, Tannen, painfully accustomed to Aneed red herrings, was beginning to intuit a possibility that Croyd might be chivalrously covering a Marta suicide. . . .

But not all the herring had run past. Aneed now demanded: "Who gave you permission to run away with the traitor Saguni?"

"Sir, that was an irresponsible decision of my own. If you wish him returned to Erth for trial, both Dr. Saguni and President Bomar have agreed to waive extradition proceedings. Meanwhile, Dr. Saguni is the only other man in the galaxy capable of directing a modification or inactivation of COMCORD and its Z-sting—just as soon as Mare Stellarum gets back on its feet. And I do think that we should now start paying attention to this priority."

Tannen said, just audibly: "*Oof.*" Aneed, both ham-hands fisted on the table, studied his knuckles: it had finally come through to him what was centrally imperative.

Acidly Bomar interjected: "Mr. President Aneed, it has

been five centuries since the launching of the first communications satellite was epochally tested by broadcasting prize fights. I am sure that you have more on your mind than the criminal interrogation of the man who has just saved your world and had previously saved it several time before you were born."

Aneed's big shoulders rose slowly and fell slowly: beneath his thick belligerent skin he was intelligent and self-honest, it was merely a matter of initial penetration. Up came his head; and he looked squarely at Croyd and entered upon the topic of their central-mutual concern.

"Mare Stellarum, then," Aneed acknowledged. "Dr. Evans—or Croyd, since you prefer that now—do you see any future for this governmental corporation that you founded?"

"Yes, sir. But only with a complete change of top officials and directorate."

Aneed pondered this. Tannen was pondering this.

Aneed looked up. "It is not easy, sir, to change the directorate. The directors of Mare Stellarum collectively control about ninety percent of its stock."

Croyd riposted: "Meanwhile, though, the Thoth Evans estate owns about sixty-three percent of *their* stock. It is an advantage of longevity that was first pointed out by a post-medieval novelist, a Mr. Wells."

"Sir, are you proposing a power play?"

"Sir, if such a power play were not possible, what would happen to the republican democracy of Erthworld?"

Aneed frowned. "Corporations that administrate republican democratic governments ought not to have this type of Achilles heel."

"But they do. And the alternative always is, that a government may choose to make do without an administrative corporation."

"Which is impossible in our complex political economy."

"Which is *hitherto* impossible. I keep hoping that human ingenuity may eventually find a way that will be better than this interim technique."

Aneed was silent for a long time. Tannen, who mightily respected Aneed when the President was off the exhibition-

ist muscle, let him think. Bomar murmured: "Now the conversation is worthy."

Aneed looked up. "What would you do, sir, with Mare Stellarum?"

"If I were you, sir?" courteously Croyd queried.

"Well—" Then Aneed straightened and told Croyd flatly: "Yes. If you were me. I."

"I would offer the directors of Mare Stellarum and the directors of Galactic a straight corporational swap. The Mare Stellarum directors take over Galactic with all its assets and liabilities, both small. The Galactic directors take over Mare Stellarum with all its assets and liabilities, both large."

The straightening of the Tannen frame was very slow and very thorough. Aneed was rigid; Bomar did not move; Herod slumped a little. Fortescue and Carlton were entranced.

Aneed found a question: "What profit would the Mare Stellarum directors realize as reward for accepting such a loss?"

"Both the Mare Stellarum directors and the Galactic directors would be freed from all debits to the Thoth Evans estate. For a consideration, that is, of some millions of credits—I have heirs to consider, and I need to stay economically viable."

"Both directorates," Tannen ruminated, "would take it in a hurry."

Aneed squeezed out: "We are trading in worlds."

"We are," Croyd soberly agreed.

"What do we gain?"

"Nothing—or everything. President Bomar has agreed to this deal, although he and his two Centauri planets will be inheriting the decrepit Mare Stellarum organization name and all—with no chairman. I said decrepit, didn't I. Excuse me, sir, I can't voice such a judgment without adding justification of sorts. Marta Evans was a potent chairman until a decade or more ago, she had her organization singing-right; you know this. What happened thereafter to her spirit, and consequently to her organization, needn't be discussed. But had it not been for our unhappy failure to pull her off the ship, I assure you that she

was *again* in shape to come in and vigorously youthen her organization—”

Croyd stopped, realizing that he was at the sharp cliff edge of beginning to say too much. While they pondered, he drove it back to centricity:

“Let me make the deal clear. The Mare Stellarum directorate would move to Rab, take over Galactic, and change its name to Mare Stellarum. Meanwhile the Galactic directorate would move to Erth, take over Mare Stellarum, and change its name to Galactic. And then your Erthworld would be endowed with the leanest, most efficient, most conscientiously progressive, most realistically idealistic governmental corporation in what we know of our galaxy.

“The chairman of Erth’s Galactic would be—Mr. Herod, here. He would sweep clean.”

Herod seemed to shrink. Although the proposal was not unexpected, Croyd having been on Rab during several days closeted with Herod and Fortescue and eventually with Bomar, incredulously eager Herod was demanding inside himself: *I have a new chance to sweep clean again?*

Aneed squinted at Herod. “That little fellow can run Erthworld?”

Bomar said quietly, “He can. Can you?”

Astonishingly, it did not anger Aneed. Instead, he meditated.

He inquired presently: “Mr. Herod, what would you do on Erth with your Galactic?”

Herod glanced at Croyd—who waved an encouraging hand at him, not at all knowing what Herod would say, confident that he would say good things well.

Herod answered slowly but with precision: “First there would be a problem of integrating my top people with the middle and lower echelons of old Mare Stellarum that we would inherit. While all this would be going on, two other things would be going on. I would be working with Mr. Tannen to reform the top ministries in order to restore control to the elected Erthworld government. Meanwhile you, Mr. President Aneed, would be driving through the Erthworld Senate a system of proposals about COMCORD and especially about the Z-sting—”

“I would?”

"You would, because I would be coming only on those terms."

Baffled, Aneed stared at small star-distant Herod. "You are proposing *conditions*?"

"Those conditions. Yes, sir."

Tannen gently interposed: "Mr. Herod, what is the substance of your ideas about COMCORD and the Z-sting—which I think was long ago called The Kazant Device?"

Herod, promptly: "The Z-sting will be immediately program-cleared pending the devising of new programs and the articulation of its systems with the i-rays of Dr. Croyd for practically instantaneous interplanetary and interstellar transmission. Also, and immediately, COMCORD will be permanently disassociated from the Z-sting."

With an odd softness, Aneed interjected: "If you should convince me, I could do that on my own say-so for a brief temporary period, pending Assembly confirmation."

"Good. Because COMCORD's function ought to be impeachment and conviction, but not sentencing or execution of sentence."

"Given a COMCORD conviction," Tannen wondered, "who is competent to make a judgment involving use of the Z-sting?"

"Nobody at all," Herod asserted. "Not *that* sort of sting. Rather, instantly upon a 3·0 imbalance against any constellation, the World President should command occupation, and should order appropriate socio-economic sanctions, subject to modification or override by a very large majority of both Assembly houses. All this would be coupled with creation of a new inspection body to prevent another Andhra-Saguni incident. But the imbalance action by the President should be mandatory upon the President."

Aneed rumbled: "You are castrating the President?"

"Not quite," Herod assured him, "for several reasons. You could previously be acting to prevent maturation of an imbalance. And meanwhile, there would be sting-buttons that you could push by executive decision. Hitherto the full power of the versatile Kazant Device or Z-sting has been concentrated on punitive potentials. But the device can be otherwise deployed: its indefinite potentials

will be explored by Dr. Croyd aided by Dr. Saguni. Some targets on top of my mind are *Anopheles* mosquitoes and the virus for the common cold, assuming that these neuterings of mosquito and virus would not play some kind of hob with ecological balances—"

"TRIVIAL!" Aneed bull-roared.

Herod's insistent and now confident voice emerged from under the steam-rolling Aneed bellow: "—could even be programmed as a deterrent and failsafe-neutralizer for any weapon whatsoever that might be rekamatic in nature—and that would include, sir, the primitively awesome nuclear weapons, and even more primitive gunpowder."

Tannen ventured: "Without exactly objecting, I have some questions."

"Would it be appropriate, sir, to discuss them later at length?"

"Good," Tannen assented.

"Not good!" Aneed seared. "The main question is your chairmanship, Mr. Herod—and yet you are imposing these conditions—"

Bomar inserted: "Sir, Mr. Herod's long-term record as governor of the two Centauri planets is the guarantor that he and Mr. Tannen will know how to compromise on brownie points without sacrificing giant points. I think you are stuck with making your decision on the basis of the man and what he has done here in Centauri." He watched Herod.

Scared pale, Herod fixed the eyes of Aneed and amended: "Of the man and his record, sir—and the generalities of his conditions. Mr. President, with all respect, my acceptance of your flattering offer would have to be contingent on World Council approval of these or better proposals, and on your prior moves toward advancing such proposals to the full extent of your executive authority. This is my program, sir; these are my conditions. Here I stand. I can do no other."

He paused. He hesitated. He wilted.

He glanced at Croyd. Croyd nodded once. Herod *was* great: the more frightened he became, the stronger he grew—without a trace of paranoia.

Catching the nod and its significance, Tannen swiftly



told Aneed: "Mr. President, my recommendation on Chairman Herod and his general conditions would be affirmative."

Fluidly changing direction, Aneed addressed the Centauri President. "If Herod has conditions, I have conditions. I will need Herod here on Erth in minimum transit-time, he must depart Rab tomorrow; and he must remain on Erth permanently until he is fired. Or on Nereid, natch. Either that instant timing, or no deal. President Bomar, can you eat *that*?"

Bomar smiled a little: Aneed was great, as long as his opposite numbers were tolerant and unintimidated. "Since detestably Centauri must lose Chairman Herod, it may as well be tomorrow. We have already appointed an interim chairman to preside over the transition from Galactic to Mare Stellarum."

"Croyd, obviously?"

"I offered this to Croyd. He has demurred. He prefers to revert to obscure agent status, working for Galactic. He is entitled to make the decision. No, not Croyd: the interim chairman will be—Dr. Fortescue."

On Moon, the Erth people gaped while Fortescue gravely inclined her head.

Bomar added: "There is an immediate question of arranging protocol details concerning the reception of Chairman Herod and his directors on Erth, and our reception of the Mare Stellarum directorate on Rab. It would be proper for Dr. Fortescue to act for us in this matter; and Dr. Fortescue has indicated that she has a preference to express as to which of your people should mediate with her for Erth. Mr. President, will you receive Dr. Fortescue's expression of preference?"

Aneed was entirely off balance. Tannen whispered, "You may as well receive her expression of preference, and you may as well accept it. This will get affairs off to a good start, and you can easily chop later."

Embracing the cue, Aneed resumed courtliness. "Gracious Dr. Fortescue, I am all ears."

Her low voice entered his mighty ears and permeated his brain. A moment later, her absurd expression of preference had addled his brain:

"Mr. President, I would prefer that my opposite number for these arrangements be Lieutenant Carlton. And in view of your own demand for haste, I think that immediately would be none too soon for our beginning. So just as soon as you and President Bomar will have concluded your business, I do earnestly request that Lieutenant Carlton and I be left in privacy for the start of ours."

Startled, Aneed: "Privacy? Just you two women alone? All the rest of us go away and leave you *private*?"

Carlton flashed a wicked grin. "Excluding even Croyd?"

Fortescue's eyebrows were belying the solemnity of her affirmative nod. "Very particularly excluding even Croyd."

Quizzically, Midge: "Would there be a special hourly rate for what this call will be costing us?"

Croyd, sans Fortescue, sans Carlton, sat in his old Rab room on his fireside couch; sat on the firefront edge of his couch with tight-folded hands between spread-apart knees, gazing into the photon fire which he had turned red and low.

Uptime was on his mind. But uptiming was in this connection a futile consideration at the moment. Not having yet mastered the trick of teleportation, he could not (with or without i-rays) move himself instantaneously to the Chou-island of Amaterasu, there to drift back into a faraway time when his hands and the hands of T'kotu had together clasped the Horns of Serapis.

Put it, though, that he should instantly commandeer a starship and go to Erth and touch down on Amaterasu and there do this uptiming. The horns that he would then clasp, and the T'kotu hands that would co-clasp with his, would be neither living horns nor living hands. He would again hear the low voice of T'kotu say, "Stay," and he would again open his eyes and again see her eyes, and her eyes would *look like* living eyes, but they would in fact be kamatron traces precisely equivalent to tri-d cinema.

And that was not what now he desperately wanted.

He was motionless, though; not restless, not tense; watching the photon fire. What you cannot change you do not try to change. And so it was with T'kotu. And so too it was with Marta. . . .

Uptiming would solve no human problems here. But

there was luckily an old old human technique, older than tools. Imaginative remembering was commonly regarded as fantasy play, a mere evocation of reonic brain-traces—and so once would T'kotu have regarded it, although not by the time of their golden anniversary seventy-five years ago. He recalled something by longer-dead philosopher Nike Pan: something about "sitting quiet, letting your memories arise in their vitality all around you. . . ."

*In their vitality.*

Closing eyes, he let his memory feed his mind: his mind was *he*, and he was one with the feeding.

It involved all of him, spiritually, sensually. Again he was in 2350, far more than a century ago. The hard horniness of the long-gone horns on his gripping palms was hard-horny, the seabird screamings were strident, the seabreeze was salt-moist.

The small warm hands of T'kotu joined his hands on the horns, her hands beneath his hands. The voice of T'kotu said aloud in his mind: *Stay*.

Wholly within it, he opened eyes. Her dark, highlighted, slightly slanted eyes filled his field: the eyes were young. He could not see her face; perhaps it was the young-mature fortyish face that he had known first and loved first; perhaps it was her wonderful thin live-wrinkled ninety-five-year-old face, the last image that he remembered and the one he most loved by reason of the half-century together that it meant; he could not tell, it did not matter, the eyes were T'kotu, the present self was she.

Should he speak? Would it rend the dream-veil?

The eyes were alive, this was no uptime icon. The voice was alive: although presumably it was all in his mind, he was projecting the eyes and the voice out into the infinitely spacious visual-auditory field of a vanished photon fire, she calling him *Thoth* for her *Maath*. . . .

"Stay, Thoth, for a little while anyway. Again you are young as I first knew you; and I think you see me relatively young as you first knew me. But I know that you cannot stay long, and neither can I. Both of us have to move along."

"I know. But I do not know why, Maath. Not why we should have to move along separately now."

"You and I are a fugue, Thoth. We had our separate theme-sounding times, then for a long while we played good counterpoint together; now we are off and away again on our themes that are no longer perfectly individual because we have mutually modulated our themes. It is good if we find it good, and I find it good if you do. Do you?"

"I do if you do, provided that there will be together-comings. And you do, assuming the together-comings. So we do."

*"Tant mieux."*

Silence. Her eyes were gleaming.

"T'kotu—"

"Thoth?"

"Will we be together again—in counterpoint?"

"Foreknowledge would defeat the pleasure of the good surprise if it comes. Believe me, I do not know."

*"D'accord. T'kotu—"*

"Croyd?"

"Of course you haven't kept continuous tabs on me, but—have you checked me, a little?"

"Until now, continuously, while I was doing other things. On this plane we can divide our attention rather intricately."

"You have checked me instant-by-instant?"

"Decorously I withdrew a couple of times."

"Other than those times, how has it been, in your judgment?"

"I'd say, first rate."

"Honest?"

"Honest."

"You disappoint me, Maath. I invented a computer that nearly slew humanity. I fell into seventy-five years of suspended animation. Once awakened, I failed for many days to grasp the perfectly obvious time-necessary location of the killer, I permitted dalliance with Carlton to delay me almost to the point of failure, and I closed by permitting the death of Marta after bringing her to the threshold of youth. This is first rate?"

"You and I together invented an aggression-inhibiting computer that was not supposed to be hooked up to a humanity-slayer. Grief-shock—for *me*, dear Thoth—thrust

you into a thrall that held you for seventy-five years in latent readiness to meet a maturing crisis. You *drove yourself* out of that thrall—I could do nothing except encourage you. Among all humans you were the first to grasp the time-necessary location of the killer. Had you not dallied with Carlton, you could have proceeded no faster, and she would not have helped you by buying Senevendia. It was Marta who made it impossible for you to save Marta; but you saved two others who are now for the first time young. This is second rate?"

Brood.

T'kotu added: "'Aggression is mammalian-genetic, and Man is a toolmaker, and his most glamorous tools are weapons. If a weapon-tool exists, he will improve it; if an improved weapon-tool exists, he will use it.'"

Croyd capped: "'As long as any sort of weapon at all is permitted to exist, no solemn interconstellational resolution will prevent a catastrophic development at the hands of some Faust-fool.' Nike Pan, 2343."

"Exactly, my Thoth. And have you been doing anything about that?"

"I guess so."

"Do you have more in mind?"

"I guess so."

"We have to move along."

"I know."

"What about our old enemy, the Z-sting, the Kazant Device? Herod's Program seems to eliminate its weapon danger, but might it perhaps be safer to eliminate the device? Can you trust humanity never to readapt it as a weapon?"

"Plowshares can be beaten into swords, T'kotu. *Anything*, even two beans pushed up two nostrils, can functionally become a weapon. Humans are higher than other animals because humans have practically no inborn inhibitions: we have only the inhibitions that are bred into us plus the ones we choose to build into ourselves. Consequently every human is all-in-himself *The Brahman*, containing Brahma and Shiva and Vishnu as avatars: the Creator becomes the Destroyer, and The Preserver can harness both of them for richness and joy and progress. If we are to be human-human, we must deny ourselves no

capability for good, but we must resolutely deny ourselves certain uses-for-evil of our endless capabilities. Chancellor Andhra thought it was all hopeless, and so he elected to insulate Erth from the rest of the universe—that is to say, destroy us with ourselves, because Man is not worth a damn except in terms of goals and wonders beyond himself. I say that if it should prove to be hopeless, we would *deserve* our own self-elimination. But I choose to insist that there is hope, and so I am willing to risk the freedom of creativity entailing subordinate destruction in the interests of growth—”

“Subordinate destruction?”

“Like first drafts of novels. Like the virus for the common cold. But like people—no.”

“But does one destroy a virus with a weapon that still holds the potential of destroying Man?”

“Who said that it would keep the potential?”

Pause. Then: “I am guessing that you and Saguni have some thoughts that you have not shared with Herod.”

“The Kazant Device, the Z-sting, is enormously complex. In the course of re-programming, Saguni and I could make some bad mistakes.”

“In fact, you *plan* some bad mistakes.”

“Well, yes.”

“So the *Zeitgeist* effect will be vanished? and also the allure bit that brought us together on two sides of the issue in 2350?”

“Utterly vanished.”

“But, Thoth—these effects are *known*, now! How can you kill the possibility that someone in the future—”

“I think I made reference to beans and nostrils.”

Silence. Then: “That is what I thought you’d say. *Bien.*”

“That is what I hoped you’d judge. *Merçi.* T’kotu—”

“Croyd?”

“Where you are now, how is it about personal jealousy?”

“Hey, Thoth! You are abandoning the universe and coming back to what is personal?”

“Put it merely that I am moving in from macrocosm to microcosm.”

“Listen, my friend, my eternal *best* friend. I am beginning to know what a woman is, and also what a man is.

And you will learn too. And with the practical concerns of territorial possession and personal gratification and comfortable survival and child protection removed from consideration, jealousy would be like not wanting one's friend to be friends with one's friend."

"Nevertheless, T'kotu, in the living of mortals, jealousy has its justifications."

"D'accord. But that is not where I am. We must move along. How is it with you and Fortescue?"

"She is my friend. We have no arrangement."

"And Carlton?"

"She is my friend. We have no arrangement."

"And Marta?"

Silence. Before the photon fire, Croyd's pose had not changed, although his clasped hands had gone flaccid. Then:

"T'kotu—"

"Thoth?"

"Marta troubles me."

"I know that. What is your thought?"

The fire-figure shifted restlessly. "It is possibly a thought born fantastically of guilt-desperation."

"Nevertheless—"

The fire-figure had clenched its hands tight again, it was looking intently upward.

T'kotu: "The hull of the *Mazurka* might have absorbed most of the reonic force of the Z-waves?"

Thoth: "It might have."

"If what came through to Marta had been *just* the right intensity, it might merely have suspended her vitality?"

"It is this, T'kotu."

"You wish to follow?"

"Yes."

"You are hoping ridiculously that Marta—without a ship, the ship having disintegrated, but protected by her suit whose helmet she may have closed as an involuntary survival gesture—might in suspended animation have continued to freefall at 1.1 C on the ship's orbit, and might have missed Earth and Moon and all other planets and planetoids, and so might have continued outward into interstellar space, or might even have been star-and-planet-pulled into decaying orbit within the Sol system.

You wish to go to Herod's astrogation room, and calculate where Marta might be when you could overtake her wherever she might be, and go there to learn what you might learn and do what you might do."

Silence.

T'kotu: "What's holding you up?"

Croyd: "Interestingly, not your existence."

"I hoped not. So you must be deterred by your concern about what to do with Marta if she is still alive. Particularly if she has—lost what you gave her."

Silence.

T'kotu: "She *may* be redeemable. There is, for example, the Rab-Vash chairmanship of Mare Stellarum. And long ago you taught me that the power to decide is a little bit real, and that it is a valuable power if one values it. What is Marta, Thoth? Is she one who, given a choice, would *choose* to be given a choice—would *choose* to choose?"

Pause. . . .

Croyd, fire-figure straightening: "Cheers, dear Maath."

T'kotu: "Cheers, dear Thoth. Out."

Out.





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