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BOOKS

People were disappearing into space!

# THE CHAOS FIGHTERS

A Novel  
of the  
Future  
by  
**ROBERT  
MOORE  
WILLIAMS**



## FOR SALE—*Homo Sapiens!*

Was man to be thrown on the cosmic auction block? John Haldane had matched wits and daring against some cunning interplanetary conspiracies, but never before had he faced so challenging an array of mysterious powers. And never before had he had to grapple with the elusively maddening *random factor!*

There was diabolical thought behind the plan to plunder the universe's treasures. And there was something else: the savage conflict of men and women caught in the meshes of the unseen bidders. On whose side would the *random factor* swing? And could Haldane control it long enough to save his own neck?

An outstanding science-fiction novel by a brilliant leader of the field.

## **CAST OF CHARACTERS**

### **JOHN HALDANE**

He was hot on the trail until his lovely suspect vanished before his eyes.

### **PETE BALKAN**

This man of science thought he had the *random factor* by the tail.

### **HEATHER**

You could think of this beauty as a real doll—until she actually became one!

### **CIRCE DAFNER**

Her appetite would not be sated until she had swallowed the universe.

### **LARRY**

He could make something out of nothing.

### **BERGEN**

He devised a key to the treasurehouse of space.

ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

***THE  
CHAOS  
FIGHTERS***

ACE BOOKS, INC.

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## CHAPTER ONE

THE SIGN in the shop window said: FOR SALE—*Homo Sapiens*.

At the sight of it, a little flicker of excitement passed through John Haldane. He hastily suppressed the reaction. Detector systems might be in operation which could pick up a flicker of undue excitement in a human being. Because he showed too much emotion in the wrong place, a PGI agent might suddenly cease to exist.

Planetary Government would not be unduly alarmed at the sudden disappearance of one of its agents. This had happened before, on the arid wastes of Mars, in the hotlands of Venus, and even here on Earth. Such a disappearance would become a routine report to be filed, indexed, correlated with similar events by J, and investigated with objective detachment by other agents.

Since Haldane's disappearance would correlate closely with a matter that was of much interest to Planetary Government, it would certainly be investigated. This fact was not a source of comfort to John Haldane. He preferred to be the agent doing the investigating, not the agent being investigated. Quickly he shifted his attention away from the startling sign to other objects in the window.

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The usual ship in a bottle and other such relics were absent. Instead the items on display were those of space instead of those of Earth. Haldane let his eyes rove over the objects. That chunk of gem stone in the corner had come from Pluto, where the shores of the Big Man Ocean—the infinite depths of space itself—lapped against the farthermost planet of the Solar System as the Atlantic laps against a pebble on the beach. The knife with the crooked blade had come from Mars. Haldane had seen such knives used there, with deadly skill. The carved female figure was unquestionably Venusian in origin.

Spacemen brought these objects back from their ports of call. But Haldane doubted that any spaceman had brought back this incredible sign. He could not understand its meaning; it was apparent that not even the PGI executives understood. This included Pepperidge, his assignment officer.

Haldane's assignment had been to investigate the sign and anyone who seemed connected with it. He was then to report back to J. In giving him the task, Pepperidge had not explained why the investigation was ordered. The powers who gave directions rarely explained the purpose that lay back of them.

Looking from the window, Haldane spied a woman in a green dress coming toward him. Maybe it was the green dress that caught his attention; maybe it was the lithe, easy way she walked; maybe it was the purposeful set of her head and her wind-blown light brown hair—but Haldane not only saw her, he also felt a glow rise inside of him.

This was unusual with him. As a PGI agent, he had been carefully trained to be wary of women, and not to let himself be attracted to one of them until he was very sure of her. But he was drawn to this one at first sight. For a moment it seemed as if he were living in a wonderful world in which he and this girl in the green dress—

She glanced at him. Pleasure showed in her eyes. But

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then she looked away from him, and entered the door of the shop. The wonderful moment was gone.

Inside the shop, he saw the proprietor come hastily forward to meet her. She pointed to the sign in the window. The shopkeeper bowed. A look of pleasure appeared on his face and a beaming grin spread from ear to ear. He motioned with his hands toward the rear of the shop, then moved in that direction. The girl in the green dress followed him.

Haldane entered the shop. It was a split-second decision that came close to being the result of pure impulse.

Across the street, a spaceman had been lounging in the door of a saloon. Hands in pockets, he sauntered casually across the pavement. Just as casually, he began to inspect the contents of the shop window. He swayed drunkenly on his feet.

At the rear of the store, the girl and the proprietor were talking.

"I came because of the sign," Haldane heard the girl say.

"Ah, yes, my dear." The proprietor's voice was a cross between a hiss and a purr. "What is it you wish to know? Do you think we have a real man for sale—and do you wish to buy one?" The last was spoken with a laugh that was close to a leer. "I don't think a young woman like you needs to buy herself a man."

The girl laughed. "No, not that. I don't have to buy a man if I want one. What—" She paused and her voice dropped in tone. "What does this sign mean?"

"You don't know?" Sharp suspicion hissed in the proprietor's voice.

"No."

"Um. Well, I will tell you. It is a book."

"I heard it was . . . more than just a book," the girl said.

The proprietor showed signs of distress. "Will you please wait in the back, miss, while I get rid of—while I see what this gentleman wants?" The shopkeeper gestured toward an



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open door that led to a room at the rear. "Right back there, miss."

The girl seemed undecided. Then she nodded and moved toward the rear and out of sight.

Putting a smile on his face, the proprietor moved toward the front. "What is it you wish?"

"The lady is ahead of me," Haldane said, smiling.

"The lady will wait."

"But I couldn't think of taking you away from your customer." Haldane made expressive gestures with his hands. "I couldn't possibly think of it." The tone of his voice and the gestures of his hands made this matter seem a serious breach of etiquette to him. "Actually, I only came in to look at the Martian *snee* in the window. I collect knives. Have quite a collection of them, but nothing like this. I'll tell you about my collection, if you wish."

The proprietor's face said he wouldn't be interested in the least.

"That is, when you finish with your lady customer," Haldane said. "Of course, if you want to give me the knife so I can be looking at it while you take care of her—"

"I will give you the knife." Swiftly the shopkeeper took the knife from the window and presented it, hilt first, to his customer.

"Now you go right ahead and take care of the lady while I study this."

"She will wait and so will I," the proprietor said. He put his elbows on the counter. The expression on his face indicated that in his opinion this customer was not to be trusted out of the proprietor's sight.

Haldane put on an injured expression. The proprietor was unimpressed. Haldane turned the blade in his hands. Actually he knew nothing about knives and cared less but he had to carry through on his act.

Under the surface, kept carefully out of sight, he felt hidden tensions begin to come into existence. Under other

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circumstances, he would have thought that this masquerade was fun. But Pepperidge had warned him to use caution.

"Hmmm. This looks like an authentic Martian *snee* all right. Possibly made by old Rhyber's bunch. They're expert metal workers, you know."

The face of the proprietor said he didn't know and didn't care.

"The composition of the metal would decide that point. Of course, you have had the metal analyzed."

"No. I have not."

"You haven't. We must have that done, of course."

"You would ruin my knife with acids?" the proprietor protested.

"Analysis won't harm the knife in—" Haldane broke off speaking. The quick tap of high heels came to his ears. The girl in the green dress was coming out of the back room. She wasn't exactly running but she was moving much faster than was necessary.

At the sight of her, the proprietor came hastily from behind the counter. "But, miss—"

The girl's face was a mask. An emotion was loose inside of her. Haldane was sure it was fear. She seemed to be suppressing a scream. Her throat and facial muscles were locked in an expression that told nothing—or everything. As he looked at her face, Haldane felt a surge of tension come up inside of him.

"I—I've changed my mind," the girl said.

The owner of the secondhand shop sputtered. "But you cannot—you have not yet seen—"

"I've seen plenty—and been seen more," the girl answered.

"Eh? What? I mean—"

The girl tried to smile. The effort failed. No smile could get through that locked musculature. "There's something in that back room—or here in the shop. I don't know where it is. But there is something in here that is watching you!"

"Watches me?" The proprietor's voice sank to a whisper

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and his breathing was suddenly loud enough to be heard. "But that cannot be. Miss!" As the girl moved past him, he reached out and caught her.

Haldane shifted the knife in his fingers. He brought the hilt of the weapon up under the proprietor's elbow, hard, rapping against the nerves where they crossed the bone. The man released the girl's arm and turned a furious face toward Haldane.

The PGI agent shifted the knife again in his fingers. He now held it by the hilt. The shopkeeper's eyes came to rest on the curved blade. He took two hasty steps backward.

The girl glanced gratefully at Haldane, then ran out the front door.

"You let her get away!" Rage sounded in the shopkeeper's voice.

"You shouldn't try to stop a lady when she has to go," Haldane said.

"But damn it!" The man was working himself into a rage.

Haldane drew back his hand and threw the knife. It passed within six inches of the proprietor's right ear and buried itself in the wall. The blade hummed as the knife hit.

The shopkeeper's head jerked around as he stared at the knife buried in the wall. When he turned to face Haldane his skin was white. Choking sounds rose from deep in his throat.

"Unquestionably this is an authentic Rhyber knife," Haldane said. "They're balanced for throwing, you know. That's one way you can tell them. Only Rhyber metal makes that sound. I'll come back and talk to you more about it—after you've dug it out of the wall."

Haldane smiled as if throwing a knife within six inches of a man's head was the most commonplace thing in the Solar System, and went out the door. It was his guess that the shopkeeper's nerves were in a deplorable state. But that couldn't be helped. Anyway, Haldane wasn't as much interested in the man as he was in the girl in the green dress.

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He saw that she was going down the street. She wasn't quite running but she was walking very fast.

Haldane started to call out to her, then changed his mind. It would be better if she had a few minutes to get herself under better control before he tried to ask questions. He started after her.

"Got a match, bud?"

The spaceman was big, brawny, and obviously drunk. His hands pawed at Haldane as he tried to lean against the agent. Haldane shrugged him away. "Go inside, the store owner will give you a match."

The spaceman pawed again at Haldane. "Trying to get rid of me, huh? So you can chase that dame."

"Nuts to you," Haldane said. "Get your hands off of me."

"Shure thing," the spaceman said, suddenly agreeable. "It's all right to shase a dame. I'd be shasing one too if I could find one that didn't run so fast." He laughed. "Good luck, bud. I hope you catch her." He leered at Haldane, indicating that as man to man he understood what was happening.

The girl in the green dress turned the corner into what Haldane noted was Halcyon Street. He followed her. When he turned the corner, he saw her ahead of him. She was still walking fast. *There's something in here that is watching you!* What the devil had she meant?

Halcyon Street was narrow and was less than two blocks long. Once it had probably been an alley, with garbage cans and trash and the litter of broken bottles and paper. Then the city had grown up around it, giving the area the dignity of a side street.

Except for the girl, at this moment Halcyon Street was deserted. No trucks, no people, not even a stray dog. This was the backwash of the city, a place where nothing ever happened. Off in the distance a jet was moaning as it warmed up. Far above him in the sky, rockets were hurtling to Mars.

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The girl was four feet tall. Haldane blinked his eyes and looked again. *The girl was now three feet tall.*

Haldane's first dazed impression was that something was going wrong with his eyes. What he was seeing was simply not possible. Therefore his eyes were lying to him. Thus his conscious mind reasoned.

His eyes, in direct contact with their own data and not giving two hoots about the opinions of his conscious mind, screamed at him that they were not lying.

"We're reporting accurately," his eyes yelled. "Not only is the girl getting smaller but the street is stretching out like a rubber band and is growing larger. *And the girl is only two feet tall now.*"

Haldane continued to stare. What had been a young woman in a green dress was now a doll in green walking along the sidewalk of a deserted street. But the doll had the erect, quick, springy stride of the young woman. It was not a mannequin, not a mechanical contrivance. It walked as the young woman had walked and it seemed to be completely unaware that it was growing smaller.

Halcyon Street was also changing. The street seemed to be stretching out like a rubber band. It had lengthened and was still lengthening. Haldane had the impression that he was looking at the street through the wrong end of a telescope. At first, the street seemed to be a mile long, then two miles long. Then Halcyon Street seemed to stretch away to infinity.

The doll lost another foot in height and became twelve inches tall. Haldane started running toward it. The doll that had been a young woman did not run from him. It continued to grow smaller and to move faster along Halcyon Street. But before Haldane could take two steps, the doll went out of sight.

There was a snapping sound, as if a rubber band that had been stretched to infinity had suddenly come back to its proper length. In the flick of an eyelash, Halcyon Street

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came back to its proper length of two blocks. The street was deserted, empty. No frightened young woman in a green dress walked along it.

Approximately thirty seconds later, John Haldane wasn't walking along it either. He had turned back, retraced his steps, and was frantically waving at a taxi cruising along the street. The driver swung in and picked him up.

"Where to, sir?"

"Anywhere but here," Haldane answered firmly. He didn't much care where he went just so he went somewhere. He wiped sweat from his face. "Head for the spaceport," he added on second thought.

The driver got the cab into action. Down the street the spaceman was weaving across the pavement toward the saloon. The proprietor of the secondhand store was peeping out of his front door. He looked like a spider that had lost the fly that had walked into his parlor.

From the window of the secondhand shop, the sign leered at Haldane as the cab drove past.

### FOR SALE—*Homo Sapiens*

Could a *Homo Sapiens* turn into a doll and walk off the face of the Earth?

## CHAPTER TWO

HALDANE wiped at his face and brought his nervous system into better balance. The sight of the girl turning into a doll haunted him. It danced as an incredible vision in front of his eyes. In his years as an agent for Planetary Government, he had seen some strange things—but never anything quite so incredible. He had never even imagined anything like this. Young women simply could not turn into dolls and walk away into lost infinities. It couldn't happen, he told himself repeatedly. But his eyes insisted otherwise.

Before the cab had gone three blocks, Haldane knew something else was happening. He was being followed. He knew this but he did not know how he knew it.

Planetary Government agents were an unusual group of people, with unusual abilities. Anybody could apply for a job as an agent, but it was only the exceptional person who could find his way through the maze of physical and psychological tests and be accepted for training. On an average about one out of a thousand applicants was accepted.

Haldane knew he was being followed. The fact that he knew it but did not know how he knew it meant that the *psi* function which he possessed was in operation. During his training period this function had been carefully studied and

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subjected to every conceivable test. The results had indicated that Haldane knew inevitably when he was being followed, but did not know how he knew it. This had baffled and infuriated the staff psychologists who had hoped they might isolate this ability and train other agents in its use. It was a very valuable ability. The life of an agent could easily depend on his intuitive powers.

Inside of Haldane a little voice said, "We're being followed." The inner voice was calm about this. It was always calm. The information it furnished might drive Haldane to desperate action, but this did not change the voice itself.

Haldane turned his head and glanced out the cab window. So far as he could tell, the traffic behind him was normal. This did not surprise him. When trouble was following him, everything always was "normal." Trouble's main asset was its ability to put forward a bland, smooth, normal face.

However, a pursuer could be lost. It would be well to lose this one before reporting to J. The odds were that the tail did not know he was following a PGI agent.

"Take me to the passenger entrance of the spaceport," Haldane said. Public visaphones were plentiful there. Agents reporting to J used the public phones where this was possible.

"You bet, boss," the driver said. A rocket coughed in the sky overhead as he swung the cab into the entrance.

The actual landing and departure ramps stretched away for miles across the flat plains of Illinois. The freight-handling sheds and the repair domes loomed above the prairie land like gigantic mushrooms that had sprouted out of a Titan's dream.

This was Earth's major spaceport. There were others in Europe and Asia, in Africa and South America. But this one served the Western Hemisphere. The ideas of the earlier dreamers, that every city and perhaps every village would have its spaceport, had not materialized. Spaceships could not land on any grassy plot. The construction of a major



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spaceport was a terrific task in terms of engineering skill and man-hours of labor. The cost staggered the imagination.

Haldane paid his cab, and moved into the crowd of travelers and sight-seers, many of whom were teen-agers. Deep within his brain a little voice again whispered, "Watch out. We're being followed."

A quick glance revealed no suspicious-looking person behind him, but this meant nothing. Experience had taught him that the shadow might be as far as a mile away. This was about the limit of his perception. Generally he could tell how close the shadow was by the intensity of the feeling within him, but not always. The intensity of the warning seemed to depend in a large degree on how much of an emotional overload the shadow was carrying, on how much hate the shadow was feeling or on how much fear. Tails were always either in fear or in anger. Haldane's ability to sense their presence seemed to depend in some degree on these two emotional factors.

*May be time to call J before he catches up with me*, Haldane thought, then instantly decided against it. He'd lose the tail first, then call J.

He went through the entrance, took the escalator to the right toward the loading ramps, transferred from it at the first landing, then took the moving belt toward the discharge ramps. A troop of teen-age boys went past him, running on the moving belt in complete disregard of the warning signs. Their instructor, a pale young man in glasses, was keeping right up with them. Through a window, Haldane saw what had attracted their attention. A rocket was unloading cargo from Venus.

Haldane caught little flickers of the teen-agers' excitement, pure raw emotion being generated within them and being radiated outward, their bodies serving as antennae. For a moment, he envied them. It was wonderful to be young and to possess such enthusiasm.

Deep in his mind, the little voice was silent.

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*He's reached the passenger entrance and is milling around there, trying to decide which way I went, Haldane thought. He'll have to own a better nose than a bloodhound if he is going to follow the trail I'm leaving.*

There was no possible way for the man who was tailing him to know which way he had gone, unless the fellow also had some ESP. At the thought, a little shiver passed through Haldane. A shadow with some of the *psi* functions was not likely, but it could happen.

Haldane stepped from the moving belt at the next landing. To the left a sign said: VISAPHONES. He moved toward it, intent on calling.

*Ping!*

In moments of growing danger, the voice inside him seemed to ring a tiny bell. The bell rang now. Haldane stopped in his tracks.

*What the devil?*

The shadow was still at, or near, the passenger entrance. Then why was the warning bell ringing inside of him?

*Some freak of eddy currents, Haldane thought. The wave form radiated from the shadow is being distorted by the steel in the building and I'm picking up the man at the entrance as strong as if he were actually in front of me.*

People were milling around the magazine counter. A fat man was trying to stuff his ponderous bulk into one of the visaphone booths. Two teen-agers, not caring about rocket landings, were avidly studying the magazines. A woman with tinted glasses set firmly on her nose and an umbrella in her hand was arguing with the cashier at the soft-drink stand.

None of these could be lying in wait for him.

*Lying in wait?* he thought. *That's nonsense!* He was angry at himself for even thinking of such an absurdity. Someone could have followed him from Halcyon Street—the second-hand shop might have been under observation—but for anyone to be lying in wait for him at the spaceport was an impossibility.

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*I'm going wacky*, he thought, moving toward the visaphone booths.

*Ping!*

The warning bell went off again inside his brain, louder this time.

Haldane turned in midstride and made his way back to the conveyor belt. Sudden sweat was on him. Had his *psi* function started playing tricks on him or was someone actually lying in wait for him?

The conveyor belt dropped him at the passenger-unloading ramp. The teen-agers were here in force, staring at the great gray bulk of the second rocket outside, just arrived from Mars. Haldane got off the belt. He listened for the warning bell. None came. He stepped on the returning conveyor belt, to go back to the visaphone booths.

*Ping!*

*Nuts!* Haldane said, to himself.

"I am not nuts," the inner voice said, calmly. "Someone is waiting for you."

*You've gone completely crazy!* Haldane retorted.

"I have not gone crazy!"

He got off the conveyor belt at another landing, shifted to another belt and went directly to the main waiting-and-observation room. It was a huge place, thronged with people. He moved through them. No one could follow the trail he was leaving. No one!

"You're wrong!" the little voice said, inside of him.

*You shut up!* Haldane answered.

"You're getting us into trouble."

*Shut up until I finish this call!*

At his command, the inner voice went into silence. Haldane suddenly felt very lonely without it. He forced his way through the crowd and moved toward the visaphone booths.

He reached the booths, entered one, slid a coin into the slot, dialed a number. The number that he dialed was not listed in any directory. Agents received it directly from their

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assignment officer. Haldane did not know whether each agent had a special number or whether they all used the same one. The number was changed frequently, at random intervals. An agent might have the same number a day, or a year. No agent ever knew when J's number was going to be changed.

Haldane listened to the clicking noises in the receiver. The view screen came to life. The number he had just called glowed for an instant, in confirmation that he was properly connected; then a metallic voice said in his ear, "Report."

"Case X-79, investigation 3-AR. Calling from public phone at spaceport." He did not give his name, the date or the hour. He was not talking to a human but to an electronic computer almost as big as the building from which he was calling. His identity would be picked up from the matched voice tones that were recorded in the computer; the date and the hour would be added automatically, and a full record would be made of this call.

Haldane had seen the vast assembly of electronic equipment to which he was reporting. He had never lost his sense of awe and wonder at the thing. It filled whole floors in a huge building. Parts of it were underground. It was connected with a vast number of circuits which fed data directly to it not only from all over the Earth but also from most parts of the Solar System.

The brains that had designed and built it were greater than it was.

"Investigated sign in window of—" Haldane stopped speaking. "We're being watched," the inner voice said.

Haldane turned his head. A tall, bronzed youth was sitting at the soda fountain idly sipping a soft drink. Now and again he glanced at the booth the PGI agent was occupying. He looked like one of the teen-agers except he seemed much more mature. No one else was paying any attention and the bronzed youth looked harmless. Haldane turned his attention back to the phone.

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“—in window of secondhand shop on Northcutt Avenue.” Haldane stopped again. The viewscreen on the phone had come to life. Words were forming there. Fascinated, he stared at them. This was not J reporting back to him. This was something else. The connection was not good and the words were not very clear. Haldane felt dazed as he read them: F—OR SA—LE H—*omo Sapiens*.

The impression of vast forces in operation was strong in Haldane. He stared at the screen. The words vanished. Another set formed. These were clearer.

*“You, too, can be a Homo Sapiens—a human being.”*

His brain reeled as he tried to grasp the implications of this message, how it had formed on the screen, and what it meant. The sheer mechanical problems involved in putting an extraneous message on a visaphone screen were staggering. The phone company had built its system so that stray scenes or messages did not get into the channels. Of course, this did happen occasionally, by accident. No system was completely foolproof. As he stared, the screen wiped itself clean. His impression was that this was no accident. He waited for a third message to form. None did.

A sound caught his ear, pulled his head around. The door of the booth was opening. The fat man he had seen previously in a visaphone booth stood there. The fat man looked down at Haldane and breathed asthmatically. One hand held the door open, the other hand was out of sight under his coat.

“Sorry, bud, this booth is taken,” Haldane said. His mind was still on the message that had appeared on the screen.

“Oh. Shorry,” the fat man said. He breathed asthmatically, and alcoholically, at Haldane and started to back away. His hand came out from under his coat. Haldane caught a glimpse of the object he was holding. It was a gas projector.

As Haldane got to his feet, the gas hit him in the face.

“I told you so,” his inner voice said, inside his mind. “Now you’ve got us into trouble.”

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Dizziness hit John Haldane, then blackness. He reeled from the booth. The fat man caught him and held him erect.

"There, there, ol' buddy," the fat man said, asthmatically and soothingly. "Everysing will be all right. I'll take good care of yoush. Just leave everysing to your old buddy."

The gas projector had vanished inside his coat. He slipped an arm under Haldane's shoulder and lifted the agent's right arm around his own neck.

"It's my old buddy," he said, to those passing by. "He's drunk. Tch, tch, tch. But I'll take care of him, I'll get him straightened out, I'll sober him up—good."

He pulled Haldane's hat down over the agent's face and led him out of a side exit. A taxicab was waiting.

It was the same cab that had brought Haldane from Halcyon Street. The same driver was at the wheel. The spy who had followed him had been with him all the time. When they arrived at the spaceport it had been a simple matter for the driver to transfer Haldane to his second tail, the fat man.

The fat man shoved the unconscious agent into the back seat and got in with him. The driver slid the cab out into the street, as if he knew exactly where he was going.

Meanwhile, back in the booth, the brain said, "Report!" When there was no answer, it repeated the request. When there was no answer the second time, it broke the connection.

The bronzed youth had watched the fat man carry the unconscious Haldane out of sight. If he had any interest in the matter, the interest did not show on his face. He finished his soft drink and then continued what seemed to be a leisurely tour of inspection through the spaceport.

## CHAPTER THREE

JOHN HALDANE swam in a sea of gray mist that seemed to have no ending. He wondered if this intangible cloud stuff was the fabric of space itself. At this thought, the mist turned black. He wondered if now he was in contact with the ebon non-matter of chaos. But he did not care. He was not concerned about the fleecy mist or the black stuff or even about what happened to him.

The gas that had been used on him had produced, besides unconsciousness, a definite euphoria, a sense of well-being. He could no longer remember under the gas' influence that other gases existed which produced the opposite effect, that made a man feel he had been plunged into the deepest hell. Haldane had the dim impression of riding in a taxicab. Then he was vaguely aware that he was assisted into a building and carried into a room. He was permitted to lie down, still in a state of euphoria, still extremely happy.

In keeping with his feeling of happiness, pleasurable moments of his youth and young manhood began coming into

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his consciousness. He began reliving them, enjoying again their savor and feel. Once again he and Pete Balkan were in Pete's laboratory, building a device which they called the Tesla Coil. They had discovered it described in an old book that had belonged to Pete's grandfather.

Although the book hadn't stressed this point, the original discovery and the first working model of this device had been made by a man by the name of Nikoli Tesla, one of the early—and almost forgotten—authentic geniuses in the field of electronics. Tesla had lived before the word *electronics* had been coined to describe the behavior of infinitesimally small bits of energy passing in and through and out of the matrix of the spaces. He had been one of the few authentic geniuses produced by the human race.

Their Tesla coil had been a fascinating thing. They had gotten beautiful sparks almost a foot long from it, they had lighted glow tubes, they had run the output through their bodies and had then fondled Pete's pet cat, and had been rewarded by fluffing out every single hair on the body of that startled animal. Thereafter, the cat had not been around.

The coil had been great fun. Then they had gotten the idea of building a bigger one, one that produced sparks ten feet long. They had solved all the problems involved in dealing with extremely high voltages. Awed by the artificial lightning they could produce, they were considering building even a bigger coil—when something had happened.

In his present state of gas-induced euphoria Haldane had difficulty in remembering what had interrupted their plans. But there had been something. Then he knew—the surprise visit from the outraged guardians of the air waves, Planetary Government's bureau for assigning and monitoring system-wide radio frequencies. The Tesla monster coil had played havoc with radio communication over an area a hundred miles in diameter around their homes. By some freak of skip-distance it had also distorted communication in the back-of-beyond parts of Australia. Later reports had indicated that



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part of the frequencies they were radiating had gotten through the Heavyside layers and had caused some minor disturbance on the moon and even one complaint had come in from Mars, then in conjunction.

The agents of the bureau were at a loss when they discovered what they had caught. They did not confiscate the equipment but they did severely lecture the young inventors. Then the agents, turned kindly, advised the two boys how to ground the coil and even provided material for the necessary shielding.

Great days followed . . . big fun. He and Pete Balkan were friends and constant companions. They stuck their curious noses into everything that came their way—into the far reaches of invention and even into the far broader and more complex reaches of human thought. Finding a book on psychic phenomena, they started exploring this field too. Explorations here did not get them any lectures from the law, but they succeeded in scaring themselves out of a year's growth. They "materialized" something (that was the word used in the book).

After the proper incantations and the proper depth of spell was reached, something actually materialized out of nowhere. It appeared before them as a small black cloud, formless but trying to take on form. It struck them with fear. They hadn't liked the fear or the formless black cloud.

Hastily, they stopped their experiments with psychic phenomena. This field was not for boys, they decided. They went on to other things, including adapting the old Morse Code so that it could be sent by simple finger taps on any hard surface.

Then Haldane, at sixteen, was accepted for training by the Planetary Government. He and Pete saw little of each other after that. In the years that had passed, Haldane had heard occasionally of Peter Balkan. Pete had gone to college, then into research.

Frequently Haldane heard Pete's name mentioned as hav-

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ing discovered this process or invented that gadget. The scientific journals printed dozens of articles by him. Haldane had also learned that Pete was working as an independent research man, heading his own organization. In a time when every corporation kept a large staff of research men and Planetary Government was always willing to pour millions into any reasonable project, it was a neat trick to make a paying proposition out of a private research company.

Slowly, the cloud stuff in which Haldane was floating lost its ebon quality and turned white again. Then it dissolved. He fell through a tunnel of darkness and hit with a thump that jarred him fully awake. Or so it seemed to him subjectively although his body did not move.

Bending over him was the worried face of Pete Balkan.

"Uck!" Haldane said. He knew what was happening to him. He was hallucinating. They had loaded him with gas. While he was in a state of euphoria, he had dreamed of Pete. Now he was awake, but the dream was persisting with such strength that it was overloading the optic nerve, with the result that he was seeing as outside of him what was actually inside of him. Now he would really have to see the psychos!

Haldane took temporary steps to relieve the hallucination. He shook his head and pressed his hand over his eyes, putting pressure on the eyeballs. When he opened his eyes again, the image of Pete would be gone.

He took his hands away and opened his eyes. The hallucination had moved. The man was no longer bending over him but was standing up. However, the man was Pete. There was no question about that.

"Pete?" Haldane said hesitantly. He was still confused. Wherever he was, Pete Balkan had no business being there.

"Pardon me. You must be mistaking me for someone else." The man frowned down at him. "What happened to you? Too much to drink?"

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"Mistaking you—" Haldane had no intention of being deceived.

"I'm George Ecro," the man said. "Perhaps some superficial resemblance has deceived you."

"Like h—" Haldane caught the words. The effects of the gas were still strong within him. But gas or no gas, he knew this man was Pete Balkan. He knew also, in a split second, that Pete had some reason for not wishing to be identified.

Balkan lounged in an arm chair. "You were certainly a long time regaining consciousness," he said. "How much did you have to drink?" As he spoke, his fingers played a nervous tattoo on the arm of the chair. Haldane caught the rhythm of the sound and read the meaning almost without realizing he was reading it. Pete was using the system of communication they had developed as kids.

"Place wired," the fingers said. "*If you even whisper, they'll hear you.*"

"Where the hell am I?" Haldane said, aloud. "What happened to me? I was in a phone booth. That's the last thing I remember. I wasn't drinking, honestly I wasn't."

Balkan shrugged. "If you want to say you weren't drinking, it's all right with me. As to what happened to you, I wouldn't know—except that you were dumped in here by some fat man."

"I've got to get out of here," Haldane said.

"You have my sympathy," Balkan said.

"Eh?" Haldane got groggily to his feet. The dizziness was rapidly passing. He was in a moderately sized room that had a door but no windows. There were four chairs and a bench made of boards. He had been lying on that. He went to the door and tried the knob.

The door didn't open. He hadn't expected it to open. But the attempt was strictly for the benefit of the unseen listeners that Pete had warned of.

A frown on his face, he turned back to Balkan. "Am I to understand that I am being held a prisoner?" The tone of

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his voice conveyed the impression that Balkan was probably responsible for this.

"The door is locked," Balkan answered. His fingers were silent and had been since he beat out the first cryptic message. "You can understand what you wish from it."

"What do you know about this?"

Balkan's shrug said nothing. Haldane glanced at his wrist watch, discovered that he did not have it. Nor did he have any of his other personal possessions. "How long have I been here?"

"A couple of hours," Balkan said. "You were really loaded."

"I told you before, I hadn't been drinking. How do you happen to be here?"

A baffled look appeared on Balkan's face. "I can't even begin to understand why I am here except that somebody made a mistake in identification. I don't know where I am or what this is all about." Again the fingers were busy on the arm of the chair. *"I stuck my nose into something hot, that's why I'm here."*

"You're talking hot air," Haldane said. "You've got to know something about where you are and why you're here."

"Well, if I'm talking hot air, make the most of it," Balkan said. However, his fingers said, *"Something rotten is loose in the Solar System. I stuck my nose into this. That's why I'm here and probably why you're here. Are you still with PGI?"*

A little chill came up over Haldane. The girl in the green dress had said that something was in the secondhand shop. Now Pete was saying that something rotten was loose in the Solar System. Were Pete and the girl both talking about the same thing?

"Yes," Haldane said, with his fingers.

"Keep talking with your mouth," Balkan said.

The strangest conversation that Haldane had ever had followed. So far as outer appearance went he was talking to a stranger and both were being wary and difficult. Their

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spoken words indicated that each was trying to find out about the other. Their fingers told a different story. Haldane wished he had two brains to carry on the double-pronged conversation. But Pete didn't seem to find it difficult. Pete Balkan had always had the kind of brain that could think on two different subjects simultaneously.

*"What were you doing, just before you were brought here?"* Pete asked.

*"I was investigating a secondhand shop. Sign in the window—For Sale, Homo Sapiens—"*

*"What? Is the PGI interested in that already?"*

*"Yeah. What do you know about it?"*

*"I'll tell you later. What happened to you?"*

*"Too long to tell here. A girl came into the shop. She got scared and ran. I followed."* Haldane's fingers got all twisted up when he tried to describe the way the girl had become a doll and had walked off into a lost infinity. Balkan's fingers beat questions at him.

*"She got smaller and smaller?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Optical illusion?"*

*"No."*

*"Sure?"*

*"Yes."*

*"What happened after she vanished?"*

*"I cleared out, to report. They followed me all over the spaceport."* Haldane shook his head. In many ways, his being followed was even more bewildering than what had happened to the girl. *"They seemed to know where I was going before I got there myself. There were several of them, including the fat man who gassed me and brought me here."*

Balkan got up and moved around the room and stretched his legs. A grin showed on his face, then went away. He came back and sat down. *"How did you get the smudges of isotope R on your coat?"* his fingers asked.

Startled, Haldane looked at his coat. Isotope R was very

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little known. While it was not harmful to humans, it possessed the quality of emitting radiation in large quantities. Smudges were visible on his coat.

*"With that much isotope R on your coat, they could have followed you to Mars with an ordinary counter,"* Pete's fingers said. The grin flickered across his face. *"How did they get it on you?"*

Into Haldane's mind came a memory of the drunken spaceman who had tried to borrow a match from him outside the secondhand shop. The spaceman's pawing had been for the purpose of putting isotope R on his coat! He knew now how he had been followed. This helped a little, but not much.

*"This means there is an efficient organization working—"*

*"At least one, probably two, and maybe three,"* Balkan said.

*"How do you know, Pete?"*

*"Guesses, hunches. Information drawn from hundreds of sources fits very roughly into a pattern. It looks like maybe two different outfits are trying to take over. They are fighting each other like two sets of wolves each tearing at the same carcass."* Distress flickered across Pete Balkan's face. *"Also, something seems to be loose in the Solar System, either a new force, or a new grouping of forces, or an old, old force manifesting itself in a new way."*

*"What?"* Haldane was so startled that he spoke aloud. A feeling of cold was coming up in him.

*"Something new is coming on the stage of existence. It is so big that it is using the whole Solar System as a backdrop,"* Balkan's fingers said. The feeling of cold grew stronger in John Haldane. *"You are familiar with the concept that progress is by sudden leaps, with long periods of waiting between the leaps. This is the learning curve. Change also operates by this same formula. There is never an even, regular forward movement. There is always a surge, a sudden shift that may be almost a cataclysm, a great forward move-*

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ment; then there is a waiting period while the gains of the surge are assimilated. It is my guess that the human race is about to undergo another cataclysmic forward movement. The factors involved are so numerous, so variable, and have such great strength that no human brain can grasp them all at once—though it may do something to manipulate them.”

The feeling of cold grew in John Haldane as Balkan's fingers continued talking.

“If we think of all nature, including the human race, and all life, as a single vast puzzle, it looks as if certain people, or groups of people, have discovered parts of the solution to this puzzle. But no one person has the whole solution. Everybody is looking for the bits he doesn't have. This looking seems to involve the snuffing out of human lives as if they are of no consequence whatsoever.”

Haldane shivered. Balkan continued with his fingers. “There are not only at least two groups striving for the bits of the puzzle that they don't have—and cutting throats in the process—there is also what I call ‘the random factor’ in operation.”

“A constantly varying variable?”

“It's more than that. It's a whimsical variable that operates according to no pattern that I can discern. It is almost as if another mind, tremendous in its scope, terrific in its powers, eon-long in its planning, is deliberately operating in the Solar System.”

Cold came up in Haldane, stronger now. For an instant he thought he heard a rustling sound, like the whisper of wings in a vast void.

“There is no predicting this ‘random factor,’” Balkan continued. “And it is tremendous. It pushes a button here. Over there, a thousand miles away, maybe as far away as Mars, a new configuration emerges. You can trace that new configuration directly back to the original pushing of the button.”

“God!” Haldane said.

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"*Maybe,*" Balkan's fingers tapped out, "*I wouldn't know, I've never met the Gentleman myself.*" Whimsicality, or deep longing, played across Balkan's face. Haldane knew that Balkan was deeply religious in a true sense, the kind of religion in which a human being senses, participates in and shares the totality of the universe, the frame of reference of the Whole. To Pete Balkan, this was religion. In him, it was separated from all creeds and all dogmas, and he never talked about it.

*"The bunch that has caught us is run by a man by the name of Crisper—"*

Balkan's fingers left off their nervous tapping. The door opened. The fat man stood there. He beckoned to Haldane.

"My old pal and buddy who got himself all drunk," the fat man said. "Come with me, my old pal and buddy."

As Haldane walked out of the room, Balkan's fingers tapped, hastily, "*Good luck.*"

Haldane had the impression that Pete Balkan thought he would need all the luck he could get, and maybe more.



## CHAPTER FOUR

"Sit down," the fat man said. He went out the door, leaving Haldane alone. The agent remained standing.

The room in which Haldane had been left was large and well furnished. Even split in two, it was still a large room. Haldane stared at the object which split the room in two. He did not like what he saw.

It was a black curtain which extended from the floor to the ceiling—a black curtain that shimmered. Where it touched the thick carpet, a little continuous flicker of tiny sparks was visible between the curtain and the rug.

The curtain was as black as the essence of midnight, the heart and the very core of blackness itself.

"Sit down," a voice said, from the other side of the black veil.

"I prefer to stand," Haldane said. He had no intention of being impressed or frightened by stage props. PGI agents were not an easily frightened lot. Also they had back of them an extremely powerful organization. Pete Balkan might

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*think* that something existed in the Solar System, but Haldane *knew* something that existed—Planetary Government.

"Who are you and what do you want?" Haldane said.

"I said to sit down," the voice answered.

"And I said to go to the devil," Haldane answered.

Abruptly, he sat down. To him, it seemed as if an invisible force came into existence above him and forced him down into the chair. It was as if a giant hand appeared and shoved him down.

A low chuckle sounded behind the black curtain. Somebody back there was both aware of his plight and pleased by it. Haldane was not amused. The pressure from above was continuing—a strong powerful downward thrust was holding him in the chair.

"The next time you are told to sit down, obey," the voice said.

"Okay, Crisper," Haldane said. "What do you want?"

Silence came from behind the curtain. Then the voice spoke again, without amusement.

"Why did you use that name?"

"Why shouldn't I use that name? Do you know whom you are dealing with?"

"Sure. Your name is John Haldane and you're a spy for Planetary Government. Where did you hear that name?"

"Oh," Haldane said. "I got the name from my assignment officer. I don't know where he got it but I will be glad to report to him that you are interested."

The voice was unimpressed. "Are you investigating a man by the name of Crisper, is that your assignment?"

"Yes."

"Um." The voice was not concerned. "What happened to the girl?"

"Eh?"

"What did you do with her?" The words came through the black curtain with the force of rifle bullets.

"What girl?"

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"The girl in the secondhand shop. Don't try to pretend you don't understand me."

"That's what I want to know," Haldane answered. "What did happen to her? Do you know?" The words that he threw back into the screen were as hard as the words that had come through it.

The man behind the screen had not expected this answer and he had been caught off guard by it. Haldane could sense his surprise and uncertainty.

"You're lying."

Haldane shrugged. "If you want to think I'm lying, that's your business. But I still want to know what happened to the girl."

Pressure flowed down on him from above. It flowed around him and seemed to flow through him. Panic came up in him. He forced it away. The pressure from above had a certain elasticity. If he did not struggle against it, no harm would result. He grinned at the curtain.

"The girl got away from me," he said. "But I want her. If you know where she is—"

The snarl from behind the black curtain had anger in it. The force lifted from him. It had been intended more to frighten than to do actual damage. The voice then spoke rapidly to someone else. "Go in there and take care of him."

"Sure, boss."

As Haldane rose to his feet, the door opened. The fat man entered. The fat man was wearing a gas mask. Through the goggles of the mask, his eyes grinned at Haldane. He had a gas projector in his hands. The projector squirted a murky yellow vapor in Haldane's face.

Haldane caught his breath, tried to hold it, choked in the effort. He hurled himself across the room, driving with all his strength at the fat man's stomach.

He got one fist into the fat man's middle before the gas hit him. The stuff surged through his lungs like a saw with millions of microscopic teeth cutting the sensitive tissues

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there. He choked, gagged, and began to black out. As he went down he knew that this was not the gas that produced euphoria, a feeling of well-being.

Pain seared him, throwing him in a wrenching, searing, tearing agony. As Haldane hit the floor, the fat man, in retaliation for the blow he had received, kicked him in the face.

Haldane rolled over and over on the floor, screaming. Behind the curtain, a man laughed. The fat man grinned. He kicked Haldane again, in the ribs this time. The blow didn't matter much. It was swallowed up and lost in a greater agony.

"What happened to the girl?" the voice said from behind the black curtain.

"Go—to hell!" Haldane gasped.

"Give him another whiff of the gas, Joe."

Haldane was helpless. He could not move, but he tried to hold his breath. Again the gas got through and he saw with the millions of microscopic teeth bit into the tissue of his lungs. Flames from the fires of hell seemed to lick along the inside of his veins. The fires reached his heart and he felt as if he were going to explode.

"What did you do with the girl?"

"She walked along Halcyon Street," he yelled.

"That's better. What happened to her?"

"I don't know what happened to her." The gas was biting deeper and deeper into his lungs. It had passed into the bloodstream and was appearing in his brain as a screaming torment.

"Give him another whiff, Joe, to teach him not to lie. He knows what happened to the girl and he'll tell us, if we ask him right—with gas!" Behind the screen, the voice laughed. The man back there and Joe, the fat man, were having a fine time.

Haldane sensed more gas come into his lungs. It did not

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make him unconscious, but he felt so completely limp he could not move a muscle.

"I told you the truth," he whispered.

"Give him more gas, Joe."

"Okay, I'll tell you all I know," Haldane screamed. "I had a cab waiting around the corner and I put her into that and rushed her down to PGI headquarters. She's there now, being questioned."

"Oh." The voice from behind the curtain didn't sound pleased. "What's the PGI trying to find out from her?"

"I don't know," Haldane answered. He felt a little better. The voice from behind the curtain had accepted a flagrant lie. "I'm only an agent. I don't know what the big wheels have on their minds. They wanted this girl, so I sent her to them—"

"What happened in the secondhand store? And don't try to tell me you don't know that. You were there."

Haldane described what had happened. "The proprietor asked her to wait in the back room. Then she got scared—"

"What scared her?"

"I don't know. She ran from the back room and out the door. She said there was something in the back room or in the shop. Personally, I think she was just having hysterics."

"What scared her?" the voice repeated.

"I told you I don't know. I didn't see anything."

"Give him another shot of the gas, Joe."

"No!" Haldane screamed. He tried to pull himself to his feet. His arms and legs were as limber as wet rags. He felt the gas hit him in the face and sear through him. This time Joe really gave it to him.

In the depths of his agony, Haldane promised himself what he was going to do to a fat man named Joe and to the person behind the black curtain when he caught them. But the thought of vengeance did not reduce the agony. He could hear the voices of the two men. There was no way of

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stopping the pounding of their questions against his ears. He was lying on his back on the floor. His eyes were open. He could not close his eyes but his vision was blurred, fogged, out of focus. The fat man in the gas mask loomed above him like a face out of a nightmare. He could see the black curtain climbing up to the ceiling. Out of the corner of one eye he could see the sparks jumping from the curtain to the rug.

"What was in the back room?"

"What scared the girl?"

"What did she want in that store?"

"Stop lying."

"Give him more gas, Joe."

The voices pounded at him. Then one of the voices went into silence. A thump sounded behind the curtain.

"Boss?" the fat man called, nervously.

There was no answer.

"Mr. Crisper? Is something wrong?"

The fat man was alarmed. On the floor, John Haldane tried to mobilize enough energy to reach out and grab the fat man by the legs and drag him to the floor. The gas was still an agony in every cell in his body. He could not lift a hand.

"Boss—"

The curtain vanished. One second it was there, the next second it was gone.

The curtain had hid a large desk, on which were a number of instruments. Haldane could see the bottom part of the desk. He could also see the fat man hastily lifting his hands. A man with a gun in his hand came hastily around the desk. The gun covered the fat man. The fat man dropped the gas projector and lifted his hands even higher.

The man with the gun in his hand was Pete Balkan. Haldane marveled about this fact.

"If you make a move, I'll kill you," Balkan said to the fat man. Haldane marveled even more. Never in his life had he

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heard Pete Balkan talk like this. What was Pete so mad about?

"I—I—won't do a thing, mister." The fat man backed against the wall and held his hands as high as he could reach. Fear passed in quivering waves through his huge body.

Balkan dropped to his knees beside Haldane. "Johnny—Johnny—"

"They gave me—gas!" Haldane whispered.

"Yes, I know," Balkan answered. Haldane understood one reason why Pete was so mad. Because of the gas they had given him! Pete was killing mad about that. Pete's arm went under his shoulders and helped him get to his feet. Haldane leaned against the desk. Sweat poured out of him while every muscle and every nerve in his body jumped in its own unique way.

He could see the top of the desk now. What he saw there told him the source of the thump he had heard. A man with a head that was completely bald was lying across the top of the desk. A lump the size of an egg had formed on the top of his head.

"Did you hit him, Pete?"

"I did that," Balkan answered. "I came through the back door while he was busy talking to you. So I bopped him. Then I had to waste some time finding his gun and turning off that radiation screen—"

"The black curtain?" Haldane asked. Misery was still layers deep in him. "That's important stuff, Pete."

"Yeah. If you had tried to go through it, you would have come out the other side changed into dust so fine that Crisper could have blown you to pieces with one breath." Grimness was in Pete's voice again.

Haldane tried to repress a shudder.

"Just as soon as you're able to walk, Johnny—" Pete said.

"There was something else too, Pete, a force that shoved me down into a chair. I don't think even our best research

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people know about that force or about this black curtain.”

“They will,” Balkan said. “Right now we’ve got to get you medical attention as fast as we can.”

“I’ll be ready to walk in another couple of minutes. There’s one more question. How did you get out of that cell?”

“Eh?” Balkan blinked. “The door came open.”

Haldane considered this answer. He was still dazed and confused, but even in his confused state, this answer didn’t make much sense to him. “Doors don’t just come open, Pete. Not around a place like this, they don’t.”

“This one did.”

“How’d it happen?”

“Maybe the fat man forgot to lock it.”

Haldane looked at the fat man. “Did you forget to lock that door?”

“I sure didn’t. Look, you guys, Crisper will kill me for this. Let me get out of here before he comes to. Just give me a chance to run—”

“Then how did that door get open?” Haldane persisted.

“Cripes, Johnny, if you’re able to ask questions like this, you’re able to walk. Come on. I know something about this gas. You’ve got to have medical attention, at once.” He took hold of Haldane’s arm.

“That door—”

Exasperation sounded in Balkan’s voice. “That door coming open was *the random factor* in operation, Johnny. It was *the random factor* pushing a button here—the effects of it may take place a million miles and a thousand years from now. Come on, Johnny.”

A wind that seemed to blow in from outer space, bringing with it all the chill of the Big Man Ocean, seemed to cut through John Haldane. “The—*the random factor*, Pete?” His teeth were chattering as he tried to speak.



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Taking him by the arm, Balkan literally shoved him from the room.

“Quit being scared, Johnny. Maybe *the random factor* is on our side!”

## CHAPTER FIVE

HALDANE's assignment officer was a wizened little gnome of a man. His name was Pepperidge and he lived up to it by being full of pepper and vinegar. An ex-investigator himself, he had achieved the heaven of all good PGI agents and had become an assignment officer. Thus he was able to send agents about their tasks, to pull strings and manipulate puppets, and to continue in the great game. He was an impatient and an irascible man, but under his impatience and his easily provoked anger was a core of deep understanding and of sympathy. He might give his agents hell, but nobody else could. As Haldane came through the door of his office, Pepperidge looked up from his desk. Fire glinted from his eyes.

"Where have you been? What do you mean by hanging up on J? What do—"

Pepperidge stopped.

"This is Pete Balkan," Haldane said. "He's a friend of mine. I'll vouch for him."

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Pepperidge's face became all smiles. He rose from his desk and shook hands with Pete.

"Will you gentlemen please have seats," Pepperidge said, beaming fondly at them. "And excuse me for a moment."

"Wait, I have things to say," Haldane protested.

"Later, John," Pepperidge said, as he left the room.

"He's gone to check up on you," Haldane said to Balkan. "He's not going to talk until he has found out if you are all right."

"I hope he doesn't find out anything bad about me," Pete said. "Look, Johnny, you've got to—"

"Aw, to heck with that," Haldane said. "I'm all right. Pepperidge will check you through the files of J and then right on up to the boss himself, until he is fully satisfied that you are fit to know even the smallest PGI secret."

Pepperidge was gone a long time. When he returned there was a glazed look in his eyes and he seemed slightly dazed.

"Is it all right for Mr. Balkan to stay?" Haldane inquired maliciously.

"Why—ah—yes, of course. There was never any question about that. What do you mean, John, by hinting—"

"What did the boss say?" Haldane interrupted.

Pepperidge sat down at his desk. He ran a hand across his bald head as if to make certain it was still there. "He said you were to take orders from Mr. Balkan." The glazed look appeared again in Pepperidge's eyes and he seemed dazed.

Haldane chuckled. He was both surprised and pleased. Putting a PGI agent under the orders of a plain civilian was simply not done. He appreciated how much Pepperidge must be upset about such a tradition-breaking order. "Good! I'm glad somebody around here has got good sense."

"That's mighty fine of the boss," Pete said.

"He also said that—that I am to consider myself under

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the orders of Mr. Balkan!" Pepperidge sputtered. "I—I assume you know Mr. Kelvin."

"Slightly," Pete said. "He sometimes comes over to my laboratory, in his spare time, to make things. I didn't really expect him to put you under my orders—"

"Good!" Haldane said, explosively. His laughter roared in the room. The effects of the gas were still strong in him but he was trying to ignore them. "Now that we've got things organized, I have a report to make."

Pepperidge managed to take his gaze off of Pete Balkan long enough to give Haldane his attention. A frown appeared on his face as he looked at the agent. "Just a little while, John, and you can make your report. I want you to come with me." He rose from his desk.

"Come with you where?" Haldane said.

"To the doctor," Pepperidge said.

"What? I'll have both of you know I'm all right." He pounded himself on the chest to prove his point.

"You don't look so good to me," Pepperidge said. For an instant, the deeply hidden core of him was revealed. In that core was a kindly, benevolent old gnome who was deeply concerned about the welfare of the agents under his direction. Normally Pepperidge kept this inner core carefully hidden from sight, but it peeped out of him, for an instant.

PGI headquarters included a hospital. The doctor in charge was a young man who was quite accustomed to patching up PGI agents.

"Oh, gas," he said. "Lie down here."

Haldane stripped to the waist and lay down on what looked like a large operating table. Lights were brought to focus on him, scanning the skin surface. Other lights flickered in his eyes. Automatic instruments noted the pupillary reaction. "Steady now," the doctor said. Haldane gritted his teeth. The doctor closed switches. Haldane felt powerful beams surge through him. With the beams came pain. Sweat began to pour out of his skin. Finally, the doctor turned off

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the switches, grunted, and came back to Haldane. He slapped the agent on the stomach.

"You're as tough as rocket hide. Here, take these." He handed Haldane a dozen small pills. The diagnostic equipment, after determining what his total body picture was, had synthesized the pills after it had made the diagnosis, the whole process being only a matter of minutes. "Take it easy for a day or two."

As Haldane finished dressing, the assignment officer came hastily into the room. "Mr. Kelvin wants all three of us," he said.

Kelvin was a big man with iron-gray hair and calm eyes. He rose and shook hands with all of them. Pete Balkan he greeted as an old friend. He listened quietly to Haldane's report. The room was big, with indirect lighting and a rug so thick it seemed to come up around the ankles of anyone who walked on it. A hidden air conditioner made soft whispering noises in the background. There was no other sound in the room as Haldane talked. The recorder that was feeding his data to J was silent. Telling about the girl and how she had turned into a doll and walked off into a lost infinity, Haldane felt again the touch of the impossible and the incredible.

When Haldane had finished, Kelvin turned to the communication box on the desk beside him. Swiftly and quickly, he dictated descriptions of the fat man and of Crisper. "Arrest them on sight." Then he turned back to the others. Leaning back in his swivel chair, he surveyed the three.

"What do you think, Pete?" he asked.

Balkan shook his head. "I want a chance to examine that equipment which Crisper has. As soon as he is arrested, I want full and free access to it. I want to know a lot more than I do about that black curtain."

"Granted," Kelvin said. "Here is the situation, from our viewpoint. There seem to be three separate and distinct groups in operation. First, group A. They are putting up

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these FOR SALE—*Homo Sapiens* signs, and they are probably doing a lot of other things, too, that we do not know about as yet. We do not know their purpose. They may be just another organization of crackpots trying to improve the world in their own way. Then there is Group B, which Crisper heads. We do not know nearly enough about him or his group either, but we do know enough to know that he is potentially a dangerous man. Crisper is interested in Group A, but we don't know why.

"Then there is a third group, C, about which we know practically nothing. Some evidence indicates that Group C is probably the biggest, the most powerful, and the most dangerous of the three. We do not know who heads Group C as yet but we are in the process of finding out. This about sums up the general picture, I think."

"Except for one thing," Balkan said.

"What is that?"

*"The random factor."*

Irritation crossed Kelvin's face. "I don't begin to understand this force that you call *the random factor*, or how it operates."

"Nobody understands it."

"A door understood it," Haldane said.

The room got very quiet after he had spoken. "Well, at this point I prefer to ignore it," Kelvin said.

"Can you ignore it?" Haldane said.

"I can try." Kelvin showed signs of nervousness as he ran his hands through his iron-gray hair. "Damn it, John, I have to ignore it, I've got to stick to the evidence. We have in existence three groups. I do not know the purpose of all of these groups, but I suspect I know the purpose of at least two of them. This purpose can be stated in one word." Kelvin paused and an expression of distaste appeared on his face.

"That word is *power*," he said. The expression of distaste

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grew stronger. "Political power. I don't like these words at all."

Across the room, Pete Balkan shifted his long legs. Pepperidge was silent, fidgeting in his chair. Haldane felt a deep anger begin to smolder far below the surface in him. He had heard a word he hated. He knew the history of the human race on the planet Earth. Bloody war after bloody war had been fought, all for political power. Uncounted millions of lives had been extinguished in these struggles.

The wars were gone, they were ended, they were done. They now belonged to Earth's dark and unhappy past. Planetary Government had banished this horror of war from the race of men.

"Do you mean that an attempt is being made to overthrow Planetary Government?" Haldane asked.

"We don't know yet," Kelvin said.

"This effort that we think may be an attempt to overthrow Planetary Government may actually be a part of the evolutionary process of the human race," Balkan said. "It may be growth—racial growth."

Kelvin wrinkled his brows. "I don't understand what you mean."

"We're human beings in the process of becoming something else. As we see history, the only law apparent in the universe is *change*. We human beings change too; we become something else, as a race and as individuals. What this *something else* is we don't know until we become it. Nor will we know what it is until we achieve it and find out what it is. But we are changing, we are evolving, we are moving in *some* direction."

"Yes," Kelvin said. "That much is obvious. You are painting a pretty big picture here, however."

"This is a pretty big universe," Pete said grimly. "As inhabitants of a big universe, the human race belongs in a big picture. Add to the fact of change, the data that the human race is still making new discoveries, learning new facts and

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new relationships between facts. We make these discoveries as individuals or as individuals working in groups. Now Group A has certain facts, certain new relationships unknown to anyone outside the group; Group B has certain other facts, and Group C probably has still other data. If all of these facts were brought together and combined—if one person or one group knew everything that these three groups know—we might have a combination that would spell political power and possible dictatorship for the group that possessed the combined knowledge—or we might have the basic ingredients for the next great upward surge of the human species.”

Haldane felt a glow come up in him as he listened to Pete Balkan's words. Pete was a man who saw what was right before his eyes and looked through it to worlds that lay afar.

Kelvin became very thoughtful. “It might work that way, it *could* work that way, unless the group that got the power decided to use the newly discovered basic ingredients for the next great upward surge of the race for its own advantage. This is the point that I don't like. I don't like it at all. And I will use every legal resource of Planetary Government to uncover it and to stamp it out, if need be.”

A buzzer sounded under the desk. Kelvin used the inter-office phone. “Yes.” He listened. “Good.” He listened a little longer. His face did not change but Haldane sensed something important. “Thank you,” he said, and hung up.

Kelvin glanced at the three men in the room. “They have picked up the fat man and Crisper,” he said. “We'll go down and see them.”

“Already?” Haldane said. “The boys are really working fast today.”

“The circumstances in this case were a little unusual,” Kelvin said, enigmatically.

They went out of the office, and the elevator dropped them to the basement. The smell of chemicals here was strong. Kelvin led the way to a door where an armed guard



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was on duty. The guard saluted Kelvin and opened the door.

They entered the room and found the fat man and Crisper. The bodies of two men were lying on adjacent tables. Haldane knew without taking a second look that both were dead.

Two white-coated technicians were in the room. They came to attention.

"Do you have the cause of death yet?" Kelvin asked.

"Sorry, sir. Not yet."

Haldane looked at Pete Balkan. A question formed on his lips. He tried to force it down inside his mind. It kept coming back. Finally it forced its way to the surface.

"Did—did *the random factor* do this?"

Pete Balkan looked startled. Hastily he shook his head. "No. *The random factor* does not operate this way. My guess is that Group C did this."

"Eh? Why not Group A?"

Balkan either did not hear the question or did not choose to answer it. He was talking to Kelvin. "One thing I would like to have—"

"Yes, I know, the equipment in Crisper's office. It's yours. While you are digging into it, I am going to put every man who can be spared to work digging into this situation. We're going to find out what is going on—or know the reason why."

## CHAPTER SIX

GOING through the door, Haldane caught the strains of music in the distance, the muted throbbing of drums and the sobbing of violins. A very superior doorman in a gold-trimmed suit looked down his nose at the agent. He took the card Haldane offered, and dropped it into the slot of the box behind him.

"It's authentic," Haldane said.

"But certainly, sir," the doorman said. "We merely check the invitations as a matter of routine, to protect the guests, sir." The doorman was unperturbed. Part of his job was to make certain that no gate-crashers came to this party. If such showed up, and the box in which he tested the card indicated that the invitation was not genuine, his task was to turn the gate-crashers over to the strong-arm squad lurking out of sight behind the Venusian palms. What happened after that, Haldane did not know.

Gate-crashing was impossible at a party given by Mrs. Dafner. She was the richest woman in the Solar System. Mrs. Dafner was three times a widow and three times as rich because of this. If she had a legitimate claim to genius, it lay in the fact that she was able to marry very rich men.

A tiny green light glowed on top of the box.

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"Pass right on in, sir," the doorman said, bowing.

Haldane grinned. There had been no question that the card, the ink, and the signature were authentic. It had taken the best abilities of the PGI to steal three signed invitations from one of Mrs. Dafner's social secretaries, so that three agents could crash this party through the front door. If this had not been possible, it would have been necessary to send agents to this party as servants.

Haldane moved forward toward a pair of swinging doors that two gold-braided servants were holding open for him. He passed through them—and into fairyland.

The party was being given on the top floor of an ultra-exclusive residential hotel, which Mrs. Dafner owned. Normally the top floor was operated as a pleasure dome which which would have driven Kubla Khan green with envy. Here jaded and world-weary men and women might come and renew tired appetites in an endless round of what they considered to be pleasure. But tonight Mrs. Dafner had taken over the roof and had made the pleasure dome into a fairyland.

The plastic dome was open to the stars now, to the cool soft winds of spring. The main floor had been made into an enchanted forest, with trees and paths and grass and flowers and spurting fountains. Nymphs were sporting there—live ones.

Haldane's first dazed impression was that these girls who were acting like nymphs were utterly naked. Then a servant said, "Get your bathing suit to your right, sir, if you wish it now," and he realized that the girls were probably not completely naked—they were just wearing transparent plastic bathing suits. The sight awed him.

"I'll get my suit later, thanks."

"As you prefer, sir," the servant said, smirking. The smirk said that no man in his right mind would be long without a bathing suit in such a setting.

The music came from somewhere in the enchanted forest.

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Muted woodwinds were singing under the stars. And a girl was laughing happily.

Haldane envied the girl who was laughing. And he pitied her too. If Kelvin and Pete Balkan were right, there might be coming into existence here on Earth the old nightmare terrors out of the planet's past. If those terrors came into existence, girls would not find much to laugh about or to be happy about. The one who was laughing now was sitting on the lid of a volcano that might erupt at any moment.

Off to the left were three bars. At one, three bartenders worked mixing and serving Earth drinks. At the second two Venusian bartenders were languidly busy. They were serving the soft, sirupy liquors of the Veiled Planet. At the third, a lone Martian bartender had nothing to do. The pepper-hot alcohols of Mars did not appeal to human throats.

However, they appealed to Haldane now. As he moved toward the Martian bar, a little man came out of the darkness and beat him there. Haldane glanced at the little man, wondering if he was one of the people he was seeking. The little man was frail and withered and he seemed to be too unimportant to be a member of Group C.

That was Haldane's mission tonight: to find Group C.

The PGI had been unable to identify any member of that group. Nor had J done much better. But J, correlating tremendous masses of very thin and doubtful data, had come up with the suggestion that the trail of Group C could possibly be picked up at Mrs. Dafner's party. J had put a very low order of probability on its own computations, which proved something or nothing.

The Martian bartender grinned as Haldane ordered. He liked to see an ambitious human who wanted to tackle the drinks of Mars. But there was doubt in the Martian too. "Does ze great one unnerstand zat zese are se drinks of Mars?"

"Make it half-strength," Haldane said.

The bartender looked disappointed. Down the bar the

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little man turned his head and said, "Give him a full one. He looks like he needs it."

"Half-strength for the first one," Haldane said. "I like to sneak up on these drinks."

"Why don't you order me a drink too?" a voice said behind him.

Haldane spun. The girl had come up unnoticed and was standing behind him. At the sight of her, he felt cold come up in him.

The last time he had seen this girl she had been wearing a green dress. She wasn't wearing the green dress now. Instead she was wearing a garment that was probably called, for the sake of courtesy, a bathing suit, though this was a wild stretching of the meaning of the words. In places where the suit existed at all, it was sheer plastic. Haldane gaped at the suit and what was in it. There wasn't much suit but there was plenty in it.

"I'll bet you can swim mighty good in that suit," he said. "The water resistance from it won't hold you back at all."

The girl was completely unembarrassed. "Thank you. I'm glad you like it—and me. As to the suit, I suppose it could be used for swimming, but it really wasn't designed for that purpose."

"Eh?" Even if she wasn't embarrassed, he was. "What was it designed for, if not for swimming?"

"For catching men," she answered, smiling.

"You ought not to have any trouble in that department, bathing suit or no bathing suit," he said.

Her smile was easy and friendly, and she put the best possible interpretation on the meaning of his words. "Thank you. You say nice things to a girl."

"You're welcome. You are a nice girl to say nice things to. Are you good for something other than looking at and talking to?"

She smiled again. "You might try me sometime."

"I would consider it a privilege." Haldane was consider-

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ably astonished to discover that more than professional interest was showing in the tone of his voice. "If I knew your name and tel number, it would be much easier to exercise that privilege." A grin came up inside of him and spread to his face. Embarrassment followed it. He hadn't made silly, fun talk with a girl since he had entered training. PGI agents didn't go in for the usual kind of home life. But he liked making fun talk with this girl, even if he was embarrassed.

He grinned at her. But her laugh suddenly turned into a gasp. An almost nude youth had come blundering out of the enchanted forest. Sighting the girl, he moved toward her. She circled Haldane and the youth followed her. Seeing she was going to be caught, the girl dived for the protection of the forest. The youth was quickly after her and was certain to catch her when Haldane reached out a toe and tripped him. The boy sprawled forward on his face and the girl, with a startled look over her shoulder, disappeared behind the trees.

Haldane hastened to help the youth to his feet. "Too bad you tripped. Are you hurt?" His voice was very solicitous.

The youth turned dazed eyes toward him. From the alcohol on his breath, it was apparent that he had been a frequent visitor at the three bars. "I—uh—fell."

"You sure did."

"Which way did she—uh—go?"

"She went that way," Haldane said, pointing toward the Venusian bar. Mumbling thanks, the youth stumbled away. Haldane watched him with interest. The youth made a bee-line for the bar as soon as he saw it clearly.

"Oh, thank you," the girl said, stepping from behind a tree. "Thank you so much. And my name is Heather, though most of my friends call me Heathen." She smiled at him. "This is one of Cecil's nights to be impetuous," she explained. "I'm so glad you side-tracked him on the Venusian bar. If

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one more drink doesn't knock him out completely, at least he won't be able to run so fast."

"What goes on here? I mean, is this chasing girls standard conduct at one of Mrs. Dafner's parties, or is this just Cecil's idea?"

"You should know, sir, that any conduct is standard conduct at Mrs. Dafner's parties. Or haven't you attended one of them before?"

"This is my first adventure," Haldane said. The tone of his voice indicated he was quite taken away with it. "I can only thank dear Mrs. Dafner for inviting me. I haven't seen anything like this party on Earth, Venus or Mars."

"I'll pass your compliment along to Mrs. Dafner," Heather said. "I know she will be pleased. She likes to have her guests enjoy themselves."

"Oh, don't bother, I'll tell her myself," Haldane said. There was not a chance in a thousand that Mrs. Dafner would know all of her guests or could even recognize most of them on sight, but there was no point in calling to her attention that someone was present that she did not actually know. If she learned that PGI agents were at her party without her knowledge or invitation, she packed enough weight politically to make even Kelvin very uncomfortable.

In the distance, trumpets blared and lights came on, illuminating the dance floor. "The grand march is beginning," Heather said. "Come on. We must see it." She tucked her hand in his arm. "Mrs. Dafner will lead it." Under her breath she added, "Riding on her broomstick."

"Eh?" Haldane said, "I thought you and Mrs. Dafner were friends."

"Not necessarily. I just work for her."

"How interesting! What do you do?"

"I'm on her payroll as one of her forty secretaries, personal, social, and otherwise. No, she only has thirty-eight now. She fired two of them today, for missing out on a detail of her party tonight. Of course, I'm not really a secretary."

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"What are you then?"

"I'm more of a private spy than anything else." Irritation sounded in her voice.

"How very fascinating!" Haldane felt his professional interest quicken. "Why would she need a spy?"

"If you were as rich as she is, you wouldn't ask that question. She needs to know what people are thinking, saying and doing. If she is considering investing ten million credits in some business, she needs to know the real character and the real abilities of the men who will manage it for her."

They were moving past the end of the bar. The little man was still sitting there. There was a glaze in his eyes and he was having difficulty in maintaining his seat. But he was still fighting. "Givesh me another glass of schnapps," he said.

The bartender glowed at him and hastened to mix the drink. He liked to see a human show appreciation for the drinks of Mars. He had already warned this human and his conscience was clear. Anything that happened after the warning was on the head of the human but it would probably be a sight a good Martian bartender could enjoy.

As they left the bar, the girl asked, "What's your name?"

Haldane gave her an honest answer. If she checked the guest list later, she would discover that a John Haldane had been invited in proper order.

"I shall call you Johnny," she answered, smiling.

Ahead of them, trumpets blared again. "Here, I'll show you where to go." Holding his arm, Heather led him into the enchanted forest. The little man took a firm grip on his glass and lurched in the same direction. The lights were on, illumining the dance floor and the fairyland around it. People were leaving the tables and moving toward the edge of the floor. An air of expectancy was present. Again the trumpets blared. The lights dimmed, then went out.

A brilliant spotlight beamed into existence, illumining the far end of the dance floor. The music came up again, the stately strains of the grand march. Caught in the beam of



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the spotlight, a man and a woman were moving at the far end of the dance floor.

From the watching guests a collective gasp went up. Haldane did not need the gasp or Heather's jiggling of his arm to know that he was looking at Mrs. Dafner. The bright glitter of gems from the circlet at her neck and from the bracelets on her arms told him who the woman was. No other woman in the Solar System could afford such gems as these.

Set firmly on top of Mrs. Dafner's head was a pearl-studded crown.

*Ping!*

"Watch out," the little voice whispered in the deep recesses of his mind.

His *psi* function had come out of hiding. He turned his head, to see if he could detect who was following him. Everyone in sight was vitally interested in the procession. He twisted and turned, trying to see with his eyes what his *psi* function said existed.

"Shhh," Heather whispered.

He turned his attention back to the scene in front of him. Mrs. Dafner was a handsome woman. Just looking at her, Haldane could see how she had managed to have so many husbands. There was something about her that many men would find fascinating. Holding the arm of her escort, she was smiling and nodding to her guests as she circled the floor. The other couples following behind her in the grand march were doing the same thing.

*Ping!* the little warning bell rang inside Haldane.

*But there can't be anyone following me,* Haldane said, fiercely and silently to himself. *There can't be.*

"I didn't say anyone was following us," the inner voice answered.

*Eh? What do you mean then?*

"Something is about to happen. I don't know what it is. But there are strong forces here."

*Eh? I don't understand.*

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Suddenly Haldane realized that a silence had fallen over the entire group. In this silence the notes of the hidden orchestra playing the grand march were suddenly loud. Beside him, he felt Heather's fingers tighten on his arm. Still fiercely clutching his glass, but not spilling a drop, the little drunk lurched past him and forced his way through the guests to the edge of the floor. He stopped there, staring either at Mrs. Dafner or at something else.

"Watch out!" the inner voice repeated.

Straining his eyes, Haldane could see nothing.

A woman screamed.

Heather's grip on Haldane's arm was suddenly convulsive.

"Look at Mrs. Dafner, Johnny!"

Mrs. Dafner had lost a foot in height. She was shrinking, growing smaller. In contrast, her escort seemed to be growing taller. She did not come up to his shoulders. She was becoming a doll.

Haldane felt the wind of outer space blow through him, cutting him to the bone with its tremendous chill.

Again, somewhere, a woman screamed. The music suddenly jarred to a halt, except for one drummer, who continued the stately rhythm of the grand march all alone. Then the drum beat stopped too, very abruptly.

For the first time, Mrs. Dafner seemed to realize what was happening. She turned startled eyes to look behind her.

Haldane saw her face quite clearly. It was a small face but it was still Mrs. Dafner's face, much shrunk. A moment earlier this face had been all smiles; it had been the face of a queen greeting her loyal subjects, receiving their homage.

Now it was the face of a woman through whom panic was sweeping in hurricane violence. It was a face that had become too small for the crown it wore. The crown toppled to one side and fell to the floor. The bracelets around Mrs. Dafner's arms were also much too large. One slid from its place, but she caught the other.

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She released the arm of her escort. He stared down at her. Horror was on his face too. The procession had come to a halt. One woman went to the floor in a slumping faint. Several of the men looked as if they wanted to faint too but had not as yet had time to think of this means of escape.

Mrs. Dafner screamed, a thin, far-away sound. She started to run, to flee, to try to get away. She ran across the dance floor. But even as she ran she became a doll that grew smaller and smaller in size.

She vanished.

Silence held the pleasure dome under the stars. Taut, nerve-tense silence reigned in the enchanted fairyland as minds tried to grasp the meaning of what the eyes had seen. As the minds failed, outraged emotions poured upward in a surging flood.

Panic, like a tornado, swept through the pleasure dome and through the enchanted forest.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

HALDANE caught Heather's arm, held her. The little drunk, still clutching his glass, stumbled out on the dance floor. There the people who had paraded in the grand march were trying to decide whether they ought to start running, start screaming, or go crazy.

The little drunk moved to the spot where Mrs. Dafner had stopped when she first realized she was shrinking. There he knelt. With great care, he set his glass on the floor. Even this event was not going to cause him to lose a drop of the precious liquid in that glass. He stared owlishly around him. Then, with both hands, he made passing motions through the air as if he were trying to feel something that he knew was there but could not see. Apparently he could not feel anything either. He sat back on his haunches and looked puzzled. Then he quietly collapsed.

Heather's fingers tightened on Haldane's arm until he thought they were going to penetrate to the bone. Figures ran past them, in all directions. Haldane pulled the girl back into the shrubbery.

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"It just couldn't happen," Heather was saying, over and over again. "It just couldn't happen. It couldn't. *It couldn't!*" Panic was in her too but it came from another source. The people around the dance floor had seen the impossible happen. Heather had seen the possible happen in an impossible way.

Haldane sensed the difference in her reaction. "What couldn't happen?" he asked quickly.

"Mrs. Dafner simply could not have used Bergen's device. She couldn't! She wouldn't dare use it with all of these people watching and she didn't have the courage to use it on herself. She would test it thoroughly on somebody else before she trusted her own precious skin to it." The girl was speaking swiftly. She was explaining to herself more than to him, Haldane knew.

"Why wouldn't she dare use it here?" Haldane marveled at the astuteness of J. Here was evidence that J's guess about something important happening at this party was correct.

"Because it would give her away, because other people would then know that she possesses Bergen's discovery. The *wrong people* would know it. And—" She caught her words and glanced sharply at him, recognizing in a split second that he might be one of the wrong people. Had she immediately recognized him as being the man she had seen in the secondhand shop? If so, her seeking him out had been a ruse.

"What the devil are you doing, having hysterics?" Haldane said. Even if the words were spoken on the spur of the moment, they were measured and deliberate. He was giving her a way to explain what she had just said and was watching to see if she would take that explanation being given her.

She promptly went into hysterics.

"Bergen's device? Who is Bergen? I don't know what I'm saying. I'm out of my mind. This horrible mess! What happened to Mrs. Dafner? Oh, Johnny, I'm so scared." She

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threw her arms around his neck and clung to him. He could feel tremors all through her body.

Whistles shrilled in the enchanted forest—the police.

Haldane wondered who had called them. He was not grateful to that unknown person.

The fear in the vast ballroom open to the stars had become so tangible he could almost smell it. People were piling up around the doors that led to the elevators. The screaming and the profanity were a swelling roar of sound.

"It's all right, Heather. Everything will be all right."

"But what happened?"

"You ought to know; I saw you do it once."

So far as he could tell, she did not hear his words. "It's so awful, all these people getting scared and some of them hurt."

"The people who get hurt here are few in number compared to the people who may get hurt because of what happened here." He made his voice grim with threat.

"John, what are you talking about? I don't begin to understand you. What—" She broke off as the floodlights came on.

"Silence, please!" A voice rolled through the enchanted forest.

The man who had escorted Mrs. Dafner on the grand march stood in the middle of the ballroom with hands up-lifted. Built like a wrestler, he had the head and the face of a lion. Under the lights his mane of silver-white hair seemed to be circled with a halo.

Of all the people in the place, perhaps he had the most reason to be scared. He had been escorting Mrs. Dafner when she had turned into a frightened doll, fleeing into some lost infinity. But if his voice was any indication of his inner state, he was calm and completely in charge of himself.

"Will everyone please return to his seat?" His voice roared through the night like the thunder of a Martian lion on the cold deserts of the Red Planet. His voice brought the panic

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to a halt. In the distance, the police whistles were suddenly loud.

"Please advise the police that their presence is no longer needed here," the voice rolled out.

The man had power, presence and courage. His voice rolled through the open area like the sound of a big bell.

"Who is that?" Haldane asked.

"That—that's Mr. Ertel," Heather answered. She had recovered from her hysteria. But she was having difficulty in pronouncing the words she tried to speak and her teeth were chattering. Haldane realized that under the assumed hysteria had been very real fear. The fear was still there.

"Who is Mr. Ertel, besides being Mrs. Dafner's escort on the grand march?"

"He is . . . Mrs. Dafner's latest boy friend. Some people think he is going to be Mrs. Dafner the Fourth—I mean that Mrs. Dafner is going to become Mrs. Ertel."

"What does he do?"

"He doesn't do anything. I mean, he's very rich."

"Now we will all take our seats again!" Ertel's voice rang out. "Also, the orchestra will start playing." At his command, the orchestra started. At this point, it consisted of a violin, a drum and a trumpet. The other musicians had joined the flight for the doors.

"What happened to Mrs. Dafner?" Haldane said.

"I—I don't know," Heather answered. Haldane could sense in fear in her again. She was moving in the direction of real hysteria now.

"Stop lying!" Haldane's voice suddenly had the lash of a whip in it. "You do know."

The fear rising in her was converted into anger and was directed at him. "You have no right to talk to me this way!"

"Sorry," he apologized quickly. "I didn't mean to snap at you like that. But I'm kind of under a strain too." Force would not get from this girl the information that he wanted. "I apologize. But Mrs. Dafner is my hostess. Something has

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happened to her and I want to help her."

"That's different," the girl said, with no real conviction in her voice.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Ertel's voice rolled out. "In behalf of Mrs. Dafner, I must apologize for what has happened here this evening. I must also give you an explanation." He paused and waited for his words to sink in.

The mood of the people was rapidly changing. The panic was going out of them. Now that Ertel was apologizing to them and was telling them he was going to explain what had happened, an eager interest was rising to replace the fear and the panic.

"I must also apologize in my own behalf, since it was I who suggested the idea originally, though I must confess that I did not anticipate that this would be the result of it." Ertel paused again. His halo was very white. It was not possible to disbelieve a man with a head of white hair such as his. A smile formed on his face, adding to the effect of the white hair.

Haldane swore under his breath. In Ertel, he recognized a first-class showman.

Near him, the little drunk rose slowly to a sitting position. He looked dazedly around him. After the amount of Martian alcohol he had consumed, he must have gone through a startling moment.

Ertel's smile grew even broader. "Mrs. Dafner's disappearance was an act especially prepared to provide a thrill for you. It was planned for your entertainment and amusement. Let me say again for myself and on behalf of our dear Mrs. Dafner that I apologize for the consternation it has caused you. Nothing could have been further from our desire than to frighten you."

As Ertel finished speaking, his smile became a broad grin. Haldane could see drops of sweat glistening on the man's face. Ertel made no move to wipe them away. The release



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of tension in the guests was as tangible as their wild panic had been.

Cheering broke out. Handclapping began and grew louder. Heather joined in, clapping enthusiastically. Haldane watched in silence. Ertel's grin broadened even more. He held up his hand.

"Mrs. Dafner will join you later. In the meantime, it is our wish that all of you continue having the grand good time of your lives."

"That's a damn lie!" a single voice spoke in rebuttal. Ertel spun on his heel, seeking the source of that voice. It had come from the little drunk.

"Bergen!" Ertel's voice had a snarl in it.

"Wasn't any act to en-en-entertain ush a-tall," the little drunk said. He spoke with firm conviction.

Bewilderment showed on Ertel's face, then anger. Then the forced smile returned. "Well, if it isn't Mr. Bergen!" His voice made a joke out of this too. "And drunk as a lord!" He snapped his fingers, imperiously. "Will two of you waiters assist Mr. Bergen to one of the rooms on the floor below? Mrs. Dafner reserved the whole floor as special accommodations for any of her guests who might become-intoxicated."

"'At's anuzzer lie!" the little drunk shouted. "Circe Dafner didn't use my transit like you said she did. And I'm not drunksh. Haven't had a drink all evening."

He was still protesting when two waiters lifted him and carried him away. Legs wobbling and hands flying, he went with them. Ertel nodded to the musicians. The music began again, with a full orchestra now. A calm like that which follows a great storm returned to the enchanted forest. The dance floor began to fill with couples. Waiters were hastily serving drinks to the guests.

"Mr. Bergen doesn't seem to like being taken away," Haldane said, watching the progress of the little drunk.

"Oh, that isn't Mr. Bergen," Heather said quickly. "That's

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Mr.—Smith. I forgot what his first name is. Mr. Ertel made a mistake in the name.”

“Probably Mr. Ertel was excited,” Haldane said.

From the middle of the floor, Ertel was calling out a list of names. “Heather Conklin, Jane Thomas—”

“I’ve got to go,” Heather said. “He’s calling all the secretaries.” She moved away, then came quickly back. “Johnny, I do want to see more of you. Will you call me?” Her eyes and her voice were appealing.

“I will consider it a privilege,” he answered.

She was gone into the crowd. He wasn’t certain but he thought she blew him a kiss as she left.

Haldane moved toward the front and looked for a tel booth. The police were present but they were looking bewildered. “But somebody turned in an alarm,” a sergeant was protesting. The sergeant was in a difficult spot and he knew it. The guests at the party had wealth, position and political power. The sergeant did not dare throw them into squad cars and take them to the station for questioning. He did not even dare to ask embarrassing questions, if they did not want to answer.

Moving toward the tel booths, Haldane caught a glimpse of a police lieutenant and a captain. They were as hesitant as the sergeant and were quite obviously allowing, and probably requiring, the sergeant to front for them—and to take the blame if he asked the wrong questions.

Haldane slipped a coin into the slot and dialed the number. He watched the screen, half wondering if another cryptic message would appear there telling him that *homo sapiens* was for sale.

“J,” a voice said.

“Case X-79. Ertel. Male. About fifty years old. Six feet tall. Snow-white hair. Report.”

J was silent. In some vast distance, Haldane thought he could hear relays clicking as the brain took the incoming signals and matched them against its files.

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"Data not sufficient for identification," J said suddenly. "Many men have that name."

"Cross check on the white hair."

"This characteristic is not sufficient for identification. I have several male Ertels with white hair."

"Then cross check your white-haired Ertels against Mrs. Circe Dafner. If one of them has any connection with her, this is probably the man I want."

Again the far-off relays clicked. "Connection with Mrs. Dafner came into existence less than one year ago. This Ertel formerly on Mars. Cult leader there. Fled from Mars under suspicious circumstances. Martian authorities would like to question Ertel but have no definite charges against him. Has used at least two other names, Bisker, and Denoy. Ertel is probably not his right name. No other data."

"Good. Thank you." For an instant Haldane felt a little silly. He was always thanking J for information, forgetting that J was only an electronic storage and associational machine which did not need to be thanked. Swiftly Haldane dictated an account of what had happened at the party. "Copy to Mr. Peter Balkan, to Mr. Kelvin and to Mr. Pepperidge. Top priority."

"Yes," the brain said.

"More data needed, on a man by the name of Bergen. Perhaps he is an inventor, perhaps he is a scientist. Is there any information on a device, or an invention, known as Bergen's transit?"

Again the distant relays clicked. Above Haldane, the screen was blank. He was still keeping a wary eye on that screen, wondering if it would tell him again that he, too, could be a human being. What was a human being? Wasn't he one already? Why should anyone want to tell him that he *could* be one?

"Henry Bergen," J said softly. "A famous scientist. His computations on the structure of space and the correlation of space-time are authoritative. At present, Bergen's where-

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abouts are unknown. As to the device called a *transit*—"J's voice went into silence. Three soft buzzes sounded. Haldane was silent too. Very quietly he hung up the phone. The three soft buzzes and the silence of J indicated that the line had been tapped.

Among the many marvelous devices built into J was a scanner that constantly monitored the lines being used for incoming and outgoing information. The slightest voltage drop over these lines, even such a slight drop as would be caused by the use of an induction coil around a line, was instantly detected.

J protected its data files. If an attempt was made to tap a line, the brain stopped reporting and emitted three soft buzzes, which meant, *The line in use is being tapped. Hang up and find another public visaphone.*

The information on Bergen's transit was important, Haldane decided, but it could wait. What was more important was to find Bergen. The agent used the stairway to go to the floor below the ballroom.

The two waiters who had taken Bergen from the dance floor were just leaving a room. Haldane waited until they had entered the elevator, then tried the door they had just closed. It was unlocked. Entering, he found Bergen stretched out on the bed.

Haldane could think of many questions he wanted to ask this man. One was what Bergen had been trying to find on the dance floor after Mrs. Dafner had vanished. Also why had Bergen called Ertel—or Bisker or Denoy—a liar?

But this room was no place to ask questions nor was Bergen in any condition to answer them. Haldane lifted the little man from the bed. If anyone stopped him, he would say that Bergen was a friend of his and he was helping the little man home. Slipping one of Bergen's hands around his neck, he started toward the door.

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He stopped. The door was opening. Heather entered. The girl had changed clothes, slipping a formal gown over her almost non-existent bathing suit. She had a gun in her hand. She stood looking at Haldane, with the gun ready.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

"DROP THE gun!" Haldane said sharply. He was bluffing and he knew it. But it might work. And it might not!

It didn't work. She didn't drop the gun. The muzzle came up to point at his midriff. It was a tiny weapon, actually a gas gun.

Haldane looked at the gas gun and at the face of the girl behind it. Pain was on her face, and grim determination. He understood the determination but he did not understand the pain.

"Put Mr. Bergen back on the bed," the girl said.

"I thought you said his name was Smith."

"I lied. Put him back on the bed."

With the gas gun pointing at his middle, Haldane obeyed. He was unarmed. PGI men carried weapons if the necessity for them was obvious, but bringing a weapon to Mrs. Daffner's party had not been considered appropriate.

He laid Bergen back on the bed. The little drunk did not stir.

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"Now face the wall, put your hands on it and extend your feet toward me," Heather said.

Haldane obeyed. It was obvious that she knew exactly how to search a man with the minimum of danger to herself. Her fingers went lightly but efficiently over his body, without missing any possible hiding places for a weapon.

She seemed surprised. "Do you mean you came here without a weapon?"

Haldane straightened up and turned to face her. She backed away two steps but kept the muzzle of the gun centered on him.

"Why should I have been armed, Heather?" he asked.

Either the question or the calm tone of voice confused her. She did not answer.

"Henry Bergen happens to be an old friend of mine. Up in the ballroom, I didn't admit I recognized him because—well, frankly, because he has taken to drink and hit the skids here recently. But, after thinking it over, I decided that because he was an old friend, I ought to at least try to take him home and sober him up. Now you have stopped me, at the point of a gun. I don't understand this, Heather." He kept his voice calm and his face smooth.

"You're lucky I didn't shoot you before I searched you," the girl answered. Her face was hard. There was a bitterness in it that he did not understand. "Nobody who belongs to Crisper's bunch is fit to be left alive!"

"Eh?" He understood her bitterness. She thought he was working with Crisper. The calmness went out of his voice and the smoothness out of his face. There were some startle reactions that even he could not control. "What the devil are you talking about?"

Her face softened and the hand that held the gun sagged a little. For a moment, she believed him. But then her attitude shifted and her face hardened again.

"You were too interested in Bergen. When Mr. Ertel told

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the waiters to bring him down here, I thought you would probably follow. You did. You also walked right into a trap."

"Could you possibly be mistaken, Heather?" His voice was calm again, his face composed. "Who is this Crisper you are talking about?"

Her face grew even harder at the name. But her voice was calm. "No, I am not mistaken. Walk ahead of me. And don't try to escape because I can really use this gun."

"I don't know what this foolishness is all about, Heather," he tried to protest.

She gestured with the gun toward the door. "Just walk ahead of me and you'll find out."

Every muscle in his back seemed to be aware of the muzzle of the gun as he went through the door. Waiters were in the hall now. Or were they armed guards? They looked at him out of the corners of their eyes, then looked behind him at the girl. They made no move to interfere.

The air of the hall was taut with tension. It seemed to exist in the very atmosphere itself, as a kind of electrical charge. The waiters seemed to be afraid to move more than their eyes. An elevator stopped and discharged three men who hurried down a hallway to the left.

"You follow them," Heather said behind him.

But the men had vanished into a room before he turned the corner of the hall.

"The room at the end," she said.

Four waiters were standing in front of the door she indicated. "Lots of waiters here tonight," he said, over his shoulder.

"Never mind that. Move on." The four waiters looked at him and then at Heather. They kept their faces impassive.

"Open the door and go on in."

Haldane obeyed. He found himself in the entrance hall of a huge private suite. A buzz of voices sounded from the rooms beyond. Two men were standing in the foyer. They



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were not wearing waiter's uniforms, nor did they look at Haldane out of the corners of their eyes; instead they stared unblinkingly at him.

"What have you got here, Conklin?" one of them spoke.

"One of Crisper's men," the girl answered.

"Oh!" Hate appeared in the man's eyes. He jerked his thumb toward the main room of the suite. "In that case, take him right in. Mr. Ertel will be very glad to see him."

Ertel was pacing the floor in the middle of the huge reception room. His white hair was awry and it no longer made a halo about his head. The calm sure smile was gone from his face. Something had happened which had scared the living wits out of him. He was struggling to control the fear in order not to lose control of the people in the room.

Every chair had an occupant, and the walls were lined with people—all of them silent. Most of them looked as if they wished they were somewhere else.

Beyond the drawing room of the suite was a large room with sliding doors. It was crammed to the ceiling with electronic devices. What those devices were Haldane could not discern in the momentary glimpse he got into the place. Two technicians seemed frantically busy over machinery.

Ertel left off his pacing to glare at Haldane and then at Heather. "Who is this, Heather?" he demanded. "You should know better than to bring strangers here now."

"Sorry, Mr. Ertel. But this stranger seemed sufficiently important to bring directly to you. He works for Crisper."

Ertel's head came up. Anger, surprise and rage glittered in his eyes. "But that can't be. His organization has been destroyed and Crisper himself is—" He caught his words but Haldane knew that here was at least one man who also knew that Crisper was dead. Had Crisper been killed by Ertel or by men under Ertel's orders?

"I see," Ertel said. The look in his eyes indicated that he was not pleased by what he saw. His clenched fist hit into

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the palm of his open hand. "By God, maybe we didn't get all of them! Maybe some of them escaped! That might account for what happened to Circel" He looked pleased for a moment. Haldane guessed that Ertel did not know what had happened to Mrs. Dafner and was frantically trying to find a solution to the problem. Ertel's assurances upstairs apparently had been all sham.

"Did something happen to her?" Haldane said. "I thought that what we saw upstairs was entertainment planned for the party."

"Go to hell!" Ertel said. "Wait until I find the man who did this!" His closed fist pounded again into his open palm.

"I don't understand you," Haldane said. "For that matter, I don't understand anything that has happened here. Particularly, I don't understand why I have been brought here at the point of a gun. This happens to be illegal, you know."

"I know," Ertel answered. The tone of his voice indicated that he was not concerned about the illegality of this or any other action.

He moved and stood facing Haldane. He was a big man, massively built, with the body of a wrestler or a miner. He looked down at the slighter agent. "Where is Circe?" he said. His tone and manner were rock hard. As he spoke, an increase of tension manifested itself in the room. Even the little movements went into silence as the people present stopped moving their feet and hands. They almost seemed to stop breathing.

"I'm sorry, Bisker, but I don't know where she is," Haldane answered.

Alarm flicked in Ertel's eyes. "Where did you get that name?" His voice had a sudden rasp in it.

"Is the name important?" Haldane said. "Who is this fellow Crisper that you have been talking about?"

"Never mind about him. "Where did you get that name?"

"It just popped into my mind," Haldane said, shrugging.

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Ertel's breathing grew heavy. "Then where you got it had better also pop into your mind."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Not at all," Ertel said, heavily. "Another dead man won't make any difference. But don't take what I'm saying as a threat." The rasp in Ertel's voice was harsher now. Strong emotions surging below the surface in the man were breaking through in his voice tones.

"FOR SALE—*Homo Sapiens*," Haldane said. "Maybe that's where I got the name."

He was playing by ear here. Inside of him, the warning voice was silent, but it seemed to him that the inner voice was guiding him in what he was saying. He did not understand how this could happen, but he accepted it as a fact. As he spoke, he could feel the tension rise again in the room. The pupils of Ertel's eyes narrowed to the size of pin points. A vein began to throb in the man's forehead. His fists clenched and unclenched.

"Did I say something wrong?" Haldane said. His voice was calm, his manner poised. Every minute of the long and difficult training he had undergone was being used now. As long as he could keep Ertel off balance, keep the man guessing, Ertel would be uncertain, and could take no action. As long as Ertel was uncertain, Haldane had the upper hand.

"Damn you!" The words came out of Ertel's mouth as choked, grunted sounds.

"You will have a cerebral hemorrhage if you don't calm down," Haldane said. "If you don't believe me, consult your own physician. He'll tell you the same thing—"

Haldane swayed to one side as Ertel's fist smashed at his face. The fist went past the agent without touching him. He caught Ertel, shoved him backward. Ertel came toward him again, his face contorted.

"You, too, can be a human being," Haldane said.

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For an instant after he used these words, he thought Ertel was actually going to have a brain hemorrhage. But Ertel stopped his charge. He was off balance again, uncertain of himself and of the action he wanted to take.

"Where did you hear that?" Ertel's face was that of a man on the verge of madness. Haldane knew that his words had struck dangerous notes somewhere. But where? Why should these words disturb Ertel enough to take his mind off of what had happened to Circe Dafner?

"I didn't hear it anywhere in particular. The words just came into my mind," the agent answered. So far as he was concerned, the only purpose of the words was to keep Ertel off balance.

"Talk fast!" Ertel said. "Was that some of Crisper's work? Was he doing that?"

"Doing what?"

"Putting those signs up."

"What signs?"

"Those FOR SALE—*Homo Sapiens*."

"Oh!" Haldane said. Suddenly he understood everything. "As to that—"

"He's trying to pump you, Mr. Ertel," the girl interrupted. "He doesn't know as much as we think he does. But he is trying to find out."

The agent's lips closed to knife line. Darn the girl! As comprehension showed in Ertel's eyes, his face grew even redder.

"I told you before you were in danger of cerebral hemorrhage," Haldane said quickly.

"I'll give you just ten seconds to start talking—"

"Damn you, get out of my way!" a voice screamed from the entrance.

Circe Dafner came striding into the room. She was no longer the smiling, poised queen of the ball, the gracious

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lady receiving homage from her loyal subjects. She was one of the angriest women Haldane had ever seen.

"Damn it, somebody get me a drink!" Circe Dafner was not only angry, but, like Ertel, she was also scared. In her, however, the anger was greater than the fear.

"Circe! Dear Circe! Where have you been? What happened to you? We've all been almost crazy with worry about you." Forgetting about Haldane, Ertel moved to Mrs. Dafner's side. He tried to take her elbow.

She snatched the elbow away from him. "Don't suck up to me! Get me a drink, you damned fool!"

Ertel snatched a decanter from the sideboard. Knowing her habits, he did not bring a glass. The decanter went to her lips, the raw liquid went down her throat like water. Haldane did not know what was in the bottle but when she took it from her lips, it was empty. She flung it across the room.

"Where have I been, you fool?" She glared at Ertel and gestured toward the roof. "I've been up there."

"Up at your party? But we looked everywhere up there for you—"

"Party, hell, I've been up there—in the sky!"

At her words, a stir went around the room. It was followed by a frozen silence as her meaning sank home to her hearers. Ertel goggled at her, still not understanding the meaning of her words. Next to him, Haldane could hear Heather breathing fast again.

"In—in the sky? I—I don't understand you, Circe."

Mrs. Dafner threw up her hands. "I don't understand it myself, but that's where I've been. I've been so high in the sky that the Earth was only a small round ball far below me."

The room got completely still after she spoke.

"Are you sure this—this wasn't a dream, Circe? Well—I

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don't see how it could have happened. I mean, there is no way—"

"It was no dream, Ertell" Her voice rose in a roar. "Who meddled with Bergen's transit? Who dared to use his transit to play this kind of a practical joke on me? Did Bergen himself do it? If he did, I'll have the hide flayed from him inch by inch." Her voice grew progressively louder as she spoke.

For the first time, Mrs. Dafner saw John Haldane. "Who is this?" she exploded. "Why didn't you tell me we had a stranger here?"

"One of Crisper's gang," Ertel said. "I—I was questioning him when you arrived."

"Crisper!" Hot fury roared in her voice. "You told me not one of them was left alive!" Her eyes came to focus on Haldane. Rage glittered in them. "So maybe this man did it? In that case, I'll take over the job of questioning him. Martell Come here and bring your probe with you."

One of the technicians in the adjoining room picked up an instrument and came trotting at her command.

Haldane knew that he was face to face with a much tougher and much more dangerous specimen of humanity than Ertel. He could not throw this woman off balance by asking quick questions. She would drive through all such questions to get the answer that she wanted.

She moved toward him. And moving toward him, she seemed to loom over him like a giantess.

He stared at her. She was becoming larger as she approached. The whole room was becoming full of giants, of huge people. Haldane stared at them. He did not understand. Was he becoming unconscious and was this appearance of hugeness a hallucination of collapsing consciousness? He did not know the answer, but he knew that this experience was jarring him to the very molecules of his body, to the very bottom of his soul.

Giants loomed over him. He stared up at them. They were

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becoming larger and larger. Then, like a puff of smoke collapsing before the rushing wind, they were gone. To the people in the room, it seemed as if John Haldane had suddenly become a doll, becoming smaller and smaller, finally to disappear.

## CHAPTER NINE

HALDANE felt a moment of giddy vertigo as Circe Dafner became a giant and then vanished. In that moment of vertigo, he cursed his errant *psi* function, for having failed to warn him.

"Why should I have warned you?" the inner voice said. "We were in no danger, then."

*Eh?*

"I told you the forces were present. They did not threaten us, then."

*You are using "then" too often.*

"*Then* is not *now*. We are in danger now. But it is a danger against which no human device, no human strength, can protect us. We go with God here and now, with *the random factor*." The inner voice went into quick silence as if even it did not dare make available any further data now.

Haldane felt movement both inside and outside of him. He was in darkness. He was moving in that darkness, but he could not tell in what direction he was moving.



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Sight came to him in that darkness, for a split second. It was not sight in the sense of seeing with his eyes. The optic nerves and the supporting neural network that translated and carried the light impulses had nothing to do with this kind of seeing. It was a direct contact of some kind with the object perceived. The object was Earth, as seen from a vast height. The Earth was a round ball, floating in majestic silence in the vast void of space.

This sense of contact also lasted for only a microsecond, but even this short period of time was long enough for Haldane to realize that he was seeing what Mrs. Dafner had seen. The contact vanished in another flickering microsecond. A room leaped into existence around him.

One instant the room was not there, then it was there. He glimpsed the walls come into reality around him, and he knew that the walls were seen with his eyes. He felt a floor come into place beneath his feet. At the moment of contact, he sagged downward. Shock was already in him. It was increasing. He went to the floor, caught himself on his hands and knees and held himself there.

Shock rolled through him. He made no effort to resist it. Every cell in his body seemed to be distorted and out of place. Agony swept through him as the cells seemed to seek and to find their proper positions.

The shock and the muscular jerks came in waves—and passed the same way. The agony was also undulatory. It came and went, came and went—each wave less than the preceding one. Then it was gone.

Under his hands and knees was a stone floor. Ahead of him was a dimly lighted doorway. Voices came from the room beyond this doorway, asking questions. The questioning voices went into quick silence as another voice answered.

This voice was deep and calm and poised. It belonged to a man who was very sure of himself.

"The more we consider the matter, the more certain we become that the sum total of human inventions and discov-

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eries, all of them added together, are not a hundredth part as miraculous and as wonderful and as awe-inspiring as the organism that produced them, the living human brain—and the human cortex.”

The deep voice paused. Haldane, still on his hands and knees, felt another shock wave roll through him. It came as tremors, then the tremors became spasms. He eased himself back to the floor. Again his muscles jerked and twitched as nerve endings caught the signals to act and as the muscles responded. Again he made no effort to resist or to control the motion of the muscles. He waited for the wave to pass, knowing it would probably be the last one.

In the adjoining room the deep voice spoke again.

“Perhaps only a few people in all human history have glimpsed the potentialities of the human cortex. Even fewer people have been able to free it from the environmentally-imposed chains that bind it and to use the vast potentialities inherent in it and in the brain and body structures that support it. These few people who have been able to set the cortex free have worked true miracles. Historically, we have known these people as sages or as saints. Sometimes we have misunderstood them, sometimes they have communicated very poorly, and we have called them magicians, wizards, warlocks or witches. Some of them have been true witches, those who have grasped only a part of the potentialities of the human cortex, and have used these potentialities for their own gain, without grasping the whole. These people the race has burned at the stake, drowned, tortured. Unfortunately we have also burned a great many innocent people by mistake, those who were not witches or warlocks, but were only poor in communicating what they knew. In this area, a little knowledge is truly a dangerous thing.”

The voice paused. The spasm was passing in Haldane. He wondered about the voice. Who was speaking in there? In his mind was the thought that no person was in there, that no one was speaking, that what he heard was a product of

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his own imagination. He had never heard another human talk as the man in the next room talked, except for Pete Balkan. And even Pete, to his closest friends, had not been willing to talk this way very often. The voice continued.

"There is another aspect of the human cortex which is worth further investigation. Part of this aspect is fairly well known, part is not known at all but is only hinted at here and there, largely in mystic and occult literature. It is as if the people who have developed this second aspect have been afraid to admit what they knew to be true, and have hidden their knowledge, revealing it only to a very small circle of initiates, if they revealed it at all. I do not find much to criticize in this attitude, for this second aspect of the human cortex, this second ability of the human organism, is truly the secret of the ages."

The voice paused, then continued.

"However, I will now discuss the first aspect. I refer here to the ability of the human cortex to create spontaneously a complete solution to a problem. It is not pertinent here to inquire as to the *real source* of the spontaneous solution, whether or not that source may have its roots in other universes, in other dimensions, in what some have called *the random factor*.

"In this area of no rules, each man is his own law and his own prophet, his own faith and the keeper of it. The first aspect now under discussion, however, is the spontaneous creation of a solution to a problem, the sudden burst of intuition, the flash of insight or of understanding. This ability has played a vital part in many, if not all, of the more important inventions made by men. Indeed, it is actually the inventive ability. Moreover, many inventors have actually *seen* their inventions before they made them, complete in every detail, in their minds. Many of the great mathematical developments which have opened vast new horizons for us have been achieved in this way, in a sudden spurting flash of understanding or of insight. This is historical fact."

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The deep voice paused again. The spasm had now passed away completely in John Haldane. But in his mind was a recurring fear. Where was Mrs. Dafner? The memory of the giantess moving toward him was still strong in his mind. As to the voice he was hearing, he was sure it was a product of his own imagination. Mrs. Dafner's man Martel had probably used the probe on him. Possibly he was still using it, in conjunction with gas. The voice Haldane was hearing was the result of the hypnotic suggestions being thrown at him. The voice came again.

"Now we come to the second aspect, and to the most fascinating concept of all. We know that the human cortex creates spontaneous solutions to problems. *Is it also possible that the human cortex can create in another manner, can actually cause to come into existence both animate and inanimate matter? In other words, does the secret of creativity, literal creation of physical objects that are tangible to our senses, lie in the human cortex?*"

Without realizing it, Haldane was holding his breath. He sensed that in the adjoining room others were also holding their breath. He knew why. The concept being presented here was not only fascinating, it was truly the secret of the ages.

"There is a something that we call the future, a function that we call *time*. This function is understood and used by all of us, to some degree. The word *time* and the word *future* are actually very poor ways to express this function. These words are verbal shorthand, single symbols that stand for a most complex and bewildering interaction between space, energy and matter. For centuries the human race has butted its head against these words, and against the wall of semantic confusion that is implicit in them. The race has used the word *future* to mean time and time alone. It does not mean this alone, it can never mean this alone, it does not stand alone.

"Actually the very concept of time is improperly applied

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here. Except in the most limited way, the future has nothing to do with time. Instead, the future is an unformed, malleable, moldable matrix. It is the stuff out of which all events flow, out of which all physical things and events are not only created but are continuously re-created. Now the secret is—*that the human cortex can actually manipulate the mold and shape this malleable matrix, can build out of it that which is sought, wanted or needed. This molding of the future is the act of creation as performed by the human cortex.*”

The deep rich voice went into silence. In the next room people stirred. Someone asked a question. “You mean that some cortexes can manipulate the future, can be truly creative.”

“Any cortex can do it, any human being can do it,” the rich voice answered decisively.

“But—” There was protest in the single spoken word, protest and doubt, as if new vistas were suddenly opening before the man who had spoken, such unlimited horizons that he did not know what to do with them. Haldane sympathized with the man who had protested. New vistas were opening inside him too, vistas so great that he hardly dared grasp them—provided these voices were not a gas-induced hallucination. He was still expecting Mrs. Dafner’s face to come swimming out of nowhere at him.

“Every cortex does it, every human being does it—continuously!” the deep voice answered the protest. “This is the act of creation, in one area, as practiced by every human being every moment of his life.”

The silence in the other room was complete.

Haldane got slowly to his feet. The effects of the shock and the resultant spasms were completely gone. His mind was still fogged with thoughts of Mrs. Dafner and of the fact that she had suddenly become a giantess. For that matter, he did not know what to make of anything else,

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including where he was, the people in the adjoining room and the rich voice talking in there.

Where he was did not seem of much importance. He was somewhere in the universe—he knew. He was also on the planet Earth—he hoped. Unless that momentary glimpse of the Earth as a ball had meaning. He hoped it had no meaning. But wherever he was, it didn't matter much. A PGI agent was at home anywhere—both the PGI and the agent hoped. He moved to the edge of the doorway and stood looking into the next room.

So far as he could tell, the room was real. This, then, was not hypnotic hallucination induced by gas. Three young men and two young women were sprawled on the floor, in easy, relaxed attitudes. They wore the briefest of clothing and their skins were all the same color, a deep bronze. Somewhere he had seen this skin color before. Where? He couldn't remember. The faces of the youths were intelligent and friendly. They looked like nice kids, the kind you might meet hiking in the hills, playing tennis or flying a glider plane.

The sixth person in the room was much older, and much different, but Haldane liked him on first sight. Like Ertel, this man had snow-white hair, a great shock of it. But his face did not in the least resemble that of Ertel. This man's eyes spoke of peace of mind, serenity, and a vast calm so great that nothing could disturb it. The eyes were warm and glowing. They had looked into the far depths of space and into the dim reaches of time and had found nothing there to disturb their owner's peace.

The white-haired man was sitting on a low stool. As Haldane watched, he reached up to a wall shelf behind him and picked up a plain straw mat, which he laid on the floor directly in front of him.

"I will now demonstrate one aspect of the act of creation as it can be performed by a human being."

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"Please watch the mat," the white-haired man said. "Note that it is bare."

In the other room no one seemed to breathe. The white-haired man with the calm face and the eyes that had probed into the farthest depths of space and the dimmest reaches of time took a deep breath and let it out as a gentle sigh. A sound like the quick tearing of very fine silk rustled through the room so gently that it was hardly audible. Yet in that sound and in this moment, a change had taken place.

A little green stone lay upon the straw mat. An instant before, the mat had been bare. Now a little round stone that glowed with a dull green sheen lay upon it.

"Wha—what—what?"

"Where did it come from?" one of the girls gasped.

A youth reached out and touched it with his fingers. He touched it with the tip of his tongue, then laid it hastily back on the mat.

"It's real," the white-haired man said, gently. "As to where it came from, I created it. Stated more scientifically, I used my cortex to blend and to use the real force of this universe in the act of creation."

"But where did it come from? Where was it?"

"It did not come from anywhere. A second before it was created, it was not anywhere in this universe or in any other universe. It was undifferentiated primal stuff, more basic than energy. I used my cortex to manipulate this basic stuff in such a way that this came into existence. Note the green color. It is, actually, a small piece of copper ore. If you test it chemically, if you heat it and observe the spectrum, you will find that it is true copper. Anything that can be done with copper can be done with this piece of copper ore."

The sound in the room was a prolonged gasp. In this moment, a million years of evolution had come to full flower. The youths who watched were finding this flowering a stupendous sight. One of the girls lifted her eyes and saw Haldane standing in the doorway. She looked at him with-

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out seeing him, then looked away, then hastily jerked her eyes back to him in a double-take. A scream on her lips, she came to her feet, pointing at him.

Haldane stepped into the room. He was bemused, both by what he had just seen and by a thought that he could not quite succeed in eradicating from his mind. At the sight of Haldane, a flicker of surprise passed over the calm face of the white-haired man. But the look was like a pebble dropped into a vast ocean; it made a small splash but it did not disturb the serenity of those vast depths.

"Hello!" The white-haired man seemed pleased. "We have a guest. How nice."

"I—uh—" Haldane was more perturbed than he had ever been in his life, without knowing why. There were a thousand things he could have said and wanted to say. He said none of them. The thought that he had been unable to eradicate from his mind came unbidden to his lips. "I—I'm looking for Mrs. Dafner. Where—where is she?"

The silence became very thick. Haldane had the impression that he had used a bad word. So far as he was concerned, Mrs. Dafner's name *was* a bad word and he didn't much care who knew it.

"Mrs. Dafner?" Even the white-haired man could not keep the start of real surprise from his voice. "Why do you ask for her?"

"I was at her party," Haldane said. Confusion was coming up in him, an aftermath of shock. He was not saying what he wanted to say. He shook his head. "Well, it doesn't matter, but I was at her party. Then I was here." He shook his head again. "A very interesting demonstration you just put on there." He nodded toward the piece of green stone on the straw mat. "It was one of the cleverest examples of legerdemain I have ever seen, even on the stage. I didn't see your hands move."

"My hands did not move." Coldness appeared in the voice of the white-haired man.



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"Oh," Haldane said. He was still saying the wrong things. What could he say that was right?

"You said you were at Mrs. Dafner's party?"

"Yes."

"I see," nodded the white-haired man.

"Sorry to intrude," Haldane said apologetically. "I guess I got an overload of booze and wandered in here by mistake. I hope you will overlook it. If you have ever loaded up on Martian fizz-water, you will understand what happened to me."

"We do not regard your presence here as an intrusion," the white-haired man said. "We are very glad to have you. But we had no notice of your coming and—" The man seemed perplexed.

"I didn't have any notice of it myself!" Haldane said. Darn it, this was the wrong thing to say too! He had to get away from these people, he had to get somewhere, anywhere, until he could reason this thing out. "Do people generally notify you that they are coming?"

"We usually have notice," the white-haired man answered. "Usually they don't just appear out of nowhere, especially not in a bedroom cut into solid rock."

"Uck!" Haldane said. He wished desperately that the inner voice would tell him what to do but it was silent. He glanced quickly behind him. The bedroom had a stool, a small table, a dresser and a bed that looked as hard as the floor. There was no window. Unquestionably the walls were solid stone. "Yep, it's a bedroom all right," he said. "Whose is it, by the way?"

"It's mine," the white-haired man answered. "I sleep there. I'm very curious as to how you got in. You didn't come through this room and there are no other entrances to my bedroom."

"Come to think of it, I'm kind of curious myself," Haldane said. "Come to think of it again, where am I? This seems a silly question to ask, but it is the one that comes to mind."

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He smiled at all of them, in an effort to show his good will. At least he hoped they would take his smile that way. Secretly he knew that the smile was actually an effort to hide his confusion.

The white-haired man considered the matter. His face was kind but it revealed that there was a problem in the back of his mind which he did not quite know how to solve. Or perhaps many problems were in the back of his mind and he was deciding how best to solve them. He spoke slowly. "Since I don't quite see how you can escape without our permission"—the words raised a touch of chill in the PGI agent—"I don't see why you shouldn't know where you are—if you don't know already. Sara, will you open the blinds?"

"Of course, Larry." The tall girl moved quickly to the wall and touched a switch there. A section of the wall slid away. A thick plastic window was revealed. Beyond the window was—

Haldane felt shock come up in him as he looked out. Since he was being watched and he felt his fate was in the balance, he fought to hide his surprise. Knowing that he wasn't fooling anybody but himself, he studied the scene beyond the window.

There, a gleaming ball was bright in a far-off sky. A part of one sea was visible. The surface of the ball looked as smooth as glass, but he knew this was a result of the distance and that in fact the surface was rough. From this distance, even the mountains were smaller than tiny wrinkles on the skin of an orange.

Haldane turned to the white-haired man. "You know, that's Earth." He kept his voice calm, the tones even and smooth, his features composed in the best PGI tradition.

"That is right."

"Then this is the Moon. That's where I am—on the Moon. Or possibly on a space-station circling Earth."

"Your first deduction was correct."

"Then I came from Mrs. Dafner's party directly to the

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Moon." The weird impressions of seeing the Earth from the sky suddenly jelled and made sense to Haldane. "Well! This is certainly interesting." He looked defiantly at the group.

Nobody denied that it was interesting. The white-haired man smiled approvingly at him. "Nicely done. Ninety-nine men out of a hundred, when unexpectedly faced with the sight of the Earth in the sky above them instead of under their feet, would have fainted."

"Thank you," Haldane said. "I am not the fainting type."

"I see you aren't." The white-haired man continued smiling. "Tell me. How is Mr. Kelvin these days?"

"What?" Haldane gasped. "Kelvin? Kelvin who? I mean—"

"Please," the white-haired man begged. "Don't bother trying to continue the act. You're a PGI agent and you know it and I know it."

"Well!" Haldane said. "Do you mind telling me how you know this?"

"Not at all. I recognized the breed, among other things. I used to be a PGI agent myself."

Haldane stared owlishly at the white-haired man. "How'd you get out of the service?"

"I resigned. The PGI is a good outfit. Within their limitations, they are doing a good job. I had no quarrel with them and I have none now. The work they are doing is important but there is other work that is more important."

"Such as—legerdemain?"

"I told you before—that wasn't legerdemain, that wasn't trickery."

"Sorry," Haldane said. "What's your name?"

"Larry Shaw."

"Good to meet you, Larry. I'm Johnny Haldane." Shaw's handclasp was warm and friendly. There was a good feeling about Shaw, a warmth, a human friendliness, but something was not right. Shaw introduced Haldane to the others. Sara was the tall girl. Jen was the skinny one. The three bronzed youths were Dick, Groff and Bill. They shook hands

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with Haldane without reservation and without fear.

"I'm still curious to know how you actually got here," Shaw said. "I could make a guess, but I can hardly bring myself to believe my own guessing." He shook his head, still puzzling over some inner problem that refused to resolve itself.

"How do people usually get here?"

Shaw hesitated and for a bleak second Haldane wondered if the white-haired man were reading his mind. Then the smile came again to Shaw's serene face.

"Generally, they buy a book," he said.

"That is interesting. A guide book, no doubt?"

"It's not quite as simple as that," Shaw patiently explained. "They buy a book. The whole story is there, in the book. If they can figure out the story from the book, they can also understand how to get here."

"I see," Haldane said. "A magic guide book. If you can solve the riddle, you get to come to the moon. I can think of a lot of places I would much rather be. Say, what's the title of this book?"

Shaw's smile was very serene. "You may have heard of it—*Homo Sapiens*."

Haldane was almost shock-proof by now. After watching Mrs. Dafner turn into a giant, then finding himself in some secluded hide-away on the Moon, nothing that happened could impress him very much—except possibly the title to this book. This impressed him. But he was not prepared to admit the fact. "Sorry, but I haven't heard of such a book."

Shaw did not lose his knowing smile. "You're an excellent liar, Johnny. One of the best I have ever seen. But the narrowing of the pupils of your eyes, among other things, gives you away when you lie. Don't they have training courses in the PGI Institute now to teach their candidates how to control this narrowing of the pupils? It seems to me they would have added such a course. As to the book, you've probably seen it advertised for sale on Earth, usually in

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some out-of-the-way shop, for we don't want to attract too much attention at this time: FOR SALE--*Homo Sapiens*."

Haldane took deliberate control of the narrowing of the pupils of his eyes. This ability *was* taught at the PGI Institute, but he had neglected to practice it recently. In consequence, he had lost automatic control of it. "I can't say I have," he answered.

Shaw seemed greatly pleased. "Splendid! Now you have taken conscious control of your eye pupils. I don't know how you got here, but we can really use you."

"What the devil—can't I even lie around here?" Haldane complained, much discomfited.

"Not very well. So the PGI is here? I didn't even know they were interested in us."

"Come to think of it, I don't think they are," Haldane answered. "What are you doing that would make us interested in you?"

"Nothing," Shaw answered. "We are just a few people who are trying to do our share toward making the universe—and particularly the Solar System—a little better place for men of good will to live in."

"Does making the Solar System a better place in which to live include lecturing on the ways in which the human cortex can manipulate the future?" Haldane questioned. He thought this would be a difficult question to answer.

Shaw's eyes twinkled at him. "So you overheard my little talk! What did you think of it?" The man was unperturbed.

"Well—"

"Sssss!" the girl Sara said. She pointed toward the bedroom. "There's somebody else in there now."

"What?" Shaw was really startled.

From the bedroom came the distinct sound of a snore.

Shaw motioned them to silence, then tiptoed into the bedroom. He emerged in a few minutes carrying a snoring man in his arms.

"Henry Bergen!" Haldane gasped.

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"Do you know him then?"

"Of course I know him."

"Then you may know also that there is no man in the Solar System that I would rather see than Henry Bergen."

"You have had a lucky accident then." Haldane was completely at a loss to explain either the mysterious appearance of the little scientist or Shaw's pleasure at the fact.

"Bergen's presence here is no accident," Shaw said, shaking his head. "Nor is your being here in any way an accident. Both of you were sent here—for some purpose. Excuse me, please, while I restore him to consciousness."

"Of course." Haldane watched Shaw carry the limp Bergen from the room. The bronze-colored kids went along.

Haldane was left alone in the room. From the mat on the floor, a small green stone stared up at him. Beyond the thick plastic window, Earth was a gleaming ball in the sky. At the edges of the window, the saw-toothed mountains of the Moon seemed to gnash their ragged teeth at him.

He did not know which he liked the least: the green stone on the straw mat, the shining planet in the sky or the saw-toothed mountains that reared in the lunar sky.

## CHAPTER TEN

IN THE days that followed, Haldane learned much more about the saw-toothed mountains. But he did not learn anything about the unknown purpose that had brought him to the Moon. Nor did he learn anything more about Henry Bergen. He did not see the man again nor did his inquiries elicit any information. He saw Shaw occasionally, but that white-haired enigma wrapped up in an eternal smile would not talk about Bergen.

Apparently there was no way to get information out of Shaw if the latter did not wish to divulge it. When questioned, Shaw only turned on his serene smile. Haldane wondered if Shaw was testing him.

No attempt was made to prevent Haldane from investigating the group. They were operating a mine and they made no secret of the fact. Haldane did not doubt that it was a perfectly legal, legitimate commercial proposition. A thick vein of ore heavy with tungsten and tin zigzagged downward toward the core of the moon. They were following this vein, mining the ore and concentrating it, but not smelting it. The concentrates went out daily, by jet freight, to Lunar City. The jet freighter also occasionally took out

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some of the bronze-colored youths who mined so industriously here, and brought in new ones, both young men and young women. Usually the newcomers did not have the healthy, fit look of the ones who went out.

Haldane wondered where they went. Dimly he remembered having seen someone with a skin this color. He remembered the incident—a youth with a skin the color of bronze had been loafing in the spaceport the day the fat man had trapped him in the booth. Even after he remembered the incident, Haldane could make nothing of it.

The youth in the spaceport had been loafing. The ones here were working, every Jack and Jill had a job, and worked at it. Haldane followed the vein deep down inside the lunar crust. He inspected the crusher and the concentrating tables, the big storage bin and the chute that fed the concentrates down into the hold of the jet freighter in the hangar in the cavern, hollowed out of the side of the cliff.

He examined the air-compressor rooms, where impurities were filtered out of the air supply and oxygen brought in from Lunar City was fed into the atmosphere. Alert, bronze-skinned kids were at work everywhere. The whole mine, of course, and all the under-surface galleries and tunnels were pressurized, but the pressure was not the sea-level pressure of Earth but was much lower. He wondered what would happen if the big hangar doors should fail to close after the jet freighter had blasted off. The hangar itself was sealed off by pressure doors, but what would happen to the mining operations here if the air seals were ruptured?

Haldane went to the small door in the big hangar doors. A youth was on duty there. He politely advised Haldane that if the latter wished to explore the surface, a spacesuit was necessary, and offered to provide one. Haldane thanked him.

The mining did not hold Haldane's interest long. He was much more interested in the bronze kids, and what they were doing. He discovered that each of them spent about six



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hours each day, working as a miner. They seemed to sleep about four hours. They spent another four hours each day in recreation, in sports which emphasized cooperation rather than competition, in listening to music, in reading, in painting, in swimming. There was even a swimming pool. Work, sleep and recreation accounted for about fourteen hours out of each day. But ten hours were left unaccounted for. What were they doing during this ten-hour period? Haldane started asking questions. He got an answer every time. Every answer was a correct answer, but all of them added up to an incomplete picture of what these young people did with their time.

"Why did you come here?" he asked the tall girl, Sara.

"Because I wanted a job in a mine," she answered coolly.

"Oh, come now, there is surely more to it than that."

"Is there? Why don't you ask Larry?"

"I did. He won't give me a satisfactory answer."

"Then why should I?" the tall girl answered, walking away. She didn't seem angry or blunt. Certainly she wasn't mad at him. On the contrary, he had the impression that she liked him. But whether she liked him or not, she wasn't going to answer his questions.

"Just a minute," he called after her. "I would like to borrow your copy of *Homo Sapiens*."

"What?" she said. The expression on her face indicated that she had not heard him correctly.

"Your copy of *Homo Sapiens*. You know: FOR SALE—*Homo Sapiens*. I understand it is a kind of a guide book."

Her face revealed puzzled bewilderment. "What are you talking about?"

"Larry and I discussed this book in your presence the night I arrived."

"Did you? I don't recall. In any event, I don't have a copy of it."

There was admiration in his laugh. "The stage lost a great actress in you, Sara."

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She smiled at him. "Did it? Well, if the stage has lost an actress, perhaps the human race has gained one?" The smile became as enigmatical as that of Mona Lisa.

Haldane could not discover what these people did with the ten hours that were missing. But he discovered where they did it. A whole section of the mine was sealed off. Several doors gave entrance to this section but they were always locked. He could never catch anybody going through these doors though occasionally he found someone coming out. Watching carefully, he discovered that these bronze kids used other doors when he was near.

The situation was the same with the jet freighter. He expressed a desire to go with the jet on the next hop to Lunar City. The pilot politely advised him that he could go. But he never could catch the freighter leaving. If he waited for hours, the ship stayed in the hangar, until he went to get a drink of water. Then the roar of the jets told him the ship was leaving. If he made special arrangements with the pilot to make the next trip—his request to make the next trip was always granted—something always came up and the pilot managed to take the ship off without him. If he took the pilot to task about this, he was answered with a profuse apology and the certain assurance that it would not happen the next time. But it always did happen the next time.

He reached the point where he was taking his inability to get his questions answered and the way the jet took off without him as a kind of a joke. Back on Earth, he knew that neither Pepperidge nor Kelvin would regard any of these things as being jokes. Nor would Pete regard them in this way.

How had it happened that both Heather and Mrs. Dafner had been returned to Earth while he and Henry Bergen had been brought to the Moon?

Haldane did not pretend to understand the mechanics of such an operation. He was even doubtful if the word *mechanics* could be applied to such a situation. He was not

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a scientist nor a semanticist. How could a woman be taken so high into the air that she could see the Earth as a ball? How could two men be transported, in the flick of an eye, from the Earth to Luna? Had *the random factor* been involved in this operation?

The vast cold of outer space seemed to come in and touch John Haldane at the thought. Haldane needed data. He needed to talk to Pepperidge, if only to get bawled out for some mythical misdeed; he needed to talk to Kelvin, most of all he needed to talk to Peter Balkan.

The thought of Heather kept coming back into his mind in spite of everything he could do to prevent it. He would like to see her again. The girl in the almost non-existent bathing suit fleeing from the amorous youth in the enchanted forest on the roof of the Hotel Cosmos had done something to him.

Occasionally rumblings came from the sealed portions of the mine where Haldane was not permitted to go. They sounded as if some mighty machine was being tested there. Yet the sounds were not like those of any machine that Haldane had ever heard. They seemed to be non-mechanical, like the surging of heavy currents in non-space.

*Non-space? The words have no meaning!* Haldane thought. He was angry with himself for thinking nonsense. Yet where did sense leave off and nonsense begin?

Nightly he watched the great ball of Earth roll through the lunar sky. This was one of the most fascinating sights he had ever seen. The people here had found Shangri La; they had withdrawn from Earth, from the flux and flow of the matrix on the mother planet. But, aloof, they still watched the home world roll through the skies at night.

Outside the plastic windows the gaunt lunar landscape still leered at him with gargoyle shapes. Haldane estimated that Lunar City could not be too far away. Perhaps, with a spacesuit, or with oxygen equipment and protective clothing, he could walk there. But after taking another look at

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the landscape outside, he decided he did not want to walk anywhere.

Then Sara came looking for him. "Larry wants to see you," the tall girl said.

Shaw received him in his own quarters where Haldane had first appeared. The white-haired enigma was still wrapped in his eternal smile. As they talked, the agent thought that Shaw was carefully weighing him, testing him, and evaluating him, and that the process of finding out about him involved channels other than Shaw's eyes and ears.

*Ping!* The little warning bell rang inside Haldane's brain. "*Psi* functions are in operation here," the inner voice whispered.

"I thought I had lost you," Haldane said, silently.

"You should have lost me, after the way you have ignored my information," the inner voice said, severely.

"Thanks for the data on the *psi* functions," Haldane said, humbly, but silently.

He continued his conversation with Shaw as if nothing at all had happened inside of him. "I am very much interested in the little piece of green stone which appeared on the straw mat the night I—ah—arrived. I called it legerdemain at the time—"

"You have changed your mind?" Shaw inquired.

"I would certainly like to see you do that again."

"A great many people would like to see me do it for the first time," Shaw answered. "You must realize that you glimpsed something that properly comes near the end of a long, and sometimes difficult, training program. Not just anyone can walk in here and see what you saw accidentally and ask to see it again and get his wish granted."

"I see," Haldane said.

"That's the problem with you, you have seen too much," Shaw said. "And a great deal that you haven't seen, you will soon be guessing at."

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"Um. There is more to see then?"

"Definitely."

"And if I see it, or even guess at it, then what happens?"

"I haven't decided yet. If you were just an ordinary person, we could block your memory and turn you loose in Lunar City, or better still, on Earth, and nothing much would ever come of it. If we turned you loose on Earth and you finally recovered your blocked memories and tried to tell what had happened to you, most people would think you were insane, and you would find yourself undergoing psychiatric treatment if you insisted on talking.

"However, a PGI agent is in a different category. If we blocked your memories and turned you loose, and you recovered those memories and reported back to duty, your superiors might think you had gone insane. But the PGI believes its agents until they are proved to be liars, and no matter what kind of a story you told them, and how much it was disbelieved, the PGI would check it right down to the last hour of the time during which you were missing. If you told them you had been in this mine and that this mine was located on the Moon, sooner or later we would have PGI agents here not only in uncomfortable numbers but in disguises that would be difficult to penetrate. If they could not get in any other way, they would arrive in force, with a John Doe warrant. So you see how it is?"

"Yes, it will work about that way," Haldane said. He felt comfortable because of the fact that the PGI was behind him. A good outfit. They looked after their own.

"Whichever way I look at you, you are a problem," Shaw said.

"Are you a little scared of me, maybe, and of the PGI?"

"Neither," Shaw answered promptly. "I know that outfit and if they knew us as well as I know them, we would find them on our side. The problem is not that they are a menace to us, but that they will have to investigate us if they find out about us. The law requires it. The very nature of the

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man who heads the organization requires it. While their investigation would not reveal anything that would damage us, it would disturb us. And the report of the investigating agents might fall into the wrong hands."

"Look!" Haldane said, his voice hot. "Nobody reads PGI agents' reports, nobody has access to J except properly qualified agents."

Shaw smiled benignly. "Yes, I know."

Haldane did not like that superior smile. It said there might be a leak in the organization. And, of course, there might be! "Whose hands would be the wrong ones?" he demanded.

"Well, I think I know, but I am not quite certain. This much I know: A struggle for power is in progress which will influence history for thousands of years yet to come. If the struggle goes one way, it may be that the Dark Ages will come again, that a pall will settle over the Solar System from which the human race may never emerge. If the struggle goes the right way, the way we want it to go, it may be that the human race will finally come into its heritage, and that men will actually become *Homo Sapiens*." The smile on Shaw's face was almost a glow.

Haldane considered that smile, and liked it. "A man once told me that in his opinion something new was emerging in the Solar System."

"Who said that?" Shaw asked, showing sudden interest.

"I'd rather not tell you."

"All right. But the man who said that was right. And the something new is *Homo Sapiens* emerging from his shell, from the millennia of bondage to his animal past." The glow grew stronger on Shaw's face, then went away. "However, *Homo Sapiens* may feel the birth pangs most strongly before he gets born and becomes what he is to become." Shaw's eyes came to rest on Haldane and a rare frown appeared on his face. "But I still don't know what to do with you. I can't keep you here forever. The PGI will tear the System apart

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looking for you. They will hunt you in every dive on Earth, on Mars and on Venus. They will drag rivers for you, they will have every local law enforcement officer in the System looking for you. What am I going to do with you?" Perplexity looked out of the man's eyes.

"You might shoot me," Haldane said mildly.

Shaw hastily shook his head. "No. We are handicapped by one of our beliefs—we hold human life sacred. Under no circumstances will we shoot you or even seriously harm you."

"In that case, you have nothing to fear from me or from the PGI," Haldane said heartily. He knew there was a good reason why he had liked this man. "You have a right to organize a secret society if you want to. You have a right to hire miners who will belong to your secret society. No laws have been broken, no one has been harmed, you have not plotted the overthrow of the government. You are in no danger."

"Not in the way you think. But I might have difficulty in preventing the PGI agents who investigated us, and learned the real story, from resigning from the PGI and joining us."

"Eh?" Haldane said. "You intrigue me. But you are hardly talking sense. One might resign, but not two."

Shaw smiled gently at him. Again Haldane had the impression that he was a small child asking impertinent questions.

"Haven't you liked this place and the people here?"

"Yes. But what has that got to do with agents resigning?"

"Quite a lot. One of the reasons you have liked this place is because unknown to you, your emotions are being manipulated here. Energies which lie in a psychic band which most people cannot detect are constantly generated here. These energies—they are actually instrumentally detectable by equipment that is sensitive enough—are resonating certain cell groupings inside of you. We maintain a certain type of psychic field here.

"A person who comes here and who is inclined toward the

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good—I use that word very loosely—begins to tune into the psychic band being generated here, and he begins to like the people here and this place. This is true liking, and it is what all men seek, a feeling of harmony, of friendship. It has a definite purpose here and it is a part of a much larger program. Now if PGI agents come here to investigate us—being what they are, essentially men of good will—they will resonate to this psychic band. It is close enough to their own deep drives so that they cannot avoid being influenced by it. They will find themselves liking us and this place so much that they will try to resign and join us.”

“Well—” Haldane said.

“We like to select our own people. Rather, we like to select them by letting them select us and then by finding us.”

As Shaw talked, the dream was glowing on his face again. It echoed in the words he used like the music of some mighty organ.

“This psychic field sounds like a wonderful way to destroy your enemies—by making friends of them,” Haldane said musingly. He was tremendously moved. He did not question the existence of such a field. Not only was his own liking of this place and these bronze kids obvious to him, but the fact that Shaw was speaking the truth was visible on the white-haired man’s face. Hope leaped up inside John Haldane—the oldest hope of the human race—of a world without hunger, without fear, without hate and without war. It was a bigger hope now than it had ever been, it did not include just one planet, one small dot of mud called Earth—it included a whole system! And by extension, tomorrow the universe!

The glow went away from Shaw’s face. Irritation passed as a series of tiny ripples over his fine features. “That was what we also hoped, at first. But we have discovered that the psychic field does not work that way. The field has to be knowingly used; it has to find an organization for good within the individual which it can resonate. Otherwise, the result



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is disaster. If a person comes to us with hate hidden deep within him, or if we give the psychic field to people who are using hate as their major emotional configuration, the energy of the psychic field is automatically converted by the individual into—hate!

"Thus the good which we try to give is automatically transformed and comes back to us or is turned loose into the world again as evil. Now, perhaps, you understand one reason why we have hidden ourselves away here. For the time being, we admit only people who can find us. These are good people who come to us. We cannot work with any others, as yet. But even in the case of these kids who come to us, we have found that a rigorous training program is necessary before the energy of the psychic field can be freely utilized by them, and transformed by them into more good and not into more hate."

Pain crossed Shaw's face as he spoke and was gone and the glow was back again. "That is our hope for the future, that we can extend the work we do here, that we can send these bronze kids out into a better world and into a better universe."

Inside of John Haldane something turned a flip-flop and started to dance. Somewhere back in his past he had dreamed this same dream. He wondered when it had been. The memory came flashing back. This had been a dream that he and Pete Balkan had shared, as kids, then had lost. Now another man had this dream and was not only talking it but was trying to put it into action. Haldane spoke very slowly. "Apparently I was able to use this psychic field."

"Of course. You had the ability to use it, for good. But you did not come here by accident. You were sent."

"You often answer my next question before I ask it," Haldane complained. "I was going to ask if there was a possible correlation between my ability to use the psychic field and my appearance here. Now the next question: Why don't you tell me the whole story back of you and these kids here,

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and trust to my discretion as to how I will word my report to the PGI, and trust to Mr. Kelvin's discretion what use may be made of it? I assure you that the boss is an understanding man."

For an instant, indecision showed on Shaw's face. He was weighing the situation in the balance and was making up his mind. "I think I will do that," he said.

Elation and a feeling of victory came up inside of John Haldane. There was a sense of triumph, and more. Somehow he felt as if all his life he had been waiting for this moment. Now the moment had come, now he was lined up with the people and with the forces he had always wanted to be with. He rose to his feet, to shake hands with Shaw.

Behind him, the door opened. Sara stood there. "The jet freighter has just come back from Lunar City," she said. "The ship brought one passenger this time, a woman who says she has solved the puzzle presented in the book *Homo Sapiens*."

"What?" Shaw said.

"This woman is in the employ of Mrs. Circe Dafner. Mrs. Dafner has finally succeeded in getting a spy through to us." Sara's voice was curt.

Pain was a gasp in the inarticulate protest of Larry Shaw.

Sara's curt but emotionless voice continued. "She says her name is Heather Conklin."

John Haldane felt a sharp stab of pain. Larry Shaw gasped.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

HALDANE's words were hot. "Heather Conklin is not a spy!"

Sara flicked an eyebrow up at him. "So you know her?"

"Of course I know her."

"Then perhaps she followed you here? Perhaps you are not only a PGI agent, but perhaps you are also a spy employed by Mrs. Dafner?"

"Go stay with this young woman. Bring her in here when I tell you to," Shaw said sharply.

Sara went out of the room with no show of emotion. Shaw turned to Haldane. His manner had changed. The glow had gone from his face and his voice had an edge on it.

"How do you know that this young woman who has just arrived is not a spy?"

"I just know it," Haldane said, discomfort coming up in him. How did he know that Heather was not a spy? All he knew was that he liked her.

Such emotional reasoning affronted every intelligent cell in his brain. Heather worked for Mrs. Dafner. Maybe Mrs.

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Dafner had sent her here. How was he to know? "Let me talk to her," he said quickly. "You wait in the bedroom there and listen to every word we say."

Shaw studied the PGI agent. "Are you in love with this young woman?"

Haldane spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "I'm a PGI agent. We don't fall in love. PGI agents are cats who walk alone."

"I didn't ask you whether or not PGI agents ever fell in love, I asked you whether or not you were in love with this young woman."

"The most honest answer I can give you is—I don't know." Haldane again spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "How would I know what being in love feels like? I never had a chance to find out." The agent was silent. Inside of him was turmoil. Shaw's face showed sympathy as he watched.

"She doesn't know I'm a PGI agent, she doesn't know I'm here," Haldane said slowly. "I don't believe she is a spy but I'm not sure. However, she once told me that she did spying for Mrs. Dafner, but I don't think she meant anything like this. However, if she has actually come here as a spy for Mrs. Dafner, I would like to know it, now." Harshness crept into his voice.

Shaw nodded and rose. "I'll wait in the bedroom. And—I'm sorry, Johnny."

Sara brought Heather into the room. "Hello, Heather," Haldane said, rising.

Coming through the door, Heather was a very self-possessed, competent young woman who knew exactly what she wanted and how she was going to get it. Under her competence was the smallest trace of fear, visible like the flick of a petticoat on a windy day. A purse and book were held loosely in her hands and her face was composed.

When Haldane rose and spoke, the composure fled from her face. The purse and the book fell to the floor. The purse flew open. An object fell from it, the little gas gun. The

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title of the book the girl had dropped was *Homo Sapiens*.

The girl's eyes came to fixed focus on Haldane. The color drained out of her face.

"You seem upset, Heather," Haldane said. "Would you like to sit down?" He motioned her to a stool.

Without taking her eyes from his face, she sat down on the stool as if she had not seen it. "How—how did you get here?" she whispered.

"So many people have asked me that question," Haldane said. He intended to maintain a light, carefree manner, or die trying. "Why don't you be more original?"

"This is no time to be breezy. I—I saw the transit pick you up. It didn't bring you back. You didn't know how to operate it, you had no means for operating it. It might have taken you—" Her voice faltered into silence.

"Where might it have taken me?" he inquired.

"Well, it could have taken you into the sun. It was wild that night. It was out of control, nobody knew what was happening. I almost died when not even the technicians could trace you or tell me where you had gone." Tears came up in her eyes, making them bright.

Haldane let her cry. When Heather's tears had stopped, he said, "You didn't seem to be in any danger of dying when you pointed that at me." His gaze flicked toward the little gas weapon on the floor. She had made no effort to recover it.

"I know I threatened to shoot you." Desperation crept into her voice. "While at that time I didn't exactly think that Mrs. Dafner was an angel of mercy, I thought there was someone who was worse than she was—Crisper. I thought you were one of his men, and I was almost—almost willing to shoot you just for that."

Haldane kept his poise. "You didn't like Crisper?"

"I should say I didn't."

"At the time you were pointing the gun at me, did you know that Crisper was dead?"

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"No. It was only when I learned he was dead that I realized you could not have been working for him—" The tears came again, a gush of them. But she went on.

"That led to the realization of a lot of other mistakes I had been making. You know, if you associate with people long enough, you begin to like them, and you begin to see the nice things about them and to overlook the bad things. I've really been a genius in overlooking the bad things. I knew that Mrs. Dafner was not lily white but I knew, also, that a lot of men were trying to do her out of her money. I excused her actions on the grounds that she was entitled to protect herself. It was not until the night of her party—it was not really until she came back and she and Ertel were threatening you—that I realized her actions were more than I could possibly excuse or overlook and that she and Ertel were actually a pair of monsters. Right there was where I stopped making a lot of mistakes." The tears were gone. The girl was speaking clearly and forcefully.

"Go ahead," Haldane said. He kept his voice quiet but inside of him was a sudden elation. This girl was honest. Even Sara was looking impressed.

"I was sick of Mrs. Dafner. I was sick of what she stood for. I guess maybe I was sick of the whole world. In my sickness I—"

"Went back to the secondhand shop near Halcyon Street and bought a book?" Haldane said.

"How did you know?"

"Maybe I'm good at guessing. But you got the book. And it led you here?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Does Mrs. Dafner know that you have come here?"

"I told her I was leaving. Nothing else."

"Did you tell her you were coming to the Moon?"

"I said I might. But what difference does that make?"

"No difference that I can see. Now about this book. The first time I saw you, you were trying to buy this book."

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"That was for Mrs. Dafner. She sent me to buy it."

"But you didn't?"

"No. Something was there that scared me."

"Ah!" A sudden connection clicked together in Haldane's brain. "But the second time you went there, you were acting on your own and not as Mrs. Dafner's agent. In that case, nothing was there to scare you?"

"Yes. I mean, I guess so. All I know is that I wasn't scared the second time."

"I wonder if people who try to buy this book for Mrs. Dafner, or for her kind, find something that scares them, either before they buy the book or as soon as they try to read it?"

"Yes," Larry Shaw said, from the doorway of the bedroom. While Heather looked startled, he advanced into the room. "Those books are brought here, for treatment by a special process, before they are taken back to Earth for distribution. They are impregnated with a substance which produces a strong fear reaction in any person who tries to buy one but who is not the type of person we are trying to attract here."

As Shaw entered, Sara quietly exited from the room. Heather stared at him. A hesitant smile came up on her face. "Heather, this is Larry," Haldane said. As they shook hands, Haldane continued, "She is no longer working for Mrs. Dafner and she is not a spy."

"Yes, I know," Shaw said, smiling.

"Did you two think I was a spy?" the startled girl gasped.

"No. But we thought it was best to let you tell us yourself," Haldane said.

In growing perplexity, the girl stared at the agent.

"Perhaps you do not know Johnny's calling," Shaw said softly. "He is a PGI agent."

Her perplexity became wild surprise. "Then you were investigating Mrs. Dafner the night you were at her party?"

"Yes."

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"Good! It's high time the old witch had the PGI on her trail. Maybe they will find out enough about her to put her where she belongs! But what are you doing here? Does the PGI operate this place?"

"No. I'm here as a sort of a prisoner. You see, I arrived without an invitation and without being expected. I came via something called the transit."

"But you couldn't have!" the girl protested sharply. "I don't mean that. What I am trying to say is that the transit is one of Mrs. Dafner's really big secrets, maybe the biggest one she has. I know it was behaving erratically the night of her party, but I don't see how it could have brought you here."

"Some of the people here think it was not an accident," Haldane said. "It brought Bergen too."

"Bergen! But he is the man who invented the space transit! She has been holding him a prisoner ever since he came to her for financing of his invention and she realized how important it really was. I mean, she hasn't actually been holding him a prisoner in the legal sense, but she has made certain that he has been kept drunk all the time except when he is working on setting it up for her. I did a lot of the testing on it myself. That is, I was the person sent somewhere via it, or brought back from somewhere—"

"Was that the way you went away from Halcyon Street?"

"Yes. How else? But—"

The door opened. Sara stood there. The tall girl had a look of triumph on her face. "Don't tell me I don't know a tear-jerking act put on to impress a couple of gullible males when I see one."

"Sara, what do you mean?"

"A ship is landing. The markings are those of a concern in Lunar City that has jet freighters for charter. The ship does not respond to our signals."

Shaw moved quickly to open the screen in front of the plastic panel.



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Below them and to one side the big doors of the hangar in the face of the cliff were visible. The strange jet freighter had already come to a landing there.

The nose of the ship was pointed toward the hangar doors. A snouted tube projected from a lock. Haldane recognized the tube as a weapon outlawed in the Solar System—a portable, quick-firing cannon.

Smoke spouted from the tube. One of the hangar doors, struck by the explosive shell, jolted wildly and came to rest half open.

If there were men working in the hangar they would have to retreat very quickly into the sealed-off sections of the mine or die.

An instant after the shell struck, the locks of the unknown ship opened. Men in protective clothing and wearing oxygen masks, carrying stubby little weapons—which had also been outlawed in the Solar System—swarmed down and into the hangar.

The eyes that Larry Shaw turned toward Haldane were alive with pain.

"Perhaps she is not a spy," Sara spoke coldly behind them. "But those are most certainly Mrs. Dafner's men. And they followed her here."

As she spoke, the rock under their feet jarred softly to the thud of another explosion, from inside the hangar this time.

"They may have followed me," Heather said. "But I still did not knowingly bring them here."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

"WHERE are your weapon stores?" Haldane said to Larry Shaw. The time to fight had come and he knew it. What he wanted was a weapon in his hands.

The smile and the glow were gone from the fine face of Larry Shaw. The features of the white-haired man were a frozen mask. "We have no weapons. We have rejected weapons. This is part of our code, one of the things that goes along with our refusal to take life. We have beaten our swords into plowshares—"

Beneath his breath, Haldane cursed, silently using all the oaths he knew. This was the fate of the man, or the group, who beat their swords into plowshares inappropriately, before the time was ready for it.

Haldane bent and scooped the little gas gun from the floor. It was the only weapon available and he took it. He moved to the door and opened it in time to catch one of the bronze kids who had been pressed against it. The kid clutched his chest but even the tight grip of his fingers did not stop the blood from oozing from the hole that was there.

"They're killing us," he whispered.

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Larry Shaw turned. He stared at the bronze kid from unseeing eyes, then walked past him and out of the door. From the distance came *brrrrping* sounds, the swift throb of gunfire.

"Son—" Haldane caught the bronze kid and eased him to the floor. He glanced mutely up at Sara. "Don't tell me you don't have a hospital either? Or even a first-aid station?"

"Sorry. We don't have either."

"I don't need a hospital, or a first-aid station," the bronze kid said. "Just let me lie here on the floor."

"What are the others doing?" Haldane asked.

"They're fighting."

"What with?"

"Picks. Shovels. Chunks of rock—"

"Rocks against burp guns throwing explosive shells!" Haldane said. "Son, can I help you?"

"Just leave me here," the bronze kid said. He seemed to know what the PGI agent was going to do. "Good luck." The words were a dim whisper from lips that were already going mute.

Haldane went through the door on the run, then caught himself and turned back, and found that two others were following on his heels. "Sara, I want you to guide me."

"Sure," the tall girl said. "But where?"

"I'll show you where. Heather—" He caught her in his arms. "I'm sorry I haven't got time right now to explain things to you. If I get back, I'll do both. But I want you to stay in there with that kid and help him if you can."

"That's my gun you've got. And I'm going with you."

"Don't be a fool. If Mrs. Dafner discovers you are here—"

"She will wring my pretty little neck. I'm still going with you."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, but you will only be in the way now." He left her staring after him.

"Take me to the hangar, preferably to some place that is high enough so I can see everything that is going on there."

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Sara nodded, led him at a run. Around them, bronze kids were shouting and running. The sound was a vast buzz of clamor and confusion. Sara led him up a slope and into darkness. This was an old mine passage, no longer in use. Sara found her way as surely as she would if there had been light. She made a final turn and Haldane discovered they were high in the hangar looking down at the lighted area below.

The mine freighter was below them. A man who had been working on one of the jets was sprawled on the floor among his tools. Another man had been working inside the freighter and had come running out to see what was happening. He had fallen forward just outside the lock.

Two men with burp guns were entering the jet freighter. They went cautiously inside. A scream followed. Then came the sound of the burp guns. Then silence from inside the ship.

One man was on guard at the door of the hangar. Others were poking cautiously into the passages at the rear. One had climbed the ramp and was examining the chute where the concentrated ore was fed into the hold of the freighter. They didn't wear uniforms, but the oxygen masks and the protective clothing made them all look alike.

At the top of the hangar, a pool of air was held but Haldane was reminded by his feeling of light-headedness that the air here was not very dense. Sara seemed unaffected. The tall girl brooded on what was happening below. One of the bronze youths, apparently gone berserk, charged out of a passage at the rear. He was screaming and swinging a pick. The pick found the skull of one of the intruders and went home there. Then the burp gun slugs found the berserk miner. His body was literally blown to pieces.

"I know where we can get oxygen masks and portable tanks," Sara said.

"Take me there," Haldane answered.

The bronze kids were crowding around the room where

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the oxygen equipment was kept. They were a frightened lot and badly bewildered, but there was a grimness about them now that Haldane had not seen before. One of the things they had sought here was harmony, peace of mind—and a path to a new future. To achieve these things, they had forgotten what they knew about fighting. The knowledge was coming back now.

"We've got the tunnels sealed, Sara," one called out to the tall girl. "But a lot of fellows were caught on the other side of the seals." The speaker's face grew grimmer as he spoke. "Anyhow I guess it doesn't matter much. The seals won't hold long."

Sara nodded and slid through the door into the room where the masks were kept. Haldane listened to the bronze kids. They were fighting mad.

*Why doesn't the random factor intrude now?* Haldane thought. He knew this question had been asked across all human history, in voices that prayed, begged, pleaded, even commanded and ordered.

Sara returned with the masks and the back tanks. She helped him strap them into place. Then she slung her own mask over her shoulder. "What do we do now?"

"I will appreciate it if you will go take care of the girl that you think is a spy," he said.

Her lips formed a straight line at his words.

"Find some place and hide," he said. "Get another mask and another tank and take them to her."

"There is no place to hide. They will hunt us all the harder because we are women."

"Yes, I know. But do your best."

"Do you really mean for me to protect this woman?" Sara said.

"I mean it," Haldane said.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to take a walk. No, sorry, but you can't go with me. Where I am going even you would be a handicap

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rather than a help." He turned away.

Climbing the slope, he emerged again from the spot where Sara had first left him. The guard was still on duty at the broken door. The men who had been in the hangar had gone into the tunnels at the rear. The man who had been examining the ore chute had climbed higher. Cautiously, he was examining the doors that led into the crusher and the rooms where the ore was concentrated. Haldane watched him for a moment, then returned along the slope until he found the connecting tunnel that circled the hangar. He went very cautiously along it. This tunnel was not lighted and the darkness here was ebon in its blackness.

As he came to a cross tunnel, he saw a light to his left. A burp gun suddenly vomited there.

"I got another one!" an exultant voice yelled. The air was thin here and the voice was faint but enough air remained to carry sound.

Laughter followed.

Two men from the intruding ship were having fun down there. They had killed one of the bronze kids. Nausea came up in Haldane's stomach, a wave of it. At this moment, he hated the whole human race, the strong and the weak, the strong for being strong enough to prey on the weak, the weak for permitting themselves to be preyed upon. The hate of the whole race passed. But hate remained directed toward the men who were here. When he reported what had happened here, there would be hell raised because of this slaughter. He knew what Kelvin would do.

But would he ever have a chance to report it? At the thought, he moved faster, until he had circled the hangar and was in the passage that led to the crusher rooms.

The fellow was inside now. He had removed one of his heavy gloves and was fingering the concentrate in the bin as if he were wondering if it were valuable enough to make stuffing his pockets worthwhile. Haldane moved quietly into the room.

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The little gas gun that Heather had brought with her made almost no noise as he pulled the trigger. The slug exploded inside the man at the ore bin.

The would-be thief spun, dropped the burp gun, clutched at his heart, and fell forward on his face. He twitched spasmodically for a moment, then was still.

Haldane moved very swiftly, doing what had to be done. When he had finished, he was wearing the suit of protective clothing and he had patched the hole from the slug with the roll of adhesive that was a part of the suit itself. He was also wearing the man's mask and had his oxygen tank on his back. The little gas gun he had taken from Heather was in the pocket of the suit and the burp gun was in his hands.

The naked body of the thief who had formerly used these things was stuffed out of sight under the ore-concentrating tables.

Haldane then went out of the concentrating rooms and into the hangar. He went down to the main floor. Men were coming out of one of the tunnels at the rear and were going into another one. They glanced at him but paid no attention. He moved toward the door of the hangar as if he knew exactly what he was doing. The guard there looked at him. Haldane snapped on the two-way radio beam that was built into the protective suit. The equipment had a range of only a few hundred feet but it was useful here, where there was no air.

"The ore up there is rich," he said, nodding toward the concentration room. "The boss will want to know about it right away."

Through the mask, a wolfish grin could be seen on the guard's face. The news Haldane brought pleased him. "You think we might maybe get a little of it for ourselves?" he said.

"We might," Haldane said. He grinned, and moved past the guard toward the ship.

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"Hey!" the guard suddenly yelled at him.

"What do you want?" Haldane said, turning.

"I thought you was Luther. But you ain't Luther. Who are you?"

"I'm Jack. You remember me. Jack. Luther is in the back. I saw him heading into one of the tunnels. He was chasing something that might interest you."

"What?"

"A blonde," Haldane answered. He grinned. "If you can find a way to sneak off, you can probably catch one for yourself too. There's a lot of 'em here."

"Damn me, I hope so!" The guard showed his grin, then jerked up his burp gun. Haldane found himself looking into the muzzle of the weapon. The guard's face had lost its grin and had become the face of a wolf. "There ain't no Jack along. Who are you and how did you get into them clothes?"

The muzzle of the burp gun stared Haldane in the face. The face behind the muzzle said the guard would shoot and ask questions afterwards.

"Watch out!" the little warning voice whispered inside Haldane's mind.

*Hell*, Haldane thought.

"I am not warning you about the man with the gun. He is no source of danger. I am warning you about—"

Something seemed to shove Haldane, or to lift him and to move him a few feet backward. The movement was very gentle, but very fast. He hardly realized it was happening until it was over and then he had so much else to think about that he paid little attention to what had happened to him.

As Haldane moved, the guard vanished. He didn't go in a puff of smoke, he didn't disappear in a flash of light, he didn't shrink to the size of a doll and slide away into infinity. He just—went.

Haldane blinked at the empty spot where the guard had been. He blinked again. The fellow simply was not there.



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"This is what I was warning you about," the voice whispered.

Haldane did not know what to think.

"There is more danger in the freighter," the little voice continued.

Haldane thought, *Whatever it is, I have to face it.*

He moved toward the freighter. One lock was open. He entered unchallenged through the open port and into the air lock inside. A crewman closed the outer door. Air hissed as it came into the lock, then the inner door opened. Haldane twisted to one side so that only a part of his features were revealed. A kid bubbling with excitement and with questions had operated the air lock for him.

"Things are going swell inside," Haldane said. "The boys are smoking 'em out of their holes."

"What's inside that cliff?"

"Just a bunch of rats."

"Any women?"

"Lots of them. Where's the boss? I got news for him."

"Women! Oh, boy! The boss is up forward in the control room." The kid nodded toward the nose of the ship.

Haldane went forward without being stopped. The main control room was occupied by three men. Glancing through the open door, Haldane saw them. One was a technician at the radio equipment. The second was a heavy-set hulking individual in a rumpled, greasy uniform, probably the captain of the ship from the rental company. The third man was—Ertell

The burp gun held loosely in his hands, Haldane leaned against the metal door facing.

"Boss, I have news for you."

At Haldane's voice Ertel turned quickly toward him.

"Good news, I hope." Ertel was bubbling with enthusiasm. He knew what could be done with the secrets of this lunar mine.

"Yeah," Haldane said. "It's good news—for the Solar Sys-

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tem. The news is—you're dead!"

Ertel stared at him. Shock was beginning to appear on the face of the man. "I—I don't know what you mean."

The captain seemed to guess intuitively what Haldane meant. "A cop!" he wheezed. A heavy bull-dog revolver—one of the deadliest weapons ever invented by man for close killing—was held in a holster at his hip. Haldane had not seen the gun until the captain turned. He saw it when the captain's hand dived toward it.

Haldane shifted the muzzle of his own gun. It burped. The captain dropped his half-drawn weapon. An explosion sounded deep within him. He grabbed at his middle and went down.

Haldane swung the burp gun back to cover Ertel. "You have a gun, too, maybe?" Haldane inquired. He hoped very much that this man did have a weapon and would try to use it. The Solar System would be much better off without Ertel.

Ertel took one look at the dying captain and hastily lifted his hands. Behind him, the frightened radio technician scrambled to his feet. His hands went up in the air too.

"Who the devil are you?" Ertel demanded. "Are you one of Crisper's men? Is this one of his hide-outs too?"

Haldane shoved the mask fully off his face so that his features were revealed. Ertel recognized him then. "You're the man Heather brought in— Then you are working for Crisper."

"No," Haldane said. "I'm working for the PGI."

"But—but—"

"You're right," Haldane said. "It's your butt. Now sit down at the radio and tell the boys inside the mine that they are licked, that even if they kill or capture every human being in there, it will do them no good, because they now have no way to escape."

Ertel's lips made sounds that were not words.

"Tell the boys inside to come out and line up along the

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cliff beside the hangar where this portable cannon will cover them!" Haldane said. He nodded toward the weapon which had been rigged to project from one of the view-ports.

"I—they won't believe me! I—"

"In case they don't believe you, tell them I'm going to start firing this cannon into the hangar. This will convince your thugs that I mean business."

With the burp gun at his back, Ertel sat down at the radio transmitter. His orders went to the leader of the men attacking the mine. Questions came back, a sullen flood of them mixed with protests. Again and again the statement was made that the defenders in the mine were beaten.

"So are wel" Ertel snarled at last. "Come out of there before this PGI man starts shooting in at you."

Eventually the attackers came out, a scared, sullen group. They lined up along the cliff wall under the nose of the cannon.

Then the bronze kids came boiling out of the mine, to disarm and take prisoner the men who had attacked them.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"THERE IS one question that I want answered," Haldane said to Shaw. "I want a definite answer. No evasions and no compromises."

"I'll try to answer it," Shaw said. The face of Larry Shaw showed mixed emotions. Pain was deep in the soul of him, because of the bronze kids who had died. While this fact could never be overlooked or forgotten, there was hope with the pain. Both the pain and the hope showed on his face.

Haldane and Shaw were inside a small room in the sealed portion of the mine, where the PGI man had never been admitted before. From the plastic windows could be seen the big doors of the hangar and the landing strip in front of them. Ertel's ship was no longer there with the nose of the cannon threatening the hangar. It had been moved inside the cliff. Men in oxygen masks and protective clothing were busy repairing the blasted hangar door. They were working harder than they had ever worked before in their lives. And more constructively. The workers were Ertel's men. In pro-

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protective clothing and carrying burp guns, urging them to work even faster, were three bronze kids.

"What is your question?" Shaw spoke.

"The guard at the door of the hangar discovered I did not belong to his bunch. He caught me. In another split second, he would have blasted me. Before he could act, something moved me, only a few feet, but moved me just the same. It also moved the guard. He was gone—pouf—just like that." He waved his hands to indicate the way the guard had disappeared. "What do you know about that?" He watched Shaw very carefully as the white-haired man prepared to answer.

Shaw sighed. "I was afraid you were going to ask me that question. Yes, I did it. Once, you saw me create a small green stone. When the guard went away, you saw me . . . discreate a human being."

"Hmmm," Haldane said. The words Shaw had used seemed to have opened a small hole somewhere inside of him. The cold of outer space was creeping in through this hole, chilling him to the very core of his being. "Go on."

"I tried for Ertel's ship first," Shaw said. His words were very soft and he seemed to be speaking out of a kind of trance. "The ship was too much for me. It was too big, there was too much metal, too much chained energy. Perhaps, with Bergen to help me, I could have dis-created the ship, but I did not want to bother Bergen even then. What he is doing is much too important. Yes, I was watching as you talked to the guard. I knew you were in danger. I moved you, a few feet, to protect you. Then I dis-created the guard."

"Ahhhh," Haldane said. The hole inside of him was getting bigger and more of the cold of outer space was creeping through it. He wondered how big he could let that hole become, how much of such cold he could endure inside him. He knew he could shut the hole any time he wished.

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"The act of creation, which you saw the night you arrived, has its opposite," the white-haired man continued. "Its opposite is the act of dis-creation, where something that *is* becomes something that *is not*." Sadness came into Shaw's voice. He had sincerely regretted what had happened to the guard. Was not the guard a human being too, though an evil and a misguided one?

The door had opened and the tall girl had entered. She had changed too. Her lips were no longer set in the knife line and the hardness was gone from the words she chose. There was a sadness in her, a kind of a gentle thing, and a sort of a happiness too.

"The Earth circuit is back in operation," she said to Shaw. "We found the trouble. The blast from the shell that knocked down the hangar door jarred several of the sensitive relays out of operation. But the circuit is working again, in both directions."

"Thank you, Sara," Shaw said. He glanced at her and started to speak, then seemed to change his mind and wait for her to speak. She moved over to Haldane and stood looking down at him as he sprawled on the cushioned bench on the side of the room.

"I'm sorry," the tall girl said, slowly. "You are not a spy, nor is the girl who followed you here a spy."

"I know," Haldane said. He waited for her to continue.

"She's in love with you," the tall girl continued slowly. "Do you know, I think she did follow you here, without ever knowing it consciously? I think that deep down inside of her somewhere, she knew you were here and that she would find you."

Haldane lifted one eyebrow a quarter of an inch.

"I guess that's about all," the tall girl said. "Except that I am sorry."

He reached out and caught her hand and squeezed it. She smiled at him, then moved toward the door. As she went out, Shaw followed her with proud, beaming eyes.

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Haldane looked at Shaw. "Sara said something about the Earth circuit—"

"I'll show you," Shaw said, rising.

Haldane followed the white-haired man along a corridor and into a single huge room.

One whole side of the room was taken up by what looked to be hundreds of winking lights. On closer inspection, the winking lights seemed to be TV screens, oval shaped, and about two inches across. As he glanced at them, Haldane had the impression that hundreds of TV cameras were in operation somewhere and that the scenes which they were catching were being sent here by micro-wave radio.

Haldane was impressed. "I don't see how you can possibly have so many TV cameras in operation," he said to Shaw. "Or how you can transmit the scenes they are catching with so little distortion."

"Those are not TV cameras," Shaw said. "Those are human eyes."

"What did you say?"

Shaw said: "I know what I am saying seems impossible. People on Earth are seeing those scenes. What their eyes see is transmitted here and is reproduced on those small screens, or on the large ones at the left, if we so desire. The audio band is also included and we can amplify that to hear what they hear, if we so desire. But these people who are serving as observation points for us are all my own kids, the ones I have personally trained here. Included among the things they learned to do here was how to transmit their sight and audio components elsewhere, in this case to the secret transmitting stations we have hidden on Earth."

"Eh?" Haldane said. There was something about this set-up that he did not like. "What a spy system!" he said.

"Exactly," Shaw said.

"The man who owned such a spy system could rule the Solar System," the PGI agent continued. "He would be able to get accurate information from any spot in the system,

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instantly, at any time, and no one would know he was getting it. I don't like this."

"I would not like it either, in the wrong hands," Shaw said. "I flatter myself but I do not believe that my hands are the wrong ones. Nor do I believe that the people who are with me have the wrong hands. I believe we can own and use such a system as this intelligently, for the good of all and not for the gain of a few."

Haldane was silent. He could not disagree with what Shaw had said. This man's hands were certainly not the wrong ones. "How Pepperidge and Kelvin would love this!"

"So they would. And so would other people too. This, with what Bergen has—" Shaw broke off. "I don't know whether Mrs. Dafner has some inkling of this system or not, but it was one of the things I was prepared to blow up before I would let her men capture this place."

"Do you happen to have Mrs. Dafner under observation at present?" Haldane asked. The thought pleased and impressed him tremendously. Shaw spoke to the youth at the console switchboard.

"We do not have her personally under observation. But we can show you the building where she is."

One of the large screens on the left wall came to life. Revealed on it was a large office building. The view was from the top street level outside of the building. Pedestrians could be seen walking along the ramp, even the pigeons in the air were visible. The view was three dimensional and clear-cut but it shifted constantly. One instant the screen revealed a shapely young woman. It held this view for several seconds. A low appreciative whistle became audible as the audio band was cut in. Then the view shifted to the flagpole on top of a nearby building. The audio reported the rumbling of trucks from the street levels below. The flying pigeon came back on the screen, then the shapely young woman. Again the appreciative whistle sounded.

"The scene shifts as the viewer's eyes shift," Shaw ex-



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plained. "We are quite accustomed to our own eyes shifting but it is sometimes disconcerting when we try to follow the shifting of someone else's eyes. However, you will get used to it."

"Can't you get a view inside the building?" Haldane asked the youth.

"Yes, but it will not do us much good. We can't get into her private offices beyond the reception room and we do not learn much by simply getting inside the building. We have several other watchers and I can shift you to one of them."

"Has there been any indication that she knows that the attempt to capture the mine has failed?"

"None."

"Perhaps she doesn't know about it yet," Shaw said.

"She knows that something went wrong," Haldane answered. "I checked Ertel's ship. It had some unusual equipment on it, including a radio transmitter in continuous operation. You can be certain that she was informed of it soon after the signal ceased."

"You may be right," Shaw said hesitantly. "Personally, I am coming to regard that woman as a she-devil."

"Somehow this brings us back to Henry Bergen," Haldane said.

A wry expression on his face, Shaw shook his head. "I thought the sight of this system for getting information would interest you so much that you would forget all about Bergen."

"It does interest me," Haldane said. "But, at most, it is only a means for gathering data. This is half of the picture. The more important half of it is what are you going to do about the data after you get it? I suppose Bergen comes into the picture on the doing-something-about-it side."

"Yes," Shaw said. "He is very busy and I would prefer not to interrupt him, but if you insist—"

"I insist," Haldane said. He was beginning to see a picture here. Maybe the canvas on which this picture was painted

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was as big as the universe and as old as time and went into the future as far as infinity. Maybe it went out of time and out of the three-dimensional universe of the human sensory perceptive system. He did not know how far it went or in what directions, but he knew it was very, very big.

The room in which Bergen worked was large. Plastic windows opened outward in the roof, giving views of space. The room was actually a well-equipped laboratory. Bergen had assistants, some bronze kids and young women. The kids seemed very sober now, but they were all busy. Bergen was busier than any of them. He looked up as Haldane and Shaw approached.

Haldane was impressed at the changes in the man. When he had first met Bergen, the little scientist had been a bleary-eyed, drunken bum. Bergen was neither drunk nor a bum any longer. His eyes were as clear and as sparkling as a frosty dawn. His skin had begun to turn brown.

"There was a rumble some time back," Bergen said to Shaw. "Was it an earthquake?"

"An explosion," Shaw said. He turned to Haldane. "I have a man here who insists on meeting you. Johnny Haldane, of the PGI."

Bergen's clear, sparkling eyes fixed on Haldane as they shook hands. "I think perhaps I have met you before, though I am a little uncertain about it."

"I tried to kidnap you from the Hotel Cosmos one night," Haldane said.

The bright eyes showed sudden interest. "I remember now. It's not very clear but I remember you. I want to thank you for trying to save me."

"It was a privilege."

"You wished to see me about something?" Bergen's eyes flicked to Shaw as he spoke.

"We have no secrets from this man," Shaw said. "In fact, he has saved us from— But no matter." Bergen had not been

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told about the attack and Shaw did not wish to waste time relating the details.

"I saw a girl walk along a street and off into a lost infinity," Haldane said. "I saw Mrs. Dafner turn into a doll at her own party. Later, I found myself transported to this place. You followed me. I wish to know about these things."

"Ah, yes. Well, I can explain some of them, but I cannot explain how either of us came here. I mean, I cannot explain or even begin to understand why we were selected. As to how we got here, I know about that. We came via what Circe Dafner used to call Bergen's gizmo—" Pain showed on the sensitive face as he mentioned Mrs. Dafner's name. "But which I prefer to call Bergen's transit."

"That is what I want to know about," Haldane said.

"I will show you," Bergen said. He led them through an archway into an adjoining room. A machine was there. It was not impressive, it was not even very big. An armature made of some gleaming metal was set into a copper housing that was solidly bolted to the stone floor. Bus bars as thick as a man's wrist led upward to a metal ball about a foot in diameter. That was all there was to the device. A control panel across the room seemed to play some part in the operation of the transit. Haldane was disappointed.

"This is a very crude model," Bergen said, apologetically. "I had to construct it from the materials Larry had available here and I had to work fast. Later, we will build much more adequate transits, with proper control devices. As to what it is and what it does—I know, but I cannot tell you." The little scientist shook his head. His face was sad.

"Why can't you tell me?" Haldane asked.

"Because there is no way to describe in words what the transit is. Perhaps my equations— But, no. Even they do not describe it."

"How did Mrs. Dafner get interested in your transit? This, at least, can be communicated."

"Yes, I can talk about that," Bergen said. "I went to her,

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for financing. My hope was that my transit would be used to lighten the lot of my fellow men and to increase their knowledge—”

“Now as to how Bergen’s transit operates—” Haldane broke off. He heard someone running through the laboratory. Sara’s voice was calling. “Larry! Larry! Another ship is landing!”

“Damn!” Shaw said.

Haldane was already moving on the run. Haldane raced across the hangar. One of the bronze kids inside Ertel’s ship hastily opened the lock for him. When the ship had been brought into the hangar, Haldane had had it backed into position. He dived to the nose of it, where the quick-firing cannon covered the open space in front of the blasted hangar door.

The ship outside was a small flier. It carried private markings which Haldane did not recognize. He wondered if Mrs. Dafner had evaded the watchers back on Earth and had come here. As he brought the sights of the cannon to bear on the lock of the ship, he sincerely hoped that she would be the first person to step out.

The lock opened. A figure in oxygen mask and protective clothing jumped down. The man was coming forward on the run, with uplifted hands.

Haldane took one look at the man. In spite of the mask and the heavy clothing the man wore, he recognized who was here. He got to his feet and lurched to the lock and out of the ship.

The bronze kids were saluting Pete Balkan and he was moving past them straight toward John Haldane.

“John, it’s good to see you again,” Balkan said. Then they were shaking hands and pounding each other on the back and walking from the hangar toward the tunnel. Larry Shaw and Henry Bergen were waiting there. In the background were Sara and many of the bronze kids and Heather Conklin, though Haldane had no time to notice her now. He was

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watching Larry Shaw and the way Larry and Pete were shaking hands and the way the bronze kids were shoving forward, and he was listening to the way Pete was calling each of them by name. Eventually Pete turned back to him.

"Meet my gang," Balkan said. "Don't look so surprised, Johnny. This is my bunch. This is Group A. I was telling you about them back on Earth"

"Uh-huhl" Haldane said. "But before springing this surprise, you should have given a little more consideration to my nervous system. I can't stand many shocks like this."

Balkan grinned at him. "I have the greatest of confidence in you and in your nervous system. It stood the shock of the transit here. It will stand anything."

"You did that?"

"Who else? I also took Mrs. Dafner for a ride that night, hoping that maybe the sight of the world from up high would be good for her soul. Unfortunately, I was wrong. Don't look so startled—"

"You should have dropped her."

Balkan laughed. "I couldn't think of everything. I had already taken over control of Bergen's transit that night, without the knowledge of Mrs. Dafner's technicians. A nice job of split-second interference tuning that was! One I don't want to have to do over again. But—how do you like these kids?"

"I like 'em fine," Haldane said.

"They think I'm a sort of a minor god," Pete Balkan said, laughing. "I organized the first bunch of them myself, bought this mine and put it in operating order, then I put Larry in charge of them. Nice job he has done here too."

"Why didn't Larry tell me?" Haldane exploded.

"I really hardly had a chance," Shaw hastily interposed.

"All right, all right, forget it. But why did you send Bergen here?"

"Because he needed to be rescued from Mrs. Dafner and

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we needed his transit in operating order on this end of the line. As to why I sent you here—Larry is a wonderful person, but he doesn't know beans about fighting. I had a hunch he was going to need a fighting man here."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"HERE WAS the situation that existed three years ago," Pete Balkan said. Haldane and Shaw listened. Bergen had returned to his own private work. Under no circumstances was the little scientist going to be diverted from his appointed task. "A man by the name of Crisper made certain fundamental discoveries in the area of basic science. These were not just inventions, they were actual discoveries of the principles on which the universe is structured." Balkan paused. He looked at Haldane.

"It is unfortunately true that nature does not care who discovers her laws. The universe does not ask whether the man be good or bad, but only that he shall be able to ask the right question in the right way and to interpret the result correctly. She is as willing to reveal her deepest secrets to the thief, the murderer, or the oppressor as she is willing to

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give them to the saint. In this regard, nature seems to be willing to play the prostitute to any man." Balkan shook his head. Sadness was upon his face. "If the quality of mercy is not strained, if it falleth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath, bringing the same moisture to both the just and the unjust, without regard for creed, color, politics, or bank credits, so also is the universe. The universe plays no favorites. Sometimes I wonder about this—" Again his voice went into silence.

"You were talking about Crisper," Haldane said, feeling uncomfortable.

"You know from personal experience at least two of the discoveries he had made. One was the black curtain you encountered in his office, the other was the force—you thought of it as a mighty hand—which pushed you downward in the chair when he was talking to you. Crisper also began, very carefully, to build a group around him, of thieves and killers, for his own purposes. I called these people around Crisper Group B. They represented a very real threat to Planetary Government and they also represented a threat to the peaceful future development of the Solar System.

"Crisper, however, went down before Group C, Circe Dafner and her people.

"Scientifically, Circe Dafner does not have a hundredth part of the ability Crisper had. She does not know a magnetron from an electron and she is not likely to learn the difference. However, even if she is not a scientist, she has certain very real abilities. One of them is a complete absence of all moral scruples, a complete disregard for the happiness and the welfare of her fellow human beings.

"One of the reasons I came here was to warn Larry of the extent of Mrs. Dafner's power. As strong as we have thought her to be, we have still very seriously underestimated her. She has some kind of an underworld organization supporting her which I only detected recently. In addi-



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tion, a great deal of activity has been in progress."

"She is still in her building on Earth," Shaw said.

"I am afraid that doesn't mean very much," Balkan said.

"I am afraid it means nothing at all," Haldane said. His tone, rather than the words he used, brought quick silence in the room. Balkan's eyes came quickly to him.

"What is it, Johnny?"

"We have underestimated her, and her resources, even more seriously than you have indicated. Another shipload of her men are within a mile of this place, now."

"Eh?" Balkan and Shaw whispered in one voice.

"My guess is that she had a second ship in reserve, probably one sent directly from Earth. This second ship was not to go into action unless the first attack failed. I'm guessing as to how the second ship got here so quickly, of course, but my guess has a good chance of being right. And I am not guessing about the men being here. There are at least forty to fifty of them, well armed, well supplied, and well protected." Haldane's voice was toneless but the words were pregnant with warning.

"How do you know this, Johnny?" Balkan's voice was very sharp.

"Remember, when we were kids together, I used to tell you once in a while about a little inner voice which said, *'Watch out!'*"

"Damn!" Balkan was on his feet.

"I know what I know even if you don't choose to believe me," Haldane continued. "One time recently I disregarded this inner voice and a fat man gassed me in a telephone booth. I've learned to accept it."

"You had better learn," the little voice whispered, inside Haldane.

"Probably Larry and I are the last two people in the Solar System who would doubt that sort of data, Johnny. We both know enough about these inner voices to know that they exist. Where are these men?"

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"All I can say is that they are within a mile of me at this moment. If we drew a circle with a diameter of a mile, they would be within this circle. As to where they are within that circle, I do not know."

"You can find them with your regular perceptics now," the inner voice said.

"I'll have to go look for them," Haldane said. "That means I'll have to go outside. I'll need oxygen equipment, protective clothing, and I would like to have a couple of these kids to go along with me. I would also like a portable radio operating on a tight beam for communication back to the mine here."

"I'll arrange it right away," Shaw said.

Some shadow was just at the edge of the mine as Haldane went out. Two of the kids were with him. With their heavy boots and their protective clothing and masks, they looked more like monsters than human beings. Haldane carried one of the stubby burp guns that had been taken from Ertel's men. The door of the hangar had been replaced. It was jury-rigged but operating. The three went out the small door and into the shadow.

Back of them a few hundred feet the light from the sun was a sizzling radiance that could sear flesh and blind unprotected eyes. Here in the shadow, where the sunlight did not strike, the rocks were colder than ice and the darkness was ebon blackness. There was no atmosphere here, to refract and diffuse the sunlight, and thus make the blackness less intense. Nor did the million and one glittering stars far overhead seem to dissipate it. The crevice into which they had moved was also out of the Earth shine.

"Let me know the instant you find anything," Balkan's voice whispered over the radio, through the darkness.

"I'll also let you know if anything finds me."

"Okay. Out," Balkan said, breaking the transmission.

"They are very close," Haldane's inner voice whispered.

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*Which way are they?*

"That way."

"But which way is that way?" Haldane demanded. There was no answer. The inner voice seemed to have only the dimmest concept of direction. Yet he knew the inner voice would tell him, in effect, that he was getting hotter or colder, was moving nearer to his target or farther away, that danger was remote or near. He moved forward as a dark ghost pushing its way through utter blackness.

Behind him, attached to him by a cable, he knew the two kids followed. But neither sound nor sight indicated that they were there. Although the suits were equipped with lights, they did not use them. Against this blackness, the smallest flicker of light would be detectable for miles. The inner voice was silent.

Suddenly Pete Balkan's voice pounded into his ears.

"Johnny! Are you getting me?"

"Yes."

"Then get back here, at once!"

"But I haven't found them yet!"

"You don't have to. They've found us. Get back here on the double. We are going to need every fighting man we can get." A click sounded in the helmet as Balkan broke the connection.

Waiting for them just inside the hangar door was Heather Conklin.

"They finally agreed to let me do my share of the work," she explained swiftly. "They're using me to run errands; they claim that's all I know how to do."

He smiled at her. He had the impression that no talk was really necessary between this girl and a man named John Haldane. She went with him into the room where the small screens revealed what was being seen by the watchers on Earth.

Shaw, Balkan and Sara were watching very intently.

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"Where are those men I was hunting?" Haldane said.

Pete Balkan left off his scrutiny of the screens. "In an old part of the mine which is no longer being used."

"How'd you find them?"

"Larry had a hunch and sent out a scouting party. This old section of the mine was already sealed off to conserve the air supply. We've already got guards going out to watch all the seals."

"You work fast," Haldane said. He took in the situation in an instant. "It looks as if it will be a lovely and interesting and deadly fight. Both antagonists are under ground and neither can get at the other except through tunnels and in the dark. Yes, it will be a splendid fight." He shuddered at the impact of his own words. "Why can't we just pump gas into the old mine? The seals will prevent it being blown back upon us. We can gas 'em like rats in their holes."

"Two reasons," Pete answered. "We don't have any lethal gas. The second, they are wearing masks already, have to because there is no air in the old section of the mine."

"Tough," Haldane said. Gas had seemed such a wonderful solution to the problem that he was reluctant to drop it.

"Thanks for calling the idea of gas to our attention, though. While we can't use it on them, there is no reason why they can't and won't use it on us. Sara, will you tell everybody to carry their masks and oxygen equipment with them at all times?"

"Right away, Pete." The tall girl was gone.

"How do you suppose those men got here?" Balkan asked.

"I don't know. I assumed a ship."

"Assumption incorrect. They came the same way you and Bergen did, via Bergen's transit."

"How do you know?"

"Turn number twenty-six on the big screen, please," Balkan said to the technician at the console control board.

"Right."

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"Just watch the big screen, Johnny, and you'll get the answer."

The scene revealed on the big screen was again Mrs. Daffner's building. The watcher who was reporting the scene was on the lower street level.

As Haldane watched seven men were whisked out of sight upward in an elevator marked "Private." Just looking at these men, he knew what they were. As a PGI agent, he had seen so many of them that he knew the type.

"I see what's happening," Haldane said. "She is calling in her strong-arm squads and is shipping them up here, via Bergen's transit. I suppose we can anticipate seeing all of those characters here in a matter of hours." He nodded toward the screen.

"Or maybe in minutes in the case of some of them. The transit works almost instantaneously. However, it has to be retuned for each individual and that will take time, perhaps as much as twenty to thirty minutes in some cases. Do you have any ideas to suggest?"

"Sure. When you sent Bergen and me here, you interfered with the operation of the transit. Why not do the same again?"

Hope came up in Balkan's face, then went away. "I was on Earth then. I had also gone to a great deal of trouble to cut in on the circuits of the transit that night. Unfortunately, I had to dismantle my hook-up immediately, to keep her technicians from discovering it. Also, to cut in again, I would have to be on Earth. There isn't time for me to make the trip back there."

Haldane shook his head. He had counted five more men going into the basement and the sight was making him depressed. Suddenly an idea came up spontaneously. It was so startling and so fear-provoking that he tried to thrust it down again, very hastily, without looking at it.

"This idea is from me," his inner voice said. "You look at it and think about it."

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"All right," Haldane said. He looked at Balkan. "In that case, why don't we all load up in Bergen's transit and pay a visit to the old lady—right in her own den?"

"What?" Pete Balkan said. "Johnny, have you gone completely out of your mind? There is nothing that old witch would like better than to get her hands on us. And—"

"Then just send me. Land me right inside Circe's office."

Pete Balkan took a long breath, considering the matter. Larry Shaw seemed to have stopped breathing. Beside him, Heather Conklin was keeping very quiet. Then the silence was broken, by Heather speaking. "I'm going with you," she said.

Haldane opened his mouth to utter a thunderous "No!" He never got to speak. "Shut up," his inner voice said. "You're talking when you ought to be listening."

Heather was speaking again, very rapidly. "I know my way around Mrs. Dafner's office. If you don't happen to arrive in the right place, I can guide you. What is more, I can get past the guards. They know me. I can get past the receptionists. They also know me."

Haldane opened his mouth, then closed it. Heather was speaking again before he could utter a word. "Here on the Moon you made me stay behind, because I would be more of a hindrance than a help. But in Mrs. Dafner's office building, this is not true. There I will be able to help you."

She spoke firmly. When she had finished, the line of her jaw was set. Pete Balkan and Larry Shaw listened quietly. Sara returned to them and seemed to sense what was happening. The tall girl was very quiet, as if she understood.

Haldane spoke very slowly. There was something in his voice that was a cross between a choke and a stutter. He found words hard to use. "There is the risk of your life. Your life is important to me."

"And your life is important to me," the girl answered.

Haldane was silent, knowing he had an answer that he could not refute.

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Pete Balkan cleared his throat. "Okay, Johnny, you and I will make the trip via Bergen's transit." His voice got more choked as Heather caught her breath. "And—this girl."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SITTING behind her big desk, Circe Dafner had many emotional tones surging through her. Foremost among them was anger. It came from many sources in her life, most of which she had long since consciously forgotten, and it developed anew out of many situations in the present. There were many things for her to be angry about, but at the moment she was fixating her anger on Ertel—for having gotten himself and his crew of men caught.

In the air of her office, something fluttered. She blinked startled eyes. It was an odd sound. It was as if the air had moved suddenly to get out of the way of a rushing body.

A boy with a toy gun was standing in front of her desk. In the flicker of her eyes, the boy grew to the size of a man and the toy weapon became a burp gun which was centered directly on her.

Not moving a muscle, she stared at the man. She did not know him, she had never seen him before. What was he doing in her office? As she stared, another flutter sounded.



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A second doll appeared on the man's left and became a woman.

Mrs. Dafner recognized this intruder. "Heather, my child!" she said. "My child, where have you been? I have wondered about you—"

Mrs. Dafner broke off speaking as another flutter sounded. A third doll formed and very swiftly became a man who also had a burp gun in his hands. She stared at the man.

By this time, she recognized that Bergen's transit was in operation and was delivering these people into her office.

Fear surged through her in a roaring wave. Her lips drew back in a snarl that revealed strong canine teeth. Her right hand moved toward the row of buttons on the top of her desk.

"I'll be delighted to blow your arm off," Haldane said. He moved the muzzle of the burp gun so that it centered on her shoulder.

Her hand stopped moving.

"We thought you would be glad to join Mr. Shaw on the Moon," Haldane said. "Larry really wants you to come. He speaks and thinks of you often."

"That bum!" The words burst from her lips.

"We even provided a way to take you there." Haldane nodded toward Heather. For the first time, Mrs. Dafner saw the straps and the circular piece of metal that the girl was holding. "Bergen calls this thing a grip. What he means is that the transit *grips* this metal belt which circles the human body."

Haldane spoke very smoothly and persuasively. He was using his nicest manner and his softest voice.

Mrs. Dafner was not deceived either by the manner or the voice. Goggle-eyed, she stared at the piece of equipment the girl was holding.

"Are—are you going to put that thing on me?"

"Yes."

"I won't do it. You can't make me do it. You can't get

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away with this. I've got friends. I've got money. I've got power—"

"You *had* these things, Mrs. Dafner."

She read doom in Haldane's face.

"I won't do it. You can't make me do it."

"I can put an explosive slug into your heart," Haldane said.

Fear in a roaring flood surged again through Circe Dafner. "You—you wouldn't shoot a woman!" she screamed.

"You are quite right," Haldane said. "I wouldn't shoot a woman. But you are not a woman, you are a black widow spider. Shooting you would not only be an act of justice, it would be an act of mercy to every other person in the Solar System."

"I—"

"Go on around behind the desk, Heather, and put Bergen's grip on her while I keep her covered."

The girl started around the desk. She got around it. Mrs. Dafner's right foot moved, stabbing at the button hidden under the thicket carpet.

Something passed before Haldane's eyes, shutting off the sight of Heather and of Mrs. Dafner. He found himself staring into Crisper's black curtain.

From behind the black curtain, Mrs. Dafner's laughter was shrill with triumph.

Haldane pulled the trigger of the gun. The weapon burped and the explosive slug struck the black curtain. He kept the trigger down and the gun kept on firing. But so far as he could tell, the slugs were *not* striking the black curtain. There were no explosions nor did the sound of explosions come from behind it.

"Go on and shoot, you fool. Shoot all you want to."

Pete Balkan caught Haldane's arm. "No, Johnny! We can't shoot our way through Crisper's ion curtain."

The sound of a solid blow came from behind the curtain,

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the thud of a fist or a solid object meeting flesh. Abruptly Mrs. Dafner stopped laughing.

Haldane knew what had happened. "Get her, Heather!" he yelled.

The sound of blows, the rending of torn garments, a short burst of heavy profanity from Mrs. Dafner came from behind the curtain.

"You miserable, ungrateful little fool!" Mrs. Dafner screamed.

Heather fought in silence. The sound of a second heavy blow came. A body fell. Haldane held his breath and made inarticulate sounds deep in his throat. Silence was on the other side of the curtain.

"Heather? Are you all right?" This was Pete Balkan speaking, voicing the words Haldane was trying to speak but couldn't.

The scratching noises continued. There was a solid bump and a muttered protest. The ion curtain vanished.

Mrs. Dafner was revealed sprawled across her desk, gasping for breath. A bruise was forming on her forehead.

The girl was nowhere in sight.

"Heather, where are you?"

The girl crawled out from under the desk. In one hand she held an inkwell. "The ion-curtain switch was hidden under the rug under her desk. I had to find it before I could turn the curtain off."

She got slowly to her feet.

"What did you do to her?" Pete Balkan said.

"I—I hit her on the head with this," the girl answered, lifting the inkwell. The expression on her face said she was perfectly willing to hit Mrs. Dafner again, if circumstances required it.

"Good girl!" Pete Balkan said. "Let's get Bergen's grip on her and get her out of here." He bent to pick up the harness that Heather had dropped.

"Hands up, all of you!" a voice spoke from the doorway.

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Squealing in sudden dismay, Heather dropped the inkwell. Haldane spun, saw what was there, and dropped his burp gun. A broad-shouldered man with a gun in his hands was already in the room. Behind him were other men. They came crowding into the room. Pete Balkan carefully laid his gun on the carpet and rose to his feet, his hands in the air.

Mrs. Dafner lifted herself from her desk. She settled back into her big executive chair and passed a glazed hand in front of her eyes. She saw the three intruders with their hands in the air and she also saw the man in the doorway.

"Well, Koker, you finally got here!" Wheezing with indignation and growing rage, Mrs. Dafner lifted herself to her feet.

"Watch out!" Haldane's inner voice whispered.

*You're telling me now!* he thought.

"Take 'em downstairs!" Mrs. Dafner gestured to Haldane, Balkan and the girl.

"Yes, Mrs. Dafner. . . . Come on, all of you!" He gestured with his gun toward the doorway, then stopped again as Mrs. Dafner roared at him.

"Do you fully understand what I want you to do with 'em?"

"Why, yes, Mrs. Dafner, you want me to take them downstairs." Koker was getting nervous.

"And when you get 'em down there, what are you going to do?"

"Why—I hadn't actually thought of that, yet."

"I knew it. You're as stupid as the rest of these fools who take my money and give me no service. This is what I want you to do with 'em: I want you to jump 'em out."

Even Koker was startled. "What, Mrs. Dafner?"

"You heard me. I want you to put 'em in Bergen's transit and jump 'em clear out of the Solar System."

Her voice was raw and harsh and filled with hate. Silence followed it. Haldane saw Pete Balkan blanch, and he felt Heather move closer to him.

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"Do you know who I am?" Haldane said.

Mrs. Dafner leaned back in her chair. She looked at Haldane. A smile came up on her face, the smile of the huntress who found pleasure in torturing the trapped and helpless animal.

Haldane recognized the smile and knew what it meant. She was only having fun now. "I'm a PGI agent," he said.

"You don't say!" Mrs. Dafner said. Koker showed surprise, but her face showed added pleasure.

"You can destroy me and the people with me. But you cannot destroy the PGI. They will hunt me until they find me. Then they will also find you."

"They will have to hunt a long time to find you. Out where you're going, there's not much traffic." Mrs. Dafner laughed uproariously at her own joke.

"They know I came here," Haldane said.

"Maybe they know you came, but they won't know where you went."

"Koker might tell them," Haldane said.

"Damn you!" Koker's voice was suddenly shrill and harsh.

Mrs. Dafner looked startled, then she grinned. "No, you can't drive a wedge between us by trying to make me suspicious of Koker. He's a good boy. He knows how to take orders and how to keep his mouth shut. He also knows he is being protected."

Koker lost some of his tension at her words. In them, Haldane read his own defeat. Beside him, Heather whispered very softly, "I feel air blowing."

He wondered what the girl meant. Had she gone out of her mind?

"Just a minute, Mrs. Dafner," Balkan spoke.

She looked up at him and was pleased. Here was another trapped animal trying to squirm free. This was good, she liked it. "I guess maybe you're going to tell me you're President Griswold."

"Not at all," Balkan answered. "I'm just a private citizen.

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It happens that I know President Griswold but that isn't important."

Mrs. Dafner was a little surprised, not by the claim to know Planetary Government's president, but by the dismissal of the claim as unimportant. "Then what is important?" she inquired.

"You," Balkan answered. "You are important."

Behind the desk, Mrs. Dafner's mouth sagged open. She had been expecting any answer but this. She knew she was important. He didn't need to tell her that. What was the fool trying to sell?

"You are important," Balkan continued. "You are so important that right at this moment, the fate of many human beings and the course of centuries of history rests in your hands." He took a step to the left.

At the movement, Koker brought his gun up. "Come on, you!"

"Let him talk," Mrs. Dafner said. "I'm curious to know what he has to say."

Beside Haldane, Heather whispered again. "There is air blowing in this room. I can feel it on my face."

Haldane gave her words no attention. At this moment, she was talking about a draft on her face! Where they were going soon, there would be no drafts—air currents did not flow in deep space. Nothing flowed there. When they reached their destination, heat eddies would disturb the serene cold of space. The eddies would not last long. Then he shivered again as a puff of cold air blew against his face.

"Do you feel it too?" the girl beside him spoke.

Mrs. Dafner's smile seemed to freeze on her face. For an instant, Haldane had the impression that she was listening. Then abruptly she jerked her head around, as if she had the impression that someone was behind her.

Only the blank wall was there. Mrs. Dafner looked front again. She seemed startled. Her eyes came to focus on her desk.

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"Perhaps you will disagree with me on this," Balkan said. Then his voice went into silence. Mrs. Dafner was not listening to him. She was staring as if entranced at an object on her desk.

Haldane followed the line of her gaze and saw the object at which she was staring. It was an inkwell. A fraction of an inch at a time, the inkwell was rising into the air.

A solid stream of cold air suddenly blew against Haldane's face. No doors were open in this room but the cold of outer space was suddenly present in it. Heather's face had turned white, Balkan had stopped speaking, Koker was almost shivering. Haldane suddenly understood why Mrs. Dafner had turned her head to look behind her. One of these cold drafts had blown on her, like a ghost breathing down the nape of her neck.

*"Random factor!"* Haldane whispered.

The whole room vibrated with the sound of a mighty gong.

Chair and all, Mrs. Dafner was lifted from the floor. A scream ripped from her lips. She tried to scramble out of the chair. Something held her fast. She wiggled, twisted, kicked and screamed. The chair moved with her wild gyrations but it did not come back to the floor. Instead it rose even higher.

Haldane spun. Koker, his mouth open, was staring at Mrs. Dafner. Haldane closed that open mouth with a fist that had every ounce of his bone and muscle behind it. Koker went backward, down and out. Haldane snatched the gun as the man dropped it, brought it to bear on the other thugs. They yielded their weapons without resistance.

Bitter cold air was now blowing through the room. Turning, Haldane saw that Heather and Pete Balkan were struggling against that wind as they slipped Bergen's grip around Mrs. Dafner's squirming body. Finally they got the grip in place.

Mrs. Dafner became a doll. Then the doll was gone.

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Across a vast distance, Larry Shaw's voice whispered to them.

"Come back now. Come back."

Haldane saw the transit pick up Heather, then Balkan, then he found himself going too.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

COLD flicked at Haldane, the real cold of space. A gasp started in his throat but before it could become sound, the millions of tiny hands had firmed their grip again. The sight of the Solar System and the suns of space flicked out almost before he was sure he had seen it.

Another scene flicked on: a huge room in the mine, with Bergen's generator spinning in its place. Larry Shaw and several of the bronze kids were seated on the floor. Each wore a strange headgear that looked like a helmet. Wires ran from the headgears to the control panel on the rumbling generator.

Haldane felt the floor firm into existence under him. He lurched and fell forward. After the transit, it felt good to fall anywhere. He lay on the floor panting, giving thanks that he could lie down. Somewhere near him someone was sobbing and crying and laughing, all at the same time. A man was swearing softly under his breath. A woman was screaming as if she were tearing her vocal cords out by the roots. Haldane pulled himself to a sitting posture. His eyes sought the source of the screaming.

It was Mrs. Dafner. Her executive chair was to one side,

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overturned, and she was sitting on the floor. Wild with fear, her gaze was roving around the room. At regular intervals which were determined by her ability to breathe, she opened her mouth and screamed.

Shaw and the bronze kids sitting with him seemed utterly unaware either of her presence or of the sound that she was making. Bergen was frantically fussing around with his generator. He was so occupied with what he was doing that he seemed not to know that a person by the name of Mrs. Dafner even existed in the universe.

Watching, Haldane saw Mrs. Dafner suddenly yank up her skirt. A tiny gun was hidden in a holster beside a fat thigh. She pulled the little gun free. Her eyes roved the room, seeking a target.

Haldane moved along the floor. He caught the gun in his left hand. With his right hand he struck with all his strength at the wrist. There was the sound of snapping bones and tendons.

Circe Dafner's anger turned to fear. The gun fell from her limp fingers. The screaming began again, louder than before.

Haldane picked up the little weapon. He turned around and saw Pete Balkan. Pete was getting groggily to his feet. He saw Haldane and grinned and said, "Hi, Johnny. Fast trip, huh?"

Haldane grinned back. There was still the sound of mixed laughter and sobbing. His eyes sought the source. It was the girl, Heather, sitting on the floor and dabbing at her eyes. He moved over and bent down beside her, patting her on the shoulder but forgetting to take Mrs. Dafner's little gun from his hand as he did so. She did not mind the gun. She crept into the shelter of his arm and buried her nose against his shoulder. He patted her very gently. In this moment, she was a very brave girl who had been very badly scared. Haldane kept on patting her. The sobs began to subside.

Pete Balkan came over and looked down at them. The grin on his face became a smile.

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Haldane stood up. He wondered what Shaw and the kid were occupied with. Then, as he watched, the process suddenly seemed to come to an end. Shaw relaxed and took the harness from his head.

"I guess the she-wolf's litter is not loose any more," Pete Balkan murmured, relief in his voice.

Shaw was slowly rising to his feet. The bronze kids were dropping backward to the stone floor and lying there as if utterly exhausted. Shaw saw Haldane and Balkan, seemingly for the first time. A ghost of a smile showed on his face and he started forward. Pete Balkan quickly moved to meet him, gave Shaw his arm and assisted him. Fatigue lay heavily on Shaw's face.

So far as Haldane could tell, all that Shaw had been doing was sitting on the floor. The fatigue on the man's face indicated he had been doing something more. Bergen shut off his generator and came toward Shaw.

"It's all right, Henry," Shaw said. "I'm just a little tired."

"What about the bums in the mine?" Bergen twittered.

"It's all right about them too."

Neither Haldane nor Heather moved. Shaw came to them and sat down on the floor. Pete sat next to him.

A tension that had been present in the big room began to die down. The bronze kids lay back, hardly moving. Bergen was now clucking over them.

"They will be all right, Henry," Shaw said, his voice hardly a whisper. "Just give them a little time. Manipulating the matrix your generator creates is—well, after it gets over being frightening, it is fatiguing."

He cupped his head in his hands, resting and breathing slowly and evenly. As he breathed, the gray began to go away from his face. He lifted his head. The old glow was coming back to his features. He heard the sound of Mrs. Dafner screaming and his eyes went to her. The glow went off his face.

"Is that who I think it is?" he said.

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"That's the old she-wolf," Balkan answered. He seemed to want to change the subject or to get a question answered, Haldane could not tell which. "How did you handle the local litter? I was worried—"

Shaw's face brightened. "You brought us the equations and the equipment to generate Crisper's force-field. We used that to give them something to think about. They were in the mine and much of the time they were in darkness. We sent Crisper's force-field after them. To them, it was as if a mighty hand reached out of the darkness and seized them. Once this happened to a man in the dark, he would turn on his light to see what had grabbed him or touched him. When he saw nothing, he would become slightly frantic." A shudder passed through Shaw's body and was gone.

"Slightly frantic are hardly the words to describe it," Haldane said.

"I know they aren't," Shaw said. "Actually it is my impression that some of those men went completely insane. Imagine how their fear reactions built up when something kept touching them from behind!" Again the shudder went over Shaw.

"That's all right, Larry," Pete Balkan said. "I know how you feel but sometimes even the most kindly of us have to use harsh measures."

Shaw's eyes showed gratitude. "How—how was it on your end, Pete?"

"When the inkwell went up on her desk, the old lady was really paralyzed," Balkan said.

"I thought it was *the random factor*," Haldane whispered. He was disappointed. There was something about the idea of *the random factor* that he had liked very much. Now to learn that what he had thought was *the random factor* was actually manipulation from here . . .

Shaw had risen to his feet. His eyes had gone again to Mrs. Dafner. The expression on his face said he still did not quite believe what he was seeing. She was sitting on the

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floor, her skirt up, and the empty holster clearly revealed. Her screams had died to sullen squawks and a glaze was settling in her eyes. Haldane kept silent as the white-haired man dropped to one knee beside the woman.

"Are you Circe Dafner?" Shaw said. His voice was gentle, with kindness and tolerance in it. She looked at him and did not seem to see him.

"Do you have something on your mind, Johnny?" Pete Balkan asked.

"I—I wanted to talk about—the *random factor*," Haldane said. He tried to organize his thinking. "I've seen so much that I'm not quite sure I understand all of it."

Balkan's face had sympathy on it. "Go on, Johnny," he said.

"The first night I was here I saw Larry Shaw create a small green stone. There was talk about the cortex. When I was after Ertel's ship, a guard had me dead to rights. Then the guard wasn't there. Larry admitted that he did it. Then, we went across space via Bergen's transit and an ink-well rose from Mrs. Dafner's desk and a cold wind blew and—" Haldane ran out of breath.

Balkan began to speak very slowly, carefully selecting his words. "The transit is a real invention. It exists, can be used, and will be widely used in the future. But when we went across space, it was used differently. Larry Shaw, hooked up with others, fed the function of his cortex directly into the field of the transit. This happens to be a possibility that even Bergen had not thought of."

"I see," Haldane said. "Though not very well. This *random factor*, and something else, still sticks in my mind."

"We'll probably get to everything that sticks in your mind, Johnny, if I know you. What is it now?"

"Well, Shaw is the man who knows how to use his cortex. But Shaw wasn't around when Crisper had me and you were a prisoner. You said the door came open because the *random factor* had operated. Of course, I didn't see the door

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come open and you might have been lying, though generally you have not lied to me."

"I wasn't lying then," Balkan said. His words were very slow now. "The human cortex is a very remarkable tool. The human being is also a very remarkable tool. But a tool implies a user. What uses the human cortex, what flows through it and with it?"

"Eh?" Haldane was really startled, then again he was disappointed.

"We have been talking about a *random factor*. Now, instead of using those words, let us begin to talk about energy and a wave form and a frequency that uses the human cortex. There is your *random factor*. It actually exists, but probably not in this continuum."

"But—"

"This energy-wave-form frequency uses you. You also can use it, if you know the rules and are willing to abide by them."

"Oh," Haldane said. This was not news to him. Somehow he had known this all along. "The rules. I guess maybe most of us have sort of overlooked that part of it, so all we can do is be used instead of also using. But—what are the rules?"

Balkan did not answer, except to nod toward Larry Shaw.

The white-haired man was still down on one knee beside Circe Dafner. He was talking to her gently but firmly. "But we are not going to punish you, Circe—"

"Huh?" she said. The sound was pure grunt.

"Instead of punishing you, we are going to give you the opportunity to become one of us, a constructive force in the Solar System and in the universe. There is much work yet to be done— The human race has come up from the mud of one small planet and has expanded until now it can call the planetary system its own. *Its own to use, not its own to possess!* Thus the race has achieved elbow room for itself. But beyond the limits of this Solar System are the shores of space itself, the Big Man Ocean. When the human

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race embarks upon that ocean, it has to be a Big Man. Those of us who work here are part of the forces that move toward making the human race what it has to become—a Big Man fit to sail on the Big Man Ocean of space."

Shaw's voice had the ring of a bell in it. "You have very real, though badly distorted abilities. We would like to help you take the distortion out of your abilities and then help us in the work we do."

The glaze was still strong in Mrs. Dafner's eyes. Probably she had not heard a word that Shaw had said. Or if she had heard, she had not understood. Suddenly she struck at him, a hard blow that landed full on the man's face. "Get away from me!" she screamed.

Shaw fell over backward, then rose to his feet. "I'm afraid that was wasted effort," he said.

"What are you going to do with her and Ertel?" Haldane asked.

"I really hadn't thought about the problem," Shaw said.

"There will be a fuss raised about the fact that she is missing," Balkan said, musingly. "The only people who will know what happened will be those thugs who were in her office at the time, but they won't talk. I imagine that Kelvin, when everything is explained to him and the evidence is presented, including one John Haldane alive and well, will find it expedient to look in the other direction—if he doesn't try to resign and join us. As to what to do with her—"

"I have an answer," Shaw said suddenly. "She is strong and can do heavy labor. We will put her and Ertel to work in the mine!"

"Splendid!" Haldane said. The thought of Mrs. Dafner and Ertel working in a mine, with pick and shovel, pleased his sense of justice.

Mrs. Dafner heard enough to understand her fate. She began screaming again. She was still screaming when the bronze kids took her away.

"If she and Ertel ever become human beings, we will

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welcome them into our companionship," Shaw said. In Pete Balkan's nod, Haldane understood that his question about the rules had been answered. But there were other questions, and one in particular.

"What is going to happen to the group here?" he asked.

"Oh, we will grow stronger and bigger," Balkan answered. "One of the things we will do immediately will be to investigate Bergen's transit. Much work has to be done on it before it can be used by the general public. And—by the way, Johnny, I assume you know you are now one of us, if Kelvin will let you resign."

"I sort of thought it might go that way," Haldane said. He hugged this thought to his heart, treasuring it there. Most of his questions had been answered. But one remained.

"Where did Larry Shaw learn to use his cortex, Pete?" Haldane asked.

"Why don't you—ah—" Pete Balkan choked. "Why don't you ask him?"

Shaw smiled. He nodded toward Balkan. "He taught me," he said.

"I thought it might have gone that way," Haldane said. "And I am now thinking something else—"

Pete Balkan sighed. "Yes, you're right, Johnny. It all started back when we were kids together. We tried to create something, following the rules of magic. We did create something which we thought came out of nothing. It scared you, and it scared me too, at the time. Later, thinking about it, I realized what had happened. We had actually used our own abilities to create this thing. It took a long time for me to find out how we had done it but I finally got the answer, at least in part. I suspect a full, final and complete answer may be as big as the universe is big. But that problem will be solved when we come to it."

"It could be," Haldane said. He rose to his feet and moved away. He needed time to think about what Balkan had said and he suspected he might need a long, long



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time. In front of him a plastic window opened out on space. In the far distance, Earth was a ball and beyond that was Sol and the far-off stars. In all of this vast expanse, *Homo Sapiens* was now at home.

But here in this group a universe was potentially spanned, here a movement that had begun evolutionary ages in the past had come to fruit, here the history of Tomorrow's Universe began. Here, also, this strange creature called *Homo Sapiens* began to come more fully into his heritage. The implications of this fact were staggering.

"You're being followed," his inner voice whispered. For the first time that he remembered, the inner voice had a touch of happy laughter in it. He turned. A young woman was there. Heather.

"I think you may as well start getting used to her following you," the inner voice said. "She is going to be around for a long, long time."

"Good," Haldane said softly. With this statement he was in complete agreement. He put his arms on the window emplacement, stood looking out. The girl put her arms beside his. Out there were suns and the vast void of space. Haldane took his arms off the window sill and put them around her. She came to him willingly and gladly. It was as if, like *Homo Sapiens* finally finding himself at home in the universe, she too had found a place where she was totally and completely at home, where she belonged.

# **Someone . . . was tampering with the laws of nature!**

The girl grew smaller even while John Haldane hurried to catch up with her. There she was, walking down the street, shrinking steadily, dwindling to doll-size, to a dot, and then—gone!

Haldane was a top secret agent for the world government. He knew it was no illusion. The mysterious girl he'd trailed from the interplanetary curio shop had actually vanished, head, hips, and heels, from the face of the Earth!

Haldane's assignment was to find out what was behind the many incredible happenings that were threatening mankind! Find out—and stop it!

It's a stimulating new novel of space and super-science by a science-fiction favorite.

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